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## English Bachelor Students' Difficulties Inventory: From Research Steps to Thesis Presentation in University of Parakou

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**Mathias HOUNNOU AZOUA**

Université de Parakou, Bénin

[mathias.azoua@yahoo.fr](mailto:mathias.azoua@yahoo.fr)

&

**Bienvenu ADJOHA**

Université de Parakou, Bénin

[bienuadjoaha@yahoo.fr](mailto:bienuadjoaha@yahoo.fr)

&

**Mouhamed El-Awal Atanda AKANNI**

Université de Parakou, Bénin

[atandaakanni@gmail.com](mailto:atandaakanni@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This study was carried out to investigate and analyze the various difficulties encountered by undergraduate students in the English Department of the University of Parakou during their research works over the period 2013-2018. The research instruments made up of open and closed questions were administered to forty-two (42) students selected according to their will and their availability and to five (05) English teachers randomly selected for the study. The analysis of the results has shown sixteen (16) different challenges which were fundamentally decreasingly: the lack of cooperation of the respondents, the lack of competence in research methodology and others. However, this prioritization of difficulties by students varies from one year to another. The same problems have been highlighted by teachers who perceive them differently. According to them, the lack of knowledge in research methodology and study conducting was the most crucial problem and caught their attention.

**Keywords:** English studies, difficulties, research works, University of Parakou.

**Résumé :** Cette étude a été menée pour enquêter et analyser les différentes difficultés rencontrées par les étudiants en année de licence au Département d'anglais de l'Université de Parakou lors de la préparation de leurs travaux de recherche sur la période 2013-2018. Les instruments de recherche constitués de questions ouvertes et fermées ont été administrés à quarante-deux (42) étudiants sélectionnés en fonction de leur volonté et de leur disponibilité et à cinq (05) enseignants d'anglais sélectionnés au hasard pour l'étude. L'analyse des résultats a montré seize (16) différents défis qui étaient de façon décroissante, le manque de coopération des répondants, le manque de compétence en méthodologie de recherche et d'autres. Cependant, cette priorisation des difficultés par les étudiants varie d'une année à l'autre. Les mêmes problèmes ont été mis en évidence par les enseignants qui les

perçoivent différemment. Selon eux, le manque de connaissances en méthodologie de recherche et de conduite d'étude était le problème le plus crucial et retenait leur attention.

**Mots-clés :** Etudes anglophones, difficultés, travaux de recherche, Université de Parakou.

## **Introduction**

According to Alsied and Ibrahim (2017), research is as “Re” and “Search”, where “Re” implies “again and again” and “Search” implies “to come up with something”. Research work is a purposeful, precise and systematic search for new knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, or for the re-interpretation of existing knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (Bocar, 2013). In that respect, research seeks to answer certain questions which so far have not been answered. In conducting a research work, researcher must be cautious because it needs from him commitment. Qasem and Zayid, (2019) thought that research skill itself is a difficult process.

Researchers could need to add some more hours, weeks before the scheduled deadline because there are some tasks that take more time than what is planned, and there are some stages in research work that is more difficult than what the researcher expected. Dombeck and Wells-Moran (2006) claim that time management skills boil down to awareness, organization and commitment. So, research task is a well-planned activity that does not suffer of any improvisation.

Beyond the time management issue, researcher must have a great literature background related to his/her field of study so as to make his/her finding more valuable.

The mastery of methodological process and logical statistical processing are cornerstones of effective research. Most of the time, the researchers, mainly student-researchers lack these skills. Many others challenges are faced with students like abstract designing, technique of effective oral presentation, literature review synthesizing, etc. Then, research work is found to be a tedious and very tiring work to do.

However, teachers and students cannot forsake this work because most often this is an academic requirement. In University area, research activity is necessary for both students and teachers. Numerous problems were faced by students while conducting the research work for graduation. So, studies must be focused on this subject to find out strategies to make research task easier for student-researchers.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Conceptual understanding: Research work**

Before graduating at University, students must write a research work and defend their thesis in front of a jury made up with teachers or researchers. Such a research relies on a precise methodology that contains different steps. For this reason, research work is a methodological job that leads to knowledge building. However, one can distinguish scientific research from the unscientific one.

According to Naidoo, (2011), scientific research is a research, but not all research is scientific. Former scholars had knowledge without being researchers. Furthermore, rapid improvement in technology has provided wider access to data to the extent that almost anyone with a mouse and internet access becomes a quasi-researcher. Nfara and Mertz, (2006) asserted that many ways of knowledge acquisition exist and include through tradition, authority, logical reasoning, experience, intuition, borrowing and the scientific method. But, only the scientific method is the most sophisticated to provide reliable information. A scientific research bears five main characteristics: relevance, conceptions of research, research orthodoxies, theoretical orientations and ethical framework (Naidoo, 2011).

## *2.2. Researchers' challenges during research*

Written scientific communication is not a simple transcription of the information obtained or a simple presentation of ideas. It is a well-developed project based on the skills of the researcher who must not be content with being up to it. It must show skills when writing scientific work. The elements to be associated for the success of this project are:

- Knowledge (old knowledge and new knowledge)
- Know-how (investigation method)
- Let people know (communication) (Kandeel, 2013)

The interaction between these three elements plays a crucial role in the production of scientific communication.

Apart the thesis design properly said, many others difficulties are frequently opposed to researchers. Among these is financial problem that can betray the achievement of the research work as stated by Sheridan and Pyke (1994).

## *2.3. Hypothesis and questions of the research*

This study was guided through the following research questions:

1. What are the difficulties encountered by Bachelor student-researchers in conducting a research work and in thesis presentation?
2. How much do the difficulties impact the achievement of students' research work?
3. What are the English lecturers' perceptions about the students' difficulties?
4. How do the student-researchers difficulties vary from 2013 to 2018?

The answers to these questions lead to the following hypothesis of the research:

**H1:** Student-researchers are faced with various difficulties while designing and conducting the research work and during the thesis presentation;

**H2:** The difficulties faced by student-researchers impede the effectiveness of the research work and thesis presentation;

**H3:** The students' supervisors consider the difficulties as challenges that lead to weak scientific quality of the research outcomes and the failure to meet the scheduled deadline;

**H4:** The difficulties encountered by student-researchers are the same for all the years but have different importance over the period 2013 – 2018.

### **3. Methodology of research**

#### **3.1. *Frame work***

The study was held at the University of Parakou, the second public university, in North of Benin. Parakou municipality is located in Borgou district, situated between 9° 21' of latitude North and 2°36' of longitude East (Afrique Conseil, 2006). It is limited to south, east and west by Tchaourou municipality and to north by N'Dali municipality (Afrique Conseil, 2006).

#### **3.2. *Target population and sampling***

The participants to the study were the undergraduate students and English teachers officially enrolled in English Department at Parakou University from 2013 to 2018. Purposive sampling technique was used to select students while teachers were selected randomly. In sum, forty seven (47) persons composed of forty two (42) bachelor students and five (05) English lecturers were selected for the study. The bachelor students sampled were divided as followed: five (5) for 2013, seven (7) for 2014, six (6) for 2015, eight (8) for 2016, nine (9) for 2017 and twelve (12) for 2018. Such reapportioning was based on the number of students who defend their thesis yearly over the period and has aimed to make the sample representative for the study.

#### **3.3. *Data collection procedure***

Various tools and techniques were used to collect data and are summed up into: questionnaires and focus group discussion.

##### **- *Questionnaire***

Questionnaire sheets were administered to the respondents to collect their different perceptions and categorization about difficulties encountered while preparing bachelor thesis. Each questionnaire was designed so as to fit with the category of respondents to which it was to be addressed to. Whatever the category of respondent, the questionnaires aimed at collecting general information like socio economic characteristics (sex, age, financial status....) and the specific data related to the difficulties encountered by student-researchers. Semi-structured and structured questions were held with participants after they finished filling the questionnaires. The interview method allowed to seek clarity and probe for deeper understanding, Denzin and Lincoln (2005).

##### **- *Focus group discussion***

This technique has consisted in forming group composed of both student-researchers and their supervisors. The main objective of such technique was to

get various responses about a given question and to get qualitative data such as the point of views or opinions of the respondents (Hounnou Azoua, 2019). Then, seven (07) ungraded students and one (01) English teacher were gathered to compose each group. Six (06) different groups were made and investigated. Through interactive discussions, students' answers were confronted to those of teachers (Hounnou Azoua, 2019) about the problems encountered by both students and their supervisors.

### 3.4. Statistical analysis

After reporting the data with Excel (software 2010), the statistical analysis was done via the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). It has consisted in descriptive statistics calculation (frequency tables) and graphs making. However, the recorded interviews were transcribed and written text was created for each interview. These data was analysed as interviews were conducted. Because Gibbs (2002), states that qualitative data analysis is interactive, and it typically coincides with data collection.

## 4. Findings and discussion

### 4.1. Findings

Two categories of responses were found out in the present study. On one hand students' answers of the questions and on the other hand the supervisor's answers.

#### - Students answers of the questionnaires

The research had pointed out sixteen (16) different issues considered as difficulties for student-researchers, related to their thesis elaboration. The following (table 1) present the students' responses.

**Table n°1:** Students difficulties in research process

| N° | DIFFICULTIES  | 2013 |    | 2014 |      | 2015 |      | 2016 |     | 2017 |      | 2018 |      | Total |      |
|----|---|------|----|------|------|------|------|------|-----|------|------|------|------|-------|------|
|    |   | F    | %  | F    | %    | F    | %    | F    | %   | F    | %    | F    | %    | F     | %    |
| D1 | Cooperation of respondents  | 5    | 10 | 6    | 85.7 | 5    | 83.3 | 6    | 75  | 6    | 66.6 | 7    | 58.3 | 3     | 83.3 |
| D2 | Time management   | 3    | 60 | 4    | 57.1 | 4    | 66.6 | 5    | 62. | 6    | 66.6 | 8    | 66.6 | 3     | 71.4 |
| D3 | Stress management   | 2    | 40 | 4    | 57.1 | 4    | 66.6 | 5    | 62. | 6    | 66.6 | 8    | 66.6 | 2     | 69.0 |
| D4 | Identification of researchable issues   | 3    | 60 | 4    | 57.1 | 4    | 66.6 | 5    | 62. | 6    | 66.6 | 9    | 75   | 3     | 73.8 |
| D5 | Financial problem   | 3    | 60 | 4    | 57.1 | 4    | 66.6 | 5    | 62. | 6    | 66.6 | 9    | 75   | 3     | 73.8 |
| D6 | Problem of interpretation, analysis, findings, conclusions and recommendation | 3    | 60 | 4    | 57.1 | 4    | 66.6 | 5    | 62. | 6    | 66.6 | 8    | 66.6 | 3     | 71.4 |

|     |  |   |    |   |      |   |      |   |     |   |      |   |      |   |      |
|-----|--|---|----|---|------|---|------|---|-----|---|------|---|------|---|------|
| D7  | Formatting of text contents  | 3 | 60 | 5 | 71.4 | 4 | 66.6 | 5 | 62. | 5 | 55.5 | 6 | 50   | 2 | 66.6 |
| D8  | Lack of confidence while speaking                                    | 3 | 60 | 4 | 57.1 | 4 | 66.6 | 5 | 62. | 6 | 66.6 | 9 | 75   | 3 | 73.8 |
| D9  | Students are unfamiliar with criteria of effective oral presentation | 4 | 80 | 5 | 71.4 | 4 | 66.6 | 5 | 62. | 5 | 55.5 | 6 | 50   | 2 | 69.0 |
| D10 | Speakers don't outline the presentation objective to audience        | 3 | 60 | 4 | 57.1 | 4 | 66.6 | 6 | 75  | 6 | 66.6 | 9 | 75   | 2 | 69.0 |
| D11 | Problem of documentation   | 4 | 80 | 5 | 71.4 | 4 | 66.6 | 4 | 50  | 6 | 66.6 | 5 | 41.6 | 2 | 66.6 |
| D12 | Problem of designing questionnaire                                   | 3 | 60 | 5 | 71.4 | 5 | 83.3 | 4 | 50  | 4 | 44.4 | 5 | 41.6 | 2 | 61.9 |
| D13 | Problem on statistical processing                                    | 2 | 40 | 3 | 42.8 | 3 | 50   | 5 | 62. | 6 | 66.6 | 9 | 75   | 2 | 66.6 |
| D14 | Students fear negative evaluation and comments                       | 3 | 60 | 4 | 57.1 | 4 | 66.6 | 5 | 62. | 6 | 66.6 | 9 | 75   | 3 | 73.8 |
| D15 | Problem of words' pronunciation                                      | 3 | 60 | 4 | 57.1 | 4 | 66.6 | 5 | 62. | 6 | 66.6 | 9 | 75   | 3 | 73.8 |
| D16 | Lack of research methodology   | 4 | 80 | 6 | 85.7 | 5 | 83.3 | 6 | 75  | 6 | 66.6 | 7 | 58.3 | 3 | 80.9 |

F: Frequency; %: Percentage

Source: Survey data, (2019)

### - Teachers' answers to the questionnaires

The lecturers' answers have also revealed the same problems that English bachelor students were faced with during the research work. Their perceptions about these difficulties are presented in the table 2.

**Table n°2:** Teachers perception of students' difficulties

| N°  | DIFFICULTIES  | F | %     |
|-----|---|---|-------|
| D1  | Cooperation of respondents  | 2 | 25    |
| D2  | Time management   | 8 | 100   |
| D3  | Stress management   | 4 | 50    |
| D4  | Identification of researchable issues   | 8 | 100   |
| D5  | Financial problem   | 6 | 75    |
| D6  | Problem of interpretation, analysis, findings, conclusions and recommendation | 8 | 100   |
| D7  | Formatting of text contents   | 8 | 100   |
| D8  | Lack of confidence while speaking   | 3 | 60    |
| D9  | Students are unfamiliar with criteria of effective oral presentation          | 3 | 37.50 |
| D10 | Speakers don't outline the presentation objective to audience                 | 8 | 100   |
| D11 | Problem of documentation  | 8 | 100   |
| D12 | Problem of designing questionnaire  | 8 | 100   |
| D13 | Problem on statistical processing   | 8 | 100   |

|     |  |   |     |
|-----|--|---|-----|
| D14 | Students fear negative evaluation and comments | 8 | 100 |
| D15 | Problem of words' pronunciation                | 8 | 100 |
| D16 | Lack of research methodology                   | 8 | 100 |

*F: Frequency; %: Percentage*

**Source:** Survey data, (2019)

#### 4.2. Discussion

The findings analysis can be divided in two parts; firstly the students' perceptions of the issues and secondly the ones of lecturers.

##### - *Students' perceptions of difficulties*

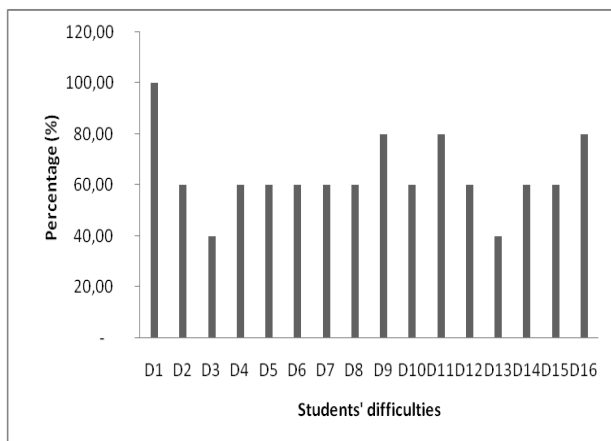
The degree of perception of each difficulty varies from one year to another. All the respondents (100%), in 2013; 85.71% in 2014; 83.33% in 2015; 75% in 2016; 66.66% in 2017 and 58.33% in 2018 thought that the target population of their research work does not cooperate while conducting their survey. This difficulty is actual for most of the researchers today. Indeed, many people are refractory for survey and do not deliver true information to researchers. According to them, everything is financial and only the researcher benefits from his/her work. Such a situation leads to time management problem expressed by 60%, 57.14%, 66.66%, 62.5%, 66.66% and 66.66% of the undergraduates respectively for 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. So, they don't know how to manage the time during their research work. This observation corroborate those of Qasem and Zayid (2019), who identified that among the challenges faced by students while writing research proposals and projects is the duration or the time given for writing and conducting research proposals and projects is comparatively less and supervisors do not give an adequate time for discussing research proposals and projects. Also, number of student-researchers, that is 73.80% for the six years, encountered great difficulty for researchable issues identification. This rate was higher in 2018 with 75% of the respondents. As far as students views about research methodology is concerned, 60% of students in 2013, 57.14% in 2014, 66.66% in 2015, 62.5% in 2016, 66.66% in 2017 and 66.66% in 2018 didn't know how to analyse and interpret research findings and how to design up the conclusion and recommendations as concluded Ahmed and Mahboob (2016). In the same streamline, formatting text contents problem, statistical processing problem and documentation problem were expressed by 28, that is 66.66% of the undergraduate students. This last difficulty is very important. Because documentation is determinant for good scientific research. Moreover, student-researchers had difficulty in finding libraries where they can search for books. They had a very weak internet connection and some books that students need were not available in the library (Alsied and Ibrahim, 2017). This problem is similar to numerous African Universities and research centres.

Additionally, 61% of the students were faced with questionnaire designing and 80.95% have declared that they lack research methodology. These observations have proved the weak scientific skill of undergraduate students involved in the study. The study corroborates Al-Qaderi (2016) who examined

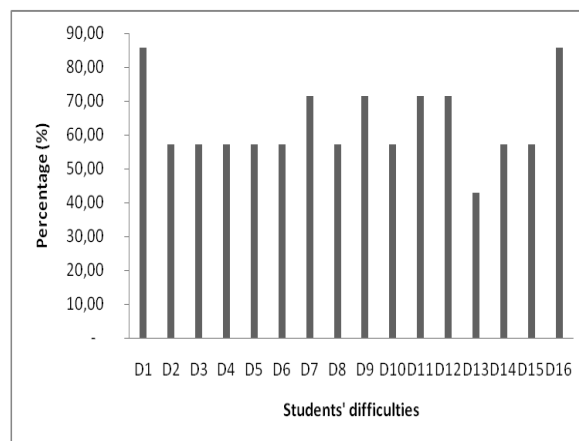
the challenges faced by undergraduate students in Ibb University, Yemen when they write their graduation research projects. He pointed out the weak academic level of the students in English as medium of instruction and research or in specialization and the lack of well-equipped library with open access to E-resources and website.

Otherwise, many others problems faced by students were revealed in the present study. There were lack of confidence while speaking, stress management, unfamiliarity with criteria of effective oral presentation, inability to outline the presentation objective to audience, fearing negative evaluation and comments during presentation by jury and words' pronunciation problem notified by 69.04%, 73.80%, 69.04%, 69.04%, 73.80%, and 73.80% respectively. These results showed that undergraduate students beyond the scientific writing problem suffer of deep presentation and communicative difficulties. The major reasons for such a low proficiency is due to various factors such as grammatical weakness, less practice, lack of motivation, educational background, weaknesses in using appropriate lexical items, Javid & Umer (2014), Widagdo (2017). Also, the financial problem was mentioned by student at 73.80% of them.

However, a prioritization of constraints showed that the lack of cooperation of the respondents is the major problem; followed by the weakness in research methodology skills. To avoid such problems, both students and University institution need involvement. Firstly, University must sensitize population about the importance of scientific research and its implication in their socioeconomic development. Secondly, student-researchers have to improve their scientific methodology proficiency by reading articles and works published. Nevertheless, the most important constraint varies depending on the students' promotion as shown in the graphics 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

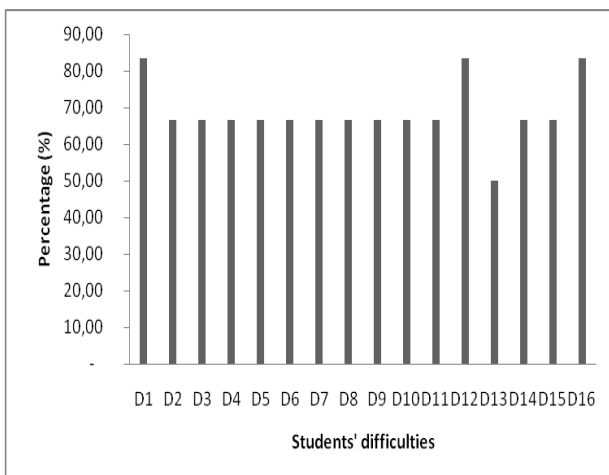


**Graph n°1:** Students difficulties in 2013  
**Source:** Survey data, 2013

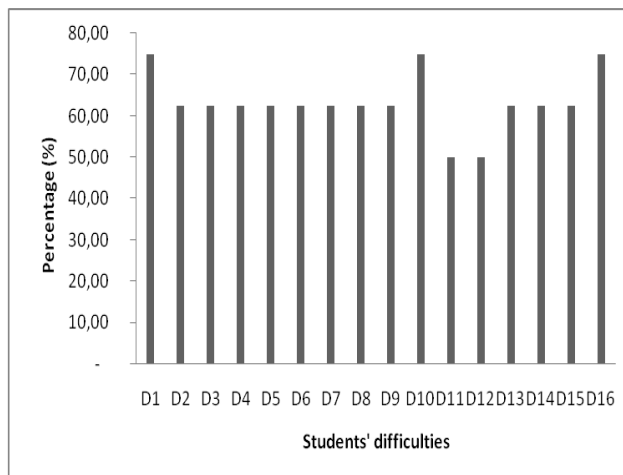


**Graph n°2:** Students difficulties in 2014  
**Source:** Survey data, 2014

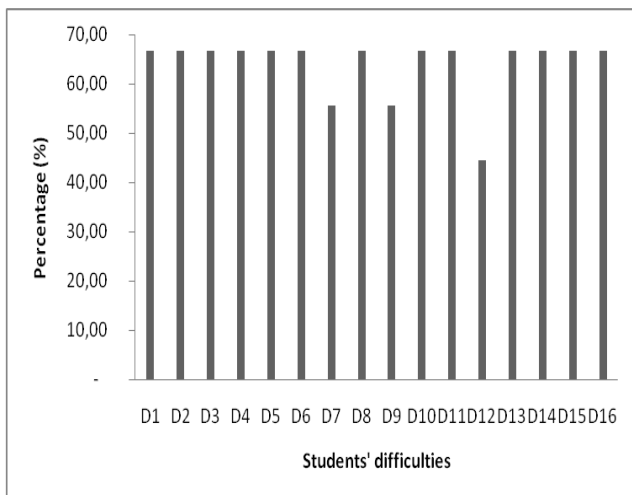




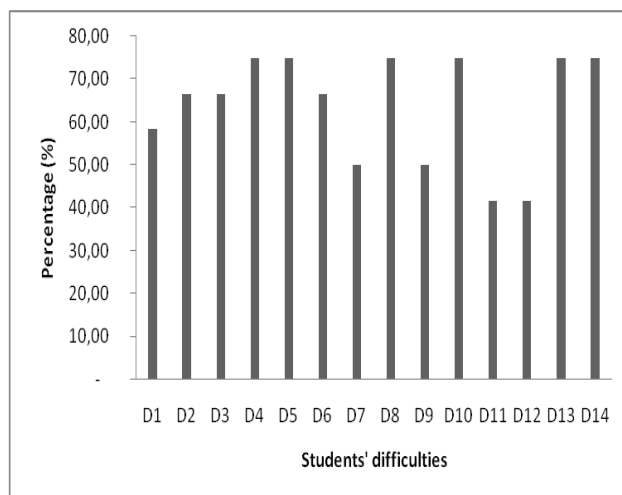
**Graph n°3:** Students difficulties in 2015  
**Source:** Survey data, 2015



**Graph n°4:** Students difficulties in 2016  
**Source:** Survey data, 2016



**Graph n°5:** Students difficulties in 2017  
**Source:** Survey data, 2017



**Graph n°6:** Students difficulties in 2018  
**Source:** Survey data, 2018

In 2013, the cooperation of the respondents' problem was the major difficulty of the students (graphic n°1). The graphic n° 2 shows two most important issues in 2014 which were respondents' cooperation as in preceded year, and the research methodology weakness. Students, in 2015, were faced with three prior difficulties such as cooperation problem, questionnaire designing problem and research methodology problem. As in 2015, three different constraints have retained students' attention. They were cooperation problem, outlining to audience presentation objective difficulty and research methodology problem. In 2017 like in 2018, student-researchers had many important issues. The difficulties D1, D2, D3, D4, D5, D6, D8, D10, D11, D13, D14, D15 and D16 were considered as most important in 2017. While the difficulties D4, D5, D8, D10, D13, D14 and D15 were mostly declared by them. These results have demonstrated that Bachelor students in English Department were facing greater and greater difficulties during their thesis research.

- *Lecturers' perceptions of students' difficulties*

The English lecturers' perceptions of the students' difficulties were slightly different from the ones of the students. In general, students' scientific skill weakness was mentioned by teachers.

From the table 2, all of the teachers, that means (100%), have indicated that students lack methodology in research and have no experience in statistical processing. Globally, (100%), attested that students don't know how to identify a researchable issues, how to design up questionnaire, how to analyse and interpret the findings and conclusion-recommendations writing. Such observations were made by Ndhlovu & Mwanza, (2015) who investigated the mistakes and challenges faced by postgraduate students in the school of education. His study explored that student's mistakes in writing proposals include broad and unclear topics, failure in methodology, terminologies of research, and problems in reporting the literature review.

Unanimously, the teachers were faced with text contents formatting by students. Kandeel, (2013) did similar conclusions in Jordan University. He discovered that student-researchers in French as Foreign Language (FFL) are unable to design up physically the text; the corpus was unorganized. He added that the text was in block, without titles; that has demonstrated that they are unable to divide it into paragraphs.

All of the supervisors (100%) had attested that their students lack relevant documentation and don't plan conveniently the time while conducting research. The study has corroborated Qasem and Zahid, (2019) who found that the challenges facing students in writing research proposals were, most importantly, absence of standard format, lack of knowledge in identifying clearly relevant literature review, lack of good, adequate, and regular feedback from supervisors, lack of materials related to selected topics, and finally the time arranged for writing proposals was not adequate.

Also they rose up some issues that are inner to students. These were unfamiliarity with effective oral presentation criteria (37.5%), outlining to audience the presentation objective (100%), fearing negative evaluation and comments during examination (100%), lack of self-confidence while speaking (60%) and words good pronunciation problem (100%). Consequently, 50% of them though that students were confronted with stress management. However, financial problem and cooperation problem even actual were less mentioned by lecturers. Because they consider that students can convince and cash respondents' adhesion and cooperation for investigation. About financial difficulty, students are paid latterly by government.

## **Conclusion**

The study has revealed the difficulties faced by English bachelor students during conducting their research work over the period 2013-2018. It has shown that student-researchers were confronted to two categories of challenges. The first one concerns the English language as medium of instruction and writing,

and the second one is related to the research methodology weakness. A prioritization of constraints showed that the lack of cooperation of the respondents was the major problem. It was followed by the weakness in research methodology skills. To avoid such issues, both university staff including the lecturers and student-researchers need involvement. This study provides a better basis for assisting Bachelor students and gives perspectives for further studies.

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