

# The convention of a doctoral thesis in applied linguistics from a European and North American perspective

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**Abstract.** This article provide guidance on how to write a good PhD thesis in Applied Linguistics according to the conventions and requirements commonly adopted by European and North American universities. The purpose of the article is to provide a reference for both PhD candidates and examiners in Vietnam in an attempt to narrow the gap between Vietnam-based PhD programmes and those offered by European and North American universities.

*Key words:* applied linguistics, doctoral thesis, conventional structure, European and North American conventions.

## 1. Introduction

Vietnam is currently making every effort to participate in the internationalisation of higher education. One of its great concerns is how to make its PhD programmes internationally recognised. In an attempt to make a modest contribution to that endeavour we, in this article, provide advice on how to write a good PhD thesis, according to the common conventions of European universities, as guidance to those who are studying for this degree within Vietnam. Because we are both from the same academic background, our presentation may be more relevant to applied linguistics than to other disciplines.

It is certainly the case that the quality of a PhD thesis (or dissertation) varies across

universities and cultures, but, in general, many thesis examiners look for the following criteria:

- Original work on a relevant topic
- Valuable contribution to academic community
- Comprehensive and critical review of literature
- Clearly stated hypotheses or research questions
- Appropriate methodology and data effectively conducted and analysed
- Awareness of ethical issues and appropriate handling
- Clear presentation and explanation of findings
- Fully-informed discussion/interpretation of findings
- Awareness of theoretical implications of the research
- Coherent presentation and appropriate style
- The thesis, or parts of it, is readily publishable.

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Similarly, conceptions of what constitutes a sound thesis may differ. So may the organisational structure of the thesis. Dudley-Evans (1999) [1] and Thompson (1999) [2] and Dong (1998) [3] examined a number of thesis types from different academic disciplines. Dudley-Evans described the structure of a “traditional” thesis as being composed of Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion (IMRAD). Thompson refined this category further by dividing ‘traditional’ theses into those with ‘simple’ and those with ‘complex’ patterns of organization. A further type of thesis is labelled as ‘topic-based theses. This type of thesis typically commences with an introductory chapter which is then followed by a series of chapters which have titles based on subtopics of the topic under investigation. The thesis then ends with a conclusion chapter. However, as Johns and Swales (2002) [4] have pointed, even the basic outline of a thesis is a complex issue that needs to be negotiated among supervisors and students. Therefore, sub-fields, methodology, and choice of an appropriate theoretical framework will all emerge as strong determining factors in terms of what a thesis might look like.

## 2. The Conventional Structure of the Thesis

For the purpose of this short article, we will suggest that a thesis is a sustained academic argument which is made as a result of having undertaken original empirical research. It usually comprises:

- Abstract. List of contents.
- Acknowledgements
- 1. Introduction (setting the problem in context)
- 2. Literature review (current, crucial and critical)
- 3. Methodology: Justification of theoretical perspective, methods & procedures for data collection and analysis
- 4. Findings: Presentation of, and commentary on, what the study has found
- 5. Discussion: Interpretation of the findings in relation to other studies in the field
- 6. Conclusion: Implications for theory, further research, and practice
- References and Appendices

Taking these points into account, we will now explain what we consider to be the purposes and major elements of each chapter of a thesis.

### *Abstract*

While not itself a chapter of the thesis, it is the first thing that academics read when they are asked if they would wish to examine the thesis. Therefore, it should be a short (about 500 words) and accurate summary of the aims, purposes, methods and major findings of the thesis. The significance of the study and the implications it has for the academic community should be concisely stated. (Obviously, this is almost the last thing that you will write after completing your study, although you will write drafts as your study progresses.)

### *Introduction*

The main purpose of this chapter is to explain, briefly, the aims and significance of your study, the ‘problem’ that you wish to explore, how you intend to carry out the investigation, and the context in which the investigation takes place. It is also important, especially in qualitative studies, to explain the researcher’s own position and motivation for doing the study. Opinions vary as to the style in which this introduction should be written: on the whole, introductions to quantitative studies

tend to be written impersonally, using mostly the passive voice; qualitative studies, on the other hand, tend to put the researcher's 'voice' very much at the forefront, acknowledging that the researcher is also a participant in the study, not merely a neutral, impartial reporter of objective data. The introduction sets the tone for the entire thesis, and like all following chapters, must be coherent in organising the ideas and accurately written. (This chapter is probably the last one that will be written, before the final abstract.)

#### *Literature review*

The review of literature, so central to scholarly work and disciplined inquiry, is expected of the doctoral student. Examiners tend to view 'working understanding', 'critical appraisal' of the body of literature, 'connection of the literature to findings' and 'disciplinary perspective' as key indicators of performance in the PhD candidate's literature review. Three categories of examiner comments on the literature review are literature coverage, inaccuracies and use and application (Holbrook, et al., 2007) [5] and the two "most common criticisms" made by examiners are the "failure to use recent literature and the inability to critically assess the existing literature" (Hanford & Maxwell, 1993) [6: 179]. The aim of the literature review is to demonstrate that you are fully aware of what has been published about the topic you are investigating, so that you can conclude the review by identifying the 'research space' that your thesis intends to occupy (Machi & McEvoy, 2009 [7]; Ridley, 2008) [8]. The review should be of current literature – books and refereed journal articles published within the past ten years, although some earlier, seminal works on the topic may be referred to. You should not simply display your knowledge of the works, but should

academically *engage* with them – for example, by carefully comparing and contrasting the views and findings of one author or research report with those of others, and by critiquing (i.e., weighing the positive and negative points) and evaluating the studies. You should also make it clear why these particular works are relevant to your thesis. By the end of your review, you will be able to state the gap in previous studies that you intend to fill by your investigation, and this statement should then lead to your formulation of the key research questions or hypotheses that will guide your study. Like all the other chapters in the thesis, the literature review will undergo several drafts, especially in conjunction with the Discussion chapter, as will be explained below.

#### *Methodology*

The aim of this chapter is to justify the methodological approach you have chosen and to explain very clearly the methods of data collection and analysis that you will have adopted to address your research questions/hypotheses. The first part of the chapter, then, will be a reasoned argument as to why you have chosen a qualitative or quantitative paradigm within which to work; this will involve referring to standard works in research methodology, such as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) [9], or Merriam (1998) [10]. This will be followed by a discussion of the particular ways of collecting data that will inform your study – for example, experiment (or quasi-experiment), questionnaire, interview, observation, etc – and why these are relevant; again, reference to standard works which discuss these particular methods will be necessary. (Two very useful books to start your thinking about this are Heigham & Croker, 2009 [11] and Richards, 2003) [12]. It is also important at this point to critique the

methodological approaches used in the empirical studies you have referred to in your literature review (where, you will have focussed on the findings, rather than the methodology, of these studies). Having thus justified your methodological paradigm and data collection methods, the second part of the chapter will explain the contextual details and the actual procedures you have used. Thus, you will describe the specific setting of your study, the actual research participants, and the logistical and ethical procedures you adopted to recruit them and to obtain their informed consent to participate in your study. This will be followed by details about how you actually obtained the data: the items in the questionnaire, and how it was administered (by hand, online, by email., etc); the length and frequency of individual interviews and the focus points of those interviews, the number of times you observed lessons and the criteria you applied to these observations, etc.

You also need to explain what procedures you adopted for piloting your research methods, and the revisions that you made following this piloting. It is also important that you explain in some detail the ways in which the data you have collected were analysed. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the key points and a brief preview of the following chapter.

#### *Results/Findings*

The purpose of this chapter is to clearly present and explain what you have found from your research instruments. If you have adopted a quantitative approach, your *results* will be presented in various tables, and each table will be followed by a clear explanation of what the statistical data implies. Most quantitative doctoral theses will use inferential statistics to identify cause-and-effect relationships

(experiment) or probability (non-causal) correlations between the key variables you have identified in the Methodology chapter. Thus, a very important point is to explain why you have chosen to apply specific statistical tests (chi-square, ANOVA, etc.) to validate these relationships. In quantitative research, all the data you have collected must be displayed and explained, otherwise the results will be considered unreliable. This is not the case in qualitative research – because the vast amount of data you have collected cannot be put into tabulated or statistical form, or indeed completely reported in full. Rather, you need to select key *findings* from the various ways you have collected your data and explain the significance of these within the context of your study. You may decide to present your findings in the chronological order of the data collection methods you used (e.g., interview, observation, stimulated recall) or else in terms of the key themes that have arisen from your analysis of the data. The very fact that you have to make such decisions clearly indicates that your interpretation of the findings is inherently subjective. This does not invalidate your interpretation, but you need to support your commentary with a wealth of quotations (e.g., from interviews) or extracts from transcript data (e.g. from lesson observations); you should also include findings that do not support your general point of view; doing so will assist the reader/examiner to trust your interpretations. Again, at the end of this chapter, you should summarise the key findings, and point forward to the next chapter.

#### *Discussion*

The purpose of this chapter is to relate your results/findings to those reported in previous published work. Here, it is essential to refer back to the studies reported in your Literature

Review, to compare and contrast what you have uncovered with what other researchers have found. It will almost certainly be necessary, at this stage, to revise your Literature Review. This is for two reasons; firstly, new studies may have been published since your original draft; secondly, and more importantly, it is likely that you will have discovered some important points that you did not think about when originally drafting Chapter 2. The Discussion chapter is often considered the most important in the thesis, and many examiners begin their consideration by reading this chapter first. This is because it is here that you show the quality of your interpretation and intellectual argument, thus justifying your position to join the international community of scholars.

#### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this chapter is to show that you can present the implications of your study based on the position you have taken in the Discussion chapter. ('Thesis' is derived from the Greek word for position.) It is useful to summarise the key points made in the previous chapter, and then to acknowledge the (inevitable) limitations of your study, in this way recognising that while you have possibly found some solutions to the 'problem' you have explored, you have also raised other, important questions that need to be addressed. Having done this, you can then, justifiably, explain the key implications of your work in terms of its theoretical contribution, further research that is needed, and how it might influence policy and/or practice. Your thesis must make an original contribution to theoretical understanding of the topic you have investigated, so you need to explain how your study has expanded, refined or (unlikely) rejected a particular theory or theoretical framework. Next, having previously outlined

the limitations of your own study, you need to discuss in what ways more research could further enlighten the academic community; these suggestions should be specific, outlining both the range of topics and sub-topics that could be investigated and the methods by which such studies might be conducted. Thirdly, you should discuss how your study is a useful contribution to (language) policies and (pedagogical) practice; for example as to whether a national or institutional policy might need to be adapted, or how your thesis might impact upon classroom practice and/or the professional development of teachers. You should end the thesis with a bold, but accurate, statement of the importance of your thesis in these respects.

#### *References*

Evidently, your thesis should be fully supported by essential background reading; most theses list 200 or more books, refereed journal articles, and attested online references. It is essential that all the published works you have cited in your chapters are entered in a list of references after the conclusion – and that this list does not include works that you have not referred to. It is also vital that the list should accurately contain all the relevant publication details of the works, presented (in alphabetical order) and fully consistent with one or other reference manual. (The most common of these manuals for TESOL and Applied Linguistics is regularly issued and updated by the APA – the American Psychological Association. The suggestions for further reading below are listed according the APA format.) Similarly, all the in-text references throughout the thesis should scrupulously follow the guidelines.

#### *Appendices*

Most theses have several (or many!) appendices. These are intended to provide more detailed information that has not been included in the body of the thesis, because to do so would clutter the main ideas and data that are presented in the various chapters. Each appendix should be numbered according to the chapter number and listed as a,b,c, etc. Thus, for example, the appendices to the Methodology chapter might, for example, include:

*Appendix 3a.* Copies of the letter of information about the research project and the consent form signed by the participants

*Appendix 3b.* Example of an interview transcript and summary sent to the interviewee for participant validation

*Appendix 3c.* Example of a lesson observation transcript.

Etc.

### 3. Drafting and redrafting a thesis

It needs to be emphasised that writing a thesis is not something to be left until after you have collected and analysed your data. It is an ongoing process, from the time that you submit an initial research proposal to the moment before you submit the final version of the thesis for examination. Mention has been made of the need to revise the Literature Review after you have drafted your Findings chapter and are working on writing up the Discussion of these findings. Your Methodology chapter will be drafted before you actually collect and analyse your data, and will need to be carefully revisited afterwards to discuss what you actually did in your fieldwork. (Like lesson plans, research schedules never go precisely according to intentions!). So, your supervisors

will want to read and comment on your draft chapters as you progress through your project. Even when all the chapters have been drafted and redrafted, most PhD students say that they still need several weeks (or months!) to polish the thesis to their own satisfaction, that of the supervisors, and that of the examiners.

### 4. Conclusion

The skills and understandings required for disciplined scholarly inquiry are acquired through undertaking research in a defined field or fields, usually through a research degree such as a PhD. The journey towards completion of a doctoral thesis is a long, painstaking and usually very lonely one - even with expert advice from very sympathetic supervisors and solid support from friends and family. However, the rewards are substantial – and not only in terms of the eventual title of ‘Doctor’. During the journey you will learn a great deal about the topic you are investigating and how to diligently collect and analyse data. You will also learn how to construct and write a coherent and persuasive argument over between 75,000 and 100,000 words (The requirement may be different by Vietnamese universities). Perhaps more importantly, you will have tested your academic skills, your physical and mental stamina, and your intellectual rigour and honesty – and you will certainly emerge not only better-informed but wiser, and an acknowledged member of the international community of scholars. It is critical to note that the qualities of “meticulousness and rigour associated with academic inquiry and reporting” (Brew, 2001) [13:45] are not easily attained or accessed, and they require time and

immersion in research activity to form and develop.

As stated in the Introduction, our purpose in writing this article is to provide a reference for the PhD candidates who are completing their thesis in Vietnamese universities. Although the article is largely based on the common conventions and requirements of Australian and New Zealand universities, we believe that these are also common in many European and North American universities. The conventions and requirements by Vietnamese universities may be quite different, and our aim is to make a modest contribution to the attempt to make Vietnamese PhDs internationally recognized. Given the gap between Vietnamese universities and European and North American universities regarding these conventions and requirements, candidates are advised to consult their supervisors who “will be more able than their students to see what variations are conventional in their particular field” (Bunton, 2002) [14] and in their university.

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## Yêu cầu đối với luận án tiến sĩ chuyên ngành ngôn ngữ học ứng dụng theo quy ước châu Âu và Bắc Mỹ

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Bài viết cung cấp những chỉ dẫn về cách viết một luận án tiến sĩ chuyên ngành ngôn ngữ học ứng dụng theo những quy ước phổ biến của các trường Châu Âu và Bắc Mỹ. Mục đích của bài viết là cung cấp những thông tin để các nghiên cứu sinh và các thành viên trong hội đồng chấm luận án tiến sĩ tham khảo với hy vọng là giúp thu hẹp khoảng cách trong việc đào tạo tiến sĩ (chuyên ngành ngôn ngữ học ứng dụng) của Việt Nam với các trường châu Âu và Bắc Mỹ.

*Từ khóa:* ngôn ngữ học ứng dụng, luận án tiến sĩ, cấu trúc quy ước, quy ước châu Âu và Bắc Mỹ.