

Original Research

Supervisors' written feedback on EFL graduate students' theses: Survey-sourced empirical evidence of best practices

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This research provides a detailed and structured narrative of written feedback provided by thesis supervisors in response to the thesis drafts of their EFL graduate students, as most prior research focused on the students' perspectives. Specifically, the objective of this research is to identify the best practises in written feedback by thesis supervisors in linguistically demanding graduate programmes via qualitative research design. In the context of this research, qualitative data was compiled from one-to-one interviews with lecturers-cum-thesis supervisors, who supervise EFL graduate students in linguistically demanding graduate programmes. The graduate programmes in management, communication, social sciences, and languages at a Malaysian public university were selected. The focus of the data collection is on the thesis supervisors' perspective in providing written feedback to the thesis drafts of their EFL graduate students. Findings were categorised into three main areas that are the focus of feedback provided, the manner in which it was provided, and the advice supervisors would give to a new supervisor. Overall, the findings suggest that written feedback is important for successful thesis writing. The findings bode well for the quality of thesis supervision provided by supervisors, particularly in providing feedback to EFL graduate students and improving EFL graduate students' thesis drafts through gradual refinement of their academic writing. The findings are also useful for new educators or lecturers who are unfamiliar with supervisory roles and responsibilities.

KEYWORDS: best practices, English as a foreign language, graduate programme, supervisor, thesis, written feedback



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1. INTRODUCTION

Feedback is one of the backbone elements of teaching and learning in higher education (HE). Specifically, a supervisor's feedback on a thesis is essential for improvement as thesis writing is challenging for non-native English speakers, especially for non-native (L2) graduate students. A thesis is a very specific academic genre that is component structured, and each component has a focused objective(s) to fulfil the requirements

of their discipline-specific communities of practises (Bitchener et al., 2010). In the context of this study, feedback, particularly written feedback from thesis supervisors, is fundamental in assisting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Master and PhD students in linguistically demanding graduate programmes to improve their thesis writing to an acceptable standard, as postulated by Cafarella and Barnett (2000) and Taheri and Younesi (2015). Furthermore, in Hyland's (2013) and

Rimaz et al.'s (2015) research, graduate students indicated a need for supervisor written feedback to support their writing. The majority of previous research has focused on undergraduate student writing responses (see Del Rio et al., 2017). At the graduate level, various studies have looked into the challenges of thesis writing from the perspective of postgraduate students at the graduate level (see Ali et al., 2016; Wisker & Kiley, 2014); however, research into the types of responses supervisors provide to their students' theses and the benefits of the feedback is lacking. As a result, further investigation of this issue would be beneficial to thesis supervisors and their students.

Previous research on global context by Bitchner et al. (2011) and Wang and Jiang (2015) has emphasised the need for a greater understanding of thesis feedback provided to postgraduate students by their supervisors, due to potential issues with the type and level of feedback communicated, as well as how the feedback is communicated. Furthermore, in the Malaysian HE's EFL graduate thesis supervision scenario, there is a research gap focused on the best practises in thesis supervision (Hazita et al., 2014), such as supervisory practises and communication methods, and thesis student reactions to supervision approach among thesis supervisors to enhance postgraduate (MA and PhD) supervision. Baydarova et al. (2021) also claimed that there is a clear misalignment of expectations between doctoral students and their supervisors. Doctoral students have experienced long completion times and high attrition rates as a result of the incongruity. Hence, further research is necessary, since the quality and quantity of knowledge shared in theses produced through best practices in thesis supervision can benefit the academic community and the HE sector by improving written feedback and increasing student satisfaction.

Malaysia, as a hub of international education, attracts many international students from all over the world. Malaysia currently hosts a large number of EFL graduate students, particularly at the PhD level, from Asia (such as China, Bangladesh, and Pakistan), South-east Asia (such as Indonesia), and the Middle East (such as Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Qatar). EFL graduate students from these countries – especially those in linguistically demanding programmes like Language, Management, and Social Sciences – require dedicated and rigorous supervision, as their EFL background makes thesis writing in English difficult. Therefore, investigating the perspectives of supervisors supervising these selected groups of graduate students is warranted

for effective and efficient supervision in terms of providing feedback to students' theses. This study, via survey-sourced empirical evidence aims to provide a detailed narrative of written feedback provided by thesis supervisors in response to thesis drafts submitted by EFL graduate students. This study looked specifically at best practices in written feedback by thesis supervisors, which is typically given in linguistically demanding graduate programmes in Languages, Communication, Social Sciences, and Management at a public university in Malaysia. The study thus addresses the following research question: what are the current best practices for supervisors' written feedback on EFL graduate students' theses in linguistically demanding graduate programmes in Languages, Communication, Social Sciences, and Management?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Feedback in general

Academic writing at the MA and PhD levels leads to an outstanding thesis. Chokwe (2015) argued that many university assessment tasks require students to demonstrate their learning and academic competence through writing. In fact, academic writing skills are deemed as priority skills among university students, whether undergraduates or graduate students. In this regard, feedback is essential to achieving a high level of writing competency and ensuring sustainable improvement in academic writing, while gradually producing a thesis ready for examination. Feedback is a vital component that must be integrated into the teaching process to ensure that learning has taken place. It is through feedback that thesis supervisors have the opportunity to engage with their thesis students' academic writing process. According to Hyland (2009), continuous feedback allows students to be enculturated into their disciplinary literacy and epistemologies. Furthermore, as previously stated by Kumar and Strake (2007), feedback from supervisors serves as a training ground for PhD students to improve their work. It is regarded as an important learning experience for students to be able to advance in their training, particularly in writing.

In line with the need for this study, Pearson and Brew (2002) argued that supervisors have a tendency to supervise based on their own prior experiences as research students. Hyland (2009) contended further that the feedback provision mechanism in higher education is experiencing problems due to a mismatch between supervisor expectations and student fulfilment of those expectations. The supervisor's and student's under-

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standing of the cultural context and expectations of their disciplinary community differ. As a result, there is a need to understand supervisors' narratives of providing feedback, which are currently rarely documented. Gaining an understanding of thesis supervisors' perspectives on providing feedback to their graduate students' thesis writing, particularly EFL students, will serve as a guide for supervisors' professional development and follow-up programmes dealing with thesis feedback for graduate students.

2.2. Kinds of feedback

The type of feedback provided is crucial for thesis students to understand the expectations of their disciplinary community (Azman et al., 2014). Feedback directly provides input to improve one's writing, reading, and speaking abilities, as well as content competency. As presented by Hyland (2009), it also conveys implicit messages about the student's discourse community, its values and beliefs, the student's identity in the community, and the nature of disciplinary knowledge.

Moreover, based on his analysis of 60 feedback commentaries in master's programmes, Hyatt (2005) classified feedback comments into six categories. Phatic comments establish and maintain good relations, while developmental comments assist students in continuously improving their work. Alternatively, structural comments provide feedback on how to improve the organisation of the work, while stylistic comments focus on the use of academic language. This is followed by methodological comments about research method design, analysis, and other methodological issues, and finally, administrative comments about course-related issues. Commentaries on content, style, and development are frequently found, while other categories rarely received comments.

In Kumar and Stracke's (2007) study, they proposed a group of feedbacks, such as 'in-text feedback comments', which refer to on-the-spot thoughts expressed through the use of dialogue by supervisors, and 'overall

feedback', which is primarily a text that summarises the main concerns or general feedback to be considered by students. They also proposed a feedback conceptual framework that included: referential (editorial, organisational, or content), directive (suggestion, question, or instruction), and expressive (praise, criticism, or opinion).

2.3. How feedback is provided

The purpose of feedback is improvement. However, feedback has drawbacks if it does not provide specific advice to guide improvement (Ghadirian et al., 2014) and lacks message clarity. These may result in a student's misinterpretation or inability to interpret (Carless, 2006; Chanock, 2000). As a result, Carless (2006, p. 219) advocated for an understanding of the '*psychology of giving and receiving feedback*', in order to provide effective feedback. In their survey of feedback on writing at the doctoral level, Gulfidan and Walker (2011) identified twelve categories of feedback as required by students, which includes: writing arguments and justifications; statement of clarity and understandability; information incorporation and omission; progression and shift between sentences, paragraphs, or sections; and formatting (e.g., tables, APA style). According to Gulfidan and Walker's (2011) findings on preferences for 'receiving feedback', electronic feedback is preferred over hand-written feedback. Furthermore, they indicated that students preferred clear and explicit feedback that was devoid of ambiguity. The feedback must also include detailed guidance for revising the paper. When compared to general comments, feedback that provides detailed, specific comments is preferred. Among the disfavoured feedback are comments that are difficult to incorporate into their revision, symbols or marks without explanation, and feedback that puts pressure on them to change their writing style (Gulfidan & Walker, 2011).

2.4. Theoretical perspective

For this study, two theoretical perspectives will be used. The first is genre theory, which investigates the discourse patterning of academic genres such as thesis. Genre theory emphasises the importance of understanding the discourse requirements and expectations of one's discourse community (Hyland, 2005; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Paltridge, 2002; Swales, 1990).

The second viewpoint employs Lee and Murray's (2015) supervision framework perspective. Lee and Murray's perspective is based on three approaches. The

functional approach focuses on task supervision. Supervisors are comment feeders, providing referential and directive comments in consultation, and guiding supervisees to complete a task. The second approach entails enculturation, which involves assisting supervisees in becoming members of their community. In this context, supervisors expose their thesis supervisees to discipline-specific terminology, writing conventions, and power relationships. The tacit and explicit modes of enculturation are primarily accomplished through feedback on the supervisee's thesis. The third approach, critical thinking, emphasises inquiry-based learning through critical thinking skills, argumentation skills, reflection, and personal growth. The emphasis of this approach is a mutual relationship between the knower and learner in terms of knowledge construction and its interdependence with the second approach, which provides the thesis supervisee with a sense of ownership over their thesis writing, socialisation into their academic community, and the development of identity as graduate students and researchers. Finally, quality relationship as the last approach in this perspective encompasses the transformative nature of the supervision process, which involves three active participants (supervisor, supervisee, and product). Power relations govern the transformation, which is governed by disciplinary, institutional, geographical, and historical context. The quality relationship approach emphasises transformation through written comments from supervisors, engagement with the comments to improve thesis drafts by thesis supervisees, and finally, producing a product that is a thesis based on research conducted.

2.5. Related studies

Mirador (2000) analysed the written comments of seven university academics on the formative and summative written products of graduate students. The findings revealed 12 common moves, such as suggestion for improvement, highlighting weakness, probing, and overall judgement. Holbrook et al. (2004) went on to evaluate feedback on three levels. They began by investigating the structure of feedback reports, the methods of communication, the attributes of examiners' evaluative comments, and the viva procedures. The second level was concerned with the frequency and prevalence of different categories of comments. The findings from the three levels of analysis revealed that thesis examiners played various different roles, such as mentor-colleague, supervisor-instructor, and assessor-arbiter. Subsequently, a study of 60 extensive graduate educational

studies assignments revealed six dominant types of written comments: phatic, developmental, structural, stylistic, methodological, and administrative. This was followed by the three most common types of comments: content, style, and development (Hyatt, 2005).

Another study investigated the classification of comments on a PhD dissertation based on Holmes' categorisation of speech functions, which is dominantly referential and the other two functions, directive and expressive (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). Referential speech function consists of editorial, organisation, and content comments. The directive speech function includes questions, instructions, and suggestion comments. Finally, praise, criticism, and opinion represent the expressive speech function.

Bitchener et al. (2011) compiled another set of supervisor feedback categorisation involving content, requirements, cohesion/coherence, linguistic accuracy, and appropriateness. Linguistic accuracy and appropriateness were the most common types of feedback. Following that are comments on content, requirements, and cohesion/coherence. As important as effective written feedback is for thesis students' writing, it is also critical to investigate the feedback provided, and how feedback is provided, while reflecting on the appropriateness and sufficiency of the written feedback. There is clearly a scarcity of research on feedback practises from the perspective or lens of thesis supervisors. As a result, more research should be conducted through their lens.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research design

This study was conducted to explore the best practices in written feedback given by thesis supervisors to EFL thesis supervisees. To achieve the aim of this study, a qualitative method was employed involving purposive sampling and one-to-one interviews with each of the thesis supervisors (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

3.2. Sampling

This study involved a non-probability sampling method using purposive sampling. Ten selected lecturers from the disciplines of Languages, Communication, Management, and Social Sciences were invited to participate in the study. Two Languages lecturers, two Social Sciences lecturers, one Communication lecturer, and one Management lecturer accepted the invitation to participate in the study as in-depth, semi-structured, one-to-one interview participants. The following criteria

'The interviews were conducted at the offices of the thesis supervisors, and each interview lasted approximately one hour. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants at each session'

were used to select lecturers from each of these disciplines: they have been on the faculty for at least ten years; they have graduated postgraduate students (MA and PhD through research-based programmes); and they are currently supervising students. The participants were briefed on the study and informed of the study's voluntary nature and withdrawal policy.

3.3. Instruments

The interview protocol used in this study was adapted from Bitchener et al. (2011). The interview questions centred on three areas: the focus of the feedback provided, the mechanism for providing feedback, and the participants' advice on good supervision practises for new supervisors. The interview questions in the instrument focused on investigating best practises in written feedback among supervisors, and they were divided into the following sections: (1) the student's competency in writing; (2) the purpose of feedback; (3) the focus of feedback; (4) how the feedback is provided; (5) the expectations of the student responses to feedback; (6) the experiences of the student responses to feedback; (7) the effectiveness of feedback; (8) supervisory training – nature of training and recommendations; and (9) advice for new supervisors.

The purpose of the semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interview with six thesis supervisors was to obtain a detailed narrative of their best practises in providing written feedback to their postgraduate students' thesis drafts. Rather than gathering findings from the perspective of postgraduate students, as is common in currently available studies, the investigation focuses on the best practises among thesis supervisors in providing written feedback to postgraduate students' thesis drafts. Since they work directly with the thesis supervisees, thesis supervisors *'are likely to be more knowledgeable and informative about the subject under investigation'* (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993, p. 378).

The interviews were conducted at the offices of the thesis supervisors, and each interview lasted approximately one hour. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants at each session. This was fol-

lowed by the audiotaped interviews. During the interview sessions, the participants were encouraged to discuss issues pertaining to the best practices in providing written feedback to thesis supervisees' written drafts and final thesis.

3.4. Data analysis

At the end of each interview, the researcher audiotaped and transcribed it. After completing the six transcriptions of the one-on-one interviews, the transcriptions were analysed for emerging patterns using a qualitative data analysis software, NVivo version 10. The coding of the data was established using thematic analysis that is a qualitative analytic method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The captured themes of the data from the interview transcripts answered the research questions and represented the patterned responses within the created data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This phase was aided by the qualitative data analysis software NVivo version 10. The data was screened in five phases: familiarisation with the data (i.e., generating initial codes), searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The findings are discussed in three areas: the focus of the feedback provided, the manner in which it was provided, and the advice supervisors would give to a new supervisor.

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

4.1. Objectives of providing feedback

The six lecturers, who were interviewed, listed many reasons for providing feedback. Essentially, the lecturers are expected to provide positive feedback in terms of understanding the context of the research. At the same time, the lecturers indicated that feedback would minimise the risks of failing to defend their thesis during the viva session. Feedback is also intended to guide students in finding resources and expanding their reading coverage. Lecturers also indicated that feedback creates awareness among the EFL thesis writers of their writing abilities. This will indirectly motivate thesis writers to enhance their writing skills or to initiate corrective actions to improve their thesis writing skills. Feedback to thesis writers also allows lecturers to inform EFL thesis writers about the writing mechanism, such as ensuring cohesiveness and coherence in their writing and effectively communicating their ideas. The following is an excerpt from one of the lecturers.

'In terms of prioritising feedback elements, one lecturer indicated that, in addition to the content of the research, language is an important factor in presenting ideas, followed by appropriate formatting in accordance with institutional guidelines. Aside from that, all respondents agreed that their primary goal in providing feedback is to improve the quality of work'

S1: ...I want the best from my students. As their supervisor, the expectation we have on our students is that they understand the context of the research and provide the fundamental inputs of that research that they are doing...

4.2. Prioritising feedback elements

In terms of prioritising feedback elements, one lecturer indicated that, in addition to the content of the research, language is an important factor in presenting ideas, followed by appropriate formatting in accordance with institutional guidelines. Aside from that, all respondents agreed that their primary goal in providing feedback is to improve the quality of work. According to one respondent, feedback is an essential part of the learning process for both the thesis supervisor and the thesis writer.

S5: My priority is to let students learn because the process of learning should be appreciated and valued by both parties.

4.3. Mechanism of providing feedback

There are many avenues available for thesis supervisors to deliver their feedback. Some respondents keep track of the feedback they give in stages using a recording system that involves hard copy and soft copy documents. This encompasses making reference to previous feedback and ensuring that it guides current and future feedback. The length of the feedback provided is also considered. There is also a difference in the way feedback is channelled. Comments to EFL thesis students living abroad are sent via email, whereas comments to EFL thesis students residing in Malaysia are conveyed on paper. International students studying abroad are then required to respond to the comments in table form, and thesis students studying in Malaysia must submit a draft copy that includes the list of responses.

S6: ...in the past I've been using... just writing on the theses themselves. So, I will have the hard copy and write... on the hard copy. But I find... with that, I am not able to track what I've been doing because, you know, when you have a copy, you give it back to the students and you don't have a copy of that. So now I've resorted to using the tracking system on words ... I find it is more difficult for me... in terms of going through because usually they give me in bulk. But I find that helps me later to track what feedback I've given them also in what have they done to fix it.

4.4. Focus of feedback content

Thesis supervisors provide feedback on the strength and weaknesses of the thesis students' writing. In terms of the weakness, the thesis supervisor (S1) prefers the thesis students to follow his or her style of writing, whereas the other thesis supervisors prefer the thesis students to be independent in terms of having their own style of writing, as the emphasis is on writing the literature review section. The thesis supervisor also prefers that students adhere to academic writing phases and carefully organise the academic content.

S6: ...depends on a student to student... come up with ideas and strengthen them, come up with suggestions on how to contribute to the knowledge.

The feedback system for EFL thesis students' writing is centred on a low level of criticality as well. Thesis students tend to report information in detail that can instead be summarised or discussed concisely and critically. Furthermore, thesis students' inability to write a good problem statement and operationalise it into research objectives causes a setback in critically reviewing the literature. Alternatively, feedback is provided to EFL thesis students to help them improve their written communication skills, as they are weak in academic writing. This is due to a lack of writing proficiency in the English Language. Concurrently, feedback is centred on communication of the gap investigated in the research.

S3: ...coming up with a good statement of the problem and from their operationalising it into objectives... Besides that, they're not able to critically look at the literature review. They're just able to write about the past work. Past studies, related studies in the field.

4.5. The scope of feedback

The scope of feedback provided by the thesis supervisors focuses primarily on content knowledge, accuracy, completeness, and relevance. Respondent S1

'Thesis supervisors stated that feedback was also provided to EFL students' thesis writing in terms of the argument development. The respondent indicated seeking detailed write-up from the students involving critical writing skills, reporting, and reviewing and presenting ideas. Coherence is emphasised in presenting their statement of problem and research objectives with clarity. Coherence is emphasised in presenting their statement of problem and research objectives with clarity'

stated that content is a critical aspect of thesis writing that cannot be compromised. At the same time, in terms of accuracy, language errors, such as spelling errors, are discouraged to the extent where EFL students must use an e-dictionary as a spelling guide. Thesis supervisor, S1 also stated that he or she provides guidance to the EFL thesis student in preparing and conducting data analysis. In such situations, thesis students gain hands-on experience with the assistance of their thesis supervisors. At the same time, S2 stated that feedback is provided based on the relevance of the thesis students' writing to review the related literature. The thesis supervisors also emphasise accuracy and completeness to ensure the relevance of the thesis students' writing.

S2: *...whether I give feedback in this area or not. Yes, of course, sometimes you read the theses and you tried to give comments in terms of their relevance whether or not they already have it, for example, if they are reviewing body of knowledge they did, whether they are reviewing the right materials or whether they should expand, or go deeper...*

4.6. Genre knowledge

Thesis supervisors emphasise genre knowledge elements in their feedback. Genre knowledge, as indicated by respondent S1, involves the knowledge of thesis structure. S1 stated that EFL thesis students must be aware of and adhere to the format of a thesis in terms of inclusion and exclusion of chapters. As for S2, EFL thesis students must understand the type of text they are dealing with, as well as the different communicative functions of each chapter of a thesis. Thesis students should be able to compartmentalise their writing in ac-

cordance with suitable move structures for each chapter of a thesis, such as the introduction, methodology, or discussion chapters.

S2: *Students have to know what should go in an introduction, what goes in the literature review in the methodology and how to write a result section and discussion. I give a lot of feedback related to the different parts of the thesis.*

4.7. Rhetorical structure / organisation

In terms of the feedback on rhetorical structure or organisation, thesis supervisors indicate that as independent learners, EFL thesis writers must develop their own organisational style for their work. However, S2 indicated that postgraduate students require guidance in organising their ideas or thoughts. Respondents also suggested that feedback should be provided on the structure and organisation to ease readers.

S1: *The organisation needs to be suitable as a post-graduate. They need to understand to what extent that thesis is deep enough to be explored so that we have rhetorical form and so on.*

4.8. Argument development

Thesis supervisors stated that feedback was also provided to EFL students' thesis writing in terms of the argument development. The respondent indicated seeking detailed write-up from the students involving critical writing skills, reporting, and reviewing and presenting ideas. Coherence is emphasised in presenting their statement of problem and research objectives with clarity. The major concern in their feedback is the lack of cohesion in the five chapters of a thesis. Respondents also advise their students to avoid padding out the literature review chapter, while focusing more on arguing with the literature.

S3: *... their main weakness is this. They're not able to coherently write according to the research objectives and statement of the problems... there is an issue of cohesion and coherence in students' writing... there are five chapters, sometimes do not gel. There's no cohesion in the five chapters.*

4.9. Linguistic accuracy and appropriateness

In terms of linguistic accuracy and appropriateness, S1 prioritised linguistic accuracy.

S1: *... for postgraduate level, the accuracy of the language itself is very important so that you can actually explain in academic way too so that everyone can understand your study.*

4.9.1. How do you determine whether or not your feedback is successful?

S2: *If I give feedback and they improve, then I know it's helpful. If I give feedback and they don't improve, they still do the same thing. Then I have to check whether the feedback is successful or not.*

4.9.2. What factors are taken into consideration when providing feedback?

The knowledge that they have in the research (proficiency level)

S2: *... sometimes when students send you [their parts], you have to give more and more feedback. You have to give a more guided, clearer feedback. Then if the students are at a later stage when they are already so much better, I just give you a bit like 'Oh, this is good. You should continue doing this.'*

4.9.3. When do you provide feedback and why?

S2: *All the time. But of course, like I said, sometimes people need more feedback in the beginning. I think usually for postgraduate students they need a lot of feedback in the beginning and a lot of feedback at the end. These are the two very important stages in between when they are out there collecting data or really analysing, that's when they can sort of comprehend on their own.*

4.9.4. How do you provide feedback?

S3: *...I usually show comments in bold or in colours, as to what exactly my feedback is based on their work, for international students. For local students, usually they submit their hard copy. So, it is written and oral to support and of course I use quotes, symbols in their work.*

4.10. Face-to-face feedback interaction

In terms of face-to-face feedback interaction, respondents indicated that they have it with their students. This activity is predicated on the notion that students and supervisors must have a mutual understanding of the written feedback provided. Feedback meetings or face-to-face feedback interactions can also guide them in determining the future direction of their research. In terms of timing, S3 stated that the feedback meeting is conducted every fortnight or once a month. S5 argued that the benefits of feedback meetings include the ability to align their thoughts and those of their students, as well as the ability to discuss differences in order to reach a consensus.

S5: *I have feedback meetings with my students and because I need to make sure that we reach the same understanding on comments that I have given. And, if I comment, I normally say, 'I suggest you do this, to do these things'. However, if the students do not agree, then, we can always discuss back and find-tune to ensure that both parties reach more quality work.*

4.11. Thesis student response to thesis supervisor feedback

Thesis supervisors expect their thesis students to accept the feedback provided. The feedback must be acknowledged by improving their work and incorporating the feedback into their writing. One respondent had a negative experience with international postgraduate students, who refused to accept the feedback given. Furthermore, respondents expect students to work on the feedback by consulting them if they have queries about it.

S3: *... have bad experiences especially with international students. They're very stubborn in terms of trying to argue their stance in that particular feedback ... resolution to solve the problem ...As I tell them to look at the literature and decide what I have, what they think about my feedback based on the literature.*

4.12. Prior feedback provision training

In terms of the thesis supervisors' prior training history on providing feedback, the findings revealed that the majority did not receive training on giving feedback to thesis drafts. The manner in which feedback is given is primarily determined by the experience of the thesis supervisors. One respondent, S1, indicated that training was received during the supervisor's own postgraduate study, and another received training through discussions and feedbacks from other supervisors, as well as courses organised by the university.

S2: *... when I first came to xxx (name of university), they do provide, like a training on how to provide supervision, how to supervise students, but the rest I learned from experience.*

S6: *No, not really ... My training is on...with my supervisor ... I think that was a good training.*

4.13. Feedback provision training

The respondents agreed on the importance of training in feedback provision techniques. In the context of this study, thesis supervisors noted that they should be provided with practical workshops or seminars to improve their feedback provision skills. The respondents

also requested for feedback guidelines. Furthermore, the type of training requested differs from training on ways of writing a chapter.

S3: If training is provided, I would prefer a workshop actually...a workshop in terms of outlining exactly the expectations of a lecturer in providing feedback for international and local postgraduate students.

5. DISCUSSION

This study has provided several key points to consider when providing effective feedback for thesis supervision. The findings of this study concur with the findings of Jafarigohar et al. (2018), who reported the identification of seven major categories of comments by thesis supervisors: academic conventions, referencing style, using a suitable formatting template, content, organisation, grammar and sentence structure, and method. Prior literature also corroborates these findings (Mhunpiew, 2013; Surry et al., 2010). Literature has indicated that manually written feedback has been replaced with technologically advanced online written feedback provision, reducing face-to-face interactions between supervisors and supervisees to a bare minimum.

According to Hyland and Hyland's (2001) study, supervisors do not expect high standards from their students, and refrain from providing too many comments as this will demotivate the students. However, Hoomanfar et al. (2018) argued that supervisors expect a higher level of content complexity in dissertations, which contradicted their findings. This prompts supervisors to provide additional comments in this area in order to assist PhD students (and their dissertations) in fulfilling the requirements for viva submission. As a result, the current study agrees with the latter.

According to Lee (2007), the literature has also provided insights for a more process-oriented supervisory role that allows for the development of collaborative knowledge creation. Naturally, the unequal role of supervisor and supervisee necessitates considerable negotiation. As a result, a collaborative relationship between supervisor and supervisee will foster greater graduate independence and competency to be nurtured.

The findings suggest that feedback from thesis supervisors is crucial in guiding supervisees, particularly EFL supervisees, in their studies. At the same time, a significant drawback is that thesis supervisors are not given any training in terms of the structure of feedback provision for thesis supervisees. Furthermore, supervision in a global and intercultural context requires the thesis su-

perisors to have intercultural competence, in order to provide feedback to thesis supervisees from different parts of the world. According to Hazita et al. (2014), Malaysia currently has a significant number of postgraduate students from Arab countries, and an increase in EFL graduates from China is expected following the Covid-19 worldwide pandemic. For these students, constructive feedback is very important due to the lack of exposure to the academic literacy genre in their own educational environment. East et al. (2012) previously claimed that in order to maintain the supervisor-student relationship and provide effective feedback, thesis supervisors must consider the different understandings, cultural backgrounds, and learning strategies inherited and practised in their learning that students bring into the thesis supervisor-supervisee relationship.

According to the findings of this study, a good thesis produced by postgraduate students is also heavily influenced by the relationship with the thesis supervisor. Ciampa and Wolfe (2019), Carter and Kumar (2017), and Mulliner and Tucker (2015) all stated that effective critical feedback from the thesis supervisor is essential for thesis writing. Structured feedback on the various aspects investigated in this study will motivate graduate students to be consistent in their writing, produce a quality thesis, and fulfil the graduation period requirement. Furthermore, thesis supervisors should be provided with the necessary training through formal channels, in order to improve their competency in providing feedback. In relation to this, the National Strategic Plan for Higher Education 2007, which aims to increase the number of PhD holders in Malaysia to 60,000 by 2023 (Ait Saadi et al., 2018), thesis supervisor feedback competency is an issue that requires attention. Such attention, in the form of thesis supervisor training in terms of providing feedback, engaging with students, being sensitive to cultural differences, and respecting the supervisor-supervisee relationship, will complement the government initiative to ensure supervisee satisfaction with thesis supervision.

The feedback provided by thesis supervisors is a vital component of thesis supervision. As a result, supervisors should be equipped with good supervisory skills and practises, in order to guide their thesis supervisees in their writing, particularly EFL postgraduate students in linguistically demanding academic programmes. In this context, relevant workshops to assist supervisors in identifying and diagnosing challenges, as well as responding to those challenges in students' writing, can be added to the professional development agenda.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings emphasised the focus of feedback provided, the manner in which it was provided, and the advice supervisors would give to a new supervisor. Focus of feedback highlighted the reasons supervisors provide feedback, category of feedback – content and/or language, and strength as well as weakness of thesis writing in terms of content knowledge, accuracy, completeness, and relevance. Secondly, the manner in which written feedback was provided entailed mechanism of providing written feedback via online or offline channel and the format of feedback provision. Finally, advice given by supervisors to new supervisors offered insights about pre-supervision training and during supervision training.

The quality and appropriateness of thesis supervision are critical to ensuring successful theses submission for examination, and constructive and detailed feedback on written work from supervisors is a key characteristic of good research supervision. This study, which included a large number of thesis supervisors in linguistically demanding graduate programmes, as well as a large number of Malaysian and international thesis students (EFL students) at Malaysian higher education

institutions, provided significant insights into the current thesis supervisor-supervisee relationship in the context of theses feedback. Moreover, the findings revealed current practices that are practically common and comparable among thesis supervisors across universities. It will also provide researchers with an opportunity to incorporate good feedback practices, in order to improve supervision quality through constructive feedback from lecturers. Indirectly, it will enhance graduate student satisfaction, which will consequently attract more incoming graduate students. The findings will undoubtedly serve as a foundation for a future longitudinal study involving other universities. As this is a preliminary in-depth study focusing on six supervisors, the findings of the supervisory feedback practices will guide a larger study. Subsequently, the larger study will eventually frame a pedagogical approach to supervising MA and PhD students that incorporates effective supervisory style and techniques for effective critical thesis writing.

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