

# From Novice to Expert: Masters' ELT Students' Voices on the Emotional Geography in Thesis Proposal Writing Difficulties

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## ABSTRACT

Research on the emotions felt by master's students in the face of difficulties during the process of writing a thesis proposal has been scarce in higher education. This study adopted a qualitative approach, while the type of research was a narrative inquiry. This study used semi-structured interviews to explore three masters' ELT students' emotional geography in writing thesis proposals at a university in Indonesia and using thematic analysis to analyze the data. This study was framed by Emotional Geography (EG) as a means for understanding masters' ELT students' voices in thesis proposal writing. This result revealed that masters' ELT students experienced various emotions, such as positive and negative emotions, that arise through their relationship and interaction with their thesis supervisor, which influenced the writing of their thesis proposal. As such, EG has provided insight about the role of emotional aspects which thesis supervisors can apply as a strategy for building relationships with students that support the proposal writing process.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Master students are deemed academically competent in higher education when they contribute to research in the form of a thesis (Sadeghi & Kajepasha, 2015). According to the official regulation on the management and administration of tertiary institutions by the Minister of Research, Technology, and Higher Education Number 50 of 2018, which discusses the publication of scientific papers, a requirement for graduate students at the master's level is to compile and complete a thesis. This field of work is crucial because the thesis writing period is a transitional period through which a novice researcher becomes a specialist (Leesing, 2011; Matsuda, 2003). In the process of writing a thesis, master's students will learn how to conduct research and report findings (Wang & Yang, 2012). Therefore, they arrange and prepare their research properly to produce quality writing (Hyland, 2016). This activity requires master students to develop knowledge and academic writing skills. In addition, many students think that they can write when they believe they have an interesting idea to write about

(Murray, 2011). Neupane Bastola (2020) explored that students' focus was on the completion of a thesis rather than learning. On the other hand, writing a thesis is not as easy as it sounds because in writing a thesis, students will need time to improve their writing skills, sort out articles that are suitable for their research, and design research ideas that must be clear. However, writing a thesis can be a barrier to completing their education on time because this activity is very challenging and exhausting (Lindsay, 2015).

The first step taken by master students in writing a thesis is to make a research proposal (Wang & Yang, 2012). A research proposal is the main key to thesis writing and the research process (Madsen, 1992). A proposal is a study plan that helps the researcher when researching because it contains procedures or stages of work that must be done following the specified time (Behling, 1984). In the process of writing a research proposal, it is necessary to develop writing skills by understanding writing strategies, following certain patterns, and practicing writing in a disciplined manner (Silvia, 2007; Yakhontova, 2003). This proved that in the process of writing a thesis, students should be ready to experience difficulties because it requires more knowledge to prove their arguments. In the process, the difficulties and problems faced by each master's student in writing a thesis proposal are certainly very different. Based on the research by Wang and Yang (2012), they found out the difficulties faced by master students when conducting research proposals. One of them is that they feel depressed in the proposal writing process, which comes from ambiguous knowledge of the research area and difficulty negotiating with supervisors. Sandeghi and Kajepasha (2015) revealed several problems in their thesis work. Apart from methodological problems, the style and language used in thesis writing were also some of the difficulties experienced by master students in writing theses. Then, Ravari & Tan (2018) found useful strategies for non-native master students to adopt and to overcome challenges in the thesis writing process.

Several studies have examined and influenced our understanding of university students' emotions toward thesis supervision (Bastola & Hu, 2020; Hintsanen & Pyhältö, 2018; Liu & Yu, 2021; Weise, Gonzalez, & Castello, 2020). Although there have been studies on students' emotions, previous studies have not focused on students' emotional constellations in depth. The significant gaps from the previous research could be seen as methodological and substantial. However, in the previous year, only quantitative and mixed-method analyses were used. Referring to previous research, we found that students in higher education still experienced various difficulties or problems when researchers wrote a thesis. Previous studies have described the challenges of writing a thesis but have not focused on the experiences of the participants, and there are other aspects of the topic that need to be further explored. Motivated by these considerations, the current empirical study set out to examine the emotional landscape in difficulties of thesis writing by masters' ELT students, particularly those in the English Language Teaching (ELT) major, by understanding the perspectives of students directly in the context of Indonesian institutions. This study employed an interpretative research paradigm and emotional knowledge through narrative inquiry to qualitatively illustrate the broader narrative of the emergence and change of students' emotions. From a theoretical point of view, the current empirical study employed emotional geography (Hargreaves, 2001) to show how masters' ELT students' emotionality was encountered in various geographic dimensions (e.g., personal/physical, professional, socio cultural, moral, and political). This framework investigated the socio-emotional elements of three masters' ELT students as they struggled to write a thesis proposal with their thesis supervisor.

It is expected that this study might generate new insights that are useful for master's ELT students in exploring the role of emotions through academic writing. Therefore, this study focuses on exploring the participants' emotional experiences in facing difficulties in the process of writing a thesis, and the research will be conducted using narrative inquiry as a research methodology. This study applied narrative inquiry as the research methodology adopted from Clandinin & Cornlerly (2000). The narrative inquiry itself is a process of telling, analyzing, and criticizing personal stories through various instruments such as interviews (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014). In connection with the explanation above, this study aimed to investigate the emotional landscape of master's ELT students' experiences

in their difficulties of thesis proposal writing and identify the contributions of the emotional landscape for higher education students. According to the gap above, this research comes up with the following research question: What emotions do masters' ELT students reflect about their difficulties in thesis writing experiences through their thesis supervisor, as viewed from Hargreaves's (2000) Emotional Geography theory?

## 2. METHODS

Three students in the English language education department participated in the research. The three students were chosen because they met the research criteria, which included having experienced difficulties and problems in writing a thesis proposal together with their supervisor. The participants were around 25 to 27 years old and from different control groups. This present study used a qualitative method. As a qualitative researcher, we have used the interpretive paradigm to investigate the different perspectives of the participants in this study. As an interpretative paradigm, this approach is aligned with qualitative data collection, analysis, and procedure (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2018). It used narrative inquiry as a methodological design that will make it easier for researchers to carry out qualitative research.

Meanwhile, we used interviews to obtain data about participants' experiences. The stories of five master students who had difficulties and problems in writing their thesis proposals became the main source of data. The purpose of conducting interviews is to obtain very clear and in-depth information about the experiences faced by master's students in the process of writing a thesis. Experiences that will be thoroughly explored relate to problems and difficulties in the process of writing a thesis. Before collecting interview data, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with them using interview guideline questions, and then we made structured interview questions for interview guides using the current frameworks by Hargreaves' emotional geography (2001), exploring masters' ELT students' emotions, and Wang and Yang (2012) regarding student difficulties when writing a thesis proposal. According to Blumer (1969), a semi-structured interview addressed how different perspectives are perceived by the people involved. The interview process was recorded using audio, and after that, we transcribed the data that we had obtained. All participants gave their consent for the recording and transcription of the interviews. Thematic analysis is used to analyze the data that has been obtained from the participants. Then, we analysed qualitative data using thematic analysis techniques in this study to reflect on and identify patterned themes in a phenomenon.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interviews conducted with three participants of this study were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques that bring up several themes that need to be analyzed in depth. The results of the themes that emerged are described one by one as below:

### 3.1. *Emotional Geography of Masters' ELT Students*

The first research question concerns, "What emotions are master's ELT students reflected about their thesis writing experiences with thesis supervisor viewed from Hargreaves's (2000) Emotional Geography theory?" answered through the five emotional terms according to Hargreaves regarding emotional geography which we used as a research framework to analyze the emotions of masters' ELT students.

#### 3.1.1. **Physical Geography**

Personal geography/physics refers to the proximity or distance created by space and time, but the meaning implied in the term "physical" can also be related to the distance between students and thesis supervisors which can develop into a close or distant relationship. In writing thesis proposals, students are assisted and guided by supervisors to write quality research proposal projects. In this physical

geography, through space and time, various emotional experiences of ELT master students have emerged, and we presented one theme that describes their feelings from the findings of this study.

### **Students' Emotional Behaviors in Thesis Proposal Writing**

The first theme concerns the emotional behavior felt by all participants, including the supervisors, in writing a thesis proposal. The interview data revealed how students felt about their emotional behavior in exerting their thoughts, time, and energy to write a thesis proposal. The emotional behavior that students feel is divided into two categories, such as positive and negative emotional behavior. Jennie said:

*"While writing my thesis proposal, I experienced several difficulties with the introduction, literature review, and methodology, and it made me feel physically exhausted. I also remembered that when I was working on the thesis proposal, I felt sad, bored, worried, and unmotivated because I got so many revisions from my supervisor, but I learned from those mistakes." (Jennie-Int)*

Through the difficulties she faced, it led her to feel negative emotions, such as always feeling exhausted, sad, bored, worried, and unmotivated. On the other hand, despite feeling various negative emotions, she was willing to learn from her mistakes. Contrary to the story of Nuri, who has experience writing thesis proposals, she gave another view of emotional behavior as a beginner writer, based on her feelings when she had difficulty writing a thesis proposal. Nuri and Jennie felt negative emotions when they had difficulties writing a thesis proposal, but Nuri considered this to be a heavy burden and put more emphasis on the negative emotions she felt. This result can be proven by the explanation below:

*"For me, who is still a beginner writer, especially in academic writing, it turns out to be enough to make me exhausted and sad for a while. I felt a mental burden, and it quite tormented my mind in the process of writing a thesis proposal. The mental burden when writing this thesis proposal is very heavy because I should remember that it is my responsibility to complete my thesis, and this is not an easy journey." (Nuri-Int)*

Then, we found one of the answers that were very opposite and different from the experience of Aya's story, who was also one of the participants who experienced physical emotion. To find out how the positive emotions Aya felt can be seen through her interview answers:

*"I am aware that my progress is slower in writing a thesis proposal than my other friends, but I enjoyed with every process. I feel motivated and challenged to learn how to write a proper thesis proposal with my supervisor. When there were some mistakes in my thesis proposal, my supervisor didn't blame me and corrected them clearly. I am very delighted with this kind of situation." (Aya-Int)*

Through all the excerpts above, the physical geography of masters' ELT students showed that master students have different emotions when working on a thesis proposal on physical geography that they experience.

### **3.1.2. Moral Geography**

Moral geography is related to a person's closeness when interacting with other people, caused by the similarity of goals and norms that apply in society (Hargreaves, 2001). The goals and norms applied by the supervisor affected students' emotional condition during the writing of a thesis proposal. Here, we presented one theme that reflected their feelings from the findings of this study.

### ***Students' Motivation in Thesis Proposal Writing***

The first theme concerns the motivation felt by all participants, including the supervisors, in writing a thesis proposal. In moral geography, masters' ELT students give some emotional reactions that are felt in the process of writing a thesis proposal. According to the interviews' data, the reason they were motivated was because the thesis proposals they worked on met the supervisor's expectations and were able to complete their proposals properly and correctly. One of the examples is from Nuri's statement:

*"According to my experience when working on my thesis proposal, the thing that increased my enthusiasm was if my proposal was in accordance with the expectations of my supervisor. When I have done and revised my mistakes according to what my supervisor said, I feel more motivated and confident in doing research because the purpose of my research is clear and in accordance with the direction of my more professional supervisor" (Nuri- Int).*

*"The difficulty in working on the thesis proposal paid off when I managed to understand what was lacking in the content of my thesis proposal because my work was in accordance with the expectations of my supervisor, and it motivated me to consistently work on my thesis" (Aya- Int).*

*"Although there are many challenges in writing a thesis proposal, I felt motivated when what I wrote in my thesis proposal was in accordance with my supervisor. It made my research clear, and it also fit for our purpose" (Jennie, Int).*

The three masters' ELT students have same believed that in the process of writing a thesis proposal, the difficulties they encountered in writing the research proposal would have been surmountable if it had met the supervisor's expectations. Meanwhile, it increased their motivation in writing a thesis proposal because the supervisor and student have clear and appropriate research objectives. The goals they wanted to achieve were the same, and they could improve students' motivation to write thesis proposals.

### **3.1.3. Professional Geography**

The participants' experiences, it showed that the role and support of supervisors in guiding master's ELT students can help them during thesis proposal writing. Here, we present two themes that reflect their feelings about the findings of this study.

#### ***Supervisors' Role in Thesis Proposal Writing***

Supervisors behave professionally in helping students who experience difficulties with the progress of writing to ELT master students so that the goals of all parties are achieved. From the supervisor's action, my participants have a different experience about their supervisor's role in thesis proposal writing. One example is from Aya's statement:

*"When I had difficulties writing my proposal, my supervisor gave clear directions so that I could find out more about my research. It truly affected my mood. Sometimes, my supervisor was also careful about the mistakes in the format of the proposal and the language that I wrote and then corrected it well." (Aya-Int)*

Nuri also has similar experience through positive emotions, and she added:

*"My supervisor was quite cooperative and thorough in checking my thesis proposal thoroughly. Besides, she was also very clear when giving feedback and made sure I understood what she had said. Sometimes she asked about this and invited me to discuss it. This really helped me to understand what she was saying. I was delighted and motivated at the same time." (Nuri-Int)*

Jennie delivered a different voice; she also offered another perspective about her supervisor's role in her thesis proposal writing. Jennie also added her opinion:

*"My supervisor provided help by providing references that I could use so that the content of my thesis proposal was of higher quality and fit for publication. The feedback doesn't seem clear, and I appreciated it (accepted). Sometimes, she also lets me send her messages if I want to ask some questions." (Jennie-Int)*

### **Providing Support and Encouragement**

The second theme relates to the supervisor's support, which evokes several emotional reactions felt by master students in the process of writing a thesis proposal. In this study, professional geography refers to the cooperative attitude given by supervisors to students. Jennie uttered:

*"My supervisor motivated me to complete my task. If I rarely came to the thesis guidance session, she asked me about the progress of my thesis proposal. Sometimes, she listened to my complaints and provided some solutions when I felt like I had given up and wanted to stop working on my thesis proposal." (Jennie-Int)*

Jennie explained that her supervisor gave positive affirmations to encourage her to work on her thesis. Then, Aya felt the same experience. Here, Aya also gave her perspective by saying:

*"When I met with the supervisor for a thesis proposal consultation, she asked me about the difficulties I was experiencing and motivated me to keep working on it and progress even a little." (Aya-Int)*

At the same time, Nuri conveyed her thoughts about her relationship with her supervisor. In addition, she confirmed that she did not have a close relationship with her supervisor. She stated:

*"My supervisor doesn't contact me regularly or ask about my progress. I should be more active in meeting her because she rarely supports me emotionally. The relationship is not that very close, and it is only limited to the relationship between supervisors and student." (Nuri-Int)*

According to the explanation that Nuri put forward during the interview session, she should be more active in contacting her supervisor because her supervisor seldom monitors her progress. Nuri thought that her supervisor did not encourage her to complete her thesis because she was rarely invited to communicate about it. It can be seen from Nuri's other perspective, she added:

*"Sometimes, I feel that she was not pushing me to finish the thesis proposal soon because I was very rarely contacted but when I needed my supervisor's help, she helped me and sometimes she gave me some motivation." (Nuri-Int)*

### **3.1.4. Political Geography**

Political geography is related to a person's closeness to other people, which is caused by factors of power and social status attached to each person. In the process of writing a thesis proposal, political geography refers to supervisors and master students. In this study, political geography was found in the three participants through an interaction process with their supervisor. Here, we present two themes that reflect their feelings from the findings of this study.

#### **Controlling Behavior**

When guiding the process of writing a thesis proposal, students need direction from supervisors to improve their writing so that it becomes quality writing. Political geography felt by students when writing a thesis proposal with supervisors is the power that is exercised by controlling behavior by their supervisors, but each supervisor has a different way of using power and controlling their participants. Jennie uttered:

*“My supervisor used her power to make decisions on my thesis proposal project. I remembered that she had changed my topic of interest and asked me to change the topic to fit her interests. I tried to negotiate about this and gave her a critical explanation, but she still forced me to follow her suggestions. That decision made me unmotivated.” (Jennie-Int)*

Different perspectives emerge from the experiences gained by master’s ELT students while working on a thesis proposal. In her experience, her supervisor does not use her powers and is willing to consider the interests of students. Besides, Aya's supervisor was also sensitive and concerned with the feelings of students when writing a thesis proposal, and the actions taken by the supervisor motivated her enthusiasm for working on the thesis proposal. Aya stated one of the insightful remarks:

*“My two supervisors have never used their power in the process of writing a thesis proposal. Both of my supervisors told me to do research according to what I was interested in because, in the end, all my work was mine and I will be the master in the field that I am interested in. I don’t forget that they also make sure that I was delighted to this experience. They were professional in helping me when I had difficulties in writing my thesis proposal and this really motivated me.” (Aya-Int)*

Decision making is processed to determine the best option or action to meet individual’s need. Nuri clarified that her supervisor uses her power in making decision to solve her problem. According to her experienced, her supervisor wanted to involve her in making the best decision for thesis proposal progress. Nuri said:

*“I was very delighted because my supervisor never forced her will on me. I remembered about how she always makes best decisions based on what I understood from what I’ve found in the journal. I was once asked to change my topic because of my mistake: I did not really understand the topic and the material well. This condition happened because I was unable to find gaps in my research. Then, she asked me to explore credible journal, but my research topic was still in accordance with my interest. She is not arbitrary but responsible, and she tried to negotiate or discuss with me first to make decision.” (Nuri-Int)*

### **Student Prepared to Learn**

In this study, masters’ ELT students used their position as someone who is ready to learn. They are beginner researchers and learned to accept criticism and suggestions from their supervisor who already has a lot of experience, especially in the field of research. The second theme concerns the position of students who are preparing to study in writing a thesis proposal. As an example, Nuri Stated:

*“As a master’s student, I was far from being smart and I position myself as someone who needs knowledge, especially in writing a thesis proposal, because I learn how to study and do research properly. I also learned to think critically when conveying argument, so when I felt my position was still lacking knowledge, I made mistakes. I just want to learn more.” (Nuri-Int)*

In this excerpt, Nuri conveyed that through writing thesis proposal. This kind of research project has significantly affected students’ ability to do research properly because writing thesis proposal has honed her ability to think critically and write logically. She realized about her position who still had limits to her knowledge, but that it made her even more excited about learning. In responding to this notion, Jennie implied that the activity of writing a thesis proposal made her realize that her position as a learner was beneficial to her.

*"I did have experience in making a thesis when I was still an undergraduate student. I thought, I already knew a lot of things, but it turned out that my knowledge was still lacking, and I realized it when I was a master's student working on a proposal. At first, I didn't believe in myself because I only focused on my inability and limited knowledge that I had. However, I have finally learned to accept my shortcomings and I am trying to study harder so that I understand proper research."*  
(Jennie-Int)

Meanwhile, Aya gave a different point of view on this matter.

*"So far, I have positioned myself as someone who still needs help from a supervisor in writing a thesis proposal. I always follow directions and feedback from supervisors but if my supervisors have different views from mine, I don't immediately follow theirs. I will give a logical argument and convey it properly to the supervisor because, just like me, my supervisor is also someone who has limited knowledge."* (Aya-Int)

Aya considered that her position while she was writing her proposal thesis was a learner who needed help from her supervisor. Moreover, Aya also added that she did not use the position she felt to cover up her critical and logical ideas when discussing with supervisors. Aya's political geography showed that she is open to receiving suggestions and directions indirectly, but they were also trying to convey ideas she believed.

### **Discussion**

The emotions reflected by masters' ELT students in relation to the thesis writing difficulties they experience through their thesis supervisors are reviewed from Hargreaves' (2000) Emotional Geography Framework. From the physical geography dimension, this finding indicated that master students' emotional behavior can be influenced by external factors such as the environment around them. In the context of writing a thesis proposal, their emotional behavior can be seen through interactions between students and supervisors. According to Hargreaves (2000), the concept of emotional geography is determined based on broad human interactions, and these interactions are not only limited to physical, social, and cultural interactions but can also be related to psychological and environmental situations. Social and cultural physical interactions can be linked to the psychological situation and the environment where the human being is located.

In the socio-cultural geography dimension, in the process of collecting and analyzing data, this finding found a shortcoming, such as not finding participants' answers related to the socio-cultural dimension of the emotional experiences of masters' ELT students in facing difficulties when writing thesis proposals. This shortcoming derived from the observation that socio-cultural emotions emphasize gender, age, linguistic, and cultural differences that are hard to locate and apply within the parameters of the thesis writing process. Exploring the socio-cultural dimension was irrelevant to the conditions of the thesis proposal writing process. However, when focusing on and sorting out the interviews of our participants about this dimension, from the interviews, we found out something new about the use of language by supervisors when giving feedback to students. Sometimes, supervisors commented using inappropriate language when they still made some mistakes in writing the thesis proposal. This condition affected the closeness of the relationship between master students and supervisors. Meanwhile, the moral geography dimension has found that most masters' ELT students feel positive emotions such as motivation, enthusiasm, and confidence.

From the professional geography dimension, they did not feel any negative emotions because positive emotions dominated the emotions they felt. The positive emotions that emerge are enthusiasm, delight, motivation, and acceptance. This finding showed that supervisors' role in thesis proposal writing is essential for master's students, especially in supporting and providing help when they face difficulties in writing a thesis proposal. It is further supported by a prior study by Ravari and Tan (2019), which found a correlation between the supervisor's supporting role and how much students

gained from their efforts. The role of this supervisor was to help in the form of additional understanding and insight that is useful for them through direction and advice made by the supervisor. Meanwhile, supporting research that has been conducted by Wang and Yang (2012), they mentioned that all difficulties in writing thesis proposals can be overcome by discussing with their supervisors who are more experienced supervisors to help the thesis writing process write a thesis proposal. This present study also supported the arguments by the previous studies (Agricola, Van der Schaaf, Prins, & Tartwijk, 2020; Liu & Yu, 2021), claimed that to help students learn more effectively, supervisors must offer them suggestions and directions (Liu & Yu, 2021), as well as provide ongoing assistance for students' research projects by conducting meetings with supervisors (Agricola, Van der Schaaf, Prins, & Tartwijk, 2020).

From the political geography dimension, positive and negative emotions emerged and were felt by all three participants. The positive emotions that emerged were delighted, motivated, relieved, and accepted. In addition, the only negative emotion that emerged was unmotivated. This finding showed that masters' ELT students position themselves as someone willing to learn from mistakes and accept suggestions from supervisors. This finding aligned with Wang & Yang (2012), who believed that each student had to update their supervisors on how they were progressing while completing their proposals, and because they were inexperienced writers, they were unable to overcome all the writing issues. This finding also found conflicts of interest during the interaction between students and supervisors that affect the emotional state of students. Besides having an important role in thesis writing, the supervisor also has a will towards the use of power to help students decide their next steps. This was conducted to evaluate students' research. This resonates with the assertions made by de Kleijn et al. (2013) that supervisors were heavily involved in evaluating the standard of student research, and a conflict of interest may arise. Based on their experience, the participants said their supervisors used their authority, and a master's ELT student used their position as a novice researcher who is ready to learn and accept every mistake they have made.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This narrative study explored the voices of masters' ELT students in Indonesia. There are two focus points in this study regarding the emotional geography of master students when writing a thesis proposal. In particular, the results of this study indicated that masters' ELT students feel various emotions through their relationship with supervisors which are categorized into five emotional geographies. The difficulties experienced by master students, not only by themselves but also through their supervisors, affect their emotional conditions, which are decided into positive and negative emotions through the process of interacting with supervisors. The findings provided insights into how ELT master's students' emotions are reflected through their difficulties in writing thesis proposals as well as the difficulties they face in creating thesis proposals with their supervisors. This study fills a methodological gap by exploring ELT master students' past experiences through the biographical narrative inquiry method. By employing qualitative research for in-depth analysis, future researchers can investigate the thoughts and emotions of thesis supervisors as they assist ELT master's students with their thesis. Narrative case study is the methodological approach that other researchers may apply.

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