Higher Education Supervision Practices on Student Thesis Writing: Language Function and Focus of Written Feedback

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Supervisors' feedback can be taken as the most powerful pedagogical tool in thesis writing. However, relatively little is known about the type of information supervisors focus on and the language functions supervisors use to communicate with their students. Data collected from eight supervisors' written feedback to students' theses at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia were coded, tabled, and converted into percentages for analysis. The results of this study showed a wide range of supervisors' practices concerning the functions and types of written feedback. While the supervisors favored feedback on the genre knowledge the most and directive clarification language functions was most frequently used to communicate with the students, little or no attention was given for the expressive approval of language functions. Overall, the results of this study suggest that supervisors' written feedback can be taken together in regard to the process of effective communication. Finally, implications for better supervision practices and further research are presented that could shed light on the strengths of using other research tools.

Writing a thesis and/or a dissertation is a daunting experience for all novice researchers. Particularly, this is more complex when English as a foreign language is used as a means of communication for research purposes partly because EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students' capabilities in the accuracy and fluency of the language are limited, as a result of which they lack the linguistic competence to adequately address each aspect of the research. Despite the fact that research courses that serve as a vehicle to build students' research skills are offered in both undergraduate and graduate schools, the student researchers have little or no capacity and understanding of basic research components and skills necessary to undertake a study.

In most universities, students usually do research under the supervision of professors. Apart from nurturing a strong working relationship with the student, the overall passion and professional commitment of advisors to educational research should not be understated. Heath (2002) stated that the role of the supervisor is to guide the research student throughout his or her study, to provide the student the time, expertise, and support to foster the candidate's research skills and attitude in order to ensure the production of a research of acceptable standard.

As student researchers are expected to take no course other than their research course in the final academic year of their study, the usual face to face interactions between the students and their professors can be minimized. Upon the acquaintance of their advisees, supervisors may start their supervision by discussing the area under investigation and the overall expectations of the research. In such kind of collaborative work, therefore, it is important not to underestimate the relentless efforts of supervisors in stimulating and enriching student researchers with relevant knowledge and expertise pertaining to

research. The most decisive factor for better or worse of research is the advisor-advisee relationship (Sambrook, Stewart, & Roberts, 2008; Tahir, Ghani, Atek, & Manaf, 2012), and this relationship can be better fostered through effective communication between the supervisor and advisee.

Supervisor Written Feedback and Why It Matters

There is a general agreement in the literature around the conceptualization of feedback as a process of communication and dialogue in specific social contexts (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). Accordingly, one of the approaches used to support student researchers, and hence improve supervision practices within higher education institutions, is through supervisors' written corrective feedback. Engebretson et al. (2008) stated that the quality and appropriateness of research supervision is critical, and that supervisors' constructive and detailed feedback on written work has been identified as a key characteristic of good research supervision.

Feedback is embedded in supervisory relationships as it can propagate a power relationship in which one is the master and the other the learner (Kumar & Stracke, 2007), and, "In a supervisory environment, feedback on written drafts is a form of communication, as it is through written feedback that the supervisor communicates and provides advanced academic training, particularly in writing, to the supervisee"(p. 462).Apart from bonding a close rapport with their students, supervisors' written feedback can also help foster students' linguistic capability. Overall, to achieve quality teaching and supervising, effective and quality feedback should be provided (Rowe & Wood, 2008).

The student-supervisor relationship is an important determinant of quality of supervision (Ali, Watson, & Dhingra, 2016), and an effective working relationship

between the supervisor and the student is crucial (Murphy, Bain, & Conard, 2007; Tahir et al., 2012). The impetus for the present study stems from the notion that the types of language functions used to provide feedback determine the quality of student-supervisor communication, thereby increasing or impinging on their relationship. This relationship requires a long-term commitment from both sides so as to transform a student's research skill. One of the commitments that offer excellent potential for increasing the supervisor-student relationship can be the type of language function supervisors use to communicate with their students.

Supervisors need to envisage students' psychometric understanding and determine how their students will react to written feedback. This is because, as Layder (1997) posits, the student's ability or willingness to do the feedback might depend on the emotional impact of feedback. Their motives to do so or not may result from positive responses such as deep consideration of the feedback and reasoned rejection of it, or negative responses such as distrust of the feedback provider (Price, Handley, Millar& O'Donovan, 2010).

Based on the type of language function provided to theses, students may show different emotional feelings towards supervision practices. For example, if supervision is full of an overly negative tone of feedback, students may lose control of their emotions or may get fraught with difficulty (Price et al, 2010). On the contrary, if supervisors consider the psychometric expectations of their students, feedback helps students overcome their emotions, and such feedback impacts greatly on future improvements. Feedback is deemed to be ineffective if students do not act on it (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Therefore, understanding the psychometric expectations of students and the complexity of the feedback processes is particularly important for effective supervision.

Research Evidence on Supervisor Written Feedback

A large body of research (Pearson & Brew, 2002; Kamler& Thomson, 2008; Whisker, 2005, as cited in Bitchener, Basturkmen, East, & Meyer, 2011) indicates that the topic of research supervision has attracted considerable interest in the literature to date. Recent research has indicated that effective and high quality feedback is a key element of quality teaching in higher education (Hattie & Timperly, 2007; Sutton, 2009; &Weaver, 2006). On the other hand, Armstrong (2004) reported the high figures of failures of postgraduate degrees in the social sciences in the UK and North America. Further, this study indicated that a high proportion of those who complete their research degrees take longer time than expected, and students often express dissatisfaction with the research process.

These studies reveal numerous concerns for both postgraduate students and supervisors.

According to Lindemann (2001), effective feedback is feedback that is focused, clear, applicable, and encouraging. Moreover, providing feedback to students gives students the opportunity to reflect on their work and to modify it in order to become more effective (Pearson& Kayrooz, 2004).If feedback is carefully targeted, especially with less efficient learners, it can enable students to acquire and utilize appropriate strategies to process the objectives of learning(Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This is because as learners' level of proficiency increases, they become more capable of correcting their own mistakes (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Ferris, 2006; Ghandi & Maghsoudi, 2014; Jodaie & Farrokhi, 2012; Lee, 2003).

Effective feedback is a clear set of guidance that is helpful in enhancing students' writing. Students were most satisfied with their supervisors when they receive both regular and constructive meaningful feedback on research and progress towards the degree (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007). Hyland (2009) posits that the most helpful feedback is that which helps them understand the expectations of their disciplinary community and "conveys implicit messages" about the values and beliefs of the discourse community, the nature of disciplinary knowledge, and student identities in the community (p. 132).

Regarding the language function of various types of written feedback, research has indicated that the way in which comments are worded by supervisors can have a potential of affecting students both negatively and positively. According to Weaver (2006), self-esteem is affected by receiving negative or unexpected feedback, especially for students with low self-confidence who tend to take all feedback as a judgment of ability. This makes the student feel beaten, and he or she may think of leaving the study. Despite the fact that feedback constitutes a major form of instruction for higher degree research students, the general focus of advisors has been reported written feedback on the micro-level (Bitchener, Basturkmen & East, 2010) and the struggle to articulate implicit knowledge (Paré, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Realizing the theoretical framework's underlying concepts is important for educators as it will help them manage the feasibility of concepts and translate the essence of the theory into effective instructional outcomes accordingly. This study is grounded in Searle's (1969) prominent theory of speech acts and Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory of learning. The first theoretical framework that is related to the present study is the fundamental concept of the Speech Act Theory by Searle (1969). Searle (1969) classified

speech into three major categories: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary.

It is important to note that the "act" in speech act theory includes not only the speech that someone makes but also the writing of a particular string of words one uses in communication. While locutionary involves the actual words of the message, the hearer's reaction to the speaker's message is termed perlocution. The concept of an illocutionary act, which states the speaker's purpose or intent, is the cornerstone of the speech act theory. This study focuses on illocutionary acts because they are commonly used to reject proposals and to make requests indicating that they have direct relevance to the area under investigation. The central premise of speech act theory is that the role of every utterance to a particular speech-act type is part of what is communicated and plays a necessary role in comprehension (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Out of a total of five illocutionary acts (assertives, directives, commissives, declarations and expressives) proposed by Searle (1969), assertive, commissives and declaratives have been excluded from the analysis because in the face of reality, these three speech acts rarely exist in supervisor-student written communication. Therefore, for this study, directives (instruct somebody to do something) and expressives (express feelings and attitudes) were used to classify and analyze supervisors' written feedback to student theses. One of the most common speech acts that are usually evident in the communications between student and supervisor is requesting clarification on the student's arguments. Supervisors often request for clarification and express their attitudes and emotions towards the proposition.

The role of feedback in teaching and learning is documented in educational literature. (Price et al, 2010), and the role of feedback in facilitating student learning has been perceived on many theoretical and pedagogical grounds. Morris and Adamson (2010) stated that constructivist theorists conceived language learning as the active building of knowledge by the learner, indicating that the learner needs to actively engage in the learning process with information and feedback from teacher, peer, book, parent, self, and experience (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

In his classical concept of socio-cultural theory of learning, Vygotysky (1978) explains the preeminent effect of social interaction to facilitate learning. He conceived the interface between learning and development through interaction, scaffolding, and modeling. Vygotysky rejected the notion of development as a necessary precondition for instruction and learning, and he stressed the importance of social interaction when he argued that the dialectic unity of learning and development inherently proceeds through specific stages whether instruction is made available or not.

Vygotysky (1978) proposed that while the individual actively learns, he/she needs to be assisted by the other, which he termed the setting as the "zone of proximal development."The term "zone of proximal development" is one of the most widely known concepts that have been used as a reference in language learning research. (ZPD) is the area of exploration for which the student is cognitively prepared but requires help and social interaction to fully develop. He stated that "the zone of proximal development permits us to delineate the child's immediate future and his dynamic developmental state, allowing not only for what has already been achieved developmentally, but also for what is in the course of maturing in the jointly-accomplished task" (p. 79).

Vygotysky explains that a social interaction between a more able person and a less competent person plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. He further elaborates that a teacher or more experienced peer is able to provide the learner with "scaffolding" to support the student's evolving understanding or development of complex skills. Collaborative learning, discourse modeling, and scaffolding are strategies for supporting the intellectual knowledge and skills of learners and facilitating intentional learning.

According to Vygotysky (1978), the most important feature of the ZPD is that, as with novices and experts in any field, learners are not yet fully alienated. He illustrated how the process unfolds in that meaning for children is fully tied to the contexts in which words are used. He further provided experimental evidence for how words have different meanings for children and how children appropriate adult meanings as a consequence of collaborative activity with others in the ZPD.

Rationale for the Study

In light of the empirical data about students' poor writing proficiency and the preeminent value of research, this study was presumably considered the best alternative with the potential to inform educators and supervisors to improve thesis writing. Hence, the results of this study could help to conceptualize, plan, and implement integrated supervision, or it is vital to consider the possible consequences of not implementing integrated supervision on the writing achievement of students.

Research indicates potential problems with how feedback is communicated in higher education (Bitchener et al, 2011). These include feedback that may lack specific advice on how to improve (Higgins, Hartely, & Skelton, 2001) or feedback that may not be communicated clearly enough for students to be able to interpret (Carless, 2006; Chanock, 2000). Taken

together, the results indicate that an awareness of the "psychology of giving and receiving feedback is vitally important to student learning" (Carless, 2006).

Therefore, this study rests on the belief that understanding a great deal about the current trends of written feedback provided by supervisors can help for designing effective and appropriate mechanisms to strengthen the communication between the student researchers and supervisors. The present study examined supervisors' written feedback on MA thesis writing based on the two primary roles of speech acts that are usually manifested in supervisor-student communication through writing—directives and expressives—and analyzed the type of specific written feedback (content generic or linguistic) employed by supervisors at Bahir Dar University.

Statement of the Problem

Reports from university instructors, experts, and the larger educational community suggest that too many university-level students have limited ability in writing academic texts. Further, the Ethiopian students often complain of being dismissed from the university because of their incompetence in English. The students can express their subject-matter knowledge in L1 but not in English (Jha, 2014). Students' thesis writing cannot improve if students are not communicating with their supervisors effectively. Consequentially, one of the most relevant measures to ensure high quality education pertaining to research can be to substantially increase the communications between supervisors and student researchers through written feedback.

The main objective of higher education in Ethiopia is to promote and enhance research focusing on knowledge and technology transfer consistent with the country's priority needs. The conflicting pressures from research reports and documented problems on the one hand and increasing demands for quality research to substantially prepare knowledgeable and skilled manpower on the other hand underscore the dire need to support students with their writing (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007).In light of these concepts and the empirical evidence reviewed, therefore, the present study was designed to respond to this need.

Significance of the Study

This study emanates from the belief that understanding a great deal about what constitutes effective feedback based on speech acts analysis of communications between supervisors and students is helpful to boost the communicative functions of written feedback. It may also be helpful for supervisors to revisit their supervisory practices and generate new designs that require adaptation to a different means of written feedback. It may also be used to provide insight into understanding the type and frequency of specific language functions used by the supervisors when they provide written feedback on student theses.

Feedback can be taken as the most powerful pedagogical tool provided that it is effective communication. There is currently limited research on the communication between supervisors and student researchers through written feedback as most of the previous research on written feedback has focused on teachers' written feedback to respond to their students' writing in the classroom rather than to student thesis writing (Diab, 2005; Katayama, 2007; Riazi & Riasti, 2007; Wang, 2010).

Despite the fact that there is a general agreement on the importance for supervisors' written feedback to the development of student writing, what aspects of written feedback (content, generic or linguistic) are being provided by university professors for their students' thesis writing remained in question, especially in the Ethiopian higher education context. To achieve the desired goal of this study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What type of language functions are most frequently used in supervisors' written feedback on students' theses?
2. What types of the supervisors' written feedback on student thesis were most frequent?
3. Is there a difference in the type of feedback provided by supervisors from TEFL and Media and Communication?

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from the two discipline areas, namely TEFL and Media and Communications. Twenty supervisors who were assigned to advise 15 TEFL and 5 Media and Communications MA summer students at Bahir Dar University were asked to submit their feedback to these students available in an electronic track feedback system. Of the 20 participants sought for the study, 5 supervisors from TEFL and 3 supervisors from Media and Communications either gave electronic feedback or volunteered to take part in the study. All the theses belonged to students who were currently third year graduate students. The final drafts of the students' theses were purposefully selected on the assumption that adequate feedback could be collected from their thesis as they were supposed to complete their studies by the end of the academic year.

The Study Setting

This study was conducted on supervisor-written feedback in response to the Master of TEFL and Media

and Communications students' thesis writing at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. The thesis work was in a compulsory course offered to graduate students as a partial fulfillment of the requirement for the MA degree in TEFL and Media and Communications. The students' thesis writing, which lasts for a year, is supported by advisors who are assigned to supervise the overall research project or writing of a thesis proposed by the student researchers. Supervision, which includes responding to the first draft, and revision are carried out through the year until the final submission of the paper to their respective department.

Data Collection

Data was collected from supervisors' written feedback on their students' theses to provide detailed information on the communicative functions of various types of feedback provided by the supervisors. Specifically, it was collected from the in-text and the overall feedback on the complete draft of an MA thesis in TEFL and Media and Communications. Evidence of feedback from samples of students' theses was analyzed using language function analysis, and feedback types were categorized and quantified.

Development of a Model for Feedback Analysis

The data obtained from supervisors' written feedback was collected, coded, and analyzed pertaining to the two primary speech act categories selected for this study: Directives (ordering the hearer to do something) and Expressives (expressing the speaker's attitudes and feelings). The two categories were further classified into four sub-categories. While directives were classified as instruction and clarification, expressives were further divided into approval and disapproval (Leng, 2014). These functions of speech were utilized as they are the basic components of supervisor-advisee communication and have received considerable agreement among researchers who examined the role of speech acts in supervision and written texts (Kohandani, Farzaneh, & Kazemi, 2014;Kumar & Stracke, 2007;Leng, 2013) . This study was guided by open, axial, and selective coding strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The focus of supervisors' written feedback was examined in relation to three major areas: content knowledge (its accuracy, completeness, and relevance), genre knowledge (the functions of different parts of a thesis), and linguistic accuracy and appropriateness (Bitchener et al., 2010). The data obtained from the samples of written feedback was then organized in tables. The samples collected from the supervisors' written feedback were number coded, and the written feedback frequency was converted into percentages for analysis.

Results

The existing results obtained from the samples of supervisors' written feedback could be condensed into three stranded themes. The first section presents the frequency and percentages of the two primary speech functions (directive and expressive functions and their sub-categories) observed in the supervisors' written feedback to their student thesis writing. The second stranded presents the thematic analysis of the samples pertaining to three types of feedback. The third section presents the comparison trends of instructors' written feedback in the two disciplines, TEFL and Media and Communication.

Results for Supervisors' Written Feedback Function on students' theses

The raw scores and percentage of the categories and sub categories of the two primary language functions were calculated, and the results are presented as follows. As a whole, directive function strongly endorsed by the supervisors' feedback seemed to be the favored language function (72.28%). Regarding the sub-categories of directives, the results of the samples seemed to indicate that the supervisors valued directive clarification function the most (44.56 %,) followed by directive instruction (27.72%). The third and the fourth speech functions communicated by the supervisors through their written feedback were expressive disapproval (25.26%) and expressive approval (2.46%).

It is notable that unlike directive comments, the expressive function of the written feedback collected from the students' theses was low. In a nutshell, it was evident that the supervisors' use of the directive function was predominant: especially, directive clarification received almost half of the total supervisors' written feedback collected for this study. On the contrary, the supervisors showed little amount of expressive functions. Particularly, guidance through expressive approval was rare (2.46%) in their communications with their students through written feedback.

Results for Supervisors' Written Feedback Focus on Student Thesis Writing

As Table 3 depicts, written feedback on genre knowledge (58.95 %) was emphasized by supervisors from the two departments more frequently than feedback on content knowledge (28.07 %) and linguistic accuracy and appropriateness (12.98 %).On the whole, supervisors from both disciplines favored feedback on genre knowledge than feedback on content knowledge and linguistic accuracy and appropriateness. The samples' evidence of the supervisors' written feedback to students also showed that supervisors from TEFL and Media and Communications shared almost

Table 1

Supervisors' Feedback Categories based on the two Speeches Act Functions

Main Function	Subcategory	Examples
Directive	Instruction	Elaborate your point in detail here.
	Clarification	What does this mean? It is not clear
Expressive	Approval	I like the organization of the literature.
	Disapproval	I don't see any connection with your title!

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Supervisors' Feedback Function on Students' Theses

Function	TEFL		Media and Communications		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Directive-instruction	51	27.72	28	27.72	79	27.72
Directive-clarification	82	44.57	45	44.55	127	44.56
Expressive-approval	2	1.09	5	4.95	7	2.46
Expressive-disapproval	49	26.63	23	22.77	72	25.26
Total	184	100	101	100	285	100

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Supervisors' Focus on Student Thesis

Feedback Type	TEFL		Media and Communications		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Content knowledge	51	27.72	29	28.71	80	28.07
Genre knowledge	111	60.33	57	56.44	168	58.95
Linguistic accuracy and appropriateness	22	11.96	15	14.85	37	12.98
Total	184	100	101	100	285	100

similar concerns regarding feedback on content, 27.72% and 28.71% respectively.

Discussion

Supervisors' Written Feedback Function on Student Thesis Writing

Based on the data obtained from the supervisors' written comments, it was evident that almost all of the supervisors communicated with their students largely through the directive clarification function. Clarification feedback is feedback that seeks students to make their points clearer. This type of feedback can serve as a general guideline for students since it shows them both what and how to revise their thesis. The particular feature of this feedback is that questions that ask students for further clarification are posed and general information about the ambiguous points is also highlighted so as to give the writer a sort of direction.

The directive written feedback observed in the students' theses included comments in either statement or question form. The following are some of the directive instructions that asked the students to revise the language and to identify the correct components of the thesis:

- "State clearly about development [of] communication."
- "Please paraphrase, mind your language, and include this in the participants' section."

The directive clarification comments collected from the supervisors' written feedback asked students to clarify the theoretical framework used and the design of the study employed in their respective theses. They include the following:

- "What is (are) the theoretical framework (s)?"
- "How do you measure suitability? More precisely, was it a purposive sampling"

These samples of written feedback collected from student theses showed that the supervisors' strong commitment to providing directive clarification and the supervisors' constructive and detailed feedback on written work have been identified as key characteristics

of good research supervision (Engebretson et al., 2008). The supervisors seemed to recognize that the use of more directive clarification functions of feedback could help them provide detailed and important information as the work could be directly referenced to this function of written feedback.

The result of this study, therefore, supports the findings of previous research that reveal that feedback offers a sense of direction and guidance to students in order to improve on subsequent pieces of work (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Glover &Brown, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Nicol, 2010). The frequent use of directive feedback reported in this study may have implications for students in establishing effective communication patterns and thereby improving their thesis writing. In other words, the written communications observed in this way are helpful for students' thesis writing as directive-clarification feedback provided specific directions to students on how to revise their essays (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). In the same vein, Hyland and Hyland (2006) claimed that in order for improvement to take place, feedback should be loaded with information.

As for specific speech act functions, one of the directive speech functions that was observed frequently in the students' theses was directive instruction feedback (27.72 %). See Table 2. The types of instructions prevalent in the comments include the following:

- "Don't forget to edit your work."
- "Bring it before sampling."
- "Include this in the participants' section."
- "Reorganize this into a coherent body of text."

The value of directive instruction feedback on different aspects of students' theses writing by supervisors in this study was relatively higher than other sub-categories of expressive functions. The present report on directive clarification, therefore, can be interpreted in that the function of directive instruction was also popular among the supervisors.

In comparison to direct clarification, the supervisors exhibited less attention on directive instruction. Given the fact that the participants were university level graduate students, the result of this study in this regard is not surprising as the supervisors might have considered their students as matured enough to understand the direct instructions that order students to revise accordingly without more clarification. This observation is reminiscent of the results of a large body of research that revealed that as learners' levels of proficiency increase, they become more capable of correcting their own mistakes (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Ferris, 2006;Ghandi & Maghsoudi, 2014; Jodaie & Farrokhi, 2012; Lee, 2003).

From the outset, it was hypothesized that the supervisors should employ little of this type of feedback as such comments give little comfort for their students and hence can be demoralizing and lead to negative emotions (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Weaver, 2006). Regarding the frequency of the sub-categories of expressives, the result of this study indicated that the supervisors exhibited higher expressive disapproval comments than expected (28.14%).

The expressive comments collected from the supervisors' written feedback that supervisors strongly disapproved of their students' written text include: "I don't see any connection with your title with this! It has major limitations almost in all the parts. This is not a conventional way of citing from an internet source."

The supervisors' attitude towards criticism and negative feedback obtained from the supervisors' written feedback, therefore, can be taken as the essence of better learning and may have positive implications for the students. This result substantiated the notion that students appreciate and benefit from constructive criticism as it increased their self confidence in their writing (Button, 2002; Goldstein, 2004).However, the result of this study may have implications for supervisors to revisit their feedback mechanisms as negative feedback is potentially more powerful than positive feedback (Brunit, Huguet & Monteil, 2000). Further, if supervision is full of an overly negative tone of feedback, students may lose control of their emotions or may get overwhelmed with difficulties (Price et al, 2010). Feedback is deemed to be ineffective if students do not act on it (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004).

Therefore, it is important to note that supervisors need to help students to manage negative emotions caused by critical feedback by including positive and encouraging feedback along with critical comments because effective feedback is feedback that is focused, clear, applicable, and encouraging (Lindemann, 2001). Also, praise has the ability to improve student academic or behavioral performance, but only if the student finds it reinforcing (Akin-Little, Eckert, Lovett, & Little, 2004).

The expressive approval speech function motivates students to express their moral values and get them approved by their advisors. Conversely, it was found that the supervisors gave little or no value to this function of written feedback (2.46%). The comments that showed the supervisors' approval include: "I like the organization of the literature. Generally, there are improvements in your introduction part in this draft. It is a good discussion."

Although some researchers advocate that negative feedback may help students to fully realize better learning from criticism (Button, 2002; Goldstein, 2004), students recommended that feedback should be positive, consistent, timely, and clear with a balance between positive and constructive comments and

comments that critiqued their work (Bitchener et al., 2011).If feedback is carefully targeted, especially with less efficient learners, it can enable students to acquire and utilize appropriate strategies to process the objectives of learning(Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

In another research, it was revealed that students wanted supervisors to demonstrate genuine interest in their work, while at the same time recognizing that ultimately the work was the students' responsibility (Bitchener et al, 2011). Given the students' reported the need for, and the value of, positive supervisor written feedback (expressive approval), it is possible to claim that the supervisors would be more fruitful if they reasonably considered this type of feedback in their written supervision to improve student thesis writing.

A plethora of research also revealed that feedback that includes praise may be effective because it elicits a positive affective reaction, which often has been linked to increased motivation and higher goals and to improved student academic or behavioral performance (Akin-Little et al., 2004; Gee, 2006). It is vital to recognize that the inclusion of both negative and positive feedback on a student thesis needs to be framed together to establish effective communication. Supervisors need to establish close rapport with their students by designing constructive feedback that includes praise as well as criticism of their students' thesis writing. Taken together, supervisors need to consider the psychometric expectations of their students so that feedback helps students overcome their emotions, and such feedback impacts greatly on future improvements. Also, an awareness of the "psychology of giving and receiving feedback is vitally important to student learning" (Carless, 2006).

Interestingly, the written feedback collected from the samples showed that the supervisors had showed their mixed reactions (both approvingly and disapprovingly) to students' thesis writing. As a result, a new function of language that cannot be categorized under either expressive approvals or expressive disapprovals emerged from the collected comments. The researcher preferred to use this language function as an "ambivalent" category. In this category, approval feedback is given as a form of reward for the students' progress, and simultaneously disapproval feedback is provided to show a total disagreement. Given the fact that the written feedback the supervisors employed includes conflicting comments to thesis writing improvement, the result of this study may have implications for supervisors to revisit this kind of feedback mechanism since poorly presented or uninformative feedback, rather than inadequacy of knowledge on the part of students, was responsible for its low efficacy as a learning tool (Howie, Sy, Ford & Vicente, 2000).

Supervisors' Written Feedback Focus on Student Thesis Writing

The supervisors' written feedback on their students' theses writing will be discussed in relation to the three major areas: content knowledge (its accuracy, completeness and relevance), genre knowledge (the functions of different parts of a thesis), and linguistic accuracy and appropriateness (Bitchener et al., 2010). Therefore, the next step in presenting the results will be to explore what aspects of the students' theses that the supervisors emphasized.

The most frequently commented-on written feedback was on the genre knowledge. The written comments forwarded by the supervisors include concerns dealing with referencing and citations, the functions of different parts of a thesis, and the relevance and appropriateness of the thesis for scientific research. The following were some of the examples:

- "You start with general idea and then move to specific idea or contexts."
- "The citation and other formats should be consistent throughout your paper."

Overall, the supervisors' major focus has been on providing feedback on the functions of different parts of a thesis to improve student thesis writing. This observation contrasts with the recent research reveals that supervisors' focus of feedback in thesis writing has mainly been on content knowledge (Kumar & Stracke, 2007).Despite the fact that feedback constitutes a major form of instruction for higher degree research students, the general focus of advisors has been reported written feedback on a micro-level (Bitchener et al.,2010) and the struggle to articulate implicit knowledge (Paré, 2011). It was also interesting to observe that all of the supervisors shared their research experiences with students through their written comments as as the role of supervisor is to guide the research student throughout their study, provide the time, expertise and support to foster the candidate's research skills and attitude and to ensure the production of a research of acceptable standard (Heath, 2002).

The second most frequently observed written feedback in terms of what aspect of the students' theses was emphasized were comments that asked students to foster their content knowledge and display in their research. In terms of content knowledge—its accuracy, completeness and relevance—the following comments that ask students to show their overall conceptual understanding were emphasized by the supervisors:

- "You did not raise anything about attitude."
- "State clearly and specifically about the nature of task based language learning/teaching."
- "You didn't explain Melkote's idea."

Hyland (2009) posits that the most helpful feedback is that which helps students understand the expectations of their disciplinary community. It "conveys implicit messages" about the values and beliefs of the discourse community, the nature of disciplinary knowledge, and student identities in the community (p. 132). Although the extent to which evidence of feedback from samples of students' theses is not as high as expected, the supervisors' preferences of providing feedback on content exhibited in this study is partially consistent with a plethora of research that confirmed that commentary on content was the category seen across the highest number of scripts (Bitchener et al, 2011; Hyatt, 2005; Kumar & Stracke, 2007).

Compared to the other two major areas of research writing, the supervisors showed little attention to the quality of their students in terms of the linguistic accuracy and appropriateness of the students' thesis writing. This was clearly exhibited by the students receiving only 12.91% of comments on these issues out the total comments provided by the supervisors in this study. A few examples of written comments that asked students to revise, edit, or use the correct and formal language included the following:

- "Please give attention to the language, format and style of your writing."
- "You still have to do a lot of editing and proofreading."
- "There are still a number of language problems."

Taken together, the present study examined the focus of supervisors on their students' theses in the final section of the study and found that supervisors exhibited little or no attention to linguistic accuracy and appropriateness to students' theses. However, apart from developing a close rapport with their students, supervisors' written feedback can also help foster the students' linguistic capability. The result of this study in this regard is in sharp contrast with previous research by Bitchener et al (2011), who asserted that linguistic features, such as grammar, imprecise or vague vocabulary, and coherence were more specifically focused. The study also indicated that supervisors provide feedback on linguistic issues at the sentence level, discourse feedback at the paragraph level, and feedback on what is expected and required for the different parts of a thesis.

Data from examples of supervisors' written feedback on student theses illustrated to what extent feedback was given on the accuracy, completeness, and relevance of the content included in each section of the thesis, as well as the linguistic accuracy and appropriateness of the final drafts. The focus of the present study was not the effect of supervisors' different types of written feedback to improve students' theses writing. Rather, it was aimed at understanding the types of written feedback most frequently used by the supervisors as part of the dialogic communications with their students.

Feedback Focus on Student Theses across TEFL and Media and Communications

This section of the study presents the findings related to the types of written feedback on which supervisors across the two disciplines focused when they provided written feedback on student thesis writing. The first interesting theme arising from the analysis of feedback from the two disciplines that was observed from the samples of supervisors' written feedback was the focus of comments with regard to content knowledge on student thesis writing. The comparison results of the overall focus of supervisors on providing feedback to their students concerning content knowledge showed that supervisors from TEFL and Media and Communications shared similar concerns (27.72 % and 28.71% respectively), and the consistency of such comments were clearly observed throughout the students' papers.

The result of this study was particularly enlightening about the focus of supervisors' written feedback. It was found that little or no attention was devoted to commenting on the linguistic accuracy and appropriateness of a student thesis from either TEFL and Media and Communications. From the shared experience, the researcher had hypothesized that language supervisors from TEFL might favor feedback on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness. Regardless of disciplines, however, the result of this study was not corroborated by the notion that the supervisors' experiences might differ with regard to the discipline. Surprisingly, supervisors from Media and Communications exhibited more commitment to comment on matters of linguistic accuracy on a student thesis writing (14.85 %) than supervisors from TEFL (11.96%).

Implications

From the literature, the importance of written supervision for the improvement of student theses has been emphasized. Regarding this, the results of this study showed that examining the language functions supervisors use to communicate with their advisees is helpful to understand the effectiveness of current supervisory practices. Given that the written feedback the supervisors employed was directed toward the graduates' thesis writing improvement, the findings of the present study may have implications for supervisors to further strengthen the other functions of feedback, especially expressive approval as this function of

language on their supervision was rare. Providing positive feedback is one of the most helpful and natural processes of learning.

Taken together, the fact that the language function of expressive disapproval the supervisors used outnumbered the expressive approval function in the corpus proves that the supervisors' written feedback collected for this study does not consider the psychometric expectations of their students. Thus, it is imperative to suggest that supervisors need to revisit their feedback mechanism as the student's ability or willingness to do the feedback might depend on the emotional impact of feedback (Layder, 1997). Their motives to do so or not may result from either positive responses, such as deep consideration of the feedback and reasoned rejection of it, or negative responses, such as distrust of the feedback provider (Price et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Based on the data obtained from the actual written supervision, one may conclude that the supervisors almost never value expressive approval speech functions as part of written feedback. While the supervisors excessively employed directive clarification, little or no attention was given for the expressive approval of language functions in their written communication with students. Even if very few of them appeared to be observed in some of students' thesis, the comments were mostly either described in brief or subjected to contradiction with their alignment with other forms of feedback, as in, "It looks good but lacks clarity."

Further, a wide range of supervisors' practices concerning the functions and types of written feedback were observed in the students' theses. These practices that were most frequent for an individual supervisor were consistently the same for other supervisors, indicating that supervisors communicated with their respective advisees in a similar trend throughout the written feedback.

A few words need to be said about the supervisors' experience and the account of the sample written feedback that mirrored the existing supervision practices. The present research aimed at examining the language functions and the type of written feedback most frequently used by eight supervisors at the Faculty of Humanities, Bahir Dar University on students' theses. The most frequently mentioned areas of written feedback provided by the supervisors in order of priority were written feedback on genre of the thesis, content knowledge and linguistic accuracy and appropriateness.

In higher education, communication is the principal means that enables universities to meet a broader range of academic goals including promoting interaction and discussion among various disciplines. Therefore, the informational role as well as the pedagogical implication of this study is not limited in the two

disciplines under this study. The study had rather attempted to shed light on broad curricula across many departments in higher education in general. As a whole, the present research was designed to supplement the overarching academic research and reinforce cross-departmental understanding in higher education by examining the types of language functions, which is at the heart of tertiary education, supervisors use to provide feedback to their students in thesis writing.

However, the findings of this study may not be generalized to other universities, and hence have implication for future research. This study touched upon a possibility of using evidence of feedback from samples of students' theses, and hence there are numerous reasons to pursue further research that could shed light on the strengths of using questionnaire and interview and including fair number of supervision practices in various departments.

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