

Assessment on Qualitative Research in Language Education: Perspectives from Thesis Supervisors

^{*1}Andri Suherman*, ²M. Adib Nazri, ³Siti Ayu Surayya

Universitas Hamzanwadi

Pancor-Lombok Timur, Indonesia

andrisuherman@hamzanwadi.ac.id, madibnazri@hamzanwadi.ac.id,

sitiayusurayya@hamzanwadi.ac.id

Abstract. This study aims to examine assessment strategies employed by thesis supervisors in assessing their students qualitative research, and to explore the thesis supervisors' perceptions of their assessment strategies. Conducted in an Indonesian university, this study adopted an explanatory sequential design of mixed-research by using a purposive sampling technique to recruit ten thesis supervisors as the research participants. The findings showed that the supervisors made a total of 1,002 feedback comments on the 20 thesis drafts. The feedback comments focused on five different aspects of students' theses including research components (58.98%), coherent and cohesion (22.32%), grammatical accuracy (10.27%), vocabulary used (4.49%), and reference and citations (3.89%). Meanwhile, data gained from interview sessions revealed four dominant themes in supervisors' perceptions of their assessment strategies including instructional scaffolding, time efficiency, students' engagement, and researcher independence. Despite some limitation such as limited number of participants and inadequate research instruments, this study provides pedagogical implication including the necessity to facilitate students with relevant trainings to help improve their thesis writing skills. Suggestions for future research are also presented.

Keywords: language education; qualitative research; thesis supervision

Introduction

Determining assessment or feedback types on students' qualitative research is found to have been a challenging work for supervisors. Studies (Cekiso, et al, 2019; Ryan & Henderson, 2018) found that poor feedback may negatively affect students' supervisory experience. Thesis supervisors were observed to often provide the kinds of assessment or feedback on their students' thesis drafts with the purpose of fostering their research writing skills (Bukhairi, et al, 2021; Hawari, et al, 2022). Most of the supervisors' feedback was in a written form and continuously provided to ensure that students were able to produce an acceptable

*Andri Suherman, andrisuherman@hamzanwadi.ac.id

standard of thesis (Paltridge & Starfield, 2019). Due to its essence, thesis supervision has been one of the most popular research topics recently. The topics were analysed to have been diverse such as teacher written feedback (Lee, 2019; Link, et al, 2022), the effects of teachers' written feedback (Gorman & Ellis, 2019; Roberts & Seaman, 2018), approaches to written feedback (Bitchener, 2018), teachers' and students' perceptions of written feedback (Arifin, 2020; Tan, et al, 2019). Despite extensive research, the types of feedback methods used by EFL supervisors for qualitative research and their perceptions of supervisory strategies remain unclear, particularly in Indonesian higher education.

Recently, there has been lack of research concerning how EFL supervisors provide supervisory feedback comments to bachelor thesis drafts. Studies on bachelor thesis supervision have revealed that many students encounter several issues in thesis writing, including research topic selection, thesis component organization, and students' personal argument in thesis (Nouri, et al, 2019; Xu & Hu, 2019). Therefore, students were found to expect written feedback from their supervisors (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). Nevertheless, how supervisors provide the kinds of written assessment or feedback on students' qualitative research has rarely been examined. Hence, this study aims to explore perceptions of thesis supervisor pertaining their assessment strategies on students' qualitative research and aspects of qualitative research they tend to assess.

Previous Research

Over the past few years, several scholars have carried out research concerning assessment strategies on thesis supervisory. For example, Lei and Pramoolsook (2020) explored perceptions and practices of EFL thesis supervisors regarding their assessment strategies in the context of a Chinese university. Adopting a qualitative research approach, they recruited six thesis supervisors to address both of their two research purposes by using semi-structured interviews and thesis draft analysis as their research instruments. Data analysis showed matches between two aspects, the supervisors' stated and actual assessment techniques. In general, the supervisors strongly believed in indirect assessment and they provided indirect feedback in practices. In different drafts stages, the supervisors highly valued indirect assessment in initial drafts and direct assessment in later drafts. The same thing was found in their actual practices. Although their research appears to have insightful data, however, they recruited a limited number of participants and thus their findings cannot be overgeneralized to other EFL educational settings. Besides, they did not thoroughly explore the effects of different assessment strategies which resulted in the confusion of which strategies were more effective.

Meanwhile, in the context of a Nepalese university, Neupane and Hu (2021) examined Master thesis supervisory feedback comments across disciplines. Adopting a mixed-research approach, they interviewed two different stakeholders; 16 thesis supervisors to uncover their beliefs underlying their supervisory practices, and 16 students to reveal their expectations. In addition, they analysed 97 students' thesis drafts in four study programs including English Studies, Education, Engineering, and Physics. Quantitative data analysis showed the supervisors made a total of 6,547 feedback comments on the 97 thesis drafts with different values of Mean and Standard Deviation in each category; mechanic (M=21.84, SD=43.87), linguistic forms (M=17.15, SD=29.79), content

($M=13.03$, $SD=15.79$), miscellaneous ($M=8.58$, $SD=82.86$), coherence ($M=4.71$, $SD=6.36$), and expected component ($M=2.19$, $SD=2.81$). Meanwhile, qualitative data analysis revealed that the supervisory feedback was found to have different patterns across the disciplines and the majority of the feedback were observed to fail of meeting students' needs and expectations. Although their finding seems to have enlightened people, however, they did not employ observations to triangulate their data which resulted in less valid findings.

In an Indonesian educational context, Nurkamto, et al (2022) investigated challenges encountered by students in virtual thesis supervision. Adopting an explanatory sequential design of mixed-research, they recruited 50 thesis supervisors from Central Java and Papua universities to participate in an online survey regarding challenges faced by students in academic writing skills during supervision process. Furthermore, 23 of the supervisors were interviewed to discover their perspectives regarding students' academic writing problems. Quantitative data analysis revealed that the students encountered different types of issues with writing research introduction being the most problematic thing (32%) and writing references being the least issue faced by students (4%). This was confirmed by qualitative data which showed that the students experienced relevant problems including thesis components and writing performances. The findings of this study appear to have been enlightening, however, their research site was merely focusing on the two big islands which might have resulted different findings in other educational context in small cities or islands.

Based on the review of previous literatures above, it is clear that not many scholars in Indonesia have conducted relevant studies, especially in West Nusa Tenggara provinces, using both qualitative and quantitative data sources. It is therefore, the current study is an attempt to fill in the gaps by examining perceptions and practices of thesis supervisors when assessing students' thesis drafts. Two research questions have been designed below to address those purposes:

1. What aspects of students' qualitative research do supervisors assess?
2. How do supervisors perceive their assessment strategies for students' qualitative research?

Method

Research Design

This study adopted an explanatory sequential design of mixed-research by quantitatively and qualitatively examining perceptions of thesis supervisors regarding their students' qualitative final research project. It was conducted at University of Mataram, a state university in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. In particular, the research site was located in English Education undergraduate study program.

Participants

This study recruited 10 EFL teachers by implementing a purposive sampling method. In this regard, the teachers were selected based on several criteria including experience on thesis supervisory work.

Table 1. The Demographic Information of the 15 Participants

Information Background	Category	Number of Participants
Gender	Male	4
	Female	6
Age Range (in years)	25-35	2
	36-45	4
	45-55	4
Academic Qualification	Bachelor	0
	Master	7
	Doctoral	3
Educational Background	English Education	5
	TESOL	3
	Applied Linguistics	2
Length of Teaching (in years)	1-5	2
	6-10	5
	11-15	3

Instruments

The first instrument was students' thesis drafts which were collected to examine what aspects of students' theses that supervisors assessed. Twenty of students' thesis drafts with supervisory feedback were randomly collected. The information of the thesis drafts can be seen in table 2 below:

Table 2. Information of the 20 Thesis Drafts

No	Research Area	Number of Thesis	Supervisors
1	English Language Teaching	13	T1, T3, T5, T9, T10
2	Applied Linguistics	4	T2, T4, T7
3	Literature	3	T6, T8

The second instrument was semi-structured interviews which were carried out to explore the supervisors self-perceived of their assessment techniques. Five representative teachers were randomly selected to participate in individual interview sessions. They were firstly asked general questions (ex: how many theses have you supervised?). After that, several specific questions were asked based on what had been previously designed in an interview protocol (see appendix). To obtain more explanation, additional questions were deployed if necessary. It should be noted that each interview process lasted for approximately 60 minutes, and was audio-recorded for further analysis. It is also important to note that the teachers were interviewed by using their first language, Bahasa Indonesia, with the purpose to prevent them from being distracted by English language barriers.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data gained from students' thesis drafts were quantitatively analysed using descriptive statistics including mean (M) and standard deviation (SD). Meanwhile, data gained from interview sessions were qualitatively analysed by implementing Thematic Analysis technique with an inductive approach using Coding System of Nvivo 12 Pro Software.

Findings and Discussion

This section reports results gained from the data collection instruments to address the two research questions previously mentioned. The findings were concurrently presented with discussion.

Aspects of Students' Qualitative Research Assessed by Supervisors

Table 3 below displays different aspects of students' thesis drafts assessed by supervisor with a total number of feedback comments and their percentage.

Table 3. Aspects Assessed by Supervisors

No	Category	Number of Feedbacks	Percentage	Number of Supervisors
1	Research Components	591	58.98%	8
2	Coherent and Cohesion	224	22.32%	6
3	Vocabulary Used	45	4.49%	4
4	Grammatical Accuracy	103	10.27%	5
5	References and Citations	39	3.89%	5
Total		1,002	100%	

As can be seen from the table above, the supervisors made a total of 1,002 feedback comments on the 20 thesis drafts. The feedback comments focused on five different aspects of students' theses including research components, coherence and cohesion, vocabulary used, grammatical accuracy, and reference and citations.

It is clear from table 3 that the majority of feedback comments (58.98%) were on the category of research components with a total of 591 feedback comments which were assessed by 8 supervisors. Meanwhile, the second most common feedback comments (22.32%) were on the category of coherence and cohesion with a total of 224 feedback comments which were given by 6 supervisors. This was followed by the category of grammatical accuracy (10.27%) with a total of 103 feedback comments which were provided by 5 supervisors. The category of vocabulary used made a total of 45 feedback comments (4.49%) and was given by 4 different supervisors. The least common feedback, references and citations, constituted 39 comments (3.89%) which were given by 5 different supervisors.

The results above were supported by data gained from interview sessions. With regards the most common feedback provided, S1 and S5 for example, mentioned in the interviews:

S1 : I don't know why many of my thesis supervises did not follow the template for thesis writing provided. As a result, some thesis components such as theoretical framework and research problems were missing from their drafts.

S5 : The most missing component in my students' thesis drafts was the theoretical framework. The students seemed to have been confused with the term conceptual framework which resulted in the absence of this component.

The interview quotes above indicate that the students were not completely comprehend with some components in thesis writing. It is therefore, the aspect of research component was the most commonly assessed by the supervisors (58.98%). Meanwhile, coherence and cohesion were argued by the supervisor to become the second commonly aspect to assess. In the interview, S2 and S4, for example mentioned:

S2 : I often noticed that my supervises forgot about coherency in their thesis writing. I found some parts in their thesis drafts were not related to each other. It confused me very often.

S4 : Honestly, coherent and cohesion was one of big issues in my students' thesis drafts. It should have been learnt by the students before starting the process of their thesis writing. What a shame.

The excerpts above indicate that coherence and cohesion was one of problematic aspects found by the supervisors in their students' thesis drafts. No wonder, this aspect was frequently assessed by the supervisor with a total of 22.32% comments. Following this, grammatical accuracy was also mentioned by the supervisors in the interview. For instance, S3 and S5 said:

S3 : I don't understand why I still fond many grammatical errors in my students' thesis drafts. It seems that they needed to master grammatical patterns before writing their thesis drafts.

S5 : At first, I mainly focused on checking the content of my students' thesis drafts. However, I found many inaccuracies in their grammatical use. So, I now switch my focus on assessing that aspect.

The statements above show that grammatical accuracy was found to have been one of major issues mentioned by the supervisors. It is therefore, this aspect was considerably often assessed by the supervisor with 10.27% feedback comments. Meanwhile, the least two aspects (vocabulary used and references and citations) were also highlighted by the supervisors in the interview process. For example, S1 and S3 argued:

S1 : I sometimes fond some vocabulary issues in my students' thesis drafts. When I noticed, most of problems were related to the use of phrasal verbs which led to illogical meanings.

S3 : I can understand that many of students made use of computer applications to help them with reference writing. However, I think they need to adjust the reference outcomes with the template provided.

The interview quotes above show that the students were having minor issues with vocabulary and reference when writing their thesis drafts. Therefore, the aspects of vocabulary used and references and citations were commented by the supervisors with 4.49% and 3.89% feedback comments respectively. This finding is in line with what Arifin, et al (2022) have found. The thesis supervisors in their study were observed to have provided a variety of feedback comments on different aspects of students' thesis drafts. The aspects commented by the supervisors ranged from students' competencies on thesis elements to students' thesis writing skills.

Supervisors' Self-Perceived of their Assessment Strategies

Data gained from interview sessions revealed four dominant themes in supervisors' perceptions of their assessment strategies for students' qualitative final research project.

Instructional Scaffolding

The first theme emerged from interview sessions was related to instructional scaffolding. When asked in the interviews, for example, S4 and S5 argued how they valued indirect written assessment.

S4 : I mostly point out the errors in my students' thesis drafts. At the same time, I provide them with some explanations in an indirect way. In my opinion, this assessment strategy is beneficial for my students when revising their drafts.

S5 : When I assess my students' research drafts, I always try to show them the errors in their drafts and explain them indirectly. This assessment strategy takes much time. However, it benefits my students with their thesis drafts revisions.

The interview quotes above indicate that the supervisors highly valued the process of indirect written assessment when examining their students' research drafts. This assessment technique was perceived to help students notice several errors in their drafts and make subsequent revisions by themselves. This finding is in line with what Lei and Pramoolsook (2020) have found. Thesis supervisors in their study were found to often provide instructional scaffolding due to its' benefits for students. Thus, it can be assumed that this type of assessment strategy was considerably a scaffold for students to become more aware of problems in their thesis writing.

Students' Engagement

Aspect relating to students' engagement was the second theme emerged from interview sessions. During interview session, S1 and S3 mentioned the benefits of indirect assessment method.

S1 : I often locate and explain the errors in my students' thesis drafts without giving the correct answers. In my view, this assessment method provides students with opportunity to think thoroughly before making revisions.

S3 : I think telling students the errors in their thesis drafts without giving the correct answers will results in independency. This assessment method is beneficial for each student since the final thesis must be conducted individually.

Based on the excerpts above, it is clear that the supervisors were aware of positive effects from becoming independent for students. Hence, indirect written feedback was perceived to prevent students from overreliance on supervisors' input. This finding echo what Zheng, et al (2020) have revealed. Thesis supervisors were observed to become satisfied with their students' high-quality thesis writing as the result of indirect feedback provision. It is therefore, it can be argued that providing feedback indirectly was an effective way to engage students, which, in return, transform them to become independent researchers.

Time Efficiency

The third theme obtained from the interview process was related to time efficiency. In relation to this, S2 and S4 argued how they believed indirect written assessment had helped them to efficient much time.

S2 : It is impossible for me to check on each error in students' thesis drafts and then provide direct feedback. Therefore, I think indirect assessment is the best choice considering the fact that I supervise 7 to 10 students each year.

S4 : Most of the time, I just tell my students the errors in their thesis drafts with explanations in several words. Although this supervisory process is a relatively very short, but it saves me much time.

The interview statements above show that the supervisors recognized the effectiveness of indirect supervisory feedback in saving their time. This assessment strategy was perceived to have helped them with time efficiency. They realized how to supervise many thesis drafts within a short period of time.

This finding aligns with what Lei and Pramoolsook (2020) have reported. Thesis supervisors in their study were identified to provide more indirect written feedback due to its efficiency in saving their time. Therefore, it can be assumed that this type of assessment strategy was considerably an effective way to prevent thesis supervisors from having time constraint.

Researcher Independence

The last theme emerged from interview sessions was related to researcher independence. When asked in the interviews, S3 and S5 mentioned the benefits of indirect written assessment for students' independence in writing their thesis.

S3 : I always believe that indirect feedback provision without correct answers can help students to become more self-reliance on their thesis writing. This is why I often use this assessment technique when supervising my students' thesis drafts.

S5 : I can provide my students with corrective feedback. But I think it can make them become overreliance on others' comments. In my opinion, indirect written feedback is much better to help improve students' high independence.

The interview quotes above show that the supervisors were aware of the necessity of independence skills for students in the process of thesis writing. Instead of providing corrective feedback, the supervisors preferred indirect feedback to help boost their independence. This finding aligns with that of Yenus (2020) who found that thesis supervisors in his study were observed to often provide students with indirect feedback because of its impact on preventing students from becoming overreliance on supervisors' comments. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that indirect written feedback is one of effective assessment techniques to help enhance students' independence in writing their thesis.

Conclusion

This study aims to examine assessment strategies employed by thesis supervisors in assessing their students qualitative research, and to explore the thesis supervisors' perceptions of their assessment strategies. Conducted in an Indonesian university, this study adopted a mixed-method research approach by using a purposive sampling technique to recruit ten thesis supervisors as the research participants.

The results indicated that the supervisors made a total of 1,002 feedback comments on the 20 students' thesis drafts. The feedback comments focused on five different aspects of students' theses including research components (58.98%), coherent and cohesion (22.32%), grammatical accuracy (10.27%), vocabulary used (4.49%), and reference and citations (3.89%). Meanwhile, data gained from interview sessions revealed four dominant themes in supervisors' perceptions of their assessment strategies including instructional scaffolding, time efficiency, students' engagement, and researcher independency.

This study provides pedagogical implication including the necessity to facilitate students with relevant trainings to help improve their thesis writing skills. Despite this, it was found that this study recruited a relatively limited number of participants and employed inadequate research instruments. Therefore, future research needs to recruit more participants and employ multiple data collection tools to generate a more comprehensive finding.

References

- Arifin, Z. (2020). An Analysis of written feedback from teachers on the writing of students' composition. *Language-Edu*, 9(1), 1-10.
- Bitchener, J. (2018). *A guide to supervising non-native English writers of theses and dissertations*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Bukhari, N., Jamal, J., Ismail, A., & Shamsuddin, J. (2021). Assessment rubric for research report writing: A tool for supervision. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction (MJLI)*, 18(2), 1-43.
- Cekiso, M., Tshotsho, B., Masha, R., & Saziwa, T. (2019). Supervision experiences of postgraduate research students at one South African higher education institution. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 33(3), 8-25.
- Gorman, M., & Ellis, R. (2019). The relative effects of metalinguistic explanation and direct written corrective feedback on children's grammatical accuracy in new writing. *Language Teaching for Young Learners*, 1(1), 57-81.
- Lee, I. (2019). Teacher written corrective feedback: Less is more. *Language Teaching*, 52(4), 524-536.
- Lei, Z., & Pramoolsook, I. (2020). Written supervisory feedback strategies on bachelor's theses: Chinese EFL supervisors' beliefs and practices. *rEFLections*, 27(2), 162-188.
- Hawari, O. M. D. A., Al-Shboul, Y., & Huwari, I. F. (2022). Supervisors' Perspectives on Graduate Students' Problems in Academic Writing. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 11(1), 545-556.
- Hyland, K., & Hyland, F. (Eds.). (2019). *Feedback in second language writing: Contexts and issues*. Cambridge university press.
- Link, S., Mehrzad, M., & Rahimi, M. (2022). Impact of automated writing evaluation on teacher feedback, student revision, and writing improvement. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 35(4), 605-634.
- Neupane Bastola, M., & Hu, G. (2021). Supervisory feedback across disciplines: Does it meet students' expectations? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 46(3), 407-423.
- Nouri, J., Larsson, K., & Saqr, M. (2019). Bachelor thesis analytics: Using machine learning to predict dropout and identify performance factors. *International Journal of Learning Analytics and Artificial Intelligence for Education*, 1 (1), 116-131.
- Nurkamto, J., & Prihandoko, L. A. (2022). Students' problems of academic writing competencies, challenges in online thesis supervision, and the solutions: thesis supervisors' perspectives. *TEFLIN Journal: A Publication on the Teaching & Learning of English*, 33(1), 123-147.
- Paltridge, B., & Starfield, S. (2019). *Thesis and dissertation writing in a second language: A handbook for students and their supervisors*. Routledge.
- Roberts, L. D., & Seaman, K. (2018). Good undergraduate dissertation supervision: perspectives of supervisors and dissertation coordinators. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 23(1), 28-40.
- Ryan, T., & Henderson, M. (2018). Feeling feedback: students' emotional responses to educator feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 43(6), 880-892.
- Tan, F. D., Whipp, P. R., Gagné, M., & Van Quaquebeke, N. (2019). Students' perception of teachers' two-way feedback interactions that impact learning. *Social Psychology of Education*, 22, 169-187.

- Xu, L., & Hu, J. (2019). Language feedback responses, voices and identity (re) construction: Experiences of Chinese international doctoral students. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 1-12.
- Yenus, N. (2020). Graduate students' perceived needs and preferences for supervisor written feedback for thesis writing. *Journal of Language and Education*, 6(4 (24)), 153-170.
- Zheng, Y., Yu, S., Wang, B., & Zhang, Y. (2020). Exploring student engagement with supervisor feedback on master 's thesis: Insights from a case study. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 57(2), 186-197.