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A Typology of Supervisor Written Feedback on L2 Students' Theses/Dissertations

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Abstract

The present study aimed at providing a typology of Iranian supervisors' written feedback on L2 graduate students' theses/dissertations and examining the way different speech functions are employed to put the supervisors' thoughts and feelings into words. In so doing, a corpus of comments, including 15,198 comments provided on 87 TEFL theses and dissertations by 30 supervisors were analyzed. We employed an inductive category formation procedure to form the typology of comments, and followed a deductive procedure to put the comments into the three categories of expressive, referential, and directive speech functions. The findings showed that supervisors provided seven main categories of comments on theses and dissertations: grammar and sentence structure, content, method, organization, references, formatting, and academic procedures. Furthermore, the findings indicated that supervisors employed comments with different patterns and for different purposes on MA and PhD students' texts.

Keywords: Academic writing; Feedback; Second language writing; Supervisor feedback

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1. Introduction

The seamless integration of instruction and feedback has become a well-established convention of different courses in academic settings. Feedback has been reported to be one of the major factors contributing to university students' learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hoomanfard & Rahimi, in press; Hyland, 2013; Taheri & Younesi, 2014). In graduate programs, instructors attempt to prepare their students to conduct research projects and report them through different media at their disposal, such as book chapters, journals, theses, dissertations (Caffarella & Barnett 2000; Can & Walker, 2011). However, academic writing is an unfamiliar and complex task for students and many step into the research area without adequate preparation (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Alter & Adkins, 2006). This unpreparedness calls for support in different forms including research methodology courses, academic writing courses, cooperative writing groups, and feedback provided by instructors and/or peers (Hoomanfard, 2017; Parker, 2009) to help learners reach the acceptable standards of both writing ability and academic subject-matter (Can & Walker, 2011; Hyland, 2013).

One type of support that graduate students need and want is supervisor written feedback (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000; Rimaz, Dehdari, & Dehdari, 2015). Feedback, regarded as the best tool to help supervisees attain the intended objectives (Bitchener, Basturkmen, East, & Meyer, 2011; Kumar & Stracke, 2007), has reached its unparalleled significance in the process of supervision because new technologies have reduced the face-to-face interactions between supervisors and supervisees to a minimum level and have made written comments on Word Documents the typical type

of the supervisor-supervisee communication type (Mhunpiew, 2013; Surry, Stefurak, & Kowch, 2010).

In addition, the relationship between supervisors and their students is a critical factor, which can determine the difference between success and failure of theses/dissertations (e.g., Li & Seale, 2007; Wright, 2003). The quality of the relationship can determine a student's feeling of being socialized into the academic community, quality of his progress, and quality of the product (Barnes & Austin, 2009). The quality of this relationship is also mirrored in the perceptions of graduate students and the quality of the final product (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Kiley, 2011). Several factors (e.g., social, psychological, cognitive, etc.) can contribute to the success of this relationship. A site which can reflect the relationship between supervisors and students is supervisor feedback.

With the popularization of written feedback, and its establishment as the most commonly-used medium of communication between a supervisor and her supervisee (Mhunpiew, 2013; Surry, et al., 2010), the investigation of feedback turns into the study of the most prominent communication channel between a supervisor and her supervisee. In addition to the revealing nature of supervisor feedback, the graduate students' dissatisfaction with the supervisor feedback (e.g., Carless, 2006; Hasani, 2014; Hyatt, 2005; Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010) calls for more studies on feedback to explore the problematic areas. These scholars have argued that more studies are required to uncover how the process of scaffolding students' academic writing ability can be improved. One of the underexplored areas, addressed in this

study, is the pattern of supervisor feedback on the Iranian MA and PhD students' texts, which can partially depict how supervisors scaffold their students' academic writing ability. The present study, in an attempt to shed more light on the issue of supervisor feedback, intends to present a typology of supervisor feedback and explore the speech functions employed to convey messages by analyzing a corpus of comments on Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) major's theses and dissertations.

1.1. Conceptual framework

The present study is built upon sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1978), one of the main inspiring figures of sociocultural theory, posits that learning, as a type of human development, is a social phenomenon. To sociocultural theory, complex skills have origins in and are shaped by individual's social interaction. A significant concept pertinent to sociocultural theory is mediation. Mediation includes the tools that connect the external world, the social plane, with the internal world, the individual plane. Sociocultural theory can explain how graduate students are socialized by interacting with their more expert individuals into their disciplinary communities of practice. As mentioned above, in the phase of theses/dissertation writing, the interactions between supervisors and students mainly occur in the form of written feedback. Through supervisor feedback, the mediational tool, novice researchers learn the explicit and implicit rules of their academic community and socialize into their disciplinary communities.

To examine the quality of supervisor feedback, a functional perspective of grammar, which attempts to show how people get things done by the use of different

resources at their disposal, such as language and other semiotic means (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), was employed. In the present study, employing the three language functions (expressive, referential, and directive) identified by Kumar and Stracke (2007) as the main language functions in supervisor feedback exchanges, the supervisors' comments on L2 MA and PhD students' texts were investigated.

1.2. Empirical studies

The paucity of studies investigating the typology of comments provided by supervisors on students' theses and dissertations is easy to notice. A brief account of the studies conducted in the twenty-first century is provided here. As the first systematic study of written feedback genre, Mirador (2000) conducted a data-driven study to categorize different written comments provided by seven university instructors on graduate students' formative and summative written products. She studied the comments and provided 12 moves including general impression, recapitulation/ referencing, suggesting improvement, highlighting strengths, calling attention to weakness, affective judgment, exemplification, evidentiality, juxtaposition, positivising, probing, and overall judgment.

In another attempt, Hyatt (2005) investigated 60 extensive graduate educational studies assignments. His study revealed that phatic, developmental, structural, stylistic, content-related, methodological, and administrative comments were the six major comment types university instructors provided. Furthermore, content, stylistic, and development comments were the most common comment types.

Kumar and Stracke (2007), also, provided a classification of comments on a PhD dissertation based on speech functions. Following Holmes' (2001) categorization, they put the comments into three directive, expressive, and referential speech functions. They included editorial, organization, and content comments under the referential speech function. The directive function included question, instruction, and suggestion comments. The third speech function, called expressive, included praise, criticism, and opinion. They found that around half of the comments were of referential function. Around 27 percent of the comments belonged to the expressive function and 27 percent of them were put under the directive category.

Bitchener et al.'s (2011) study was the latest one on supervisor feedback categorization. They analyzed 15 scripts from three different faculties (Sciences/Mathematics, Humanities, & Commerce). Employing a data-driven approach, they analyzed the comments and categorized them into four major categories, which were content, requirements, cohesion/coherence, and linguistic accuracy, and appropriateness. They found linguistic accuracy and appropriateness as the most commonly provided feedback type. It was followed by content, requirements, and cohesion/coherence comments.

Although these four studies have widened our understanding of the topic, there are some issues that can justify the present study. The number of examined scripts is one of the drawbacks of the previous studies. The pioneering study of Miador (2000) was successful in providing a basic typology of comments at the graduate degree; however, she just examined seven scripts, which seem to be inadequate to draw solid

conclusions from. Similarly, Bitchener et al. (2011) examined only 15 texts. The same drawback can be mentioned for the study of Kumar and Stracke (2007), which consisted of a single PhD dissertation. Although supervisor feedback can be taken as an occluded genre, as it performs "essential waystage roles in the administrative and evaluative functioning of the research worlds" and is out of sight of outsiders (Swales, 2004, p.18), and the access to this genre is difficult, in order to have a more generalizable conclusion, a higher number of texts should be examined to iron out the individualities imposed by the style of a limited number of supervisors and find a generalizable pattern. Furthermore, in two of the studies (Mirador, 2000; Hyatt, 2005), the examined texts were class assignments although the nature of class research assignments might be similar to that of a thesis or a dissertation (with regard to the framework in conducting and reporting a research), the supervisor plays both guide and gatekeeper roles while supervising a student's thesis/dissertation (Kamler &Thomson, 2006), which is not the case while examining students' assignments. If we put the issue on a cline with assisting and appraising as the two extremes, the role of an instructor while giving feedback on a class assignment might be much more inclined toward the assisting extreme; however, the same instructor might take a mid-point position while supervising a thesis or dissertation. Thus, it seems logical to separate these two different, but similar, feedback types. The last issue deals with a niche in the literature; none of the reviewed studies investigated the comments given on master's degree theses. The master's theses can be taken as one of the first arenas, where a student can be examined with regard to her research capabilities. Overlooking the supervisory behaviors at the master's level might deprive us of a part of the story, which has remained untold. Furthermore, in the context of the present study, Iran, to the best of

the researchers' knowledge, although some studies have investigated the perceptions of graduate students writing in their L1 (Taheri & Younesi, 2014), or have investigated L2 students' writing strategies (Dehghan & Razmjoo, 2012), no previous study has investigated the typology of supervisor feedback on L2 students' theses and dissertations.

1.3. The present study

The present study has attempted to overcome the above-mentioned drawbacks by including both master's theses and doctoral dissertations to have a better understanding of the supervisors' commenting behavior. Furthermore, unlike previous studies that included the scripts from a single university, the present study examined the theses/dissertations of 10 different universities located in four provinces of Iran. The data were extracted from 87 scripts, a number much higher than any previous study. It can be claimed that this rather considerable sample can give us more generalizability power in providing a comprehensive typology of supervisor feedback. Thus, the research questions of the present study can be formulated as:

1. What are the foci of comments provided by supervisors on theses and dissertations?
2. What speech functions are used to convey feedback on theses and dissertations?

2. Method

2.1. Corpus

Fifty master's theses and 37 PhD dissertations, supervised by 32 supervisors, were selected. The researchers gathered the corpus from ten different universities located in four provinces in Iran. We selected ten universities of different types (e.g., state and private) to have a more representative sample. In these ten universities, each year around 130 to 140 master's and 25-30 doctoral students defend their theses/dissertations. At the time of data collection, 74 PhD holders were supervising students in these universities. The present study included those theses/dissertations which had been finalized within the last two years prior to the study. Within these two years, the same criteria were employed to assess students' texts. Due to feasibility issues, theses and dissertations in TEFL were selected. More than 70% of these texts were provided by the supervisors. These texts were either in the form of soft copies of the first draft along with supervisor feedback or hard copies returned to the supervisors. Some supervisors asked their students to return the annotated texts to compare the first and the revised drafts. The soft copies were provided by the supervisors from their computer hard disks or email services. In the majority of cases, and in order to observe the ethical principles, the researchers had to study the comments in supervisors' offices, and could not take them out. This procedure strengthened the study by enabling us to consult the supervisors about the category of ambiguous comments through member checking (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Razavieh, 2006). This was specifically beneficial with categorizing comments in the form of marks (question or exclamation marks), which were not clear what they referred to.

In addition, employing quota sampling, we requested some graduate students from the same ten universities to allow us to examine their texts; however, the participation rate was as low as 20%; thus, we employed snowball sampling design to collect more texts. Snowball sampling was used since a large number of graduate students did not agree to let the researchers access the reviewed versions of their theses/dissertations, which were full of corrections and suggestions. We assumed that they declined our request since they wanted to protect their face. Thus, the researchers asked the participants to convince other graduate students to take part in this study. The participation rate within the snowball sampling was 55%, which provided us with 27 texts.

2.2. Data analysis

Mixed methods and quantitative content analysis procedures were employed to analyze the comments. We employed mixed methods content analysis to first inductively categorize the comments inductively and then compare their frequencies. However, quantitative content analysis was used to categorize the comments into the three a priori language functions.

2.2.1. Focus of comments

The analysis of data included several steps. At first, the researchers identified the linguistic and non-linguistic comments in the text. There were some signs used to function as comments. For instance, a supervisor had used a red line to ask the writer to omit a space between a heading and the following paragraph. Then, the researchers put the comments into different categories based on the areas they addressed. One of

the authors analyzed all comments and half of the comments were analyzed by another researcher independently. In order to code the comments, the researchers followed the inductive category formation procedure (Mayring, 2004). This procedure is employed to develop categories gradually from some material. At two formative and summative levels, the inter-coder reliabilities (Cohen's Kappa) were 0.82 and 0.93, respectively. For instance, a comment was provided on the data analysis section, but it was about the organization of the text. The supervisor had provided some information on how to separate data analysis from data collection section. This comment was coded "organization" by a coder, and "method, data analysis" by another one. After extensive discussions, usually these comments were put in the broader category (in this case it was organization). All those comments which had yielded disagreement were extensively discussed until unanimous decisions appeared out of discussions. Table 1 provides the comment types and their definitions induced from the corpus.

Table 1

Feedback types and their definitions

Feedback types		**Definition/ examples**
Grammar and sentence structure		Comments addressing erroneous items at the word, phrase and sentence levels.
Method	Participants/ corpus	Comments addressing the issues of population, sample, sampling, homogeneity of groups, etc.
	Research design	Comments addressing the soundness of the research design (approaches: qualitative, quantitative, mixed method; research methods: experimental, ex post facto, correlational, etc.)
	Data collection/	Comments addressing the data collection procedures,

	procedures	data collection tools, etc.)
	Data analysis	Comments addressing the data analysis procedures (the soundness of descriptive and referential statistics, reliability formulae, etc.)
Content	Argumentation	Comments addressing the sufficiency of the argumentation (proposing a claim, providing sufficient support with evidence, evaluating the claims, the use of cohesive ties etc.)
	Accuracy	Comments addressing the accuracy of the provided content. It has to do with the accuracy of the academic propositions provided by the writer.
	Relevance	Comments addressing the relevance of the intended chunk with the context. Does the paragraph belong to this subsection? Does this sentence belong to this argument? (Coherence)
	Literature support for arguments	Comments addressing literature support for arguments.
Organization	-	Comments addressing students' deviation from the disciplinary generic structure (missing a mandatory heading, mixing two chapters, adding an unnecessary sub-heading, etc.)
References	-	Comments addressing the in-text citation and references section (based on the university convention)
Formatting	-	Comments addressing the mechanical issues (punctuation, paragraphing, spacing, font, size, indentation, etc.)
Academic procedures	-	Comments about the thesis-related academic procedures (e.g., send the revised version to Dr. X; Upload the revised version to get a defense session permission; It is done, you can print your thesis, etc.)

2.2.2. Speech functions

In order to categorize the comments based on their speech functions, we followed the speech function categorization provided by Kumar and Stracke (2007). In their oft-cited study, they argued that supervisor feedback mainly served directive, expressive, and referential functions. These are the functions which have been employed in different categorizations from the outset of the speech function studies in the 1950s to the latest ones in both theoretical and empirical works (Holmes, 2001; Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Stracke & Kumar, 2010).

Unlike the previous stage, which employed an inductive approach, in this phase, we utilized a deductive approach. The functions of speech categories provided by Kumar and Stracke (2007) were employed to categorize the comments. Holmes (p. 275) argued that there are three main speech functions: directive (utterances which attempt to get someone to do something), expressive (utterances which express the speaker's feelings), and referential (utterances which provide information). The comments were put under these three categories. Again, a two-level reliability procedure was employed. At first, ten percent of the comments were coded by two of the researchers; the inter-coder reliability of the first phase was 0.86. The differently coded items were reanalyzed and then one of the researchers coded all comments and another researcher coded half of the comments. This process yielded an inter-coder reliability coefficient of 0.89. As mentioned above, those comments which had led to disagreement were discussed extensively until coders reached full agreement. It should be noted that each comment could include several sentences and several speech

functions; thus, the number of functions of speech items is higher than that of the comment chunks.

3. Results and discussion

This section of the paper deals with the presentation and discussion of the findings in the context of previous theories and empirical studies.

3.1. Foci of supervisors' comments

The findings indicated that seven feedback types were provided by supervisors: grammar and sentence structure, method, content, organization, references, formatting, and academic procedures. Tables 2 and 3 show the frequencies of different categories and subcategories.

In order to answer the research questions, 15,198 comments were identified in 50 MA theses and 37 dissertations. The average numbers of comments on each MA thesis and doctoral dissertation were 198.9 and 141.97, respectively. The comparison of the total number of comments given on MA and PhD theses and dissertations showed that the number of comments provided on MA theses was significantly higher than that on PhD dissertations (X^2= 2897.07, $p<.05$). Furthermore, the comparison of the frequencies of different feedback types yielded some similarities and discrepancies, which are presented here.

The most recurrent feedback type on both theses (39.35%) and dissertations (36.8 %) was grammar and sentence structure. More than one-third of all comments

were on grammatical issues. The comparison of these frequencies revealed that significantly more structural comments were given on theses than dissertations (X^2=9.08, p<.05). On average, 78.28 and 52.32 grammatical comments were given on theses and dissertations, respectively. The main reason that can contribute to these high frequencies is the fact that none of the participants was a native speaker of English, and they wrote in a second language, which could increase the probability of making mistakes. This finding is in line with that of Bitchener et al. (2011) who found linguistic accuracy and appropriateness of the most common feedback type.

Table 2

Feedback categories and their frequencies

Feedback types	**Master's degree**		**PhD**		**X^2**	**Sig**
	Freq. (mean)	**%**	**Freq. (mean)**	**%**		
Grammar and sentence structure	3914 (78.28)	39.35	1936 (52.32)	36.8	9.08	.003
Method	831 (16.62)	8.3	418 (11.29)	7.95	.72	.39
Content	2413 (48.26)	24.26	1660 (44.86)	31.6	94.33	.000
Organization	695 (13.9)	6.98	379 (10.24)	7.21	.268	.604
References	806 (16.12)	8.1	364 (9.83)	6.9	6.68	.01
Formatting	1005 (20.1)	10.1	259 (7.0)	4.93	120.72	.000
Academic procedures	281 (5.62)	2.82	237 (6.4)	4.5	29.68	.000
Total	**9945 (198.90)**	**100**	**5253 (141.97)**	**100**	**2897.07**	**.000**

Another reason that can cause this high need for grammatical feedback might be similar to what is called trade-off hypothesis (Skehan, 2009), positing that under

specific conditions, a student's attention to a specific cognitive area may deplete his attention to other area(s). Likewise, the cognitive pressure of the process of relating and generating different propositions can reduce the writers' attention on grammatical structures and distort the retrieval and application of grammatical rules during the online planning. It is argued that the conversion of ideas into the written product in a second language is difficult as the proposition can turn into written words if the writer has a good command of lexicon, morphosyntactic knowledge of the second language, and access to a variety of collocations and sentence frames, and graphemic knowledge (Schoonen, Snellings, Stevenson, & van Gelderen, 2009). This complexity of the writing process in a second language can lead to the inaccessibility of second language writers to some knowledge resources (e.g., grammatical knowledge) (Manchón, Murphy, & Roca de Larios, 2005) and lead to the occurrence of grammatical deviant items.

Table 3

Feedback subcategories and their frequencies

Feedback types		**Master's degree**	**%**	**PhD**	**%**	**X^2**	**Sig**
		Freq. (mean)	**%**	**Freq. (mean)**	**%**		
Grammar and sentence structure		3914 (78.28)	39.35	1936 (52.32)	36.8	9.08	.003
Method	Participants/ corpus	215 (4.3)	2.3	63 (1.7)	1.2	17.73	.000
	Research design	185 (3.7)	1.9	122 (3.29)	2.3	3.71	.054
	Data collection/ procedures	253 (5.06)	2.5	105 (2.83)	2.0	4.37	.037
	Data analysis	178 (3.56)	1.8	128 (3.45)	2.4	7.29	.007
Content	Argumentation	424 (8.48)	4.3	582 (7.89)	11.1	258.3	.000
	Accuracy	705 (14.1)	7.1	512 (9.21)	9.7	32.9	.000
	Relevance	622 (12.44)	6.3	373 (7.24)	7.2	4.02	.045
	Literature support for arguments	662 (13.24)	6.7	193 (2.24)	3.7	57.5	.000
Organization	-	695 (13.9)	6.98	379 (10.24)	7.21	.268	.604
References	-	806 (16.12)	8.1	364 (9.83)	6.9	6.68	.01
Formatting	-	1005 (20.1)	10.1	259 (7.0)	4.93	120.7	.000
Academic procedures	-	281 (5.62)	2.82	237 (6.4)	4.5	29.68	.000
Total		**9945 (198.90)**	**100**	**5253 (141.97)**	**100**		

The second common feedback type was content. Around a quarter of comments on theses were content-related (24.26%); however, content feedback comprised around one-third of comments on dissertations. The comparison of content-related frequencies indicated that the number of content comments on dissertations was significantly more than that on theses (X^2= 94.33, p<.05). A more detailed scrutiny of the data (Table 3) showed that in three subcomponents (argumentation, accuracy, & relevance), supervisors gave significantly more comments on dissertations than on theses (X^2=258.3, X^2= 32.9, X^2= 4.02, p<.05, respectively). The supervisors provided significantly more literature support for arguments comments on theses than dissertations (X^2= 57.5, p<.05). This feedback type was also found in previous studies (Bitchener, et al., 2011; Can, 2009; Hyatt, 2005; Kumar & Stracke, 2010). The higher number of these comments on dissertations can be attributed to the supervisors' higher expectation of doctoral dissertations. One of the differences between thesis and dissertation is the extent to which the propositions are provided accurately, deeply, and coherently (Muthuchamy & Thiyagu, 2011). As found in the study of Hoomanfard, Jafarigohar, Jalilifar, and Hosseini Masum (2018), supervisors expect a higher level of content complexity in dissertations; thus, they give more comments on this area to help PhD students (and their dissertations) achieve the intended quality. On the other hand, supervisors conceptualize thesis as the first formal academic product of a student. They, therefore, do not ask for high standards and do not provide too many comments, which can lead to student's demotivation (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). In this study, we found that supervisors gave more argumentation, accuracy, and relevance comments on dissertations than on theses to improve both academic knowledge of the PhD students and the quality of the dissertations to reach the intended standards. The only

feedback type that was provided more on theses was on literature support for arguments. In the majority of cases, supervisors asked for the source of the written sentence or paragraph. Almost all of these comments were provided on the first two chapters. The findings vividly suggested that PhD students were more capable of providing relevant references.

No significant difference was found between the total number of method comments on theses and dissertations (X^2= .72, p<.05); however, the comparison of subcomponent frequencies showed that the number of comments related to participants/corpus section on theses was significantly more than that on dissertations (X^2 =17.73, p<.05). On the other hand, significantly more data collection and data analysis comments were provided on dissertations (X^2= 4.37, & X^2= 7.29, p< .05, respectively). The only non-significant difference was pertinent to research design (X^2= 3.71, p<.05). Another difference between theses and dissertations documented in the literature is that doctoral dissertations have more rigorous research methods than master's theses (Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2013). Around 10 percent of comments were on the method section. Although the backbone of an empirical research project is its method, the number of comments on this section does not mirror this significance. It seems that a large number of method-related problems are dealt with in proposals and are not conveyed to the thesis/dissertation phase. The comments on the two areas of participants/corpus and data collection were provided significantly more on theses than dissertations. This result suggests that doctoral students were capable of writing these two sections and included almost all the necessary information. However, supervisors

gave more data analysis comments on dissertations than theses, and there was no significant difference between the frequencies of research design comments.

When the doctoral documents were scrutinized closely, it was found that supervisors were more meticulous about the design of the study and data analysis. They tried to make sure that the best options were selected. These comments were chiefly about the reason for using a specific design or statistical procedure. Furthermore, qualitative research designs were found in dissertations more frequently. Literature indicates that non-native writers prefer to avoid qualitative designs as there are complexities that are difficult to tackle (Belcher & Hirvela, 2005); however, some research ideas in doctoral dissertations should inevitably benefit from the qualitative designs. This point was witnessed in our study. Those dissertations that employed qualitative research designs were given more comments on the design and analysis sections than those with the quantitative design, which is believed to follow a more predictable format and is reported to be quite simple and straightforward (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007).

Fewer than 10 percent of all comments were on Organization (thesis= 6.98% & dissertation= 7.21%). The comparison of the frequencies of organization comments showed that there was no significant difference between the frequencies of these comments on theses and dissertations (X^2= .268, $p<.05$). One might expect to find fewer genre-related comments on dissertations; however, the difference between thesis and dissertation was the source of this relatively high number of comments. For instance, in doctoral dissertations, there are usually pilot study sections in the method,

the majority of doctoral students had difficulty including content in this section or in the main study section. The definition of the key terms was another section which is not usually asked for in master's theses, but it is present in almost all doctoral dissertations. As another example, some doctoral students merged the *limitations of the study* and *suggestions for further research* sections, which is a common practice in master's theses; however, some comments were provided on dissertations to split these steps of the conclusion move. These differences between master's thesis and doctoral dissertation resulted in the provision of some comments.

Other significant differences were found in the references and formatting subcomponents. These feedback types were provided significantly more on theses than dissertations (X^2= 6.68, X^2=120.7, $p<.05$). As found in previous studies (Hoomanfard, et al., 2018; Maclellan, 2001), doctoral students' previous academic experience can help them conduct and report their future research based on the academic rules and standards. Before a doctoral student begins to write his/her dissertation, he/she has already written a thesis and published a number of papers, thus he/she is, to a large extent, familiar with the requirements of formatting and referencing, and consequently, less in need of feedback on these areas. A noteworthy point with regard to formatting was inconsistency in the rules suggested by APA (American Psychological Association) and by the students' universities. Especially, doctoral students, who had observed the APA style in their papers, had to switch to a new style temporarily.

Academic procedures received the least frequent feedback. The comparison of the frequencies of this type of feedback on theses and dissertations denotes that the

number of this comment type on dissertations was significantly more than that on theses (X^2= 29.68, p<.05). Supervisors employed these comments to guide their students through further steps. Comments such as *Why didn't you apply some of my previous comments?*, *you may send this chapter to your advisor*, *contact your advisors to find a suitable time for your defense session* or *print the revised version of this chapter and submit it to Ms. X* were used to show the next step to the students. These written comments seem to have two functions. The first is to make sure that the student understands the next step, and does not disobey what is stated. In other words, they would like to document their orders. The second function of these comments is that they are substituting for the in-person discussions in the supervisor office. By the advancement of technology, the popularization of distance education, and the establishment of computer-mediated communication, an increasing number of issues are communicated through electronic devices; MS Word documents and Email services are the two media which are employed in the supervisor-supervisee relationship more often than other media (Mhunpiew, 2013; Surry, et al., 2010). This might have led to this amount of feedback on academic procedures.

3.2. Speech functions used to convey feedback

The comments provided on theses and dissertations were categorized into the three speech functions of directive, expressive, and referential. Some comments included one speech function; however, some others were codified as two or even three speech functions. For instance, a feedback chunk which was started with a criticism (expressive), followed by the provision of a couple of sentences of information (referential), and was terminated by an instruction (directive) was codified three times.

Thus, the number of comments here is more than the number of feedback chunks stated in the previous section. The total number of codified comments was 18230. Table 4 displays the distribution of these comments under the three speech function categories.

Table 4

Feedback categories and their frequencies

	Master's degree			PhD		
	directive	expressive	Referential	directive	expressive	referential
Freq. (%)	5440 (46.98%)	2089 (18.04%)	4048 (34.96%)	2972 (44.67%)	1158 (17.4%)	2523 (37.92%)
	Directive		Expressive		Referential	
X^2 (sig)	9.13 (.003)		1.177 (.278)		16.024 (.000)	

As evident in Table 4, just under 50 percent of all comments provided on MA theses were directive (46.98%). These comments got the supervisees to make some changes in the text or to answer a question. Only 28 percent of directive comments on theses were in the form of question, and the rest (72%) were in the form of instruction (63%) or suggestion (9%). Around 27 percent of directive comments on theses were accompanied by referential comments and 18 % of them were provided with an expressive comment. In other words, 55 percent of directive comments were provided with no further word. They were used to give an instruction or suggestion (mitigated or not) or ask a question. On the other hand, directive comments on PhD dissertations comprised 44.67% of all comments. About 67% of directive comments on dissertations

were in the form of question, and the rest were instructions (14%) and suggestions (19%). Only 28% of directive comments were provided with no additional explanation or opinion, which is significantly lower than the 55% of comments on theses. Furthermore, 56% of directive comments were provided along with referential ones. And around 16% of directive comments were accompanied by expressive comments. The results of Chi-square showed that significantly more directive comments were provided on theses than dissertations (X^2= 9.13, p<.05). Directive comments were employed in all areas, ranging from content-related areas such as content, organization to mechanical aspects such as grammar, references, formatting. All academic procedures comments were in the form of directive speech function.

The second investigated speech function was expressive. Those comments that expressed the feelings of supervisors about a specific part were put into this category. The expressive comment was the least recurrent type of feedback. Of all comments provided on theses, 18.04 % of them were expressive; while 17.4 % of all comments were on dissertations. The result of Chi-square indicated that there was no significant difference between the frequencies of expressive comments on theses and dissertations (X^2= 1.177, p<.05). Although supervisors could provide their neutral opinion about a section, criticize or praise a section, the majority of comments were in the form of criticism (64 %) and just a few number comments were employed with the function of praise (11 %) and neutral opinion (25 %). This type of feedback was also accompanied by other speech functions; the patterns of comments on theses and dissertations were almost the same, so a single description was provided. More than half of expressive comments (54 %) were accompanied by directive comments. In the majority of cases,

this combination addressed general issues such as *This chapter is not well-organized, I want you to organize different sections more coherently,* or *It is unacceptable, you have to follow the APA style for in-text referencing*. Another combination was the integration of expressive and referential comments; around 27 % of expressive comments were provided with some information on the issue. The rest of expressive comments (19 %) were provided independent of any other information or direction. The only feedback area which was not conveyed through expressive speech function was the academic procedures.

The last studied speech function was referential. The referential comments were regarded as the most recurrent feedback type on PhD dissertations. Around 38 % of all comments on dissertations were referential; however, 34.96 % of comments on theses were of this kind. The result of Chi-square showed that referential comments were given significantly more on theses than dissertations (X^2= 16.024, $p<.05$). Referential comments were employed to serve two main functions; they were used as mini-lessons to teach their supervisees a specific point; sometimes it was accompanied by a hyperlink to an external source, or the title of a book or paper, and sometimes it was just the supervisors' words. These comments were usually accompanied by an instruction, informing the supervisees what to do to modify the text. The second function, much more evident in PhD dissertations, was to provide a scientific context of the issue and ask the supervisees' opinion or idea about it. It was a bidirectional discussion in which the supervisee was not taken as a consumer of knowledge, but as an active academic member. These comments were mostly followed by questions, urging students to conduct a short research and provide their own opinions or ideas.

Thus, in both functions, referential comments on PhD dissertations were usually accompanied by directive comments.

Several issues can be discussed based on the above-mentioned findings; however, we would like to discuss the findings of this section in light of the supervision framework provided by Lee and Murray (2015), which posits that a supervisor can take one or some of the following approaches: functional (managing the project), enculturation (helping students become members of the community), critical thinking (encouraging students to question and analyze their work), and quality relationship. The first approach is the functional one in which the progression of the task is supervised by the supervisor. The analysis of comments showed that this type of supervision approach was undertaken by all supervisors through providing steering comments; supervisors employed referential and directive comments to provide consultation and direct the supervisees toward the intended aim, which is the completion of the task. Rarely were expressive comments employed to serve this function.

Enculturation is the second approach to supervision. In so doing, supervisors give their students the chance to familiarize with the terminology, conventions, and power relationships. The more knowledgeable agents try to inform their students about the tacit and explicit rules through continuous communication, mainly in the form of feedback on students' texts. Cotterall (2011), emphasizing the significant role of feedback in education, argues that being a member of the academic community is virtually impossible without having access to the academics in their fields and

receiving feedback from them. Enculturation starts from the very first day of one's education. When it comes to the written feedback, we observed that the three types of speech functions played their roles in the process of socializing a graduate student into the disciplinary community. Lei and Hu (2015) posit that the students' acquisition of jargon and conventions requires the guidance of a supervisor, mainly in the form of feedback. In the present study, referential comments, especially on theses, were employed to teach students new concepts and jargon pertinent to their topic. Not always have these attempts been successful as these technical terms might lead to the incomprehensibility of comments, which is a source of students' dissatisfaction (Ferris, 2007; Hoomanfard, Jafarigohar, & Jalilifar, in press; Zhao, 2010). Directive comments were also employed to enculturate students into the academic sphere; requests (and/or orders), and questions were employed to both build the product and, simultaneously, prepare students to confront what they might receive from journal editors and reviewers. Supervisees can get familiar with the explicit and implicit conventions of writing and revising an academic prose based on journals' guidelines and provided comments. Several scholars (e.g., Lei & Hu, 2015) have argued that without sufficient conventional socialization with the help of a dedicated mentor, individual efforts are more likely to lead to failure.

Along with directive and referential comments, the supervisors employed expressive comments to help students understand the necessary issues. Expressive comments were employed by supervisors to highlight some writing or discipline-related conventions. These comments, sometimes provided in the form of praise to reinforce the good habit, or formulated with acrimonious words were employed to

draw a student's attention to a specific convention. Stracke and Kumar (2010) posit that praise comments can play a significant role in the process of enculturation as the students are given a sense of security that they are becoming members of the academic community. However, the bitter tone of the criticism comments made them understand the significance of conventions; thus, students, normally, complied with those rules to accomplish the task successfully. In addition to conventions, expressive comments were used to manifest power relations too.

We would like to discuss power relations and relationship development issues together, since they are highly pertinent. In the present study, the high number of criticisms on both theses and dissertations seemed to be rather alarming. Directive, referential, and expressive comments can convey the relationship type that a supervisor intends to build. However, expressive comments carry out this mission more straightforwardly and have a stronger affective influence (Stracke & Kumar, 2010). Expressive comments can exhibit an array of power relation indicators, which tacitly expose the power relations to the new-comers of the academic society. The formulization of opinion, praise, and criticism comments can expose the symmetric or asymmetric power relations between the supervisor and students in that specific micro-social (department, institute) and macro-social (society) domains. In short, the employed discourse forms the knowledge/power (Foucault, 1974). Furthermore, the process of supervision is a transformative one, in which the three active participants (supervisor, supervisee, & product) are transformed, and this transformation is done through the power relations (Grant, 2010). This transformation can determine the quality of the product and the identity of the supervisee as a prospect supervisor and a

member of the academia (Halbert, 2015). The power relations, influenced by disciplinary, institutional, geographical, and historical context (Walker & Thomson, 2010), are mainly established through written comments and can affect different aspects of supervision; to a large extent, it can determine the content provided to students through feedback, the way it is codified into a language, and the relationship developed between supervisors and their students.

With regard to the relationship development, expressive comments play a significant role; the recurrence of harsh criticisms can completely destroy the rapport between the supervisor and the students and discourage them in conducting their research (Lumadi, 2008). On the other hand, the supervisors' creating a balance between praising/neutral opinions and negative comments can create a condition in which students sense the feeling of security and support, which is highly motivating. To be more specific, it can be asserted that although, because of the power asymmetry, it is unlikely for a supervisor and his/her student to behave as friends (Ives & Rowley, 2005), an informal condition, similar to that of a psychological consultation session, is required in which a combination of professionalism and appropriate social and emotional distance is observed (Hemer, 2012). The midpoint seems to be the right position to take by the supervisors; they should be aware of the perilous conditions on the extremes, which can be shaped by providing too many pieces of negative or positive feedback.

Another approach provided by Lee and Murray (2015) is critical thinking. This approach deals, chiefly, with argumentation, reflection, and personal growth. A

significant part of critical thinking is enquiry-based learning. The practice of enquiry-based learning requires a task which is set by a mentor, who engages students and facilitates the accomplishment of the task, and a student (Adcroft, 2013). In this model, the knowledge is not transferred from a knower to a learner, but the knowledge is co-constructed (joint-texting) by the knower and learner (Kamler & Thomson, 2006). The practice of these two approaches entails the existence of symmetrical dialogues between the knower (supervisor) and learner (student), in which the learner is taken as the co-constructor of knowledge and not the consumer of it; otherwise, the learner will not be given the chance to develop a high quality product, understand his/her own weaknesses, and become an independent member of the academia. This condition gives the graduate writers a sense of ownership of their texts, socialize them into the academic community, and develop their identity as researchers (Chamberlain, 2016). Examining the function of different comment types, we could easily notice that directive comments were the driving forces of enquiry-based and self-regulated learning approaches, which are sought in critical thinking approach.

To examine the issue of power relations and relationship development, we followed the lead of Kumar and Stracke (2007) to put directive comments in the three categories of suggestion, instruction, and question. The findings of the present study indicated that although supervisors rarely took the position of peers to their students, they paved the way for more-symmetrical discussions through suggestions and questions. The significantly higher number of question and suggestion comments on dissertations indicated that supervisors were more enthusiastic to initiate dialogues with their doctoral students than their master's students. Supervisors benefited from

these comments as new windows to open dialogues with their doctoral students, and attempted to challenge them with more profound tasks, usually requiring more powerful argumentation, deeper reflection, synthesis of propositions, or further empirical and/or library research, which are directly in line with the objectives of critical thinking approach to supervision (Lee & Murray, 2015). On the contrary, supervisors were inclined to focus on instructing their master's students a plethora of linguistic and technical issues in the form of transmission of knowledge and postpone the transformation of students to the doctoral degree. Certainly, the reasons for this procrastination should be uncovered by conducting a comprehensive study, which was out of the present research scope.

Although questions were the most empowering vehicles to generate dialogues between supervisors and students, referential, and expressive comments were also influential. Supervisors employed referential comments to furnish the context for initiating a scholarly discussion with their doctoral students. In addition to imparting some knowledge, supervisors employed these comments to direct their students in their argumentation, reflection, or their further research. However, the occurrence of referential comments on theses with this function was a rarity; they were mainly used to convey some knowledge without any further requirement or dialogue.

Expressive comments, which convey the feelings of supervisors toward a student or a text, regulate the extent to which encouragement, a defining feature of critical thinking approach (Lee & Murray, 2015), can be actualized. A supervisor's review which merely includes a large number of negative and harsh comments is

unlikely to establish a sense of encouragement. Stracke and Kumar (2010) posit that although negative comments can improve the knowledge of students, the use of praise comments can function as a significant tool towards self-regulation and can keep the students motivated in the long journey of completing their theses/dissertations. As a solution, in order to avoid demotivating students with negative comments, supervisors can employ the sandwich technique (Hyland & Hyland, 2001), in which a piece of positive comment is presented before a criticism. By so doing, "the full force of criticism and suggestion" is mitigated (Hyland & Hyland, 2001, p. 207). Keeping a balance of positive and negative feedback can not only keep the door of providing negative evidence open, but also keep the door of affective and cognitive improvement open, which can guide students to move towards constant inquiry into their products and personal growth, which are asked in critical thinking approach.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study showed how differently supervisors provide feedback on L2 MA and PhD students' academic texts. Occupying a significant gap in the literature, this content analysis research provided a detailed comparison of supervisors' evaluative behaviors while providing feedback on L2 MA (newcomers of the disciplinary communities of practice) and PhD students' (more linguistically and academically competent members) academic texts. The findings supported our initial conjecture about the existence of possible differences between supervisors' assessment of L2 MA theses and PhD dissertations.

The principal findings indicate that there are seven main feedback types provided on theses and dissertations. The findings show that within an EFL context, a substantial number of comments address the deviant grammatical sentence structure items and as the group with lower English language ability, MA students receive more feedback on grammar. Based on the findings, supervisors provide more comments on the method sections with qualitative research designs (either qualitative or mixed-methods studies), which are more frequent in PhD dissertations. The findings suggest that while assessing MA students' texts, supervisors provide more comments on the descriptive aspects of the method sections, such as participants/corpus and data collection procedure; however, due to the higher number of qualitative studies and the higher criteria set by supervisors while assessing PhD students' texts, their main focus is on the research design and data analysis sections, which are more susceptible to mistakes than descriptive sections. Likewise, expecting their PhD students to attain a higher level of precision, supervisors provide more comments on the content of PhD students' texts. The lower frequency of meticulous comments on the quality of arguments, accuracy of statements, and relevance of propositions on MA students' texts is not an indicator of their better performance than PhD students, but seems to show supervisors' setting lower standards while assessing MA students' texts and/or avoiding the provision of a large number of comments, which can demotivate these novice researchers.

Furthermore, unlike our initial expectation, we found that supervisors focus on organization of both MA and PhD students' texts with no significant difference. The scrutiny of comments shows that PhD students' weaknesses in organizing the areas

which are different from their MA theses urge their supervisors to provide feedback. It seems that when the transfer of knowledge from prior experiences is not useful, supervisor feedback emerges to fill the gaps. In those areas that are based on a limited number of rules, such as formatting and referencing, doctoral students with their academic writing experiences seem to be less in need of help in the form of feedback. To enable their MA students to write academically, supervisors provide more comments on these areas; however, doctoral students seem to need fewer comments to fulfill the requirements. The majority of supervisor comments on formatting are pertinent to those areas in which there are inconsistencies between the rules of commonly-used (e.g., APA) styles and those of the universities' manuals. Again, the failure of doctoral students to transfer their prior experience to the new context is highlighted in supervisors' assessment. The last feedback area deals with the academic procedures. The findings show that supervisors use this type of feedback more frequently on doctoral students to inform them about the next move. It seems that supervisors' lower number of office meetings with their doctoral students can explain the use of computer-mediated communication to fulfill the task.

In addition, based on the findings, supervisors employ different language functions purposefully while reporting their assessment of L2 graduate students' texts through feedback. To name the main findings, we have found that supervisors take a more symmetrical stance while assessing doctoral students' texts. They provide a combination made of referential comments and questions to provide a setting for dialogic discussions and then raise a question to motivate their students to take part in the dialogue. As Merkel (2018) argues, this condition occurs when students are highly

proficient in a subject area and supervisors employ these questions to find their students' reasons for their choices. The combination of referential and directive (in the form of questions) language functions are less frequent in comments on MA students. While assessing MA students' texts, supervisors seem to prefer the transmission of knowledge through referential and instructive comments, rather than transforming their students into independent researchers through engaging them in symmetrical dialogues. Expressive language function is employed by supervisors mainly in the form of critical feedback on both MA and PhD students' texts. However, critical comments should be employed along with positive comments, otherwise they can adversely affect graduate students' self-esteem, motivation, and learning (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Lizzio, Wilson, Gilchrist, & Gallois 2003; Warrell, 2016). While assessing their students' texts, supervisors employ different language functions to help them become proficient academic writers. They employ referential comments to teach their students new technical terms, concepts, and rules they need to write academically in their fields of study. They use directives, in the form of questions and instructions, to request their students to provide more information or make a change in their texts. These comments, quite similar to those provided by journal editors and reviewers, can familiarize students with the implicit and explicit conventions of their disciplinary communities. Expressive comments are also significant in the process of students' enculturation. Critical comments can be cautiously used to highlight the significant conventions, and praise comments can motivate students by receiving a feeling of security (Stracke & Kumar, 2010).

Some practical implications can be put forward based on the findings of this study. As O'Donovan, Price, and Rust (2004) argue, the transparency of assessment criteria can affect the performance of students in higher education. The findings of this study threw light on the assessment criteria that supervisors employ to evaluate their students' texts. MA and PhD students can benefit from these criteria to get familiar with the standards against which their performance is assessed. In addition, some troublesome areas (e.g., differences between theses/dissertations or differences between university and journals' rules, higher standards for dissertations) are identified in this study, which can benefit L2 graduate students to avoid some of the possible shortcomings. Although the explicit articulation of assessment criteria is not sufficient (Rust, Price, & O'Donovan, 2003), it is the first step of a significant process, which can improve graduate students' learning and performance. Furthermore, novice supervisors, who are mainly dependent on their own experience as graduate students to provide feedback on their supervisees' texts (Bitchener, et al., 2011), can also benefit from this extensive feedback typology to provide a thorough assessment of texts. Moreover, the findings of this study showed how different language functions are used to accomplish supervisory roles. In addition, it was found that when there is an inconsistency between the rules of commonly-used manuals (e.g., APA) and those of universities, doctoral students are more likely to need help. Supervisors should raise their students' consciousness about these differences to avoid possible interference. Similarly, supervisors should inform their doctoral supervisees about the differences between MA theses and PhD dissertations, and inform them about the explicit and tacit assessment criteria of dissertations. In addition, we would like to invite supervisors to stop regarding thesis/dissertation assessment merely as a deficit model and encourage

them to provide more praise comments, which can have positive affective and educational effects.

Further studies on supervisor feedback are required to provide insights into how MA and PhD students' texts are assessed by their supervisors. In addition to replicating this study in other contexts, further qualitative research can be conducted to uncover supervisors' perceptions of employing different speech functions in their comments. Furthermore, studies can be conducted to check whether the provided comments are in line with those students need and want. A comparison can also be made to see if there is a significant difference between the commenting behavior of more and less experienced supervisors. Other researchers are also encouraged to conduct the same study on oral comments provided by supervisors during the office meetings. Finally, cross-linguistic and cross-disciplinary supervisor feedback studies can reveal the hidden aspects of supervisor feedback.

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