

## Investigating Supervisory Written Feedback on EFL MA Dissertations in the Libyan Academy: Supervisors' Expectations

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### ABSTRACT.

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This study aimed at investigating the concept of feedback in order to understand this phenomenon much better. It explored the expectations supervisors hold while formulating their written feedback. Data were collected qualitatively in which semi-structured interviews were held with 7 supervisors in the Libyan Academy/ Janzour. The findings revealed that supervisors expect that they are doing all the best to benefit students and that their written feedback has a positive effect on their students. Hence, they expect their students to be punctual and work hard after receiving feedback. These findings will hopefully help students understand what supervisors expect of them; and hence they can improve their performance to please their supervisors.

**Keywords:** Written feedback, Supervisors, dissertations, EFL (English Foreign Language)

### الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة بالتحقيق في مفهوم التغذية الراجعة لفهمها بشكل أفضل، حيث تبحث توقعات المشرفين عند صياغة هذه التغذية. تم تجميع البيانات عن طريق مقابلات شخصية مع 7 مشرفين في الأكاديمية الليبية/جنزور. أظهرت النتائج أن المشرفين يتوقعون بذل قصارى جهدهم لمصلحة الطلاب، وأن التغذية الراجعة الكتابية لها تأثير إيجابي وتساهم في تطوير رسائلهم. وبالتالي، يتوقعون من طلابهم الالتزام بالمواعيد والعمل الجاد بعد تلقي هذه التغذية. نأمل أن تساعد هذه النتائج الطلاب في فهم ما

يتوقعه المشرفون منهم، وبالتالي يمكنهم تحسين أدائهم لإرضاء مشرفهم والحصول على رسائل دقيقة ومُحكمة.

## Introduction

Generally, feedback is considered as a crucial element in the educational process as it provides students with the required instructions to fill the gaps between their current knowledge level and the level they desire to reach. This also applies to MA students who are conducting their dissertation which is considered as a critical part (Biggam, 2017), and for many of them it is the first formal independent work (Lum, 2018). Hence, they lack the understanding of the research requirements and experience (Paran et al., 2017). In this regard, the feedback provided by supervisors plays a vital role in guiding and facilitating students' work (Wang & Li, 2011). Feedback refers to the input from the reader to the writer which may include comments or suggestions for better performance (Keh, 1990). The feedback focus on students' gaps and works on filling them no matter it was given in the form of comments, suggestions or advice. Teachers and instructors help students move from their current knowledge level into the desired level through directing them with the suitable feedback. In the same manner, students consult supervisors to guide them with their experience in order to enhance the quality of their work throughout dissertation preparing (De Kleijn et al., 2013). However, supervisors' expectations and beliefs are still implicit (Pearson & Brew, 2002). Hence, this study attempts to shed the light on the expectations of supervisors while their formulation of feedback and answer the following question:

1- What expectations do supervisors have while formulating their written feedback in dissertation drafts?

## Literature Review

Feedback is "information about how successfully something has been or is being done" (Sadler, 1989, p. 120). In 1994, Winne and Butler defined feedback as information that can be used by the learner to confirm, add to, or reconstruct knowledge in memory. Moreover, it is a tactic employed by teachers to inform students with the mistakes and errors they make to improve their future production of the linguistic elements (Ferreira-Cabrera, 2017). Also, it can be described as the "cornerstone of all learning" (Colbran *et al.*, 2016, p. 6). Moreover, Feedback can be treated as the basic pedagogical item for the development of academic writing (Catterall *et al.*, 2011). It might be given in oral or written forms to achieve the desired purpose. Written feedback refers to all comments written on the margins or the notes between lines and at the end of the of students' writing drafts (Ferris, 2011). Feedback has several significant functions. Firstly, it assists learners to be aware of their writing slips according to the Standard Written English conventions. It also improves their editing abilities. Also, it encourages learners to appreciate feedback and write more precisely (Ferris, 2011). In previous studies, a study on the formulation of supervisory in-text feedback on PhD theses was done by Kumar & Stracke (2007). They identified three main categories of feedback: referential, directive, and expressive. Referential feedback deals with organization and editorial issues, directive deals with making questions and suggestions, and expressive deals with supervisors' opinions; their praise or criticism.

Teachers and instructors play a vital role in the improvement of students' skills through giving meaningful feedback which constructs an essential part in the assessment process (Irons, 2008). That is, teachers provide feedback to students based on their errors and mistakes. In this way, students will be able to understand how the correct form should be produced (Gitsaki & Althobaiti, 2010). Teachers differ in their style, focus, amount and usefulness of feedback (Hyland, 2013) and their practice is believed to be followed by their own beliefs. That is, the theories that teachers themselves hold and construct the core of the

teaching process (Burns, 1992, p. 64). A study was conducted by Montgomery & Baker (2007) to explore the teachers' self-assessment of WCF, students' perception, and the teachers' actual practice. The results revealed that there is no remarkable difference between the self-assessment of teachers, their real performance of WCF, and the students' perception. Nevertheless, the results also indicated that teachers are not fully acquainted with the quantity of feedback should be given. That is, they provide much feedback on local issues rather than global ones. Hence, one of the study recommendations was to concentrate on how to make teachers' beliefs relate their own use of feedback regarding L2 writing. Similarly, AlBakri (2016) conducted a case study in order to examine Omani teachers' practices and views about feedback. He found that challenges teachers face while providing feedback impact on their decisions. That is, teachers encounter some difficulties to produce well-formed and understandable feedback due to the lack of training. Hence, the study recommended that training programs should be offered for teachers to expand their knowledge about how to make effective feedback.

In 2003, a study was conducted by Lee to investigate the criteria used by ESL teachers in providing feedback. The study revealed that most of the teachers prefer to use direct feedback over indirect feedback. One of the study suggestions is that teachers should use both types of feedback regarding the appropriateness of the situation. In Bahrain context, a study was done by Mubarak (2013) to investigate the practices of feedback, the impact of direct and indirect feedback on learners' writing, and to find out the learners and instructors' beliefs towards feedback. The results demonstrated that both learners and instructors appreciate the value of feedback in addition to learners' preferences of direct feedback. However, the results also showed that there are many problems in the way of teaching the language in addition to the way of utilising feedback methods. Another study was organized by Cinkara & Galaly (2018) to find out the influence of feedback practices on EFL Iraqi students' writing. It investigated both teachers and students' attitudes towards written

feedback. a closed-ended questionnaire was distributed among 100 teachers and another one among 200 students. The findings revealed that students' skills of writing improved with teachers' written feedback, particularly when the feedback was positive and constructive. It was also noticed that students prefer feedback when it is given timely and when it corrects their mistakes. In addition, Alkhatib (2015) conducted a study to explore the actual practices of EFL writing teachers about the written feedback. The findings demonstrated that teachers concentrate on linguistic errors more than the content and the organization. In addition, they utilize both direct and indirect feedback techniques. Nevertheless, the case is not only about the use of direct or indirect feedback. Students blame teachers for not leaving them engaged as active members in the process of feedback, whereas teachers are totally satisfied with their ways of using feedback and criticize students for not taking their feedback in consideration (Havnes *et al.*, 2012).

In the case of post graduate supervision process, an integrated, complex, and consistent compound of academic and personal abilities is needed to reinforce the relation with the students (Taylor, 2002) and benefit them (Mapesela & Wilkinson, 2005). These abilities comprise the skill of leading post graduate students in order to create an academic proposal, helping them to pick the appropriate research methods and to make them able to design integrated scientific research (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011).

The role of academic supervisor in research is to support and encourage students in order to facilitate success and efficiency in producing scientific research (Gray & Jordan, 2012). The supervisors' feedback works to raise the standard of the research through some advice and guidance, which will enrich its content (Gyuris, 2018) and ensure its coherent language (Bitchener *et al.*, 2010). This feedback has the function of assessment as well as feed-forward. It evaluates the results students reached and give advice to achieve others (Price *et al.* 2010). For the supervisors to have an effective role, they should follow up on the

academic steps taken by the researcher before starting to write the research, especially the procedures for registering and accepting the research topic (Deem & Brehony, 2000). Moreover, Saeed *et al.* (2021) suggested that one of the tasks of the supervisor is to solve the problems encountered while writing the research. This ensures that errors and pitfalls are overcome and then the research done more quickly. Other important factors are to be available and give punctual feedback so that students do not fall behind (Schulze, 2012) as well as offering online contact with students to receive questions and provide feedback (Leggat & Martinez, 2010). However, there is no fixed criteria all supervisors follow to satisfy students' demands. That is, they utilise different styles based on the needs of their students (Orellana *et al.*, 2016; Doğan & Bıkmaz, 2015; Deem & Brehony, 2000) and the individual differences among them (Kelley & McLaughlin, 2012). For some supervisors, they pick their supervisees carefully; students with intelligence abilities and super skills which in turn eases the burden of giving much feedback on unnecessary issues and to avoid disagreement (Gardner, 2009).

#### Research Methodology

Research methodology is considered as systematic investigation of the applied procedures in a certain study (Kothari, 2004). In respect of this study, a qualitative approach was adopted in order to achieve the aims of the study and to answer the research question. An exploratory design was adopted as well. This type is adopted when there is no sufficient information about a particular phenomenon (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). Finding conclusive answers for the research questions is not the aim of this type. Instead, it aims to find information and problems that has not been fully studied before (Brown, 2006). That is, it is used in this study to explore new dimensions of the feedback provided by supervisors to MA students working on their dissertations.

#### Data collection instruments

This study aims to investigate the concept of feedback; hence, it will achieve this by adopting qualitative approach in addition to the information coming from literature.

Semi-structured interviews with a number of supervisors in the Libyan Academy were shaped as qualitative instrument from which data related to the concept of the study can be gained through theme-based interpretation. Interview is the most used instrument in collecting qualitative data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2001; Patten, 2016). In respect of this study, the interviews were based on the theme of the study and in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of supervisors' expectations towards MA students after receiving their feedback. they were semi-structured. That is, they were based on pre-determined questions asking about particular things related to the theme of the study to keep the interviews focused and avoid going off the path. At the same time, other questions were added or modified during the interview to collect as much data as possible. The selection of interviewees was also related to the aim of the research; some instructors in the Libyan academy who are supervising or have supervised MA students conducting their dissertations.

The interviews ranged from 10 to 15 minutes. Open-ended questions were utilized as well as following probe question when needed. The official interviews were held from the 3rd to the 23rd days of January 2023 at times ranging from 12:00 to 14:30. They were conducted in English even though before the official starting of the interview, Arabic -the mother tongue of all supervisors- was used to prepare a comfortable atmosphere. At the end of the interviews, supervisors were given the opportunity express and add any comments regarding the topic under study.

For ethical consideration, supervisors were asked to choose the appropriate time to make the interviews and they were given the time lime needed. They were given a full idea about the

research aims and the way their answers would be analysed in addition to the chance to see the questions before the start of the interviews. Moreover, their permission was asked to record the interviews. The records were securely saved and accessed only by the researcher.

### Results

In analysing the interviews, the names of the interviewees will not be mentioned due to ethical and confidential considerations. Instead, Letters A, B, C, D, E, F, and G will be used to refer to the supervisors participated.

The results of the interviews demonstrated that supervisors hold positive beliefs towards the feedback they provide to students and high expectations towards their students after receiving that feedback.

When supervisors were asked whether their feedback positively affect students' work, all of them agreed that it helps students to develop their skills which makes their work rise to the required academic level. They started their answers using words such as "definitely", "certainly", "sure", and "of course". For instance, four of them added that they see the huge difference between the old version and the one after receiving feedback as was stated by D *"when students get my feedback, they edit their writing and when they show it to me again, I notice that the edited section starts to make sense"*, or as mentioned by G *"the feedback has a great effect and the drafts of students changes 180 degrees after getting my instructions"*. others had enough with the first approval. However, after using probe questions they also referred to the improvement they notice among versions.

As for the criteria used to supply students with feedback, supervisors were similar to each other, since their criteria depends on the material under assessment. A said *"the feedback depends on the chapters, if it was about literature review or methodology"*. The same thing was said by B and C referring to that the feedback they use for literature review concentrates

on the academic way of writing and citations whereas the feedback for methodology focuses on the methodological issues such as the use of appropriate instruments. However, their focus was slightly different; some of them mentioned that they give equal importance to the content of the dissertation as well as the way of writing as stated by B *"when it comes to assessing students' writing to give the appropriate comments, I devise the same focus on all related issues that would affect the dissertation"* whereas D, E, F, and G mentioned that they focus on the content rather than the linguistic and academic writing issues supporting their answers with the maturity of the students and their ability to handle the writing by their owns as mentioned by F *"content is the basic matter that needed to be assessed claiming that other issues are the students' responsibility"*.

For the type of feedback preferred to be used, all the interviewees said that they use direct feedback to tell students what to do. After using probe questions to pay their attention to the typology of feedback followed in this study, all of them mentioned that they use directive feedback in the form of suggestions. The use of other types varies from one supervisor to another. To clarify more, most of supervisors do not write questions on students' drafts, they only use question marks when they do not understand something as mentioned by A and D or when notice information that is not related to the research as mentioned by C and E or in both cases as said by F and G, as if they mean (what is the meaning of this?) or (what is the relation of this?) as stated by D *"I rarely write questions, I simply write a question mark when I find something vague"* or as said by F *"I put question mark without writing a question in cases where there is unrelated or any incomprehensible information"*. For referential feedback, all supervisors, with no exception, mentioned that they follow a fixed template accepted by the Libyan Academy. Regarding the organization of in-text paragraphs, they agreed that they ask students to move sentences and paragraphs when they are in the wrong place. As mentioned by B, C, D, E, F, and G, they ask students to move paragraphs to specific

places such as saying *"to previous chapter"* *"next chapter"* *"chapter three, chapter four"*. However, A does not show students where to put the moved paragraph *"I only tell the student that this paragraph should not be here"*. For expressive feedback, A and D stated that their job is not to flatter students *"the students have to do this, they do not need my praise"* as said by A with great stress on *"have to"*, C and G mentioned that they rarely write praise on the drafts of students claiming that this is the expected but they may tell the students orally if they were doing well. Nevertheless, B, E, and F demonstrated that they write positive expressions when they like something written by the students *"I always start with the positive points then move to the negative"* as stated by E and F. For criticism side, A stated that he writes his criticism directly. E stated that *"this only happens when the student does not pay attention to my corrections and keep repeating the same thing many times"*. Other supervisors clarified that they do not use criticism to mean offence to students, as stated by B *"we are here to guide them"*.

Regarding supervisors' own expectations, All the interviewees expect students to take all comments and instructions in consideration and work within the time frame using words in their answers such as 'punctual' and 'hard worker'. For instance, D stated *"I spend time and effort to write instructions to improve their work, I do not accept laziness in editing or doing it in the wrong way"*. A, C, E, F, and G demonstrated that the majority of their students matches their expectations and they apply all the feedback they receive. B and D mentioned that some students are up to the expected level, whereas some of them are under the level of their expectations.

The results also illustrated that supervisors assured the clarity of the written feedback which does not make students need further clarification. C, E, and F mentioned that their students rarely ask for further clarification since all the written comments are obvious enough. B and D illustrated that sometimes students ask for further clarification or explanation. Others

added that only occasionally, students may request further explication after receiving the feedback. All of the previous supervisors mentioned that they do not depend only on the written feedback and that they offer oral feedback whenever students were in need. In addition, they mentioned that they always arrange meetings to meet with student and look at the latest developments. However, A stated that there is only written feedback between him and students; *"I depend mainly on the written feedback, whatever I want to ask students to do, I write it"*.

In the case of students' ability to handle the work without receiving any feedback, all the supervisors confidently emphasized the impossibility of students to handle a well-formed dissertation without receiving feedback and being guided by someone who is more knowledgeable. They demonstrated their answers using words and phrases such as *"I do not think so"* as stated by B, *"never ever"* as stated by A, and *"of course not"* as stated by E. C and G continued to mention their experience when they were students and how the feedback of their supervisors helped them. D stated *"we learn till we die, students need someone to motivate and guide them"*.

When supervisors were asked whether they were satisfied with their supervisees, supervisors agreed on their satisfaction. A insisted on his total satisfaction with the results achieved by his supervisees due to his effective feedback to the extent that he asked the interviewer to look at the MA dissertations submitted under his supervision and how they were accepted with excellent degrees. B and D mentioned that they are satisfied with most of their supervisees except those who are *"lazy"* as was described by B or *"indifferent"* as D described. In other words, the students who do not follow their feedback and do not respect the timetable. However, they mentioned that this rarely happen. C, E, F, and G mentioned their satisfaction. Moreover, they declared that this satisfaction is a result of their selection; they do not accept the supervision of all students, they pick the students they believe that

they are good enough to be supervised as stated by G *"I only supervise students I know they are hard workers through my teaching experience with them"*. When they were asked about the other students, they said that this is not their responsibility as stated by D *"this is not my business, the department should not accept all that number of students as it cannot offer supervisors for all of them"* or as F mentioned *"this is a research and it will not be done perfectly with low level student, the question is why the department accept such students from the beginning?"*. In addition, all supervisors insisted on quitting the supervision when they are not satisfied with the work of students.

### Discussion

All supervisors declared that they make an effort and spend much time to provide students with the required feedback, this confirms (Taylor, 2002; Mapesela & Wilkinson, 2005) in which feedback requires much skills and effort. Hence, they expect students to work hard after receiving that feedback. In addition, they expect them to be punctual and give priority to their dissertations. Supervisors assured their satisfactions with their supervisees. For instance, they mentioned that most of their students follow their instructions and match their expectations; this could be attributed to their selection of specific students which go align with (Gardner, 2009) view of picking the proper students. In other words, the selection of students whose skills, motivations and abilities are perfectly suited.

However, they declared that only few students may not be up the expected level and, in such cases, supervisors may end up quitting the supervision if the students keep ignoring their feedback and exceed the time lime. In this regard, Stubb *et al.* (2011) declared that leaving students alone in research will lead to their stumbling and inability to continue the research. Hence, it is preferable for the supervisor to explore the reason behind students' laziness and make attempts to fix it (Ahern & Manathunga, 2004).

It is worth to mention that supervisors have similar criteria in formulating their written feedback. This is different from what Hyland (2013) mentioned; teachers differ in the way of providing feedback. As shown in their responses, one of the supervisors stated *"the feedback depends on the chapters, if it was about literature review or methodology"*. This means that they write feedback based on the material they want to amend (Gitsaki & Althobaiti, 2010). However, while some of them give equal concentration to the content and the academic way of writing, others put their emphasis on the content and expect students to handle other issues related to writing. This aligns the findings of (Xu, 2017; Basturkmen *et al.*, 2014), in which content and language accuracy are the most focused on disciplines.

Expectations of supervisors extend to reach the type of feedback they prefer to utilize. All supervisors expect that direct feedback is better to be used instead of indirect feedback. They believe that giving directive feedback in the form of suggestions is clearer and easier to be understood and applied by the students. This is similar to the finding of Lee's (2003) study whereas both criteria were utilized in Alkhatib's (2015) study. The findings also revealed that supervisors did not expect writing questions to be needed, they claimed that question marks '?' are sufficient to tell the students that there is something wrong. This contradicted the findings of Saeed *et al.*'s (2021) study, where the supervisors overutilize the questions to provoke students to think and interact with feedback more deeply.

In the case of organizing the dissertation, supervisors expect and ask students to follow the template confirmed by The Libyan Academy. However, they mentioned that they help students to organize in-text paragraphs by asking them to move the wrong-placed sentences or paragraphs from one place to another.

### Conclusion

This study has shown that the feedback is one of the most effective elements in developing MA students' dissertations and the best guide to allow them being admitted officially.

Supervisors in the Libyan Academy expect that the written feedback they provide to students helps them to improve their dissertations and that the required efforts are made. They prefer to give directive and straightforward feedback in the form of suggestions or instructions and expect their supervisees to be hard workers and punctual. Moreover, they pick them carefully and hence they are satisfied with them.

### Conflicts of Interest

As there is no research goes smoothly without challenges and difficulties, the researcher faced several obstacles while working on this study, including both difficulties in collecting data and others related to administrative procedures. In the case of collecting the theoretical data, there were deficiencies in the sources in the Libyan libraries. Collecting the authentic data was also challengeable and time consuming, as it was difficult to reach all the supervisors in the Academy as well as reaching some professors and recognised that they had no supervision experience in the Academy.

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