

CONCEPTIONS AND PROBLEMS RELATED TO THE ACADEMIC WRITING OF THE UNDERGRADUATE THESIS IN DENTAL STUDENTS OF A PERUVIAN UNIVERSITY

Concepciones y problemas relacionados a la escritura académica de la tesis de licenciatura en estudiantes de Odontología de una universidad peruana

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify the conceptions and problems related to academic writing presented by a group of dental students during the preparation of their undergraduate thesis

Materials and Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out with 72 students of stomatology at the Universidad Científica del Sur (Lima, Peru). The technique used was the survey and the instrument was a questionnaire (Writing Process Questionnaire) that evaluated the dimensions of blocking, procrastination, perfectionism, innate ability, knowledge and transformation, and productivity. The scale data were analyzed through relative frequencies for each question, also analyzed through average scores.

Results: 68 students were surveyed (response rate = 94.4 %) and the frequency of responses per question showed that in the dimension "blocking" 35.3 % (n=24) agreed that they "hate writing" and 48.5 % (n=33) strongly agreed that they "find it easier to express themselves in other ways than writing". Correlations were found between the dimensions blocking-perfectionism ($r=0.712$), blocking-procrastination ($r=0.645$) and productivity-procrastination ($r=0.708$).

Conclusion: Undergraduate students perceive some difficulties during their thesis writing. These are more frequent in the dimensions of blocking, perfectionism, procrastination and productivity. Scores are lower in students who present previous extracurricular writing experiences and present high academic performance.

Keywords: Dentistry; Students; Academic dissertation; Writing; Academic performance; Surveys and questionnaires.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Identificar las concepciones y problemas relacionados a la escritura académica que presenta un grupo de estudiantes de Odontología durante la elaboración de su tesis de licenciatura.

Materiales y métodos: Se elaboró un estudio descriptivo transversal que incluyó a 72 estudiantes de la carrera de Estomatología de la Universidad Científica del Sur (Lima, Perú). La técnica utilizada fue la encuesta y el instrumento fue un cuestionario (Writing Process Questionnaire) que evaluó las dimensiones de bloqueo, procrastinación, perfeccionismo, habilidad innata, conocimientos y transformación, y productividad. Los datos de la escala fueron analizados a través de frecuencias relativas para cada pregunta, también fueron analizadas a través de puntuaciones promedio.

Resultado: Se encuestaron a 68 estudiantes (tasa de respuesta = 94,4%). La frecuencia de respuestas por preguntas evidenció que en la dimensión "bloqueo" el 35,3 % (n=24) indicó estar de acuerdo que "odian escribir" y el 48,5 % (n=33) estuvo totalmente de acuerdo que les "resulta más fácil expresarse de otras formas que escribiendo". Se encontraron correlaciones entre las dimensiones bloqueo-perfeccionismo ($r=0,712$), bloqueo procrastinación ($r= 0,645$) y productividad-procrastinación ($r=0,708$).

Conclusión: Los estudiantes de licenciatura perciben algunas dificultades durante la escritura de sus tesis. Estas son más frecuentes en las dimensiones de bloqueo, perfeccionismo, procrastinación y productividad. Las puntuaciones son menores en estudiantes que presentan experiencias extracurriculares de redacción previas y presentan un rendimiento académico alto.

Palabras Clave: Odontología; Estudiantes; Tesis académica; Escritura; Rendimiento académico; Encuestas y cuestionarios.

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INTRODUCTION

Mastering the processes of writing and publishing is essential for a particular field that aims to contribute to knowledge. However, they are often challenging for undergraduate students as well as for teachers and researchers.¹ The problems relate to mastery of discursive genres, achieving an identity as a writer, and mastering aspects of semantics, grammar, and syntax.² These difficulties are also present in dentistry students and are evident in undergraduate academic works such as undergraduate theses.

Writing a thesis is a common academic requirement for obtaining academic degrees and professional titles. Health science programs are no exception to this requirement and it is common for undergraduate students to complete final degree projects, essays, monographs, theses, among others, in order to graduate. In the Peruvian dental context, writing a thesis is required to obtain the professional title of Dental Surgeon and the academic degrees of Master and Doctor. Writing a thesis is primarily a writing process and many students fail to complete it due to problems and lack of experience with academic writing.

There is a majority of students who fail to graduate or obtain a degree, mainly because they do not complete the thesis required as a final project; in some Canadian master's and doctoral programs, between 30% and 50% of students will abandon their studies without graduating.³ While other students will extend their studies beyond the original schedule.⁴ This problem is known as low completion efficiency and is common in many programs due to the combination of personal, academic and institutional difficulties evidenced by the thesis students.

One of the academic problems that prevents students from completing their studies is the difficulty in writing, mainly when writing the thesis.³

The thesis is an academic work and as such requires constant reading and writing processes by the thesis writer. However, students perceive academic writing as complex, challenging and a “painful” experience,⁴ mainly due to the lack of experience and lack of knowledge about how to write the thesis. This inexperience is complemented by the little or non-existent habit of reading, which has been constantly decreasing during the last decades.⁵ The lack of the writing habit will make the student take longer than stipulated by the institution and perhaps present blocks that will prevent him from writing paragraphs and pages of the thesis.

Difficulties in writing the thesis are presented as one of the factors that prevent students from graduating or obtaining a degree. Other difficulties are also common, such as: lack of interest, lack of motivation, poor relationships with thesis directors, inadequate administrative support, family/work problems, among others.^{6,7} When these factors are combined, a scenario is generated that makes it impossible for the student to construct and complete his or her academic work.

Regarding academic writing, it is common that in health sciences programs, writing and publishing are not practices that are taught on a daily basis in universities. This topic has been addressed mainly at the doctoral level and rarely in undergraduate theses; it is mentioned that historically, no systematic attention has been paid to academic writing⁸ and it is assumed that students have already acquired adequate communication skills.⁹ Mike Rose and Karen A. McClafferty, agree that professional and graduate schools should help students learn to write in the genres of their disciplinary communities, and suggest that by adding writing courses, students will be able to master the genre of their disciplinary communities better and faster.

In the dental context, academic writing has been little addressed and there are no studies that have studied the difficulties of students when preparing their undergraduate thesis, which represents a gap in knowledge. It is perceived that academic writing is not a mandatory element and the thesis writer is left to develop his or her academic writing independently.¹⁰

It is also common for students to be prepared to carry out research, but not to present and write up the research results, since no one teaches them how to write.¹¹ In some health sciences programs, the research culture subordinates writing and only focuses on producing knowledge.⁹

When preparing the thesis, it is common for writing and supervision practices to present inconveniences; students state that these are topics that are rarely addressed by academic authorities and this affects their academic training and the completion of the thesis. Faced with this problem, there is a need to identify the difficulties that students perceive when writing an academic thesis, especially among students in health sciences programs, since the studies that have focused on this topic are mainly in the social sciences and humanities.

The importance of identifying these perceptions lies in knowing which aspects should be improved through educational policies, teaching strategies, courses, subjects or workshops that are aimed at promoting academic writing. Thus, the present study aimed to identify the conceptions and problems related to academic writing that a group of dentistry students present during the preparation of their undergraduate thesis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted. The study population was students enrolled in the subjects of “thesis project preparation” and “thesis execution” of the Stomatology degree at the Universidad Científica del Sur (Lima, Peru) during the second semester of 2023. The number of student participants was 72. No sample calculation was performed as it was decided to address the entire enrolled population.

Students who were just beginning their thesis project or those who had already registered their project were included. The aforementioned courses are aimed at preparing the bachelor's thesis. In the first year, the study topic, its introduction, justification and methodology are constructed; in the second year, the thesis project is reviewed by a jury of two teachers and if it is approved, the execution, results and discussion are carried out. Throughout the two semesters, students write their thesis with the help of a thesis director and the teachers responsible for each course. In this way, all students who were enrolled in one of the two courses were included because they were writing some segment of their thesis.

The variable to be studied was the problems related to academic writing, defined as the difficulties, conceptions and beliefs that a subject presents when writing a certain text. In the present study, these problems and conceptions were oriented towards the writing of sentences, paragraphs and pages that a bachelor's thesis implies. The technique used was the survey and the measuring instrument was a questionnaire. The questionnaire used was the “Writing Process Questionnaire”, developed by Lonka *et al.*,¹² to diagnose writing skills in doctoral students. This instrument has been validated and translated into Spanish by Cerrato *et al.*¹³ This last version

was the one used in the present study. It presents 25 questions grouped into 6 dimensions: blockage (5 questions); procrastination (4 questions); perfectionism (4 questions); innate ability (2 questions); knowledge and transformation (6 questions) and; productivity (4 questions).

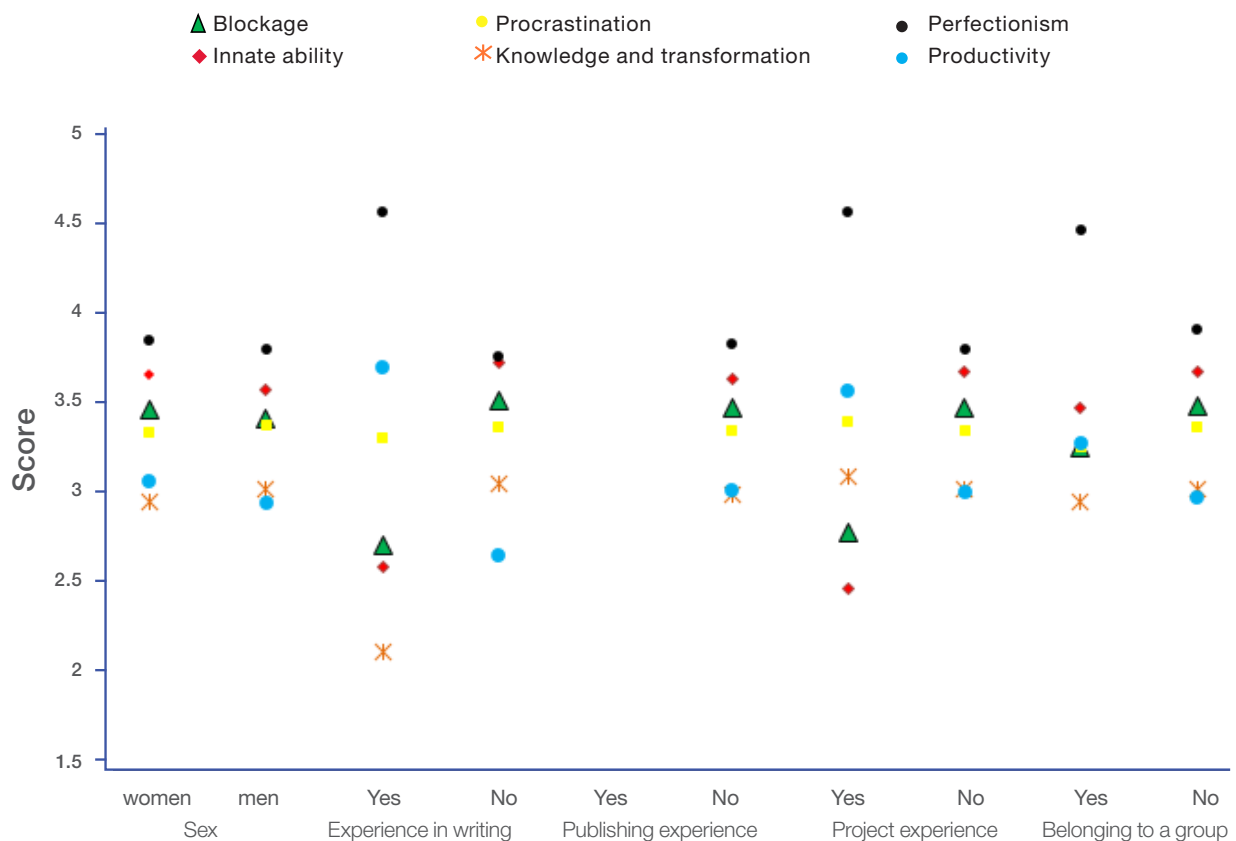
The answers to each question were Likert-type with five scores (from totally disagree to totally agree). This scale has been used in multiple studies that demonstrate its validity and reliability.¹⁴⁻¹⁶

A questionnaire was also used to collect personal and academic information from students such as: age, sex, academic year, academic weighting (considered as the category to which the academic average belongs: top third, top fifth or no category), marital status, extracurricular experi-

ence in academic writing, experience in scientific publication, experience in research projects, membership in a research group, employment status and methodological design of the proposed thesis.

The survey was conducted virtually (because the subjects were taught non-face-to-face) during the month of November 2023 by a single interviewer. After prior agreement with the teachers responsible for each subject, permission was requested for the students to be presented with the objective of the study and to be able to send the link (through Google forms) where the questionnaires were located. The survey took between 5 to 10 minutes to complete and all the questions had to be answered in order to conclude the procedure.

Figure 1. Scores according to dimensions and characteristics of respondents.



The students were read the purpose of the work, they were told that they were free to participate, that the information collected would not provide data that could identify any student and that through informed consent (sent through Google forms) they could accept or not complete the survey.

The data were extracted from Excel, which recorded the information automatically, and transferred to the SPSS program (v. 24.0). A reliability analysis was performed using the alpha coefficient, obtaining a value of 0.90. The scale data were analyzed using relative frequencies for each question, and were also analyzed using average scores (means and

standard deviation of each dimension), where values close to 5 indicated fewer writing problems.

Comparisons between the personal characteristics of each student (dichotomous variables) and the scale frequencies were compared using Fisher's exact test.

Comparisons between the personal characteristics and experiences of the thesis students with the scores of each dimension were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U test. While the academic and thesis characteristics were analyzed using the Kruskal-Wallis test. A value of 0.05 was accepted as the level of significance.

Table 1. Demographic and academic characteristics of the respondents.

	Variables	n	%
Sex	Female	45	33.8
	Male	23	66.2
Academic year	3rd	9	13.2
	4th	28	41.2
	5th	31	45.6
Academic weighting	Top third	8	11.8
	Top five	48	70.7
	None	12	17.6
Marital status	Single	61	89.7
	Married	4	5.90
	Living together	3	4.40
Employment status	Does not work	57	83.8
	Works part-time	17	16.2
	Works full-time	0	0.00
Writing experience	Yes	6	8.80
	No	62	91.2
Publishing experience	Yes	1	1.50
	No	67	98.5
Project experience	Yes	3	4.40
	No	65	95.6
Group membership	Yes	11	16.2
	No	57	83.8
Thesis design	Descriptive	33	48.5
	Descriptive comparative	18	26.5
	Experimental <i>in vitro</i>	11	16.2
	Experimental in animals	3	4.40
	Systematic review	3	4.40

RESULTS

A total of 68 students were surveyed (response rate = 94.4%). 66.2% (n=45) were women, 45.6% (n=31) were enrolled in the fifth year of studies, and 8.8% (n=6) indicated having experience taking academic writing courses (Table 1).

The frequency of responses by question showed that in the “*knowledge and transformation*” dimension, 45.6% (n=31) considered themselves to agree that writing develops thought and 16.2% (n=11) strongly agreed that rewriting texts several times is quite natural. In the “*block*” dimension, 35.3% (n=24) indicated that they agreed that they

Table 2. Frequency of responses according to items and dimensions.

Questions	Dimen- sion	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neither disagree nor agree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)
It is helpful to get feedback from other people on the texts I write	KT	0 (0.00)	5 (7.4)	4 (5.9)	19 (27.9)	40 (58.8)
When I write I worry about whether the reader understands my text	KT	3 (4.40)	8 (11.8)	9 (13.2)	25 (36.8)	23 (33.8)
I often put off writing tasks until the last minute	Proc	1 (1.50)	12 (17.6)	14 (20.6)	21 (30.9)	20 (29.4)
Writing is a creative activity	KT	3 (4.40)	6 (8.8)	9 (13.2)	22 (32.4)	28 (41.2)
I find it difficult to write because I am too critical	Perf	10 (14.7)	11 (16.2)	19 (27.9)	16 (23.5)	12 (17.6)
My previous writing experiences are mostly negative	Bloc	7 (10.3)	13 (19.1)	19 (27.9)	17 (25.0)	12 (17.6)
I write regularly regardless of my mood	Prod	5 (7.40)	16 (23.5)	17 (25.0)	17 (25.0)	13 (19.1)
I produce a large number of complete paragraphs	Prod	9 (13.2)	16 (23.5)	23 (33.8)	14 (20.6)	6 (8.00)
If I were not given deadlines I would not write anything	Proc	0 (0.00)	10 (14.7)	17 (25.0)	29 (42.6)	12 (17.6)
Sometimes I get completely blocked when I have to write texts	Bloc	6 (8.80)	11 (16.2)	18 (26.5)	23 (33.8)	10 (14.7)
I find it difficult to get down to writing	Proc	1 (1.50)	6 (8.80)	13 (19.1)	20 (29.4)	28 (41.2)
Writing means creating new ideas and ways of expressing oneself	KT	3 (4.40)	6 (8.80)	10 (14.7)	25 (36.8)	24 (35.3)
Writing develops thinking	KT	2 (2.90)	4 (5.90)	9 (13.2)	31 (45.6)	22 (32.4)
I find it easier to express myself in other ways than by writing	Bloc	1 (1.50)	7 (10.3)	17 (25.0)	10 (14.7)	33 (48.5)
I only write when the situation is calm enough	Bloc	8 (11.80)	9 (13.2)	21 (30.9)	20 (29.4)	10 (14.7)
The ability to write is something we are born with; Not everyone can learn it	IA	7 (10.3)	19 (27.9)	16 (23.5)	16 (23.5)	10 (14.7)
I have a hard time handing in my texts because they never seem complete	Perf	1 (1,5)	7 (10.3)	16 (23.5)	20 (29.4)	24 (35.3)
I only start writing if absolutely necessary	Proc	10 (14.7)	10 (14.7)	13 (19.1)	25 (36.8)	10 (14.7)
I hate writing	Bloq	2 (2.9)	10 (14.7)	17 (25.0)	24 (35.3)	15 (22.1)
I am a regular and productive writer	Prod	9 (13.2)	16 (23.5)	15 (22.1)	18 (26.5)	10 (14.7)
I can revise and write my texts without stopping	Perf	3 (4.4)	26 (38.2)	17 (25.0)	13 (19.1)	9 (13.2)
I write whenever I have the chance	Prod	3 (4.4)	23 (33.8)	20 (29.4)	15 (22.1)	7 (10.3)
Writing is a skill that cannot be taught	IA	10 (14.7)	21 (30.9)	12 (17.6)	12 (17.6)	13 (19.1)
Writing is difficult because the ideas I produce seem silly	Perf	7 (10.3)	7 (10.3)	15 (22.1)	24 (35.3)	15 (22.1)
Rewriting texts several times is quite natural	KT	11 (16.2)	17 (25.0)	15 (22.1)	14 (20.6)	11 (16.2)

Dim: Dimension. **KT:** Knowledge and transformation. **Bloc:** Blockage. **Proc:** Procrastination. **Perf:** Perfectionism. **IA:** Innate ability. **Prod:**Productivity.

Table 3. Scores according to dimensions and academic characteristics of the respondents and their theses.

Variables	Categories	Dimensions					
		Block	Procras- tination	Perfec- tionism	Innate Ability	Knowledge and trans- formation	Produc- tivity
Academic year	3 rd	3.13	3.07	3.44	2.94	3.92	2.80
	4 th	3.47	3.76	3.45	3.07	3.88	3.15
	5 th	4.38	4.12	3.46	4.25	3.77	3.02
Academic weighting	Top third	2.57	3.13	3.09	2.87	3.93	3.05
	Top five	3.49	3.65	3.45	2.96	3.74	3.15
	None	3.78	4.14	3.18	3.20	3.90	3.08
Thesis design	Descriptive	3.19	3.31	3.04	3.19	3.79	3.96
	Descriptive comparative	3.34	3.21	3.36	2.58	3.90	3.15
	Experimental <i>in vitro</i>	3.56	3.56	3.34	3.13	3.78	3.13
	Experimental in animals	3.92	3.98	3.33	2.83	3.72	3.08
	Systematic review	4.26	4.36	4.16	3.00	4.22	2.91

Table 4. Correlations between scores according to dimensions of the questionnaire.

Dimensions	Block	Perfectionism	Procrastination	Innate Ability	Knowledge and transformation	Productivity
Block	1	$p=0.024$ $r=0.712$	$p=0.005$ $r=0.645$	$p=0.105$	$p=0.542$	$p=0.098$
Perfectionism	$p=0.024$ $r=0.712$	1	$p=0.733$	$p=0.561$	$p=0.881$	$p=0.312$
Procrastination	$p=0.005$ $r=0.645$	$p=0.733$	1	$p=0.089$	$p=0.076$	$p=0.043$ $r=0.708$
Innate Ability	$p=0.105$	$p=0.561$	$p=0.089$	1	$p=0.776$	$p=0.240$
Knowledge and transformation	$p=0.542$	$p=0.881$	$p=0.076$	$p=0.776$	1	$p=0.145$
Productivity	$p=0.098$	$p=0.312$	$p=0.043$ $r=0.708$	$p=0.240$	$p=0.145$	1

“hate writing” and 48.5% (n=33) strongly agreed that they “find it easier to express themselves in other ways than by writing” (Table 2).

The scores by dimension showed that between men and women, the averages were similar without significant differences ($p>0.05$). Those with previous experience in academic writing showed lower scores for blockage (2.73 versus 3.52) ($p<0.05$), procrastination (2.62 versus 3.73) ($p<0.01$) and innate ability (2.15 versus 3.07)

($p<0.01$). Students with writing experience also presented higher scores regarding productivity (3.7 versus 2.68) ($p>0.05$) and knowledge-transformation (4.55 versus 3.76) ($p>0.05$) (Figure 1). Fifth-year students had higher scores for blocking (4.38) and procrastination (4.12) ($p<0.01$). Students in the top third had lower scores during blocking, procrastination, and productivity. Students who were conducting systematic reviews had higher scores during blocking, procrastination, and perfectionism ($p<0.01$) (Table 3).

Correlations were found between the dimensions blocking-perfectionism ($r=0.712$), blocking-procrastination ($r=0.645$), and productivity-procrastination ($r=0.708$) (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

Thesis writing is perceived as a complex process. In this study, the conceptions and difficulties that a group of undergraduate students have when writing their thesis were made evident. Writing has been described as complex and difficult because it is uncomfortable, it is not pleasant to sit down and start writing, it is not pleasant to break the inertia of silence and there will always be something more (be it physical or mental) pleasant and comforting than writing.^{17,18} It is often a slow process, which demands dedication, time and patience; even for experienced writers, they often write up to six drafts and then make corrections that will end up in a 20-line text.¹⁹

These aspects constitute a personal problem for the students and a problem for the program, as they decrease the number of graduates or increase the dropout rates. In addition, thesis writing has often proven to be a source of emotions of disappointment, guilt, doubt, stress and anxiety.²⁰ These difficulties have also been found in the respondents, mainly with blocks, procrastination and low productivity.

The scores found indicate that the greater the blockage, the greater the procrastination and search for perfectionism in most students. These difficulties have also been found in other thesis students (mainly during the doctorate), where blocks, perfectionism and procrastination are frequent^{13,21} and sometimes reduce the student's productivity.²² The present study also follows the same line and shows that approximately 48.5% of students agreed or totally agreed that they

completely block themselves when they have to write texts.

This blockage can be due to multiple factors such as pressure, stress, insecurity about what is written, perfectionism, lack of motivation and failure to meet one's own expectations regarding one's academic process.²³ Being blocked, postponing work, being very critical and perceiving writing as an innate skill is related to lower productivity.¹³ The feeling of perfectionism is often related to blockages.²⁴ While perfectionism and being very critical can reduce the creation of knowledge.¹²

In the present study, few students presented scores that were related to being perfectionists, but they do consider that the thesis should be constantly revised and corrected. Regarding productivity, this was related to procrastination, perhaps because as undergraduate students they have multiple academic, care and perhaps work activities that affect the exclusive dedication to academic writing. These other responsibilities and tasks can cause students not to have many opportunities to write.²⁵

The perceptions of the students surveyed may be influenced by other factors such as the obligations and tasks that are usually required during the degree. Many times, this makes students perceive academic writing as an individual act and that it does not require collaboration; however, this is not the case and social support, feedback, criticism and comments are required; when this collaboration is absent, writing becomes complex.²⁶

It can also be mentioned that the results are influenced by the learning that students carry from basic education; in some of them it may happen that they did not present adequate writing skills and this is evident during university life.

This is related to some deficiencies of the school education system that affect the preparation of a bachelor's thesis.

Unlike other levels (for example, the doctorate), there is a greater awareness of using strategies for learning to write, since it is part of the research work.²⁷ It should be noted that during the degree, it is not usually a stage of exclusive dedication to the thesis, therefore students have other academic activities. In the dental context, it is common that the greatest dedication time is directed towards clinical-assistance activities of patient care and the thesis is not a priority. It should also be added that the majority of teachers are dedicated to clinical-assistance activity and are not necessarily academics or researchers who have the ability to guide students' written products.

These difficulties can be reduced through text production strategies and from the positive attitudes that students have. In fact, presenting some proactive positive conceptions improves writing performance.²⁸ These attitudes were reflected when some students (31%) disagreed by stating that writing is a skill that cannot be taught or when 27.9% also disagreed that the ability to write is something that one is born with and that not everyone can learn it.

Positive attitudes that show interest in improving writing skills and being able to overcome the deficiencies that are perceived when writing the thesis. In contrast to the negative beliefs and perceptions about the writing process that can cause low self-regulation of the same.²⁹ Writing a thesis is a demonstration of writing skills; in a bachelor's thesis, a student is not expected to construct new knowledge, but rather to reconstruct or test established techniques and theories, as well as to demonstrate his or her learned research skills.³⁰ The students surveyed showed that writing experiences allow them to have lower scores in

blocking and procrastination; these experiences are favorable and will improve writing at later levels such as graduate school and professional life.

This is in line with what Berger³¹ and Bommarito²⁷ suggest when they mention that from the bachelor's thesis the student must learn basic writing standards, the conventions of a field of study, the ability to develop a "voice" and "identity" as an author, learn to take a position, organize ideas and be able to put them on paper, know the discourse, debates and assumptions of the subject of study, and know the rhetorical demands of a discipline. Hence the importance of including subjects related to writing and composition in the study plans, in order to familiarize students, from the undergraduate level, with the topics of discursive genres, writer identity, semantics, syntax, among other aspects.

Experiences in writing and research allow for the adoption of adaptive strategies and a better understanding of thesis processes.³² This could explain the fact that those students who took academic writing courses (extracurricular) had lower scores for blockage and procrastination, as well as better perceptions in the questionnaire. These positive experiences and perceptions improve the ability to produce texts, something that has been studied in doctoral students.^{21,33}

The results found contribute to the description of the perceptions and difficulties that students have when writing a thesis. This is an aspect that has been little addressed at the undergraduate level and in health sciences programs. Although the limitation was that the number of thesis students was not large enough to be able to generalize the findings, they do contribute to other programs being able to replicate the methods and verify the difficulties in their students. These findings could be complemented with the opinions and perceptions of the thesis directors, since they are

the ones who evaluate and review the academic products of their thesis students.

CONCLUSION

Undergraduate students of the Dentistry program at the Universidad Científica del Sur (Lima, Peru) perceive some difficulties during the writing of their theses.

These are more frequent in the dimensions of blockage, perfectionism, procrastination and productivity. The scores are lower in students who have previous extracurricular writing experiences and have a high academic performance.

Some conceptions about writing are favorable because they support the ability to create new ideas, forms of expression, creativity and development of thought, however, other conceptions are negative and are oriented towards the difficulty of writing, not being regular and productive.

Programs can improve the promotion of academic writing through some strategies such as: workshops, courses, seminars, clubs, retreats and training thesis directors who accompany the process of building a thesis.

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The author shows no conflict of interest with respect to the article.

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