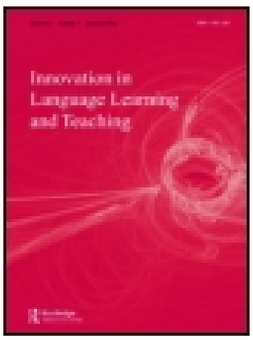

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Understanding Arab students' challenges, strategy use and future vision while writing their Masters dissertations at a UK University: a qualitative inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the strategic learning efforts and future vision of a group of Arab postgraduate students studying in a British University while writing a dissertation in English (about 15,000–20,000 words). It is guided by Dörnyei's [2009. "The L2 Motivational Self System." In *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self*, Chapter 2, edited by Z. Dörnyei and E. Ushioda, 9–42. Bristol: Multilingual Matters] concept of 'possible selves', and Hajar's [2016. "Motivated by Visions: A Tale of a Rural Learner of English." *The Language Learning Journal* 1–17. doi:10.1080/09571736.2016.1146914.] distinction between compulsory and voluntary strategies. Semi-structured interviews with each participant were used to collect data. The data suggest that the participants' language learning goals and associated strategy use for writing a dissertation were essentially influenced by the practices of their dissertation supervisors, who seemed to adopt a 'dynamic assessment' approach. The adoption of dynamic assessment by most supervisors helped the participants to strengthen the vision of their ideal L2 self, and make their goals clearer and more specific. From this qualitative study, practical recommendations to develop the effectiveness (quality) of Masters dissertation supervision at UK universities were made, and areas for ongoing research were suggested.

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1. Introduction

In English-speaking education systems, international postgraduate students whose first language is not English may find the Masters dissertation challenging, perhaps because they cannot fully understand the supervision process in terms of the responsibility of choosing the research topic, the research methodology and the quality of the writing of the final product (Paltridge and Woodrow 2012; Sadeghi and Khajepasha 2015). As Dong (1997, 10) argues, 'for non-native students, the mismatch of writing difficulties and expectations operating in their home countries compound their writing difficulties'. Related to this, Johns and Swales (2002) suggest that many international students in the UK are not likely to be cognisant of the basic outline of a dissertation, along with the amount and type of input provided by their supervisors. Devos (2003) partially ascribes this matter to the influence of the academic conventions and cultures of international students' country of origin. According to Devos (2003, 166), many students pursuing their academic studies through the medium of English abroad are classified as surface or rote learners, given that they are likely to be unable to learn independently, or even to identify realistic language learning goals by themselves.

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In response to these claims, Clark and Grieve (2006, 63) affirm that these stereotypical perceptions have been 'asserted rather than demonstrated'. That is, much of the evidence given for the way international students behave in formal settings has been based on 'reports and perceptions by Western instructors, thus filtered through their own values, expectations and standards' (Clark and Grieve 2006). In this respect, Paltridge (2014, 304) underlines the salience of not taking a stereotyped view of how a student from one language and culture will necessarily write in another. Paltridge (2014) also contends that a handful of empirical studies have been underpinned by sociocultural perspectives on language learning, and aim to uncover the mediating role of situated contextual realities (e.g. assessment mode, supervisors' practices and peers' mediation) on non-native English-speaking students' experiences in terms of writing their MA dissertations in English (e.g. Paltridge and Woodrow 2012). Related to this, to date, no studies have explored the situated use of language learning strategies (LLSs), underlying motivations and ultimate vision of international students while writing a dissertation in English.

Arab students' study abroad experiences in English-speaking education systems have been sparsely studied (e.g. Alhazmi and Nyland 2013; Alreshoud and Koeske 1997; Hamdan 2007). It is surprising, perhaps, that none of these studies was exclusively conducted to disentangle Arab students' academic writing challenges and their strategic language engagement in a study abroad context. Nevertheless, Arabic-speaking students as one group of international students among others were partially included in a few extensive empirical studies that examined the academic writing experiences of international students from diverse minority groups. Bailey's (2013) study, for instance, analysed the challenges of 311 international postgraduate students, mostly from Cyprus and mainland China, while writing their first academic assignment at a UK university. In Bailey's (2013) study, only four participants came from an Arab background. Based on the findings of her study, Bailey (2013, 176–177) concluded that several postgraduates were unaware of the basic elements of essay structure and academic style, such as formal vocabulary and hedging, as well as the conventions of academic writing, namely making referencing and avoiding plagiarism.

Thus, the qualitative research study reported in the current paper has to an extent redressed the above research gaps by adopting a sociocultural standpoint, in order to capture not only the difficulties that postgraduate students from an Arab background face while working on their dissertations, but also their strategic language efforts and learning goals mediated by some influential social agents. In what follows, my inquiry will be first situated in the landscape of sociocultural perspectives in study abroad research, with particular attention given to Dörnyei's (2009) distinction between two types of possible selves (i.e. the 'ideal' self and the 'ought-to' self) and Hajar's (2016) division between compulsory (i.e. largely regulated by cultural beliefs) and voluntary (i.e. basically internalised within the self) strategies. Following this, the objectives of the study will be presented, and an analysis of the qualitative data will be given in rich detail. This paper concludes by providing insights for educators in English as a Foreign Language and study abroad contexts.

2. Theoretical consideration

With the so-called social turn in education (Block 2003), the landscape of language learning research has challenged the ascendancy of cognitive learning theories by arguing that language learning cannot be seen as just the by-product of 'an individualistic mental process' (Morita 2012, 26). This is because the social, cultural, historical and political-economic situations to which a language learner belongs in mediating their cognitive and metacognitive mechanisms need to be taken into consideration. In this sense, some researchers who endorse socially oriented theoretical perspectives (e.g. Darvin and Norton 2015; Gao 2016; Lantolf 2013) underline that language learning is a social process, in which culturally and historically situated individuals actively pursue both linguistic and non-linguistic objectives, related to identity formation. From this view, learning a language is

conceptualised as a vehicle for self-explanatory and social alteration, rather than being 'an end-in-itself' (Morgan 2007, 1035).

According to Kinginger (2013, 4–5), most of the literature on study abroad outcomes has only paid attention to language proficiency gains. The focus on the notion of 'social turn' was crystallised by a colloquium at the 2010 meeting of the American Association of Applied Linguistics (Kinginger 2013). This focus has been combined with a growing number of in-depth qualitative studies, in order to uncover the 'situated experiences' of international students in new cultural settings (Kinginger 2013). Such studies, as Coleman and Chafer (2011, 67) note, are primarily concerned with individuals' personal narratives, their fluid identities, the formation and development of social networks and the changing perceptions of one's learning motivations and goals (e.g. Jackson 2015; Montgomery 2010).

Palfreyman (2003, 245), in turn, suggests that the 'social turn' in education offers 'a new dimension to the study of learning strategies' by advancing sociocultural approaches as a complementary vision by which to unravel the situated, a fluid nature of LLSs according to specific learning settings and learners' learning goals. However, Griffiths (2015, 3) argues that little attention has been paid to language learners' learning goals when researchers have sought to classify LLSs. In response to Griffiths (2015) claim, Hajar (2016, 5–6) classifies language learners' LLS use according to their oriented-learning goals into two categories: 'compulsory strategies' and 'voluntary strategies'. 'Compulsory strategies' signal the strategies used by learners in response to the direct involvement or coercion imposed upon them by some powerful agents such as teachers and family members. These strategies are fundamentally linked to the goal of 'grade-achievement'. On the contrary, 'voluntary strategies' are those used by language learners because of their own language learning beliefs and personal ambitions. That is, 'voluntary strategies' are more internalised within language learners' selves and less 'passed on' by others. Examples of these strategies are composing English poetry and participating in English-related competitions.

Hajar's (2016) compulsory–voluntary classification of LLSs seems to correspond to Dörnyei's (2009) notion of possible selves used to depict individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming in the future through their language learning. Dörnyei (2009) primarily distinguishes between two kinds of possible selves: the 'ideal' and the 'ought-to' L2 selves. According to Dörnyei (2009, 17–18), the ideal L2 self represents the future self-image that a person internally desires to achieve (i.e. it is a representation of hopes, aspirations and wishes). A learner is expected to use more voluntary LLSs to accomplish their desired visions. Conversely, the 'ought-to' self is a vision of the future self that appears to represent the wishes and expectations of significant others (e.g. teachers, family members); it is about having to 'bow to social pressures and demands, or avoid possible negative consequences' (Ushioda 2014, 133–134). For example, a language learner might study English in order not to fail an exam or not to thwart their parents. To achieve these goals, a language learner may well use more compulsory LLSs (i.e. exam-oriented strategies), which are fundamentally imposed by some influential agents. Thus, the goals or visions relating to the ought-to self are more likely to be more short-term than those relevant to the ideal self.

3. The study

3.1. Aims

To date, there is no empirical study that has addressed the challenges faced by Arab university learners and their strategy use when writing dissertations in English. Guided by sociocultural theories of learning, this qualitative study was therefore implemented in order to fill this gap. In addressing this inquiry, my study was guided by the following research question: *What influences the participants' strategic language learning efforts and their vision of the future while writing their MA dissertation?*

Table 1. Demographic data of the participants.

Name	Gender	Age	Nationality	Educational background
Hadi	Male	22	Jordanian	BA in Industrial Engineering
Tariq	Male	23	Saudi	BA in Industrial Engineering
Sultan	Male	25	Saudi	BA in Industrial Engineering
Ismael	Male	27	Libyan	BA in Business and Management
Yasmine	Female	25	Iraqi	BA in Business and Management
Hiba	Female	23	Syrian	BA in Agricultural Engineering
Rabab	Female	25	Emirati	BA in Gynecology

3.2. Participants

A purposeful sampling strategy was adopted in the current study (Patton 2002). In selecting the participants for the study, the following sampling criteria were adopted: firstly, all participants had to be native speakers of Arabic, and were non-English major students. Secondly, none of them should have lived outside the Arab region before arrival in the UK, in order to attain a greater chance of capturing the participants' expected challenges and their strategy use when writing a dissertation in English (about 15,000–20,000) for the first time. Furthermore, none of the participants were known to the researcher before the data collection stage, and all were willing to describe their language learning experiences and strategy use while working on their dissertations. A final criterion for participant selection was that the participants had to be of different genders, and from different Arab countries. The participants were given pseudonyms and their profiles were provided in Table 1.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

All the data used in this paper were collected between 5 April and 23 August 2014 in an English-medium university in the UK. Three semi-structured interviews with each participant were conducted. Given that all the interviewees were Arabs, I decided that Arabic was the best language in which to conduct my interviews. Using this shared language helped the participants express themselves freely. Each interview lasted around an hour (for a sample of the interview schedule, see Appendix 1).

Braun and Clarke's (2013) systematic guidelines for conducting thematic analysis (TA) were adopted to analyse the semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants. TA is 'a method for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) across qualitative data' in rich detail (Braun and Clarke 2013, 218). In phase 1, the researcher familiarised himself with the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts 'actively, analytically, and critically' (Braun and Clarke 2013, 205). After a process of familiarisation, data were coded to generate initial codes in relation to the focus of the study inquiry (Braun and Clarke 2013). For this purpose, a 'selected reading approach' (van Manen 1997, 93) was used, meaning that as I read the transcripts, I highlighted the statements that seemed to capture the influences of diverse contextual factors on the participants' experiences in writing their dissertations in English, including their strategy use and self-images. After this, those codes that shared unifying features were collated to generate themes. Three higher codes were identified: 'effect of mediating social agents', 'the mediating role of objects' and 'the participants' adaptation to independent learning'. Following this, the sub-themes within each theme were identified, after testing the tentative themes formed in the previous phase against the coded data and the entire dataset. Since the interviews were originally conducted in Arabic, I asked another researcher who came from an Arab background to translate the selected interview transcripts into English after completing the coding process. After this, I sent the selected translated data to my participants to be verified. The final thematic map of the data was then produced (Figure 1).

Once all the themes had been obtained, the researcher provided extracts for each theme to show the participants' in-depth experiential accounts. This will be explained in the next section.

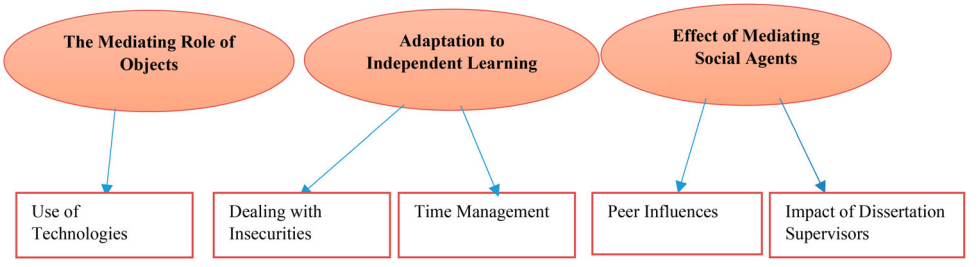

Figure 1. The final thematic map derived from interview data.

4. Findings

This section now examines the three main themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data: 'impact of social agents', 'adaptation to independent learning' and 'the mediating role of objects'. Notably, these emergent themes which influenced the participants' thinking and strategy deployment sometimes operated jointly. For example, the practices of many dissertation supervisors of this study played a remarkable role in fostering the participants' adaptation to independent learning in the UK, as will be described in the forthcoming sub-sections.

4.1. Impact of social agents

In examining the data related to the mediating role of a group of individuals on the participants' academic learning and strategy use in the third term of their postgraduate programmes, two kinds of fundamental agents were identified, namely the dissertation supervisor and peers. None of the participants made reference to the influence of their personal tutors on their strategy choice and use.

4.1.1. Impact of dissertation supervisors

The interview data reveal that the participants' choice of their research supervisor was principally determined according to the policy and procedure of each academic department. More specifically, three participants (Ismael, Rabab and Yasmine) mentioned that they had the right to select a supervisor with whom they felt comfortable, by approaching the potential supervisor in the first place. Rabab, for instance, expressed this idea by stating as follows:

> I was interested in the notion of type 2 diabetes mellitus in women. It was tackled in two modules taught by a knowledgeable professor … This professor liked me because I always participated a lot in his classes. I contacted him and he showed his willingness to supervise me … He asked me to put my ideas on paper before meeting him to discuss my research proposal. (Rabab, April 22, 2014)

Conversely, the other participants admitted that they did not select their supervisors, but rather, that their departments allocated them in accordance with a student's abbreviated research proposal. The participants also raised certain issues related to the amount of support provided by their dissertation supervisors varied. Apart from Hiba, the other participants mentioned that their choice of research topic was based on their personal interests and the guidance of their supervisors in the course of narrowing down the focus of their research. The following interview extracts elucidated this idea:

> The sector of healthcare in Iraq was in need of effective project management because it influenced individuals' lives and the economy of the country … my ideas appealed to my supervisor. He gave me some suggestions to narrow down my specific zone of interest. So I decided to focus on the role of stakeholders in managing healthcare projects. This will be the first study in this field in my context. (Yasmine, April 26, 2014)

> The modules in the first two terms of my MA programmes focused mainly on how we dealt with machines. In my dissertation, I wanted to deal with something new related to the best way of making Saudi employees more engaged in their work … After two long meetings with my supervisor, I decided to investigate the claim that the minority groups in work are more engaged than the majority ones. (Tariq, May 16, 2014)

The above extracts replicate the mediating role of supervisors in fostering the participants' agentive powers when finding an appropriate research topic. In this respect, learner agency is understood as 'the human ability to act through mediation, with awareness of one's actions, and to understand their significance and relevance' (Lantolf 2013, 19). In Hiba's case, she claimed that her research topic was assigned by her supervisor because the latter was not convinced by her carelessly written proposal. Therefore, the supervisor gave her a research topic based on his previous work. In addressing this point, Hiba stated as follows:

> I came to two meetings with my supervisor without having a clear idea of what I wanted to discover. I wrote my research proposal hastily for I thought it's the duty of my supervisor to find a research topic to me … I directly accepted the idea suggested by my supervisor. (Hiba, May 12, 2014)

Hiba's inability to recognise her responsibility for finding a suitable topic attests to Paltridge's (2013, 88–89) argument that in dissertation-writing research, it is 'not all about language' because international students also need to be familiar with the social and cultural context in which the dissertation occurs.

The data analysis also shows that the participants held different expectations and perceptions of the supervision process. Two participants (Ismael and Hiba) were fully content with the amount and type of input provided by their supervisors. They divulged that their supervisors offered them a considerable amount of support by providing them with some resources relevant to their research topic, suggesting the appropriate methods for their study and the way of approaching potential participants, as well as giving detailed feedback on their drafts. Although research degrees typically demand independent work (Starfield 2010), the guidance given by these supervisors might be partially attributed to their sympathy with the participants' worries over their families back home due to the political turmoil taking place in their homelands. The following extracts explain this idea:

> My supervisor was compassionate towards my worries about my family in Syria due to the civil war taking place there … he sent me articles and links related to my study. I used the questionnaire developed by my supervisor in one of his writings … my aim now is to get my master's degree at any cost in order not to disappoint my family back home … I'm also a government-sponsored. (Hiba, June 15, 2014)

> My supervisor was always protecting me from the pressure I experienced because of the war in Libya … I'm very afraid to fail and disappoint my family and relatives … my supervisor supplied me with a reading list for my research. His comments were so detailed on my drafts and he responded quickly to my emails with questions … I followed my supervisor's guidance to finish my dissertation. (Ismael, June 28, 2014)

The above extracts indicate that Ismael and Hiba received a considerable amount of assistance from their supervisors when writing a dissertation in English, and this assistance was consistent with their short-term goal, that is, accomplishing their MA programmes successfully. The other five participants held more complicated views towards the issue of supervision. There was a discrepancy between these participants' expectations and the supervisor's perceptions of what the role of a supervisor involves, principally with respect to the amount of input that would be provided by the supervisor. The following extracts further demonstrate this idea:

> My supervisor was more reactive than proactive. Sometimes he didn't reply to my emails, especially when he was in India to participate in a conference … He was too occupied with his administrative commitments. This made me a bit distressed because I needed his help in the methodology section of my dissertation … in one of our meetings, I was shocked when he said to us that his main task was only to give us general advice … Nonetheless, I liked working on my dissertation more than module assignments because the research topic was my choice. (Hadi, July 27, 2014)

> As my supervisor was working in for Xerox, he arranged three interviews with people working there to collect my data … I didn't receive many comments on my drafts from my supervisor. He just mentioned in the body of his emails a few things for me to consider. I found reading materials by myself. I adopted a strategy given by a PhD student by using Google Scholar to find peer-reviewed articles. I did this by using some key words relevant to my research topic … my supervisor was friendly and kept encouraging me throughout my research. (Tariq, July 09, 2014)

> My supervisor used to respond to my emails quickly and commented on my drafts. But she often gave me the choice to do whatever I wanted. So I sometimes felt afraid of being not on the right track, but was also excited to research in a topic that appealed to me. (Sultan, July 04, 2014)

These extracts suggest that the majority of participants to varying degrees seemed to expect their supervisors to direct their dissertations more. Accordingly, McCallin and Nayar (2012, 70) affirm the salience of clarifying the supervision expectations by research supervisors to their supervisees at the initial meeting to overcome any qualms or worries about supervisory practices. The above extracts also reveal the metacognitive awareness of the participants in reflecting on the pros and cons of their supervisors, and in exercising their agency to overcome the difficulties they confronted.

4.1.2. Peer influence

The data collected in the research suggest that the participants were inclined to discuss their research issues and share their academic and non-academic problems almost only with their Arab counterparts. The scarcity of classroom lectures in the third term of the participants' postgraduate programmes appeared to play a cardinal role in curtailing their communication with non-Arab students. When asked to identify the individuals who either facilitated or deterred their learning efforts when working on their dissertations, the participants reported thus:

> No one had a negative influence on me. Such days I'm studying in the library with two Arab colleagues. We encourage each other and exchange some good strategies mentioned by our supervisors. For example, I followed the advice of looking for articles that presented a systematic review of the previous studies related to my research topic … however, I'm no longer in contact with the other classmates. (Tariq, July 24, 2014)

> Excluding my supervisor, the most influential individual for me was an Arab colleague … He kept asking me about my academic progress and other things … I also shared some good articles with one Saudi colleague via Dropbox … I wish I had more opportunities to communicate with other classmates. (Hadi, July 05, 2014)

In the case of Hiba, however, she built a strong relationship with a Korean classmate who helped her to use the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyse her quantitative data.

4.2. The participants' adaptation to independent learning

Although most participants expected to receive more assistance from their research supervisors, the data show that many participants acted agentively to overcome the challenges of writing their dissertations in English, principally in terms of demonstrating effective time-management skills together with accessing and collecting data for their research project.

4.2.1. Time management

According to Griffiths (2013, 31), managing time is considered as one of the prominent characteristics of 'a good language learner'. The data suggest that the participants demonstrated effective time-management skills by showing their awareness of deadlines, starting working on their dissertation early, setting priorities and allowing sufficient time to revise their work. They mentioned that the difficulties that they underwent when writing their assignments in the first two terms of their postgraduate programmes helped them to improve their metacognitive strategies, including planning and time management. This idea is elucidated in the extracts below:

> From the beginning of my master's programme onwards, I worked hard to finish my academic assignments at least three days before the deadline. I did this because I had to send my work to a tutor in the surgery sessions to check it before the submission. So I'm familiar with this matter. (Rabab, August 13, 2014)

> As my supervisor didn't provide his group students with a timetable to follow, I made use of the one provided by my colleague's supervisor. So each week I sent an email to my supervisor telling him of the part that I expected to finish. And he was happy with this. I couldn't finish my dissertation without giving myself deadlines and sticking to them. (Yasmine, August 05, 2014)

The above extracts depict the participants' exercise of their agentive power as a precondition for controlling their own learning processes and organising their research.

4.2.2. Dealing with insecurities

The data also indicate that the participants commented on their new identity as a neophyte researcher and as an academic when writing their dissertations. In spite of their acknowledgement of not being competent researchers, the participants (apart from Ismael and Hiba) to varying degrees exhibited their agentic behaviour and willingness to act as researchers in order not only to complete their master's degrees, but also to add some contributions to their own research areas, increase their intellectual capital and to benefit their own countries (i.e. personal and national interest). They did this by using many strategies to confront different challenges, principally the challenges of accessing and collecting data. The following extracts describe this idea:

> I discovered that writing a dissertation was a very independent project. There were no weekly deadlines from my supervisor and no regular discussion with classmates … I had a problem in finding participants to complete my online survey … I asked a lady working in the graduate office of my department to send it to undergraduate students … I drew a mindmap for each chapter that summed up the main points. Each concept was reduced to few words. This enabled me to review my ideas quickly by looking at the key words on a mindmap than by reading notes word for word … I feel that this project can benefit many companies in Jordan. (Hadi, July 11, 2014)

> I felt I grew not only as a student, but more importantly as a researcher. I think this was one of the aims of my postgraduate programme here … one of the challenges I faced was how to present my findings. So I checked some examples of dissertations from previous student … this project will definitely benefit my country. (Yasmine, August 05, 2014)

These extracts affirm that the participants held a personal sense of agency, which arose from a belief that 'their behaviour can make a difference to their learning in that setting' (Mercer 2012, 41).

4.3. The mediating role of objects

The data suggest that technology played a focal role in the academic life of participants, considering that they could not have completed their research work for the dissertation without the affordances provided by technology. More precisely, they used the Google Scholar search engine and library catalogues to find relevant resources (almost all participants), Mendeley Desktop to manage the references and to annotate PDFs (Sultan, Tariq and Hadi), Dropbox to save their work and/or share some documents with their close colleagues working on similar research topics (Rabab, Hadi and Yasmine), smart phones to audio-record meetings with their dissertation supervisors and/or their interviewees (Tariq, Hiba, Rabab and Yasmine), software packages to analyse the quantitative data such as SPSS (Sultan and Hadi), and the Microsoft Word spell-checking facility (all participants). Some participants, especially those from the oil-rich Arab Gulf States, indicated that their university lecturers in their homelands were reluctant to introduce technologies inside the classroom or to enlighten the participants as to their availability. The following extracts epitomise this point further:

> Although the university library in Emirates had access to digital resources, no teacher told us about these facilities and thus I didn't make use of them … they just used the assigned books for lecturers … In the UK, Computer and Internet technologies greatly facilitated my efforts to produce my dissertation … I downloaded the relevant articles on my laptop and used Mendeley to arrange them and take notes on the same PDF … I used my iPhone4S to record the interviews … I supported the soft copy reading because paper is bad for the environment. (Rabab, August 14, 2014)

> In Saudi Arabia, I used the Internet at University to download some articles for my graduation project, but none of the tutors gave us strategies to help us find useful and reliable articles … one or two university lecturers sometimes used PowerPoint for lecturers. In the UK, I relied heavily on technology … I recorded my dissertation supervisor's speech in my meetings with him. To analyse my quantitative data, I used a statistical analysis software programme called SPSS. I learnt how to use it after finding by chance the links provided by the university and by watching some videos on YouTube. (Tariq, June 05, 2014)

The above extracts reveal the importance of technology in bolstering the educational and linguistic aspects of the students' lives in the UK, underpinning the developments of their critical and metacognitive capabilities. It should be noted that a couple of participants (Ismael and Hiba) employed technologies less than the other participants in their academic studies in the UK. The limited past experiences of these participants in relation to the use of technology in formal learning might have a role to play in this regard.

5. Discussion

The findings presented above show that the participants (excluding Ismael and Hiba) produced a developed version of their ultimate visions of the 'ideal L2 self' by identifying goals at both individual and national levels. Islam, Lamb, and Chambers (2013, 4) proposed a new construct of 'National Interest', which includes 'attitudes towards national socio-economic development, national integrity and the projection of a positive group/national image in the international arena'. Whereas Ismael's and Hiba's aspirations were confined to completing their master's degrees successfully, the other participants divulged that their MA research projects could also increase the breadth of their knowledge in the subject specialisation to be employed in their future careers and benefit their own native country and fellow citizens (i.e. a long-term dominant goal). For example, Yasmine, the Iraqi participant, stated at a later stage of her dissertation writing that she would attempt to publish some parts of her dissertation in an Iraqi scientific magazine, since she deemed her research topic about the role of stakeholders in managing the healthcare projects in Iraq would have a direct effect on Iraqis' livesand the economy of her country. Sultan was also eager to go back to Saudi Arabia to apply his research to public-service factories. This new vision of the participants' ideal language selves also led them to take up a particular set of LLSs while working on their MA dissertations. Most of these strategies were more internalised within themselves, and less directed by external factors, that is, the dominant use of voluntary strategies over the other-imposed strategies – strategies such as watching YouTube videos related to SPSS for data analysis, drawing a mindmap for each chapter that summed up the main points, and setting a deadline by themselves to complete each chapter of their dissertation.

The strategy use and future possible selves of these participants did not take place in a sociocultural vacuum, since they were presumably influenced by mediated and situated processes. In consonance with sociocultural language learning perspectives, the participants of the present study were perceived as 'human-entities-acting with-mediational-means' (Lantolf 2013, 19), working on their dissertation with the assistance of material and cultural tools (e.g. assessment modes and technology) which are strongly mediated by social actors. More specifically, many dissertation supervisors in the current research study seemed to embrace what is called 'dynamic assessment' (DA), underpinned by the lens of a sociocultural approach (Hessamy and Ghaderi 2014; Lantolf and Poehner 2013). Lantolf and Poehner (2013) suggest that the conceptualisation of fairness in assessment is reframed in DA, because unlike the conventional assessments, it goes beyond helping language learners improve their test scores to include

> performance that is undertaken collaboratively with the assessor, often referred to as a mediator. The kind and amount of support individuals require, as well as their responsiveness during interaction, enriches assessments by identifying both the underlying causes of poor performance and how near individuals are to successful independent functioning. (Lantolf and Poehner 2013, 147)

In effect, the amount and type of input offered by many dissertation supervisors to the participants of this research appeared to be largely determined through the latter's cognitive abilities and affective situations, in addition to their awareness of the fact that the supervisor's role in dissertation-writing research is 'collegial rather than authoritarian, and skills of hypothesising and speculating are highly valued' (Paltridge and Woodrow 2012, 90; see also Montgomery 2010). For example, two participants (Ismael and Hiba) received more academic and non-academic support from their supervisors, who

seemed to sympathise with these participants' sorrows and worries over their families back home due to the political turmoil taking place in their homelands. In addition, such support aligned with their short-term goals related to accomplishing their MA programmes successfully to meet their family members' expectation. However, the dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of supervision was clearly reported in the case of one participant (Hadi), given that his supervisor was overloaded with his administrative commitments and did not have sufficient time to set up frequent tutorials with students. This finding resonates somewhat with Moses (1984, 163) argument that 'supervisors convey an uneasiness about frequency and duration of meetings, about finding time themselves and sometimes pinning down elusive students'. Therefore, Woolhouse (2002, 143) asserts the importance of specifying the first and second tutorials between supervisors and their supervisees to negotiate responsibilities, share views and learn from each other.

Concerning the quality of mediation in DA, Lantolf and Poehner (2013, 149) argue that an implicit form of mediation is preferable to present in the first place, since the defining feature of DA in language learning is to pinpoint the minimum level of support that learners need in order to take responsibility for accomplishing their intended learning goals successfully. As reported in the findings of the present study, the majority of dissertation supervisors tended to orchestrate the participants' learning efforts implicitly, through, for example, helping them narrow down the focus of the research topic chosen by the participants themselves along with giving these participants more leeway and autonomy to choose the appropriate methods for their study and ways of approaching potential participants. As mediation became more implicit, the supervisors as 'enabling social resources' played a role in bolstering the participants' growing sense of agency i.e. 'the human capacity to act on informed choices' (Benson and Cooker 2013, 7).

In keeping with this view, which links the 'construction' of the ideal L2 self (i.e. the future self-image that a person internally desires to achieve) to the exercise of agency (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova 2014: 36), almost all participants in response to the assessment method used in their MA dissertation generated their future visions of the ideal L2 self, which is likely to replicate their individual and national interest (Islam, Lamb, and Chambers 2013). To accomplish their ideal language selves, the participants also adopted a particular set of LLSs which were more internalised within themselves, that is, voluntary strategies. Lantolf and Poehner (2013, 154) note that DA does not constitute a threat to the validity and fairness of assessment, given that 'one cannot assume that all individuals will require the same quality and quantity or even that a given individual will require similar mediation at different points in time'.

It is noteworthy that the participants' critical comments on the lack of the introducing of technologies inside the English classroom in their homelands in comparison with the situation in academic settings in the UK are indicative of exercising their agency. As Gao (2013, 228) argues, 'the very reference to constraints or enablement in the learners' descriptions of contextual and structural conditions is indicative of the agency as it speaks for their intentionality'. Commenting on the limited implementation of technologies in some academic settings, Fullan (2013, 37–38) pinpoints that teachers who have got used to and feel comfortable with what may seem to others as traditional and out-dated ways of teaching would conceive innovation as a disruptive and unwanted annoyance. This argument was echoed by Van den Hoven (2014, 66–67), who talked about the growth of education provision in the oil-rich Arab Gulf States, principally Qatar and Emirates, through the dissemination of the latest technologies at universities and colleges, with the purpose of preparing students for meaningful twenty-first century lives. However, Van den Hoven (2014, 68) states that these ubiquitous technological resources are likely not to be sufficiently integrated inside classes by 'expatriate English teachers, who were predominately native Arabic speakers … [and] those English teachers were often inadequately trained and worked on short-term contracts'. With this in mind, organising training sessions for teachers of English in the Arab world by experts seems to be essential in enhancing their perceptions of the importance and benefits of technology for learning and teaching English. By doing this, these teachers can enlighten their students preparing for completing their higher studies abroad to the importance of developing their computer literacy because most of

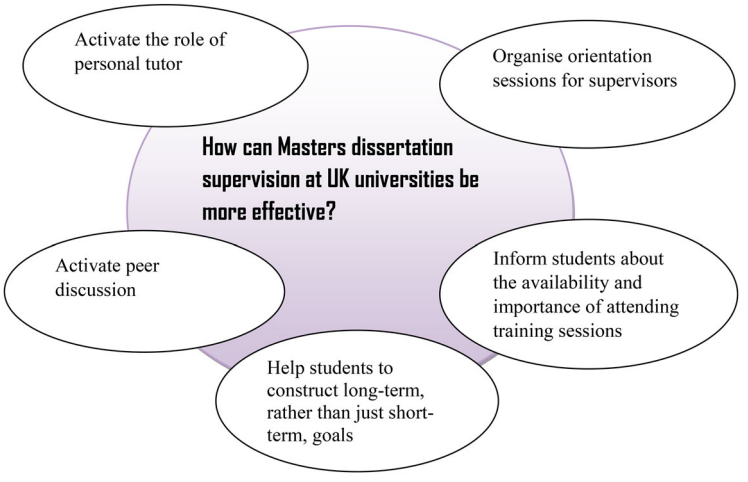

Figure 2. Recommendations to improve Masters dissertation supervision.

their academic work abroad will be on or near a computer, using a host of technological tools such as word processing, electronic dictionaries, Dropbox, Mendeley Desktop and SkyDrive.

6. Conclusion and implications

The qualitative study reported in the current paper is the first empirical study to examine the challenges, LLS use and ultimate vision of some Arab postgraduate students while writing their MA dissertation in English at a UK university. This study was underpinned by a sociocultural perspective, a perspective which has insufficiently been adopted in study abroad research. In the light of the findings of the present study, the following recommendations are made to develop the effectiveness of Masters dissertation supervision at UK universities (see Figure 2):

(1) MA programme providers should organise some orientation sessions attended by dissertation supervisors from diverse academic disciplines to exchange ideas and enlarge their awareness of the possible academic and non-academic challenges that international students face during the writing dissertation process. Students' personal tutors could also be encouraged to attend such sessions to be made aware of the recommendations.
(2) Along with supervisory meetings, the role of personal tutors in the postgraduate programmes needs to be activated, especially in relation to clarifying to Masters students some codes of practice that identify the duties of both supervisors and students throughout the writing process. This matter can help students avoid any potential miscommunication and improve their critical thinking skills.
(3) International students need to be directly informed by their supervisors and/or personal tutors about the availability of free training sessions offered by their university, principally the sessions related to critical thinking, gathering and analysing data electronically and time-management skills. This is because many international students are not fully cognisant of the importance of taking part in such activities, along with their limited experiences with technology to check the latest activities.
(4) Despite writing a dissertation is chiefly considered an independent learning project, the present paper suggests that Masters students can capitalise on involving themselves in discussions with their fellow students about their research projects. For instance, a dissertation supervisor can ask their students to create a blog to pose questions, share and exchange ideas, recommend some resources and reflect on the research process and dissertation writing.

(5) Dissertation supervisors need to take measures to enhance their supervisees' *long*-term, rather than just short-term, goals. They can do so, for example, by showing more commitment and interest in their students' work, sending timely feedback and helping students to pursue a topic which excited their interest with providing evidence of how the writing dissertation process can gain academic, professional and national benefits to a researcher.

Despite this research providing important new information on Arab postgraduate students' language learning experiences and strategy use while writing a dissertation in English at a UK university, it has limitations which should be acknowledged. In particular, the findings of this study in relation to the effects of DA on language learners' achievement and future visions are difficult to generalise principally because of the limited number of participants. This is arguably a fruitful area of further research, especially since empirical research on the validity of DA is still relatively rare. Also, it is important to note that this study only relied on students from an Arab background as the research participants. Future studies which include supervisors, personal tutors and administrative staff would enrich the data base available.

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Appendix 1.

Indicative interview protocol

1) Why did you choose this research topic?
2) How did you choose your research topic? Did your dissertation supervisor play a role in this matter?
3) Why did you use a specific methodology in your study?
4) What do you think about your own identity as a researcher and as an academic?
5) Did you get a long time to get approval from your participants? How did you approach them?
6) What about your relationship with your dissertation supervisor?