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## Investigating Supervisory Feedback Practices And their Impact on International Research Student's Thesis Development: A Case Study

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### Abstract

There is inadequate research examining international doctoral students' experiences of feedback from their supervisors and its impact on their thesis development. There is indeed a dearth of local literature on research investigating supervisors' concepts of research supervision as evident in their supervisory practices and communication methods, and the research students' expectations of research supervision, as well as their reactions to the supervision approach. The literature has emphasized the need for a more process oriented supervisory role that facilitates collaborative knowledge creation be employed (Johnson et al., 2001; Greenberg and Baron, 2003; Lee, 2007; Lee et al., 2008) to transform the relationship between supervisees and supervisors from one that is dependent to independence to graduate competent researchers successfully. At the same time it is important to note that the naturally unequal roles between supervisors-supervisees require continual negotiations and interactions throughout the supervision process to attain collaboration in thesis development. This paper will report on the preliminary case study investigating the nature and patterns of supervisory practices and methods of communication employed by a supervisor supervising an international research student. Research findings from this preliminary investigation is only part of a larger study and will guide further in depth investigation of supervisory feedback practices towards framing an overall pedagogical approach to supervising international students with an integration of effective supervisory styles and intercultural communication methods, essentially providing a toolkit for developing critical literacy in EFL thesis writing.

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## 1. Introduction

Supervisor provision of feedback in thesis writing and its development essentially defines the core of supervisory practices. Feedback is particularly important for thesis students because in many respects it replaces the type of instruction other students receive in lecture and classroom approaches (Benesch, 2000; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Hyatt, 2005; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Hyland, 2009). More importantly, in the process of researching and writing up a thesis, supervisees need to depend on feedback provided by their supervisors, in order to receive input and guidance about their research progress and thesis writing (Wang and Li, 2009). Furthermore, Engebretson et al. (2008) and Bitchener, Bastrukmen and East (2011) identified supervisors' constructive and detailed feedback as key to successful completion of a research thesis and characterizes good research supervision. They also emphasised that knowledge is created within and through the feedback process especially when the feedback is facilitative in nature, indicating inherent pedagogical dimensions in the nature of research supervision. Mouton (2001) relates this nature of postgraduate thesis supervision to the four dimensions of supervisory roles, namely the advisory role, the quality control role, the nurturing supportive relationship role and the guidance or what we term as the coacher role. Central to these continual roles, provision of quantity and quality of feedback is key in developing the supervisory experience to be more process oriented, facilitating collaborative knowledge creation and fostering independence among student researchers (Johnson et al., 2001; Greenberg and Baron, 2003; Lee, 2007; Lee et al., 2008).

While there is reasonably substantial literature on challenges of supervising international EFL research students and the difficulties they encounter in thesis writing, little attention has been given to the process of supervisory feedback and practices and its impact on thesis development in terms of ideation and quality of writing among these students. This paper will report on the case study investigating the nature and patterns of supervisory feedback and the extent to which it helps an Arabic international research student in writing the Literature Review chapter. Research findings from this preliminary investigation is only part of a larger study and will guide further in depth investigation of supervisory feedback practices towards framing an overall pedagogical approach to supervising international students with an integration of effective supervisory styles and intercultural communication methods, essentially providing a toolkit for developing critical literacy in EFL thesis writing.

## 1. Background

In the recent decade Malaysia has seen a significant increase in the number of postgraduate students from the Arabic countries. Many are enrolled into the undergraduate, master and doctoral research programmes at private and public institutions of higher learning throughout the country. All these degree programmes are taught in the English language and require the international students to complete their assignments and research dissertations or thesis in the English Language. Majority of the Arab students find academic English very challenging, particularly academic writing genres such as essays, reviews, and research project papers or articles and thesis. This is not only due to their low or inadequate proficiency in academic English but more so due to the academic literacy genre that they are not previously introduced to in their own educational environment.

Grabe and Kaplan (1996) and Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) pointed out that the aforementioned academic genres are not taught in the EFL classrooms where these students originate from. Furthermore, the academic culture in these Arabic countries do not train them to be critical thinkers and discover their own point of view or own voice; three important elements in helping students to become independent researchers and writers. Herein lie the need for a systematic pedagogical approach to supervision where these international students can be socialized into the academic genre through the interaction process of supervisory feedback. Viewing research supervisory experience as a social process is couched within the socio-cultural theory of learning expound by Vygotsky (1978). It provides a useful way of conceptualising the journey of learning that the students experience as they interact with their supervisors, fellow student researchers, other academicians and people embedded within social situations and events that they are introduced to or exposed to in their academic environment (Kublin et al., 1989). According to Bitchener, Basturkmen and East (2011, p. 83) seen from the perspective of social-cultural theory, the supervisor-supervisee relationship takes on a more egalitarian "peer-to-peer" relationship, with the former being the more capable peer whose role is to scaffold and negotiate the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to ultimately develop an independent thesis writer. Therefore from this perspective, supervisor feedback is critical to the development of independence.

In this reported study, the concept of scaffolding in the supervision interactions are traced according to the four dimensions of supervisory roles identified by Mouton (2001) as noted earlier and the nature as well as focus of the feedback provided by the supervisor for each cycle of these roles. Hence the three main objectives of the case study are: 1) To trace the extent to which the writing of the Literature Review chapter (LRC) of the thesis improves (or not) with these cycles of feedback provided by the supervisor as they negotiate their roles; 2) To measure the extent to which these feedback are acted upon by the supervisee in the follow up drafts of the chapter; and 3) To gauge the extent to which the international student strives to attain independence as a thesis writer.

## 2. Research Methodology

As this reported study afforded preliminary data for the larger study, a case study method is employed to enable an in depth understanding of the processes of interaction and negotiations between a supervisor and a supervisee and in which multiple sources of evidence is used namely, a pre-draft questionnaire, a semi structured interview, and review of written drafts of the LRC are administered. The case studied is a pair of supervisor-supervisee from the English Language Studies (ELS) programme in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at a local university. The supervisor has more than twenty-year-experience supervising students at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, all of whom have successfully graduated. Among these are 8 PhD holders. The supervisee is a male Arabic doctoral candidate who has enrolled for 3 semesters in the ELS programme and is preparing his LRC for his research proposal defence.

The questionnaire comprised of 16 items designed to gauge the supervisee's understanding of the purposes of a Literature review chapter in a thesis. The supervisee was asked to complete the questionnaire before he embarked on his first LRC draft. The semi-structured interview was conducted after each draft is returned to the supervisee with the supervisor's feedback. Whenever possible the interview session is held after the face to face sessions with the supervisee and the supervisor, separately. The aim of the interviews is to capture the supervisee's and supervisor's view of the feedback provided and the extent to which the previous feedback and discussions were helpful in improving the drafts. The disclosure will also provide evidence of any increased understanding in the supervisee about the purpose of the LRC. A total of twelve interview sessions, six with the supervisee and six with the supervisor were conducted and recorded for analysis.

To gauge the extent to which feedback helped improve the writing of the LRC, three drafts of the chapter were collected for analysis. The supervisor had written in her feedback in the text of the chapter and additional notes from the face to face sessions were referred to for document analysis. These drafts were subjected to two levels of analysis. The first level entailed analysis of the nature and focus of feedback provided in the drafts and the notes, and determining the type of supervisory role these demonstrated as well as the extent to which it brings the supervisee closer towards independence. And the second level of analysis of these drafts required the appointment of a reader to assess the 'quality' of the LRC drafts in the sequence they were written. The reader was provided with a checklist adapted from Akindele (2008) and Bitchener & Banda (2007) which are categorized into six criteria for assessing the LRC encapsulated by the following purposes and function of a Literature Review:

- i. To provide synthesis or a set of summaries of each work reviewed.
- ii. To show the relationship of each work to the other under consideration.
- iii. To highlight gaps in previous research.
- iv. To resolve conflicts amongst seemingly contradictory previous research.
- v. To show insight and awareness of differing arguments.
- vi. To link the review at all times to the rationale and purpose of the proposed study.

The reader is to assess on a scale of limited, adequate, good and excellent, the extent to which the six criteria are achieved by the writer for each draft submitted to discern improvements in the writing of the chapter. The reader appointed is an experienced lecturer at the same faculty who has had more than 20 years of supervisory experience. The reader was given 3 to 5 days to read each draft as they are submitted by the supervisee after corrections and improvements have been made (accept for the first draft) following each feedback sessions with the supervisor. Data analysis collated from the aforementioned multiple sources were triangulated for deeper and closer interpretation of findings.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, we present and discuss the findings of the related sections of our three research objectives: the extent to which feedback provided by the supervisor are acted upon by the supervisee and corollary the extent to which these feedback help improve the draft of the LRC as evident in the subsequent drafts; and the extent to which the scaffolding of the interactions and negotiations in the supervisor-supervisee roles help the Arabic post graduate student attain independence as a thesis writer. Given the singular pair of supervisor-supervisee selected for this case study to provide preliminary data, implications and suggestions for the larger study will be discussed in the conclusion.

##### 4.1 Feedback on writing the LRC

Analysis of findings evidently shows that there is positive impact of feedback on the quality and quantity of writing produced by the supervisee in improving the LRC after three drafts. In fact the supervisor's feedback in their roles as guiding coach and quality control provided much needed structured direction and helped enlighten the academically challenged supervisee on several related matters pertaining to ideation with regards functions and purposes of a LRC.

*SI: Of course my supervisor play a main role in my writing and her comments are benefits to my thesis. About my role, I am trying to write and already write more but I respect my supervisor comments and I follow her in writing.*

In relation to preferred mode of feedback and pattern of interactions the supervisee appreciated both written and face to face sessions, and would prefer to make the combined mode a compulsory practice in supervisory pedagogy. The supervisee opined that:

*SI: My supervisor used to write her comments on my drafts. She writes a lot, sometimes every page and every paragraph she corrects. Many times I cannot read her writing so I wait until we meet for face to face session. After I told her I have problems to read her writing we agreed to use digital copy. So I send my supervisor the digital copy of the draft and she will use the Review tool to insert comments and track changes she makes on the text. Here she writes less than on the hard copy. But the face to face session helps a lot to make clear my questions and her comments. I usually record the face to face session and make notes about important things to write and change. I playback the recordings many times. I use this to understand what she writes in the comment boxes. I think it is important to have face to face to understand the feedback.*

Additionally the supervisee commented that he found feedback that only posed questions such as "What do you mean?" and mere question marks or squiggles across the pages unhelpful and prefers more directive feedback so that he knows what he was supposed to do to the text. This is especially necessary for students for whom English is a foreign language. This perspective concurs with findings reported by Bitchener, J., Basturkmen, H., & East, M. (2011) in their research report (p. 38).

Meanwhile, assessment of the first draft of the LRC submitted by the supervisee indicated that he has a good ability of explaining relationships among studies reviewed but is only adequately able to relate these with his current proposed study. This provides an insight into the level of understanding about Literature review held by the Arabic student from the outset. It is however noted that this adequate ability remained unchanged even after the third draft. As each draft assessed by the reader show small incremental improvement in all parts of the five main criteria of a Literature Review chapter, only one of the six functions showed most improved development. Specifically, there was improved ability from adequate (draft 1) to good (draft 3) in *providing synthesis or a set of summaries of each work reviewed*. However, the supervisee only manages to improve from limited to adequate ability to *apply the existing literatures to support the arguments* related to his own study, in drafts 2 and 3, indicating that he still lacks the skill and confidence to do so. For the other five criteria, while the reader reported some improvements were made to the drafts, these were not satisfactory enough to attain better than adequate for all drafts submitted. The changes made by the supervisee deemed 'major changes made to the second and third drafts'

can be considered minimal as it reflects transformation of information presentation rather than regeneration of synthesised information. The following excerpt illustrates this: R=researcher S1=Supervisee

**R:** *What are the major changes that you made in the second and third drafts of your LRC and why did you make these changes?*

**S1:** *My supervisor pointed out that the sub-section about Language learning strategies in my chapter was vague and I need to "establish the direction of this information". In the first and second drafts I wrote about it without any diagrams so in the third draft I made out diagrams for each strategy to show it clearly*

#### 4.2 Feedback on development of supervisee in achieving independence

A convergence of the data analysed indicated that while the road towards independence for the supervisee is spurred by the impact of feedback on his knowledge about Literature Review and emerging confidence as a writer, the socialization process of transforming him into an independent researcher writer is further influenced by other factors impacting on his full potential to become independent. These are identified as current deficiencies needing further supervisory pedagogical interventions: 1. limited ability to evaluate texts relevant to his own study; 2. limited ability to critique reviewed sources; 3. Adequate to good ability to summarize and indicate strengths of the literature reviewed but remained limited to point out their weaknesses and the need to improve on such studies. Generally, the supervisee demonstrates an inherent lack of critical thinking and inability to assert his identity and voice in his writing. While this is commonly found among L2 students writing in English, it is particularly acute among students from Arabic countries due to their academic background which does not encourage expression of a critical voice or allow critical evaluation of established authorities (Hisham, 2008; Fadi, 2010). It is imperative therefore that a supervisory pedagogical framework address the cultural barriers that impede the progress of a supervisee towards independence right from the onset of student enrolment. The student should be socialized into the academic genre of disciplinary research based writing which requires criticalness and confidence to express both positive and negative evaluation of works by other researchers, indicating their own points of view, and know the difference between critical evaluation and criticism.

In relation to what type of feedback is provided by supervisor towards developing independence in the supervisee, the supervisor mentioned that she took into account a range of factors right from the onset of supervision, including the supervisee's cultural background, level of academic literacy and language proficiency, personality factors such as maturity, confidence, anxiety and tenacity levels, ability to work independently, and perceived academic competence. Perceived notions of these factors about the supervisee guide the supervisor in determining the inherent roles she needs to play to facilitate the supervision. For the case study the supervisor started with the coacher and quality control roles as the supervisee was generally tentative and unsure of the direction and design in which his research should proceed and what entails a Literature Review chapter. From within this context, the quality and quantity as in the nature of interactions and patterns of feedback provided by the supervisor were mainly issued in the following patterns for content, organization and structure, style and accuracy:

##### 1. Guidance and coacher role:

- i. Highlighting the paragraph or phrases or words.
- ii. Enquiring the intent of the paragraph or phrases or words. E.g. "Why do you want to state this?"
- iii. Relate the plausible intent with the purpose of the section and other points in the same section.  
E.g. "How does this relate to the purpose of this section and the main idea of this section? How is this important in relation to this purpose? What position about this idea does you intent to take here?"

The supervisor explained that more indirect feedback framed as guiding questions or statements is most often used if her intent is to guide and coach. Her intent is to make the student think about why the section highlighted is problematic. It also helps stimulate critical, lateral and creative thinking as the student is pushed to relate with other sections of the chapter, criteria of a LRC, be aware of his point of view and position with regards the views and so forth.

##### 2. Quality control role:

- i. Instructions to rewrite sentences and paragraphs as they either convoluted, ungrammatical or

unclear/nonsensical.

- ii. Grammar and spelling check.
- iii. Reorganizing sections of the chapter to ensure coherence and cohesiveness in ideation and structure of related chapters.

According to the supervisor, most of the time the pattern of feedback provided for quality control was very directive where corrections are pointed out, or paragraphs and phrases are crossed out and asked to be removed. She infamously will draw arrows indicating sections needed to be moved from within a chapter or across chapters. The supervisor measures the effectiveness of her feedback by reviewing the extent to which the problems or suggestions made are addressed by the supervisee in the subsequent drafts.

The supervisor also reported that most commonly, she often has to play these two roles more prominently for international students who lacks in language proficiency and has limited background in the discipline knowledge that is being investigated. For these cases and the one reported here, the supervisees most often need more time and exposure to research projects to gain the independence targeted. Hence supervisory pedagogy intervention approaches should cater for the varying levels of researcher aptitudes at the entry level especially so as to provide appropriate and relevant measures of interventions and intensive skilling, if the outcome aimed for at the end of the 3-4 research programme is independence. Having said that, there is a possibility that this is a cultural phenomenon where the desired egalitarian "peer-to-peer" relationship of supervisor-supervisee cannot overcome the socio-cultural psychological barrier of certain learning cultures where the teacher will always be regarded as mentor more than guidance.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to report the findings of part of a wider study investigating impact of feedback on thesis writing and development by ELF research students writing in English. The focus of this paper was a case study of supervisory feedback on the development of a Literature Review chapter by an Arabic doctoral candidate providing insights into three main issues that puts into perspective: 1. the types of supervisory roles and the nature of feedback provided by a supervisor in improving the supervisee's writing of the LRC, 2. the direct and indirect effects that the feedback have on the supervisee's understanding of how to write the LRC, direction on how to improve the LRC, and embark on the process of achieving independence, 3. the emerging salient socio-cultural dimensions beyond supervisory feedback that provide extended support for successful socialization of the student into the related academic genre.

In regards the first and second issues, most notably it was found that the accomplished supervisor is able to adaptively switch between the various dimensions of roles as the situation demands. Supervisor feedback corresponds mainly to the current level of student writing and academic competences where the amount and types of feedback needed is then provided accordingly. Gurr (2001) observed that supervisors need to be able and willing to alter their approach to supervision appropriately this way as the student develops. In relation to the third issue, the findings revealed that the supervisee's progress from supervisor-dependent to independence was not evident in the development of the drafts and as demonstrated in the unequal supervisor-supervisee roles during the four months duration the study was conducted. It can be postulated that this occurrence is largely indicative that the Arabic student requires more facilitation of regular writing experiences, timely and structured feedback, as well as sustained and productive interactions with the supervisor. Indeed research by Caterall et al. (2011) indicated that students believe they showed significant improvement in learning to write through involvement in pedagogies that required them to interact with peers, engagement with writing and reviewing practices to develop advanced academic literacy skills while complemented by good supervisory practices. In conclusion this reported case study points towards the need for supervisory pedagogical scaffold interventions and interactions to provide systematic postgraduate supervision towards supervisee independence as research disciplinary writer among L2 and EFL candidates.

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