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*Corresponding author: Zahra Shahsavari, English Language Department, Faculty of Paramedical Sciences, School of Paramedical Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz 71439-14693, Iran
E-mail: shahsavarizahra@gmail.com

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EDUCATION POLICY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Postgraduate students' difficulties in writing their theses literature review

Zahra Shahsavari^{1*} and Haniyeh Kourepaz²

Abstract: This study set out to identify postgraduates' problems in writing their theses literature review section. We adopted the exploratory sequential mixed method design. In the quantitative part, we applied descriptive analysis to evaluate 40 completed master theses based on the Akindele's (2008) guideline. In the qualitative part, 10 postgraduate students took part voluntarily in semi-structured interviews. To analyze the interview data, the raters applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The results indicate that most students, even *proficient ones* were not able to synthesize, critique, or explain the literature in their writing. They mainly focused on summarizing other researchers' findings and interpretations. Other problems dealt with lack of sufficient knowledge and time to complete their literature review, and the deliberate dereliction of some supervisors and professors who do not fulfil their obligations to provide the students with sufficient information about writing it. Solving these problems can not only change students' negative feelings and experiences in writing their literature review section but also *enhance students' motivation to write any pieces of writing effectively*.

Subjects: Educational Research; Higher Education; Education Policy & Politics

Keywords: literature review; postgraduates; thesis writing

1. Introduction

Although writing effectively can lead to fruitful academic upshots (Mousavi & Kashefian-Naeeni, 2011), writing thesis is not an easy task for many students. Most of them face with challenges of writing up their theses particularly their literature review section (Boote

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Zahra Shahsavari is an assistant professor at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. She obtained her PhD in English Language from University Putra Malaysia (UPM). Her research interests include scientific and academic writing, writing assessment, critical thinking in education, and the use of technology for teaching and learning.

Haniyeh Kourepaz got an M.A. in *teaching English* from Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Fars, Iran. Her major area of research interest includes teaching and writing studies.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The purpose of this study was to identify postgraduates' problems in writing their theses literature review section. We applied a mixed method design to evaluate 40 completed master theses based on Akindele's (2008) guideline. In the qualitative part, 10 postgraduate students took part voluntarily in semi-structured interviews. The results indicate that most students mainly focused on summarizing other researchers' findings and interpretations. Other problems dealt with lack of sufficient knowledge and time to complete their literature review, and the deliberate dereliction of some supervisors and professors who do not fulfil their obligations to provide the students with sufficient information about writing it. The results of this study may assist both researchers and educators to *enhance their students' writing skill effectively*.

& Beile, 2005; Fergie et al., 2011). According to Randolph (2009), view flaws in the literature review may lead to view flaws in the rest of the dissertation. Hence, in every study, literature review should be written effectively to promote readers' understanding and awareness of the particular and appropriate approach (Lopez, 2014).

Akindele (2008) argued that the first impression of the quality of each thesis usually forms when thesis examiners finish the literature review as the vital part of the thesis. According to Mallett (2004), a literature review section should evaluate and show the relationship between the past and present work, why the researcher carries out the research, and how the researcher selects particular methodologies or theories to work.

Lopez (2014) mentioned that writing a literature review section differs from annotated bibliography that includes brief explanations or notes for each reference. In fact, what makes a literature review effective is a connection between current issues and previous findings in the same topic. This idea is supported by other studies that writing a literature review should be clear and comprehensive. It should be prepared and organized critically in order to compare and contrast different theories and notions. In a word, to write a thesis literature review critically, researchers should consider various factors such as recognizing the similarities and differences of the various findings, distinguishing gaps existed in the study, and comparing/contrasting the obtained results in different studies (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013).

In another study, researchers believed that an effective literature review section should be comparable with the results of the study (Bert & Banister, 2016; Musa & Khamis, 2015). Ridley (2008) argued that the main purpose of the literature review section is to show how limitations in other works create a research gap for another research. Consequently, a literature review should involve not only the statement of personal judgment but also an appeal to share values and ideas. It should not be simply the description of what other researchers have published in the form of a set of summaries; in contrast, it should take the form of the critical discussion that requires critical analysis.

According to Kuang and Maya (2015), the literature review section is one of the most important parts of the postgraduates' theses. Without a qualified literature review, the students will not be able to understand their thesis topic, the keywords, and the related studies in that area. In addition, a comprehensive literature review is required to support and explain the discussion that may affect the result of the study.

Given the importance of writing the literature review section, many studies have evidenced the problem that most postgraduates are not able to write their literature review section effectively (e.g., Akindele, 2008; Fitt et al., 2009; Kuang & Maya, 2015). To fill this gap, this study tries to identify the difficulties postgraduate students face in writing their theses literature review section.

2. Literature review

To write an effective thesis, students require a solid grasp of the literature review. A number of definitions emerge from the literature review. According to Cooper (1988), a literature review should contain at least two elements. The first one is a large comprehensive database that reports on primary or original studies. The second one tries "to describe, summarize, evaluate, clarify, and/or integrate the content of the primary reports" (p. 107).

Later on, Cooper's definition of the literature review was completed by other studies. For example, American Psychological Association [APA] (2010) defined a literature review as a freestanding article that considers the connection between current and previous findings in the same topic. According to Fink (2005), an effective literature review is a combination of

previous research studies presented in such a way that adds value to our understanding of that work.

Other researchers such as Gall et al. (2007) highlighted that a literature review should show how various studies related to each other. It should also provide a meaningful structure to a research topic or a research problem. Therefore, a literature review plays a crucial role in delimiting research problems, seeking new lines of inquiry, avoiding fruitless approaches, gaining methodological insights, identifying recommendations for further research, as well as seeking support for grounded theory.

Due to the importance of the literature review, various classifications in writing this area have been found. Earlier studies such as Cooper (1989) classified the literature review section in five categories: “focus, goal, perspective, coverage, organization, and audience” (p. 2). Kachru (1999) considered individualized voice as the chief component of the critical literature review while other researchers such as Stapleton (2002) disagreed on the point that voice itself could be considered as the main important element in writing the literature review. They referred to voice, identity, and critical thinking as the main elements of literature review writing. Boote and Beile (2005) created the literature review-scoring rubric containing five categories, namely, coverage, synthesis, methodology, significance, and rhetoric. Although their scoring rubric is the vital part in assessing the literature review quality, it has some shortcomings in that it only examines dissertations using quantitative methods. Besides, the reliability of the scoring rubric has not been fully established. Later, Akindele (2008) provided the guideline including six components, namely: the summaries of each work, the relationship between each work and other research, the gap in previous studies, resolving conflicts among research, awareness of different views, and linking with the purpose of the study.

Based on the above classifications, some empirical studies have been conducted to assess the quality of the students’ literature review. For example, T. Moodie (1994) assessed the literature review of international postgraduate students’ theses in the faculty of Engineering at Monash University in Australia. The results indicated that most students did not use critical voice in writing their literature review. Later, Boote and Beile (2005) applied their own rubrics to assess the quality of the literature review of 30 students’ doctoral dissertations. They found a lack of synthesizing as the most common failure in writing students’ literature review section. Fitt (2011) applied Boote and Beile (2005) rubrics to assess the quality of 30 randomly selected dissertation literature reviews of students who studied at instructional technology. The results showed that only a few students got high scores in the critical assessment of the literature reviews while the majority of them had low scores.

In the same line, Akindele (2008) assessed the literature review section of graduate dissertation at the University of Botswana by using her own guideline. She examined 30 completed master’s theses from the University of Botswana. The results indicated that the majority of students had serious problems in writing a literature review critically; most of them were unable to summarize the weaknesses of the literature in other studies. Likewise, they were not able to use critical thinking and assert their identity or voice in their writing.

Although many studies have emphasized the characteristics of a good literature review, they lack particular debate on postgraduates’ problems in writing their theses literature review section. To fill the gap, this study tries to identify the difficulties postgraduate students face in writing their theses literature review section. To meet this aim, we tried to address the following research question:

What are the postgraduates’ main problems in writing their literature review?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

In this study, we adopted the exploratory sequential mixed method design. It means that the qualitative part of data collection and analysis is followed the quantitative part (Creswell, 2003). In the quantitative part, we selected students' theses and evaluated their literature review section based on Akindele's (2008) guideline. In the qualitative part, we conducted semi-structured interviews to identify if postgraduates have problems in writing their literature review.

3.2. Participants

To assess students' literature reviews, we examined the literature review section of 40 completed theses drawn from a pool of 100 master's theses completed between 2010 and 2016 academic years. The selection of the samples was carried out randomly.

In addition, 10 EFL postgraduate students, whose theses were evaluated, took part voluntarily in semi-structured interviews. The age of the sample group was between 27 and 37 years old (mean = 31, SD = 7.12). The students were not preselected; however, the consent was sought after explaining the purpose of the study. All participants perused their master's degree but in different faculties such as language and education. To safeguard the interviewees' anonymity, we concealed their particulars. All of the students were from one university; however, to protect the students' anonymity, we concealed the name of the university and students' gender, and referred to each student as "he". This seemed logical to encourage all students to talk freely in the interview without being afraid of probable harmful consequences of telling the truth.

Furthermore, to avoid any probable misunderstanding in English, we conducted all interviews in students' first language (Izadinia, 2014). Each interview took approximately 10 to 15 minutes. The interview questions mainly focused on the possible problems in writing a literature review.

Based on the university rules, after accepting the proposal, each student had only 6 months to submit his thesis; otherwise, he had to pay extra tuition. In addition, to get a complete mark, he had only 6 months to publish at least one article in a reputable journal. As for scoring, 18 and 2 marks (out of 20) were allocated to his oral defense and publication, respectively.

3.3. Instruments

We applied Akindele's (2008) guideline to analyze students' literature review. The model has been applied in previous studies (e.g., Akindele, 2008; Bacha, 2019) due to providing a comprehensive guideline to analyze the literature review (Bacha, 2019).

Akindele's (2008) guideline contains six components linked with four issues namely, evaluation, critical thinking, authorial voice, and identity. The first component is the summaries of each work. The second component shows the relationship between each work and other research. The third component represents the gap in previous studies. The fourth component focuses on resolving conflicts among research, which identifies if the writer is aware of different views to resolve conflicts among the contradictory views with previous studies. The fifth component shows awareness of different views, which shows the writer's insight, and awareness of different opinions. The last one represents the link with the purpose of the study. It shows if the literature review can support the purpose of the study (see Figure 1).

4. Data analysis

In this study, we applied the exploratory sequential mixed method design. In the quantitative part, we selected 40 completed master theses and evaluated them based on the Akindele's (2008) guideline. In the qualitative part, 10 postgraduate students took part voluntarily in semi-structured interviews.

Figure 1. Akindele’s (2008) guideline for analyzing the literature review (pp. 4, 10–11).

Review component	Realization
1. Summaries of each work Does the review provides a set of summaries of each work reviewed?	Evaluation
2. Relationship of each work with other research Does it show the relationship of each work with other research?	Evaluation
3. Filling gaps in previous study Does the review shed light on any gaps in previous research?	Evaluation & critical thinking
4. Resolve conflicts among research Does the writer resolve the conflict amongst seemingly contradictory previous research?	Critical thinking
5. Awareness of different views Does the writer show insight and awareness of differing arguments?	Authorial voice/identity
6. Link with the purpose of study Does the writer link the review at all times to the rationale and purpose of work	Authorial voice/identity

Akindele’s (2008) Guideline for Analyzing the Literature Review (p. 4 & 10-11)

To analyze EFL students’ literature review section, two raters who got PhD and supervised MA students more than 5 years were trained on using Akindele’s (2008) guideline. To safeguard the raters’ anonymity, their gender, major, and universities were not mentioned. First, the raters randomly selected one of the students’ theses and evaluated the literature review section based on the guideline. After reaching an agreement on scoring, each rater evaluated the literature review of 20 students. In this study, each criterion in the guideline was given a score from 0 to 10 points. Due to having six criteria in the guideline, an overall score for analyzing the literature review section was between 0 and 60 points.

To analysis the interview data, the raters applied Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis including six steps namely, transcribing verbal data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. According to Izadinia (2014), thematic analysis is one of the most useful forms of analysis that puts emphasis on identifying, pinpointing, examining, and reporting themes within data.

5. Results

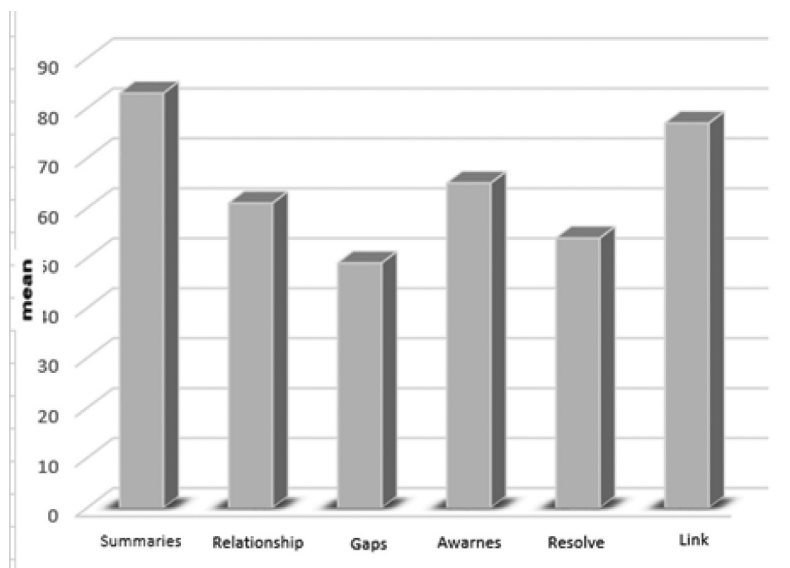
This study tried to identify if postgraduates have problems in writing their theses literature review section. In the quantitative part, the descriptive analysis of the students’ literature review shows that students focused more on summarizing of each work, linking with the purpose of study, awareness of different views, relationship of each work with other research, resolving conflicts among research, and filling gaps in the previous study, respectively (see Table 1 and Figure 2).

In the qualitative part, we identified three main themes in analyzing the interviews that showed students’ problems in writing the literature review section as follows:

Table 1. Students’ literature review scores based on Akindele’s guideline

Student #	Literature review component					
	Summary	Relationship	Gaps	Different views	Resolve conflicts	Linking
Total 40	331 (83%)	242 (61%)	196(49%)	259 (65%)	217(54%)	306(77%)

Figure 2. The comparison of literature review components.



5.1. Lack of knowledge of writing effective literature review

Most interviewees (80%) were not aware of the importance of the literature review. They believed that the literature review section should only summarize other works. One student said: “the focus of the literature review is to obtain the ability to comprehend a particular topic through learning, what strategies were used previously to probe the topic, and what research has already been completed on that topic”. Another one stated, “in writing the literature review section, I should mainly attempt to evaluate and show the relationship between the previous studies. In fact, an effective literature review should be the combination of previous research studies presented in such a way that adds value to our understanding of that work”.

Although awareness of different views has a significant role in writing the literature review, most of them (60%) mentioned that the author should take a neutral perspective in his/her writing. One student said: “we should avoid using the contradictory views since this type of views may have some negative effects on the view of thesis committee members, those who are in charge of evaluating our theses”. Similarly, another student added, “only positive views related to the research should be discussed in the literature and opposing views should be ignored”. In his opinion, the researcher can just parrot other writers’ views in the literature review. Only 20% of students highlighted the importance of using different views. One of them mentioned, “we should use different views to make the subject of our study clear”. Few students said, “we should consider both positive and negative views of other researchers to provide logical reasons for supporting our discussion part”.

Another problem was that most students (70%) pointed to writing the related literature reviews without focusing on having different ideas about the inclusion of the high-quality articles in their review. A few of them (20%) mentioned that using the high quality and update articles seem essential in writing. In contrast, one of them said, “[to write my literature view], I just downloaded the relevant articles regardless of their qualities since identifying and using the best sources take a lot of time”. Another one concluded that “I used any related journals because of not having access to most high quality journals by university”.

Some students (40%) did not have a clear conception of the literature review organization. They stated that the organization of the literature review should be dependent on the type of data, a quantitative, a qualitative, or a mixture of both. One of them mentioned, “I think, we should divide the literature review into two parts in which the theoretical part precedes the empirical one”. Another one believed: “a quantitative research should precede a qualitative one”. Only two

students disagreed with this view. They noted, “in organizing the literature review, cohesion and coherence are more important than the research type”.

5.2. Time for completing theses and publications

Some interviewees (40%) referred to lack of sufficient time to complete their theses. This could undermine the quality of their writing particularly the literature review section. Another one said, “the quality of my literature review was not important to me. I just thought of completing my thesis on time and starting my own businesses as soon as possible”. Another one stated, “I did not spend a lot of time on completing the literature review. Generally, the quality of our theses is not that important in our master’s theses marks. In our university, students’ grades usually range from 17–20 [out of 20]. I have never seen theses failure or resubmission”. In contrast, one student said, “I tried to do my best in writing the literature review as my future carrier has been dependent on getting my degree”.

Most students (70%) did not use high quality and update articles to write the literature review. Some of them claimed that their supervisors rarely check the quality of articles cited in the literature review. One of them mentioned, “since publishing in high-impact journals within six months seems impossible, a lot of students especially those who do not like to pursue their PhD or find an academic job do not think of the quality of their theses particularly the literature review section”.

5.3. Supervisors and professors’ role in writing literature review

Some of the students (40%) argued that their professors who taught them the research method rarely focused on writing an effective literature review. This may result in writing faulty literature review. Other students (30%) believed that they had received minor comments in writing their literature review from their supervisors. For example, they [supervisors] asked them to check their punctuation mark, verb tense, connection between paragraphs, text citations, or missing references. One of them said, “my supervisor rarely responded my phone and email; he returned my first three chapters to me after three months, without checking the literature review. Then, he just asked me to find somebody to edit the literature review”. Another student noted, “most supervisors do not give us constructive feedback on the literature review unless they have a vested interest in our research outcome”. Another one said: “most supervisors do not revise our literature review effectively unless their names appear as the first author or the corresponding author in publishing the paper”. Except three interviewees, the rest believed that their supervisors and committee members scarcely examined their literature review. One of them said, “my supervisor asked me to copy the literature review from other related studies and then send it for editing services to paraphrase it for me”. Others argued that their supervisors mainly focused on the method and discussion in examining their theses and oral defenses. Two of the students highlighted that in their oral defense, the committee members asked them to skip the literature review part to shorten the presentation time. Only two students (20%) were very thankful to their supervisors because of giving them an accurate feedback on their literature review.

6. Discussion

This study tried to identify if postgraduates have problems in writing their theses literature review section. Our quantitative results indicated that writing a literature review is not an easy task for the postgraduate students; many students do not know how to develop their literature review. The finding enhances our understanding that “writing a literature review involves a synthesis of a complex range of analytical and rhetorical skills as well as academic writing skills, and an understanding of what is meant by critical analysis and argument” (Turner & Bitchener, 2008, p. 1) This idea is supported by other studies (e.g., Kafipour et al., 2018).

A critical analysis of the students’ literature review section based on Akende’s model shows that most students were good at summarizing each work and linking it with the purpose of their own study though they had major weaknesses in reporting the gaps in the previous study and resolving conflicts among research. This finding is consistent with Randolph’s (2009) idea that most researchers are not

able to “consider contrary findings and alternative interpretations in synthesizing quantitative literature” (p. 11). Part of that reason may lie in students’ cultural backgrounds as most students embrace only positive views in eastern countries. Most eastern societies have a teacher-dominated, group-based, and centrally organized pedagogical culture for many years (Kashefian-Naeeni & Riazi, 2011; Zhang, 2007).

Another finding showed that students’ literature review section was mainly based on authorial voice and evaluation rather than critical thinking. In a word, a majority of students just summarized other researchers’ findings and interpretations rather than examining all aspects of their research critically. Most of them, even with proficient ability in writing were not able to synthesize, critique, or explain the literature. The result is consistent with other studies in that due to having a poor performance in using critical thinking, students just report the research method, design, and analysis in their theses without providing justification or logical reasons in writing their theses (e.g., Akindele, 2008; Boote & Beile, 2005). This finding highlights the importance of developing students’ critical thinking skills (Shahsavari et al., 2013; Simpson & Courtney, 2002). If the students promote their critical thinking skills, they will be able to justify and link different concepts and ideas. The probable reason is that the students’ competency and familiarity with language learning strategies especially cognitive and metacognitive ones may lead to the deep processing and mental activity (Hamzah et al., 2009).

In our qualitative analysis, some students frequently mentioned that they did not have sufficient time to complete their literature review. As noted earlier, after accepting their proposals, students had only 6 months to submit their theses; otherwise, they had to pay extra tuition. This finding is inconsistent with Gall et al.’s (1996) ideas who believed that having enough time is very important to complete an acceptable dissertation literature review; each student needs three to 6 months of effort to finish just the literature review effectively. Ignoring the quality of literature review, a majority of students preferred to publish an article in easygoing journals since the deadline for publication was too tight. They would face with many barriers to meet the expectations of reviewers if they wanted to publish in reputable journals (Flowerdew & Wang, 2016).

Moreover, most students were indifferent to the inclusion of the reputable articles in their review. They just downloaded the relevant articles regardless of their qualities since their university library databases could not provide the full text of many high-quality articles while lack of attention to the quality of articles used might affect students’ literature review section. As Akindele (2008) mentioned the literature review is not effective unless the researcher reports the similarities and differences between studies published in both low- and high-quality articles.

Another problem was that most students did not have clear ideas about the literature review organization. This finding is consistent with this idea that in writing, organizing ideas on paper seem difficult for students (Norazmi et al., 2017). Hence, identifying various types of organizations such as preferred historical, conceptual, and methodological is required (Randolph, 2009).

In this study, some postgraduates mentioned that their research method professors did not teach them how to write creative and integrated literature reviews and most supervisors did not have a strong contribution in writing their literature review. The probable reason may result from the low quality of teaching writing in EFL settings (Lap & Truc, 2014). However, it is in contrast with Akindele’s (2008) belief in that the first impression of the quality of each thesis is usually formed when thesis examiners finish the literature review as the main part of each thesis and dissertation.

7. Conclusion

The current study tried to identify a comprehensive understanding about postgraduates’ difficulties in writing their literature review section. Our findings showed that most EFL students were not able to write effectively. The main problems deal with students’ lack of sufficient knowledge on implanting a critical view to write their literature review, lack of sufficient time to complete their

theses and publish their related articles, and the deliberate dereliction of some supervisors and professors who do not fulfil their obligations to provide the students with sufficient information about writing a literature review.

8. Limitation and implication

One of the limitations of this study is a sample size; the power of our findings might increase if we analyzed more theses and conducted more interviews. In addition, since students have different learning abilities, skills, and characteristics (Kaur, 2017), the result might vary from faculty to faculty, university to university if we changed our sample size. In this study, we applied Akindele's (2008) framework to analyze students' literature review section. Applying other frameworks such as Boote and Beile (2005) could change the result. Moreover, most students complained about supervisors' contribution in writing their theses. This claim would not seem logical unless we include some supervisors' voices to analyze students' problems carefully in writing the literature review.

Although this study highlighted the importance of developing students' critical thinking skills, there is a great source of frustration for students in using critical thinking skills in their literature review. The major problem of many students is not lack of understanding what the literature review is; rather, they do not know what critical thinking is (Schmaltz et al., 2017). There is an urgent need for solving the problem by both students and supervisors. Unfortunately, like other universities, most of our supervisors have received little or no particular training in critical thinking. In this case, the supervisors cannot expect their students to be critical thinkers unless they become critical thinker first (Tiruneh et al., 2014). To this end, the integration of critical thinking skill into existing curricula at the universities seems essential.

This study identified some of the postgraduates' problems in writing their literature review section. The results may have some helpful suggestions for supervisors who like to find solutions to these problems. They can not only identify the strengths and weaknesses of students' literature review but also teach students how to write their literature reviews more effectively. The results can also help students to analyze their own writing critically. If students master the critical analyses of their literature reviews, they can bring it in any piece of their writing.

Finally, identifying the problem without an effective solution is useless. To avoid writing a faulty literature review, not only supervisors but also other educators such as advisors, committee members, curriculum course designers, policymakers, and faculty members have particular responsibilities to find out students' problems and solve their problems. Solving these problems can not only change students' negative feelings and experiences in writing their literature review section but also enhance students' motivation to write any pieces of writing effectively.

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Author details

Zahra Shahsavari¹

E-mail: shahsavarizahra@gmail.com

Haniyeh Kourepaz²

E-mail: h.kourepaz92@gmail.com

¹ English Language Department, Faculty of Paramedical Sciences, School of Paramedical Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Meshkinfam St., Shiraz 71439-14693, Iran.

² English Language Department, Islamic Azad University of Marvdasht, Marvdasht, Iran.

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