

The Role of Prior Studies in Scientific Research: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study explores the significance of prior research in the preparation of master's theses, with a focus on students in the Department of Arabic Language at Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah International Islamic University, who often overlook its importance. The study aims to clarify the role of previous studies in academic research and provide practical guidance on how to utilise, present, and critically analyse them effectively. Adopting a descriptive-analytical approach, the research demonstrates that engaging with prior studies enables students to achieve a deeper understanding of their research topics, accurately identify research problems, and recognise existing knowledge gaps. It further shows that prior studies assist researchers in selecting appropriate methodologies, avoiding unnecessary repetition, saving time and effort, and minimising errors by learning from the experiences of earlier scholars. Moreover, the study highlights the vital role of supervisors in guiding students to meet academic quality standards, stressing that continuous consultation and adherence to academic guidelines contribute significantly to producing rigorous, original, and valuable theses.

Keywords: Prior Studies, Master's Theses, Descriptive-Analytical Approach, Academic

Introduction

Prior studies represent a fundamental pillar in constructing sound scientific research, especially in the theses of postgraduate students. Researchers unanimously agree on their pivotal role in shaping both the theoretical and field frameworks of a study. From a methodological standpoint, these studies make significant contributions to identifying and formulating the research problem, as well as providing tested methodological insights and tools that assist researchers in achieving their objectives (Tawaher, 2022).

The importance of prior studies also lies in helping the researcher make a well-informed choice regarding their thesis topic. They guide the selection of tools and procedures to be used in the research and assist in choosing or designing a tool similar to one that has been proven effective in previous research (Yahyawji, 2022). Master's students must understand the benefits of using prior studies. These include highlighting aspects that have already been explored and uncovering the knowledge and field gaps that require revisiting. They also enable the researcher to benefit from the experiences and insights of earlier scholars, helping them avoid the difficulties others have faced.

Additionally, prior studies enrich the research with quotations from earlier work, clarify the methodologies of past researchers, and thus provide the student with complete or partial ideas about the appropriate methods for conducting their own study. Moreover, they enable the researcher to interpret, analyse, and discuss their results effectively, and also facilitate comparisons between their findings and those of earlier researchers (Kroom, 2015). Therefore, new researchers must utilise prior studies and give them great attention, making them an essential part of their thesis, so that their work is of high quality, offers new contributions, and is characterised by precise, clear, and in-depth scientific analysis and interpretation.

How a Researcher Begins Using Prior Studies

The first step a researcher takes is to search for prior studies that have titles similar to their proposed research title. For example, if the proposed title includes three variables, the researcher should look for studies that cover two of those variables or even just one. If they find a study that consists of all three variables exactly as in their own proposal, this indicates that the topic has already been fully explored. In such a case, they should choose a different research title to avoid repetition.

After identifying relevant studies, the researcher should either print out these papers or organise them in a separate folder on their computer. This organisation facilitates a deep and reflective reading of the materials. The researcher must also allocate sufficient time to read each study thoroughly. During this process, they should summarise and record the following aspects of each study, using a structured method such as the card-style summary format shown in the table below:

Table 1

Summary of Prior Studies Using the Card Method

Author	
Publication Date	
Place of Publication	
Full Bibliographic Information	
Main Research Question	
Sub-questions	
Study Hypotheses	
Methodology & Tools	
Sample Characteristics	
Study Findings	
Quotations	
Personal Notes	

The researcher must comprehensively utilise prior studies, assigning a dedicated table (as shown above) to each study. Each cell should have sufficient space to record notes, especially during the initial stages of defining the research problem. For instance, if the research topic addresses the difficulties of learning Arabic grammar, the researcher should refer to the specific challenges mentioned in prior studies, ensuring all related information is properly cited in footnotes. Additionally, the researcher may benefit from the statistical data presented in some of these studies, but must verify the accuracy of such data before using it.

The researcher should also incorporate the operational definitions from prior studies within the section on research concepts. They may adopt an existing definition or formulate a new one tailored to the objectives of their own research. Moreover, prior studies help guide the researcher in selecting appropriate methodological procedures, including the most suitable research methods and tools for the topic at hand.

These studies direct the researcher's work, leading to sound methodological decisions that are most relevant to their subject. The researcher also employs the findings of prior studies, referencing them to support their own results. This integrative process builds a chain of evidence, where each result complements the next. As consistency between findings increases, it may eventually lead to establishing a principle or generalisation that governs and explains the studied topic or phenomenon.

Thus, the researcher can interpret their own results in light of previous research outcomes and clearly articulate the scientific and intellectual contributions of their study in comparison to earlier work on the same topic (Hirche & Hezrashi, 2022).

Accordingly, the researcher begins formulating the research problem and objectives and selecting the appropriate methodology through the analysis of prior studies, while also benefiting from their sources and references. It is essential to emphasise the necessity of reviewing the sources when quoting and not relying solely on what is mentioned in prior studies without first verifying the accuracy of the citations and the correctness of the information. This helps to avoid errors or misunderstandings.

Case Study

The evaluation of several master's theses and doctoral dissertations in the Department of Arabic Language at Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah International Islamic University has revealed an apparent deficiency in how researchers utilise prior studies. Instead of using them as genuine knowledge and methodological resources, many students merely mention these studies superficially, as a procedural requirement, without engaging in deep reading or deriving meaningful insights from them. It has been observed that most researchers are content with reading only the summaries and tables of contents of these studies. They then rephrase that content in a shallow manner in the "prior Studies" sections of their research. Their use of these studies is often limited to very narrow aspects, such as research methodology, which they usually copy verbatim without any critical analysis or evaluation. This issue was clearly evident in a master's thesis titled "*Linguistic Phenomena in the Tafsir of Ibn Juzayy...*" "الظواهر اللغوية في تفسير ابن جزي..." where the researcher used prior studies selectively and unevenly. For example, he relied on previous work to discuss Ibn Juzayy's exegetical methodology and copied Quranic examples directly from those studies. Additionally, they depended entirely on those sources for the biographical information about Ibn Juzayy. However, the researcher completely neglected to refer to prior studies related to linguistic phenomena, as if no previous scholarly contributions existed on the topic.

A poor level of methodological rigour and presentation marked the thesis. The researcher's treatment of linguistic phenomena (such as synonymy, polysemy, and antonymy) (كالترادف والتشارك والأضداد) was limited to direct quotations from linguistic dictionaries, without any attempt at commentary, analysis, or interpretation. Had the researcher reviewed relevant prior studies in this field, he could have offered a more profound and academically grounded analysis.

What is even more concerning is the researcher's lack of responsiveness to the examiners' feedback. He made no effort to seek clarification on how to implement the required revisions, nor did they consult prior studies to improve the quality of their work. On the contrary, he added unnecessary content while neglecting the specific points highlighted by the reviewers. This reflects a weak research methodology and a disregard for academic rigour and precision.

Lack of Supervisor Guidance

Through the analysis of the previously mentioned case, it became evident that there was a shortcoming in the academic supervision of the thesis. The researcher did not make sufficient effort to communicate with their supervisors to obtain the necessary academic guidance for preparing the thesis. This lack of academic supervision led the researcher to prepare the thesis independently, without benefiting from the educational expertise of the supervisors. On the other hand, there was also a noticeable deficiency on the part of the supervisors in providing effective follow-up. Neither supervisor took the initiative to reach out to the student to offer scientific guidance. Likewise, the individual who reviewed and evaluated the thesis did not communicate with the researcher, merely submitting their assessment to the Graduate Studies Department. The researcher also failed to reach out for clarification on points that required further explanation.

This situation reveals a fundamental methodological issue: the researcher neglected to benefit from several critical academic resources, including:

1. The academic expertise of the supervisors
2. Feedback and guidance from the thesis evaluator
3. Consultations with other subject-matter experts
4. References and prior studies in the field of research

This negligence compromised the quality of the thesis, which ultimately proved to be weak from a methodological perspective and lacked the scholarly contributions expected at this academic level.

The Real Causes behind Negative Outcomes in Thesis Preparation

Several factors negatively affect the quality of preparing scientific theses, which can be summarised as follows:

First, The Problem of Topic Selection and Research Plan Preparation.

Students face methodological challenges from the outset when choosing their research topic. Often, they rely heavily on the supervisor's proposal without considering their own research interests or academic inclinations. It is also observed that some supervisors prepare the entire research plan themselves without involving the student in searching for or reviewing prior studies. This results in the student submitting a research plan without having a solid understanding of the fundamental aspects of their topic.

Second, a Lack of Sufficient Time Dedicated by the Student.

Students preparing a thesis often fail to allocate adequate time for reading, researching, and gathering information before beginning to write, due to other commitments and distractions. Consequently, they cannot fully grasp their topic, and their ideas remain scattered, unorganised, and incoherent. They tend to copy directly from sources and references without engaging in critique, explanation, or interpretation. This leads to a weak and poor-quality study, primarily because the student did not fully benefit from the prior studies they reviewed.

Third, Deficiencies in Academic Supervision. Methodological problems also arise in the relationship between the supervisor and the student, including:

- Lack of precise mechanisms for regular communication
- Absence of continuous guidance from the supervisor
- In some cases, a complete communication breakdown results in weak follow-up and declining quality of research outputs
- Supervisors failing to thoroughly read or critically evaluate the work submitted by the student, merely allowing the student to continue and forward the research to reviewers. This often leads to a shock during the final defence when significant methodological flaws or analytical issues are discovered in the thesis.

Therefore, we observe that students spend no less than three years working on their master's theses, and many spend up to eight years, which is an excessively long period for preparing a master's thesis. This is not really a thesis but rather a research writing project, as it is considered a "Program B." This program requires the preparation of a supplementary research project along with the study of two semesters of ten prescribed courses. The thesis word count typically does not exceed 40,000 words, which is equivalent to approximately seventy pages.

Some specialists have even argued that master's theses should not be considered a reliable previous study for other scientific theses. One expert expressed that master's theses are not reliable and cannot be accepted as earlier studies due to their generally weak quality and the many errors made by students. Moreover, these theses are not corrected before being placed in the library, so they become flawed references for future students, which is unacceptable (*Qasemi, 2020*).

Therefore, there is a need to reconsider master's programs to achieve the following goals and aspirations:

1. Preparing scientifically qualified researchers
2. Enhancing fundamental research skills
3. Developing a deep understanding of research topics
4. Ensuring the quality of research outputs
5. Qualifying students to produce rigorous scientific research

Study Findings

1. The results indicate that some supervising professors do not give sufficient attention to guiding students in preparing their academic theses, particularly master's theses.
2. Some students do not hold regular meetings with their academic supervisors and instead prepare their theses individually without receiving the necessary methodological and educational guidance. This negatively affects the quality of the thesis in terms of structure, analysis, and interpretation.
3. The findings also show that several students do not review the prior studies they have collected, do not utilise them adequately, and fail to incorporate them into the preparation of their academic theses effectively.
4. It is also observed that some students quote from sources and references, and sometimes from prior studies, without providing scholarly commentary, clarification, or linking the quotations to the context of their research topic. This results in weak logical coherence within the thesis and makes it appear fragmented and lacking in cohesion.
5. On the other hand, some supervisors face difficulties because students do not adhere to the guidance provided. Some students disregard instructions and fail to comply with feedback, which sometimes leads the supervisor to approve the thesis without making the necessary corrections, leaving the task of review to the examiner. Since the examiner does not have the authority to reject the thesis, they merely guide the student in making the necessary revisions. This often leads to a lengthy process of corrections and final improvements.

Discussion of the Results

One of the reasons some supervising professors do not pay sufficient attention to guiding students in the preparation of their academic theses, especially master's theses, is the breakdown in communication between the two parties after the student registers their research proposal and begins their study and reading. Often, the student does not take the initiative to reach out to the supervisor, perhaps believing they can continue working on the thesis independently without assistance. In reality, however, this stage is one in which the student is in critical need of guidance and instructions on how to gather scientific material relevant to their research topic. This stage is considered one of the fundamental phases during which the student should meet with the supervisor two or three times a week. These

meetings help the student understand what is required of them, make the most of the material they have collected, and develop the necessary skills to organise and structure that material. These tasks cannot be carried out effectively without the guidance and direction of the academic supervisor. Therefore, it is the supervisor's responsibility to emphasise to the student the importance of regular meetings and to encourage them to present their progress, whether in gathering material, reading sources, or reviewing prior studies. Supervision is one of the core duties of university professors, and the supervising professor needs to follow up with the student, guide them throughout their academic journey, and assist them in exploring the various aspects that contribute to their academic development during their university studies. Supervision encompasses several dimensions, including supporting the student in organising both their academic and personal work, fulfilling educational and administrative roles, and guiding the student methodologically, such as how to search for, handle, and properly cite information according to accepted academic standards. It also includes assisting students in preparing their graduation projects and training them in the use of research tools and scientific methods (Soumiya, 2021).

Therefore, it is clear that the student cannot effectively begin writing their thesis without first meeting with their academic supervisor. The supervisor must direct the student to thoroughly read prior studies and emphasise the importance of doing so to produce a sound academic thesis that meets established research standards. Furthermore, the supervisor should proactively reach out to students who delay their meetings, rather than overlook prolonged absences. This helps motivate students to continue writing and making progress in their research, and prevents neglect or complacency. The supervisor should schedule regular meetings with the student, at least once every three weeks, and ensure that these meetings are communicated to the department's graduate studies committee. Written reports detailing the student's research progress and any obstacles encountered should also be maintained. The supervisor should carefully read everything the student writes ahead of scheduled meetings and provide feedback in a constructive, critical, and supportive manner. It is also essential for the supervisor to submit quarterly reports on the student's progress to the Dean of Graduate Studies. (Soumiya, 2021).

These are the proper requirements of academic supervision. Supervisors must be fully aware of and well-versed in the appropriate requirements of academic supervision, as outlined and clarified by higher education institutions. It is equally essential for researchers and those interested in the field of scientific research to recognise the fundamental and central role of the academic supervisor, to understand the obstacles that hinder its effectiveness, and to seek appropriate means for its development (Abdullah, 2017). On the other hand, it is acceptable, and even advisable, for the supervisor to assist the student-researcher by providing relevant quotations, theories, references, and sources closely related to the research topic. At the beginning of the thesis writing journey, the supervisor can supply the student with academic models connected to the subject of their study. They may also help the student learn how to organise information and quotations, link and adapt quoted texts, and provide appropriate commentary that demonstrates the student's understanding and engagement with the content of the study being prepared. Since students may initially struggle to create appropriate logical links between quoted materials, the supervisor's role becomes essential in guiding and training them in this area to ensure that the thesis is coherent and has a clear academic structure. If the student makes mistakes during the

preparation of the research, the supervisor must clearly point out these issues and must not approve the thesis unless the student is on the correct path. The supervisor should require the student to meet academic quality standards in the preparation of the thesis, ensuring it aligns with the nature of the study and its relevant theories.

What has been proposed here represents a core part of the supervisor's responsibilities in the academic supervision process. It plays a vital role in developing the researcher's capabilities and enabling them to produce research of high scientific value and exceptional academic quality. Therefore, supervisors must provide detailed guidance to their students regarding their academic projects to ensure they are executed correctly (Roland Louis, 2010). Accordingly, the supervisor should train the student in all the steps, principles, and ethics of scientific research. They must also assess the student's skills and contribute to shaping them into a future researcher, while also overseeing the student's work and guiding it toward the required academic standards at every stage of the research process. The supervisor should also teach the student the value of time, effort, and financial investment in the service of knowledge, nations, and humanity (Khatib, 2017).

Regarding Students' Non-Compliance with Supervisors' Guidance

When researchers fail to follow the guidance of their supervisors or act contrary to their instructions, prompting some supervisors to approve theses and leave the task of revision and correction to examiners, this reflects a significant problem in the supervision process. A supervisor should never yield to the researcher's preferences if the student is not on the right academic path or fails to adhere to rigorous research standards. It is unacceptable for a supervisor to approve a thesis that does not meet the established criteria of scientific quality. The application of quality standards in university education benefits the entire educational system, including the student, faculty member, and university. High-quality theses and dissertations have a positive impact on the student, who bears the primary responsibility for the effort in research and analysis. At the same time, the academic supervisor also benefits from the strength and quality of the student's work (Khatib Zouleikha & Souag Mokhtaria, 2017, *Ma'āyir al-jawda*, p. 258). In developed countries, graduate studies departments typically take on the role of training students in research methodology and academic writing. This empowers students with the skills needed to apply research methods effectively and introduces them to the principles of scientific thinking. Therefore, a supervisor's approval of a thesis that does not meet scientific and quality standards is considered a clear professional error.

This issue becomes evident in the weak research skills observed among some master's and doctoral students. Significant shortcomings include poor research writing skills and inadequate presentation skills during the thesis defence. Consequently, supervisors must approach this issue with firmness, providing clear and correct guidance to the researcher and outlining a structured research path.

Adequate research supervision contributes significantly to preparing students by equipping them with research skills and fulfilling the broader goals of higher education and society—namely, producing qualified researchers capable of addressing diverse societal challenges (At-Tahir Othman & Abdurrahman Al-Kharsani, 2011). There are four key sets of standards that help instil the necessary academic culture and methodological, technical, and scientific

controls: Legal Standards, including the supervisory oversight that supports and encourages students' engagement with scientific and creative thinking. Professional Standards encompass ethical, literary, and moral expectations. Technical Standards involve both the researcher's competence and the supervisor's seriousness in ensuring that the research and thesis are thoroughly completed (Khatib, 2017).

Accordingly, the supervisor must fulfil their role with the utmost integrity and diligence, ensuring that no academically weak thesis is produced under their supervision. A substandard thesis not only reflects poorly on the student but also places responsibility and potential blame on the supervisor before anyone else.

Positive Outcomes for Researcher Success

1. The researcher must give significant attention to prior studies by reading them carefully and analysing them thoroughly. This deepens their understanding of the research topic and helps them define the research problem clearly and accurately.
2. Relying on prior studies enables the researcher to ensure that their research title has not been addressed before using the same variables, thus guaranteeing the originality, novelty, and scientific value of the study.
3. When researchers read earlier studies thoughtfully and critically, they can identify the *knowledge gap* or *research void* that has not yet been explored, allowing them to build their research problem on solid scientific foundations.
4. Reviewing prior research experiences helps the researcher choose the appropriate scientific methodology and tools by benefiting from the successful approaches used by earlier scholars.
5. By utilising prior studies, the researcher avoids repeating what has already been done, which saves a significant amount of time and effort and reduces the likelihood of making the same mistakes encountered by other researchers.
6. A researcher who thoroughly understands and effectively presents prior studies can compare their findings with those of earlier research. This enables them to clearly highlight the scientific contribution of their own study, both in terms of theoretical insight and practical application.
7. Maintaining consistent communication with the supervisor, listening to their advice, especially concerning prior studies, and following academic guidance helps shorten the time needed to complete the research. It leads to noticeable progress in the study.
8. Giving proper attention to prior studies, in accordance with expert guidance and scholarly standards, plays a critical role in producing competent researchers who are well-equipped to tackle future research challenges, particularly at the doctoral level.

Conclusion and Findings

This study concludes that prior studies are one of the fundamental pillars essential to the preparation of scientific research, particularly master's theses. They are not merely a routine component required in a thesis but serve as a powerful tool for understanding the research topic, identifying aspects that have been previously studied, and uncovering knowledge gaps that require further investigation and analysis. The findings reveal that neglecting prior studies or misusing them leads to a decline in the quality of academic theses and limits their potential contribution. In some cases, it even results in the repetition of past research or the transfer of information without commentary or critical analysis. The study also showed that

a lack of communication between the researcher and their supervisor, as well as insufficient guidance on how to benefit from prior research effectively, are among the main reasons researchers take extended periods, sometimes several years, to complete their theses without achieving the desired academic quality. Therefore, the success and distinction of a master's thesis require the researcher to give special attention to prior studies, beginning with collecting and deeply reading them, then summarising, analysing, and correctly utilising them throughout all stages of the research. This includes drawing on them for commentary, interpretation, and logical connection between quoted texts in a way that aligns with the research topic. The study also emphasises the importance of continuous communication between the researcher and their supervisor, as well as the need to seek guidance on how to benefit from prior studies while avoiding common mistakes in their application. Doing so ensures the production of a high-quality academic thesis and represents a solid step in the researcher's journey toward specialisation and excellence in scientific research.

Recommendations

1. **Raising Awareness of the Importance of Prior Studies.** It is essential to organise workshops and training courses for new master's students to clarify the role of prior studies in formulating the research problem, objectives, and methodology, and to teach them how to analyse and properly utilise those studies.
2. **Including Prior Studies as an Academic Subject in Curricula.** It is recommended to incorporate the study of previous research into academic courses. Students should be taught how to collect, analyse, summarise, and present prior studies, with practical training on research tools such as summary tables, research cards, and textual linking strategies.
3. **Strict Requirements for Research Proposal Approval.** Prior studies should be a mandatory requirement for accepting any research proposal. The student should be required to attach several relevant prior studies, along with a summary for each, before the thesis title is approved.
4. **Encouraging Continuous Communication between Researcher and Supervisor.** There should be consistent and ongoing communication between the student and their supervisor from the beginning of the research until its completion. Students should meet with their supervisor weekly or biweekly to benefit from guidance and correct errors early in the process.
5. **Implementing Strict Evaluation Policies for Academic Theses.** Supervisors and examiners must be encouraged not to accept weak or disjointed theses. Instead, students should be required to revise their work under direct supervision until the thesis meets academic standards.
6. **Developing Research Skills in New Researchers.** It is recommended to establish dedicated units within faculties or universities to help develop students' research skills. These units should provide consulting services on scientific reading, critical analysis, academic writing, and effective use of prior studies.
7. **Creating a Standard Template for Summarising Prior Studies.** A standardised table should be designed (as proposed in this research) for summarising prior studies. It should include complete bibliographic data, research questions, methodology, findings, and relevant quotations, and be adopted by all researchers in their theses.
8. **Preparing a Comprehensive Guide for New Researchers.** A detailed and comprehensive guide should be prepared for new researchers, outlining the steps of conducting scientific

research with a particular focus on the importance of prior studies, how to utilise them effectively, and how to avoid common mistakes.

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