

Insights into Bachelor Thesis Writing for English Undergraduates: A Case Study from a Private University

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Abstract: *Writing a bachelor thesis in English in the senior year has long been a fixed requirement for English undergraduates in private colleges and universities in China. This study is aimed to find out the major barriers that English seniors have been confronted with in their bachelor's theses and how they evaluate the academic task they have completed. Data were collected through questionnaires as well as the aid of the English Department in College of Science and Technology of China Three Gorges University by probing into after-writing feedbacks from the writing process of 118 senior English undergraduates in 2021. The study shows that over 85% candidates found the bachelor thesis task no easy job. Meanwhile, various difficulties throughout thesis writing were reported ranging from high standards set on the thesis, absence of systematic academic training offered by the college to the busy senior year schedule, poor self-discipline to lack of supervision, low motives of writing, among others. The results of this study imply that it might not be rational to take a one-size-fits-all approach to English bachelor theses and it is hence suggested that the bachelor's thesis for English undergraduates in private higher institutions should be optional rather than mandatory by taking into consideration the real conditions of both students and the university.*

Keywords: *CST, Bachelor Thesis Writing, Difficulties, English Undergraduates, Evaluation*

1. Introduction

The bachelor thesis (BT) project has been an essential experience for senior undergraduates in both public and private colleges and universities in China. As a basic and the ultimate curriculum requirement, though duration may vary for different disciplines in different colleges and universities, the project usually starts at the beginning of the fourth or fifth (medical students) academic year, followed by certain regular procedures such as literature review, thesis proposal, thesis defense, etc.. Unlike most previous theoretical courses in the classroom or lecture hall, the BT task is more of practice for undergraduates with a combination of their academic knowledge and professional qualities acquired in college. As the final stage of the bachelor's degree program, writing BT is not only a showcase to put what the senior students have learned into practice, but also a challenge that involves innovation and research abilities [1].

In 2018, the Ministry of Education released its first national standard on teaching quality of higher education institutions, covering 587 majors in 92 categories for undergraduates. According to the National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate Foreign Language and Literature Majors (NSTQ), in addition to academic theses, senior undergraduates could also submit translation practice, internship reports, research reports and case studies, among others as the final component of their degree program [2]. Nonetheless, quite a lot of colleges and universities still prioritized BT while mostly ignoring the rest of the options as regards the degree assessment. It is mainly because most colleges and universities have established a mature system for writing, supervising and assessing the BT over the years.

On December 24, 2020, the Undergraduate Thesis (Design) Sampling Inspection Method (a trial version) (UTSIM) was issued and proposed that the sampling inspection of BT written in the previous year should be carried out once a year by the educational administration at provincial level, and in principle, the sampling proportion should not be less than 2%. Meanwhile, it called on all higher institutions involved to investigate and verify the BT suspected of plagiarism, counterfeiting, tampering, trading, ghostwriting and any other academic misconduct in accordance with the relevant procedures, and accordingly revoke the degree granted [3]. UTSIM is the first official guideline for BT inspection

nationwide and it will contribute tremendously to both the quality of BT and the scientific assessment of the degree. But it also implies that writing BT before graduation is still likely to be the mainstream assessment approach to the degree.

For a long time, studies on English BT considerably focus on qualities and tend to shed light on different problems detected from the perspective of supervisors by taking a few or a small group of samples in the process of offering guidance. According to Jinqin Li, English majors' lack of innovation and creativity had long been the biggest problem in BT and how to address the problem was the key to the quality of BT, which called for the cooperative efforts of students and teachers as well as the university^[4]. To improve the BT quality of English undergraduates, Xinwei Zhu, based on her supervising experience, proposed the combination mode of individual guidance and collective guidance^[5]. Huan Wang held that in addition to lack of innovation on writing topic selection, plagiarism and formatting errors were also penetrating through English BT writing, and that supervision work should be intensified from the very beginning of the task^[6]. Enlightened by NSTQ, Min Cao stressed the significance of critical thinking that was scarce in English undergraduates' BT and recommended that students' interest of learning should be nurtured and intensive literature reading be encouraged^[7]. Concentrating on English major's language performance in BT, Xingxing Li categorized all the language problems from BT of her students into interlingual errors and intralingual errors, and suggested that situational teaching and inquiry-based learning be widely adopted for both teachers and language learners^[8].

In fact, the great concern with BT quality for English undergraduates has never ceased in the past decade. However, there are very few studies conducted from the students' perspectives through hearing their complete voices, especially after the thesis defense. The voices of English undergraduates really matter if the BT quality is to upgrade and a more scientific evaluation of the degree is to be attained. Moreover, a matter-of-fact approach also matters in regard to the feasibility of BT for different English undergraduates in different colleges and universities.

2. Research Design

2.1 Objective

This study is aimed to find out what major problems the senior English undergraduates in a private college have been confronted with in the BT project, and how they evaluate the works they have completed in terms of the overall difficulty, expertise representation, innovation and research work interest.

2.2 Design and Sample

A cross-sectional study with a quantitative approach was designed for all the 124 senior English majors in May, 2021 at the College of Science and Technology of China Three Gorges University (CST). Founded in 2000, CST is a private multidisciplinary undergraduate college in west Hubei province, the People's Republic of China. With the unique location and a serious commitment to service, CST has been among one of the top private higher institutions in central China. English undergraduates in CST include students from three branches: English Language and Literature, Translation Practice and Business English.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaires were distributed to 124 senior English majors from CST between May 24 and 28, 2021, shortly after they finished their thesis defense. The prospective English graduates were invited to participate in a survey concerning their bachelor theses, and asked to respond honestly and anonymously in the questionnaire that consisted of four multiple-choice questions and one short-answer question. All of the 124 candidates were willing to join the survey and were required to send their questionnaires back to the writer's mail box in the college by the end of May 31, 2021. Finally, 118 valid questionnaires were collected back.

Data form multiple-choice questions were gathered and input into a dedicated computer and handled with the aid of Microsoft Excel 2016. For the diversified responses collected from the open-ended question, induction was adopted before data processing.

3. Results

Major findings derived from the study are presented below in two aspects: students' difficulties in the process of BT writing and their evaluation of the task.

3.1 Students' Difficulties

Students' difficulties in the BT task were detected in the short-answer question "What major difficulties have you been faced with in the bachelor thesis task?" Students' feed-backs vary and cover a wide range of factors. 11 participants (9.3%) wrote down only one answer, 107 (90.7%) contributed at least two while 80 (67.8%) responded with more than four. The inductive method was introduced for relevant and similar information. For instance, complaints from respondents about the official repetition ratio for the thesis, the number of revised drafts, the required number of words and the unpleasant duration of the whole task were all classified into "high standards". Finally, the major difficulties reported from 118 senior English undergraduates are categorized and summarized as follows.

More than 70% participants seemed bored with the tedious process of BT and thought that the numerous standards set for them in different stages (research subject selection, literature review, thesis proposal, thesis defense, etc.) were somewhat high. About 63% respondents confessed that they were not able to concentrate on BT by listing a series of distractions. According to the official schedule for English graduates of 2021 in CST, the first draft of BT is supposed to be submitted by early January 2021, the end of the first semester and the terminal draft at the end of April. A lot of respondents said that they were not able to finish their first draft before the deadline due to their busy internship. Some even complained that they failed to turn in an acceptable final draft before the thesis defense in late May despite repetitive revisions and trials. Besides, a large proportion of participants claimed that they had neither knowledge nor experience before on such professional writing, and consequently attributed their obstacles in BT either to absence of systematic courses or lectures on academic writing offered by the college (50.8%) or lack of guidance from their supervisors (39.8%). However, 47.5% respondents viewed their weak autonomous work as one of the greatest challenges in BT writing.

Table 1: What major difficulties have you been faced with in the BT task?

Difficulties	Number of respondents	Percentage
high standards	84	71.2%
busy senior year schedule	75	63.6%
absence of professional academic training	60	50.8%
poor self-discipline	56	47.5%
lack of supervision	47	39.8%
poor language proficiency	39	33.1%
low motives of writing	31	26.3%

3.2 Students' Evaluation of the BT Task

3.2.1 Evaluation in Terms of Task Difficulty

Evaluation of difficulty of the academic thesis was seen in students' responses to the survey question "What's your view on difficulty of the bachelor thesis task?" There were four options from which 15 (13.6%) candidates marked *Easy* or *Fairly Easy* while 102 (86.4%) decided on *Hard* or *Very Hard*.

Table 2: What's your view on difficulty of the BT task?

Difficulty Level	Fairly Easy	Easy	Hard	Very Hard
Number of respondents	3	12	79	23
Percentage	3.4%	10.2%	66.9%	19.5%

3.2.2 Evaluation in Terms of Expertise

Expertise refers to professional knowledge or competence attained by English undergraduates through study and training required by the Teaching Guide for Undergraduate English Majors in Colleges and Universities (TG) ^[9]. Students' evaluation of BT on expertise was acquired from the question "Could bachelor theses reflect your expertise?" 52 (44.1%) English seniors believed in the positive role that BT played in their expertise representation, less than those (60, 50.8%) who held the opposite view.

Table 3: Could BT reflect your expertise?

Options	Yes	Unsure	No
Number of respondents	52	6	60
Percentage	44.1%	5.1%	50.8%

3.2.3 Evaluation in Terms of Innovation

Innovation means creative work. The creative work in BT could be new methods, new hypotheses, new areas, new perspective and (or) new findings, etc., which were displayed in brackets after the question “Was there creative work in your bachelor thesis?” Surprisingly, the vast majority of respondents (83.9%) revealed that there was not any creative work in their academic thesis, though there is supposed to be some.

Table 4: Was there creative work in your BT?

Options	Yes	Unsure	No
Number of respondents	14	5	99
Percentage	11.9%	4.2%	83.9%

3.2.4 Evaluation in Terms of Interest in Research

Over 70% of all respondents said that they were not interested in research work while approximately one fifth of them showed interest. It is unknown whether the decision of the preference was made long before the BT task or right after they finished it. However, if they are to engage in research work in the future, they are more likely to attend the graduate school for further study.

Table 5: Are you interested in research work?

Options	Yes	Unsure	No
Number of respondents	23	12	83
Percentage	19.5%	10.2%	70.3%

4. Discussion

The major finding of the study implies that the present one-size-fits-all approach to BT for English undergraduates may not work as well as it is hoped. According to Administrative Measures for the Authorization and Conferment of Bachelor’s Degree (AMBD), the bachelor’s degree cannot be awarded unless the candidates have finished either their graduation thesis or design as required^[10]. As to the forms of graduation works for undergraduates, diversity is permitted. Nonetheless, for English undergraduates, writing academic papers in English seems to be a long-standing tradition, and it has become the final and one of the most significant criteria for the degree in both public and private higher institutions in China, though differences exist as to specific requirements such as duration of the task, word number, duplicating rate, credits, etc. in different colleges and universities.

Generally speaking, students with better performance in College Entrance Examination (CEE) are more likely to attend public higher institutions. It is also widely accepted that compared with private ones, public colleges and universities are endowed with better resources and higher levels of platforms in addition to superior sources of students. Therefore, there should and could be differences as to how to complete and appraise the graduation works. Given that one of the initial purposes of BT is to summarize and demonstrate what the graduates have acquired in both knowledge and competence related to their major in college, and that more than half of the participants in the survey held a negative attitude toward BT regarding expertise, it is firmly believed that for English undergraduates in private higher institutions like CST, BT should not have been the best or the most widely adopted approach to the purpose. Internship programs, translation practice, publications and even specialized examinations, for example, can help as well.

At first glance, surprisingly, most candidates (83.9%) reported lack of or no innovation in their BT. However, it is not surprising to notice that in liberal arts such as language study, innovation in either theory or practice is rather difficult especially for students in private colleges. Forcing all the English undergraduates into BT with creative work is far away from nurturing their interest and abilities, which can be partly mirrored from students’ low motives for writing (26.3%) and their disinterest in research work (70.3%). In a word, policies and measures concerning the degree project ought to be based on real conditions of the colleges and universities after taking into consideration difficulties faced by the

majority of students and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. After all, 86.4% English majors in CST found BT writing arduous.

Another major finding is that the current curriculum program for English undergraduates in CST may have played an inactive role in developing their competence. According to TG, English undergraduates should not only have gained a good command of the language, but also have acquired such qualities before graduation as intercultural competence, independent learning capability, basic research ability as well as critical thinking. However, results show that at least 50% respondents threw a negative attitude toward whether BT represented their expertise. Meanwhile, 33.1% candidates in the study reported problems in language performance in one way or another and 39.8% ascribed their difficulties in BT to the supervisors for not offering help as needed. Maybe this is true. But it is also true that BT offers the senior students golden opportunities to not only show but grow their independent learning and research abilities. Therefore, students' lack of supervision or language inefficiency can be also recognized as a manifestation of their inability to think critically and study independently and creatively.

According to the NSTQ, curriculum design and development should be dynamic and student-centered, and more importantly, cater to the needs of society. Unfortunately, although a wide range of courses are offered in CST, most of them prove relatively stable. In some courses like *An Integrated English Course*^[11], *Advanced English*^[12] and *Successful Writing*^[13], the writer notes that the same textbooks have been in use for nearly a decade. Undoubtedly, those textbooks proved helpful for both teachers and students and may still work. But it cannot be denied that however classic a specific course is, the curriculum adopted and teaching materials selected ought to keep pace with the learners and the times as well.

In fact, the situation in CST is not unusual nationwide. From a historical perspective, little emphasis has been put on learners' creative and critical thinking in practical English teaching throughout the country^[14]. In the meantime, as English Language and Literature has sprung up in more and more higher institutions since 2003, the great homogenization of curriculum structure and evaluation approach for English undergraduates in a great number of colleges and universities regardless of their own real conditions has impaired the sound and sustainable development of the major^[15].

The third finding of the study relates to the senior year predicament of English undergraduates. Take CST for example, a busy senior year schedule is filled with a required three-month off-campus internship from October to December, job hunting and interviews, types of significant examinations such as the National Teachers Certificate Examinations in October and March, the annual National Post-graduate Entrance Examination in December, Civil Service Examinations in November and April or May (national or provincial level), Test for English Majors Band 8 in March, etc. and most importantly, the BT task throughout the year. Every examination entails sustained painstaking efforts and matters directly or indirectly to their future career. With physical and mental fatigue in so many distractions, it is hard for the senior students to work to the maximum of their intellectual ability and give BT the top priority as suggested.

Whether BT ought to be prioritized by senior students is not a problem. The problem is how shall the authority make a proper senior year schedule for the students and help them spend the year in a less hurried and stressful yet more effective way. According to AMBD, higher education institutions have the right to set their own regulations as to the process and procedures of BT based on the reality of the institution and their majors. If we take a reasonable look at the BT project in CST, it is not difficult to find that spending almost a whole academic year on BT is incredible. But in many colleges and universities including public ones, traditions so far have still outweighed the real conditions.

Finally, it has to be mentioned that communicative competence in native language should also be valued by English majors though this is not specified in TG or NSTQ. Good interpersonal skills play an active part not only in effective communication with the supervisors, but also in successful teamwork with other learners and researchers. In light of the poor self-discipline and weak supervision reported by some respondents, it is also recommended that a more effective and specific mechanism on guidance be established for both supervisors and students to promote better exchanges and closer cooperation between the two sides.

5. Conclusion

This paper probed into the main difficulties that the English graduates of 2021 in CST encountered in BT, and tentatively examined how they looked at the required senior year task. Based on the investigation above and given the sources and career planning of English majors in private universities,

a more reasonable and micro look should be taken at the BT project and a more practical approach has to be adopted to the degree assessment in CST and the universities alike.

6. Limitations

First of all, the study was conducted to the English graduates of 2021 only in CST. If the source of the samples in the study had been more various, the outcome of the survey might have been somewhat different. In addition, most of the survey questions were yes-or-no ones and the options designed were quite simple. If more details of the questions were taken into consideration, evaluation from the participants would be received in a more multi-dimensional way. For example, it is still unknown that to what extent the respondents thought that BT could represent their expertise and why half of the respondents did not believe in expertise reflection of their BT. It is also hard to recognize where their innovation was in theses for those 8.5% respondents and why around 70% of the surveyed showed little passion for research work. Nonetheless, these limitations are also quite illuminating for the further relevant study ahead. More importantly, this pilot study is hopefully able to shed light on the current situation of the bachelor's degree project for English undergraduates in private colleges and universities across the country, thereby helping to develop the degree assessment as well as the curriculum system for English undergraduates in a more scientific way.

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