Appendix B

Guidelines for Organising a Research Dissertation or Thesis

This appendix provides suggestions for organisation of a research dissertation or thesis in the areas of applied linguistics and language learning research. They are not intended as a strait-jacket and in general it is a good idea to identify exemplary studies in your specific area of research and examine carefully how they are organised. The University at which you are studying may have its own guidelines on organising a dissertation or thesis, which do of course take precedence over these.

There are a number of ways at looking at the structure of a thesis. One way is that examiners will expect to find in your thesis the answers to five key questions (adapted from Taylor & Beasley (2005)):

(a)	**why has the research been undertaken**
(i)	summarise and evaluate the literature
(ii)	identify the trigger for the research
(iii)	define the research project
(iv)	justify its importance
(b)	**how has the research been undertaken**
(i)	potential conceptual framework
(ii)	choice of conceptual framework
(iii)	range of possible empirical methodologies
(iv)	choice of methodology
(v)	any test criteria, e.g. statistical significance levels
(c)	**what was found in the research**
(i)	steps followed
(ii)	report findings
(iii)	allocate to main body or appendices
(d)	**what do findings mean**
(i)	interpretation of my findings
(ii)	why they are justified
(iii)	answer research questions
(e)	**what has the research shown**
(i)	summary
(ii)	how my research confirms/refutes/adds to knowledge of the topic
(iii)	its implications for future research
(iv)	if appropriate, its implications for practice

Your thesis should be structured so as to answer the questions stated above, but there are a number of possible structures which may be used. Check the requirements for your University. When writing and organising a dissertation or thesis, it is best to try to consider the piece of writing from the perspective of the examiners who are reading and assessing it. Examiners typically want to find answers to questions like the ones above, or may have

checklists of what they are looking for and appreciate being able to find explicit statements as quickly and easily as possible. Therefore, the structures suggested below are intended to **signpost** the thesis so examiners can find what they are looking for and evaluate the study effectively. It may be perfectly obvious to you why you have taken specific decisions during the research process, but this may not be at all obvious to the examiners, so make all of your decision-making process as explicit as possible.

Abstract

It is a good idea to spend time on writing an effective abstract. This is often what is read first by examiners or other readers, and first impressions matter. A good abstract should summarise the content of the thesis and make people want to read it. It should also state explicitly your central argument or thesis as well as your findings. If you find it impossible to state these explicitly and concisely, then there is likely to be a problem with your study and you need to do more work on it. For the same reasons, the title of your study is important and should be designed with care.

Task

Examine the abstracts in articles you admire, noting the kind of information which is included and which is not included.

Table of Contents

Silverman (2005) stresses the importance of a well-organised list of contents with a breakdown of numbered sections and sub-sections, suggesting that this achieves:

1) "to demonstrate that you are a logical thinker, able to write a dissertation with a transparently clear organisation.
2) To allow your readers to see this at once, to find their way easily between different parts of the dissertation and to pinpoint matters in which they have most interest."

It is a good idea to start a draft table of contents at the start of your project and to update it as you go along, so that you can remain aware of the shape of the study.

Chapter 1: Introduction

A good structure for the introduction chapter is to begin with a macro perspective on language learning, teaching and use in the world today and then gradually focus down onto the specific issue or aspect you are dealing with, and the local context in which you are studying it. For example, a study might begin with a discussion of globalisation and international communication and the need to learn English as an international language. Then the focus moves down to introduce the student's own country and culture and the place of English use and learning in that. There is then an introduction to the school where the teacher is employed and the curriculum, teaching materials and methods. This sets the context within which the research takes place. Within this specific context you could then identify a problem or issue which the research will address. So there is typically a shift in perspective during the introduction from global issues to a narrow area of knowledge and a context-related issue.

Next you should state the research focus explicitly; it is good practice to state the research questions and methodology employed. The introduction should include a justification and rationale for your research and why it is worth doing. It is a good idea to state explicitly your central argument or thesis at this point. This is your central finding or your position; all elements of your dissertation or thesis should be lined up to support your argument or position. If you are unable to summarise your central argument or position in a couple of sentences, then you will have problems in writing a coherent thesis or dissertation. For example, the central argument in Brown's (2003) study in chapter 7 is that differences in the interactional strategies employed by interviewers in oral interviews impact on candidate performance. Note how all elements of the study are designed to support this conclusion. Your thesis is not a detective story in which the reader has to try to guess what your argument will eventually be in the final chapter – you need to state the argument at the start and assemble evidence to persuade the reader of the validity of your argument.

The final element in chapter one is to provide the reader with a very brief overview of the chapters of the thesis in order to prepare them for the task of reading it. Examiners in particular like to have the structure and argument of the study clearly signposted.

Task

Examine the introductions in an article you admire, or in all of the articles in this volume. Identify which strategies the authors use to contextualise their work, relate it to a field of literature and to identify a research gap. How do they present a justification and rationale for their research?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Here you are reviewing literature which is directly relevant to your research questions. Many students do not understand why it is necessary to review the literature, so we explain this. If I write that "it is impossible not to communicate" then my readers are entitled to construe the sentence as an entirely subjective and possibly unfounded and unsupported opinion. If, by contrast, I write "there is a general consensus (Hanneman &McEwen 1975; Watzlawick et al. 1980; Ellis & Beattie 1986) that it is impossible not to communicate" then the sentence performs multiple simultaneous functions, as follows:

a) it demonstrates that, rather than being my personal opinion, it is the collective opinion of leading academics in the field;
b) in combination with the bibliography, the references enable readers to check my statement and ensure that I have correctly represented those academic's opinions;
c) it demonstrates knowledge of and familiarity with an academic field. The names and dates are particularly important in that they allow readers to assess how wide, relevant and up-to-date my reading of the area is. If, for example, a recent article has disputed the point which I am making, and if I do not refer to this article, readers may conclude that my argument is weakened and out of date;
d) it shows that the statement is not being passed off as original thought, gives credit where it is due and hence avoids accusations of plagiarism;
e) there are inevitably different schools of thought within an academic discipline and references can be a shorthand for explaining which particular school of thought you are following;

f) the references can serve as points of exploration for the reader, who can sometimes find a reference to an interesting publication which is unknown to them. External examiners will be annoyed if they look in the bibliography and find that the details are inadequate or non-existent.

There are two stages to the literature review; gathering the relevant literature and reviewing the literature. When gathering literature, firstly decide on your research focus. Use academic databases to search the literature, rather than an Internet search. This is because studies found by an academic database have undergone a quality assurance procedure, whereas anyone can put any document they like on the Internet. Examples of relevant databases in our academic area are ERIC, Linguistics and Language Behaviour Abstracts and MLA. Use an advanced search to narrow down the search to the literature most relevant to your research questions. Use electronic journals to access literature wherever possible, as you know that the peer-review process has been conducted. Use Endnote or similar software to create the bibliography. Usually, your University library will run courses or provide documentation to show you how to do all of this. Take notes and keep careful records, making sure you attribute all quotes to authors. Ensure that you find the most recent literature in your area; nobody will be impressed if your review is of authors in the 1980's and you are not familiar with the latest work.

Once you have found the relevant literature, you need to read it and then review it. You will need to select studies to review on the basis of their relevance to your research focus, their importance (are they published in refereed journals?) and their currency (are they old or recent?). Critically analyse the literature, rather than simply describing or reporting what authors say. You need to make clear how you evaluate the literature and what your position is. Analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the literature you read in terms of methodology used, type and quantity of data, how the data are presented and analysed, whether conclusions are based on evidence and the quality of discussion. Relate the literature to your research questions and create an argument running through the literature review so that the reader can follow a train of thought. Research questions should emerge from your analysis of the literature. In other words, you use the literature to establish a research gap: e.g., nobody has studied this phenomenon in this context using this methodology before. Often, published research studies finish by providing suggestions for further research and these are in effect ready-made research questions for you to exploit. After the literature review it should be clear **what** you're going to investigate and **why** – the next step is **how** in the methodology chapter

Task

Examine the literature review in an article you admire, or for all of the articles in this volume, noting how the authors critically evaluate the literature and develop an argument. Identify which strategies the authors use to develop a research gap and rationale for their own research.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

A methodology chapter is necessary because it provides an overview of and justification for your research design. Your methodology chapter is central to your thesis and should 'mirror'

everything else in your thesis. If you decide to do an experimental study, then your literature review should review some experiments and reveal the characteristics of good and poor experimental studies; these should then feed into your research design. By the end of a good literature review, the reader will have a good idea of the research design the writer will introduce in chapter 3 and why. By the end of a weak literature review, the reader will have no idea what kind of study the writer is going to undertake.

According to Cryer (2000) "a rationale for the methods used to gather and process data, in what sequence and on what samples, together constitute a research methodology ... an informed and properly argued case for designing a piece of research in a particular way," The following is a checklist of areas which should normally be covered in a methodology chapter. However, your University may have its own specifications, which should take precedence.

- focus of the study
- research questions and sub-questions
- overall research paradigm and epistemology
- overall methodological approach and justification
- data collection instruments including rationale, justification and design principles
- data collection procedures, including sampling issues, how access was obtained, and pilot study where applicable
- relevant information on the context in which the study was undertaken
- data analysis procedures
- discussion of validity and reliability in relation to your study and how you have tried to maximise these
- ethics
- discussion of methodological issues and problems which have arisen
- reflections on the research process, including reflexivity, and limitations of the study

An alternative way of outlining your methodology is suggested by Murray (2002) in terms of providing answers to these questions:

- What did you set out to do?
- How did you set out to do it?
- Why did you choose that approach?
- What were your research questions?
- How did your method fit the questions?
- Which topics do you need to cover to explain your methods?

A common problem in theses is that the methodology chapter does not mirror other chapters. For example, the methodology chapter states that ethnography is the methodology employed, yet the literature review contains no ethnographic studies. It is also quite common to have a statement of the principles of a particular methodology, but when the data are presented and analysed, these principles are not actually employed. In a strong thesis, all elements and all chapters move in the same direction, mirror and reinforce each other. In a weak thesis, it is hard to see how the different elements and chapters relate to each other; the stated research design does not mirror what is actually done. So it is a good idea to return to the methodology

chapter when completing the writing-up stage and see whether it does in fact mirror all components of the thesis.

Task

Examine the methodology section in an article you admire, or for all of the articles in this volume. Identify which strategies the authors use to present and to justify their choice of methodology. Do the authors cover all elements of the checklist above?

Chapter 4: Data Presentation

In this chapter, you should present your data. Typically, you will choose to present only a portion of your total data, selecting that which is relevant to your research questions and which relates clearly to your argument. Your University may allow you to include additional data in the appendices. Ensure that your presentation is reader-friendly and do not assume that the reader will understand why you have included the data or what point it is intended to illustrate; you need to state explicitly what the data demonstrates in relation to your research focus and your central argument. In a strong data presentation chapter, the reader can easily grasp the nature of the data, its significance and how it supports the central argument of the thesis. The reader is presented with a convincing 'story' explaining what the data mean. In a weak data presentation chapter, the data are simply inserted into the text, possibly with some descriptive comments; the reader has to try to work out for him/herself what the significance of the data is and how they relate to the research focus. If you are presenting figures or tables, these should be labelled or titled to make clear what point they are making. Bryman (2001) suggests that when presenting data, you should ask yourself what story you wish a table or data extract to convey, and try to relay that story to your readers. If you do not know what story your data chapter is telling, you need to do more analysis of the data. It is a good idea to write a sentence or two before each table or data extract to contextualise it in your argument and then after the extract provide an analysis and a statement of how this advances the argument (Silverman, 2005). The data presentation chapter is **not** a detective story in which the reader has to try to work out for him/herself what the data mean – this needs to be made explicit to the reader. Since data analysis chapters may be organised in many different ways, depending on the nature of the data, it is a good idea to have an introduction to the chapter which explains how it will be organised, together with a summary at the end.

Task

Examine how data are presented in an article you admire, or for all of the articles in this volume. Identify which strategies the authors use to relate data to the research focus and central argument. Look at the differences between the ways that quantitative data and qualitative data are presented.

Chapter 5: Findings

In this chapter, you should present your findings. A clear structure for this is to state again your research questions and to provide answers to the questions based on the evidence provided in chapter four. This enables readers and examiners to locate and understand your

findings as straightforwardly as possible. Always ensure that you have compelling evidence to support any claims you make.

Task

Examine the findings sections in an article you admire, or for all of the articles in this volume. Look at how findings are presented and related to the research focus.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications

Chapter six follows a similar structure to chapter one, but in reverse. That is, you start from the very narrow area and the specific context you have studied, and gradually shift perspective to place your findings within the broader context of human knowledge and the world today. You should locate your findings in the literature, e.g. this was A's finding, and my findings concur with this. However, B's findings are different to mine, but this may be explained by the differences in the ages of the learners who were studied. Do your findings support one theoretical model and be at variance with another? Then you should explain what the implications of your findings are for the field of study. Are there any suggestions you can make, based on clear evidence, which will improve policy or professional practice in the area of language teaching, testing etc. Are there any implications for research in these areas? Do you have any suggestions for future research? You may also reflect on the research process; what have you learnt by undertaking this study? What would you have liked to have done but were unable to? What are the limitations of your study? In this chapter, then, you are explaining what your research means in relation to different audiences.

Task

Examine the conclusions in an article you admire, or in all of the articles in this volume. Identify which strategies the authors use to locate their findings within the literature and to present implications and recommendations.

Finally, it is a very good idea to have access to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA). Any questions you have in relation to presenting data in appropriate formats, writing style, referencing etc., can usually be found in this comprehensive work.

References

Ensure that all of the works which you cite in your studies are correctly and fully referenced in your references or bibliography section. Check that you have used the formatting specified by your University.