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On the role of oral feedback in ESL postgraduate thesis writing supervision

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Abstract

The provision of oral feedback to ESL students at the postgraduate level plays an interventionist role in their development as writers. It is through such feedback that the students are expected to be guided towards achieving their writing goals. Supervisors provide written feedback and this is usually supported with oral feedback which appears to play a crucial role in the supervision process in that it helps in the formation of scholarly identities, scaffolds students' academic writing and learning, fosters autonomy, equality, and learning skills among ESL learners, develops students' dialogical skills, helps students focus on their research, and guides them to conform with dissertation/thesis writing. However, ESL students' own cultural background and social circumstances may affect the efficacy of the oral feedback process. Some limitations of existing studies are discussed and key directions for future research on the role of oral feedback in ESL postgraduate supervision settings are suggested.

Keywords: Supervisory feedback, oral feedback, postgraduate supervision, ESL postgraduates, thesis supervision meetings, research writing

1. Introduction

Tertiary level students, whether studying in native or non-native English language settings, are often regarded as neophytes of their academic discourse communities (Harwood & Hadley, 2004; Li, 2006; Russell, 1990; Swales, 1990). Those who undertake research writing, particularly at the postgraduate level, are therefore required to write up their reports, theses or dissertations “in ways which will be judged as appropriate by those communities” (Pecorari, 2006, p. 4). Put differently, they need to “[re]invent the university” in terms of its norms, values, and conventions that are somewhat encrypted in the “ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define...the various discourses of our community” (Bartholomae, 1986, p. 4). Add to this arduous task the fact that research students are necessarily highly independent individuals who have different needs, approaches to research study, and particularly expectations of their relationship with their supervisors, perhaps as a result of cultural differences (James & Baldwin, 1999), postgraduate supervision becomes a crucial part of the students’ academic learning at the university (Kamler & Thomson, 2006). The problem is further compounded in the case of ESL (English as a Second Language) postgraduates who also need training in the competent use of the language for specific academic purposes, particularly in the area of writing (See e.g. Allison, 1995; Bizzell, 1992; Ferris, 2003; F. Hyland, 2000; K. Hyland, 2004; Swales, 1990). Good supervisors, note James and Baldwin (1999), value diversity, take cognizance of students’ needs, and “adjust their own practices accordingly” (James & Baldwin, 1999, p. 3). Thus, supervisory feedback, whether oral or written, is an important mode of linguistic input that contributes significantly to students’ development as academics in their discipline as well as their acquisition of the target language. Supervisors almost always provide written feedback (hereafter, WFB) on their students’ thesis drafts (Tee, Kumar, & Abdullah, 2013), and this is usually supported with oral feedback (hereafter, OFB) via supervisory meetings (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Bitchener, Basturkmen, East, & Meyer, 2011; Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). OFB plays a crucial role in the supervision process as it additionally helps in the formation of scholarly identities (Knowles, 2007) by directing them to become “particular kinds of knowing subjects, with particular capacities, identities, and subjectivities...[as well as] particular styles and forms of writing ” (p. 25-26).

The aim of this paper is to review the literature on the role of oral supervisory feedback that also sheds some light on students’ difficulty in comprehending feedback and the potential benefits that may be derived from discussing meaning in face-to-face conferences (Zamel, 1985). In some ways, this review may also be deemed necessary because it extends similar work by Cadman (2000) who cites Todd (1997, p. 1) that “there is currently a ‘lack of literature looking in detail at postgraduate overseas students’ experiences of studying and into lecturer’s experiences of supervising and teaching overseas students” (Cited in Cadman, 2000, p. 477). Moffet (1968) broadly defined “feedback” in instructional settings as “any information a learner receives as a result of his trials” (p. 188). This definition does not seem to provide much insight other than the view that in a learning situation, the term refers to the evaluation of the learner’s effort at learning. Later, Lamborg & Lamb (1980) provided a clearer definition by saying that feedback is “information on performance which affects subsequent performance by influencing a student’s

attention to particular matters so that those matters undergo a change in the subsequent performance' (p. 66). Hence, feedback as per Lamberg and Lamb's (1980) definition encompasses the students' response to and incorporation of their teachers' feedback in subsequent work. Feedback may also be considered a means of communication that provides a certain amount of information for the receiver to improve his/her writing in the learning process (F. Hyland & Hyland, 2001). This improvement occurs only when effective feedback is provided, which is claimed to comprise the instructor's comments that are focused, clear, applicable, and encouraging (Lindemann, 2001). Feedback that is provided orally plays an important role in resolving confusions in the instruction/supervision, and in clarifying any earlier written feedback provided by teachers to their students (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990). It is both direct (targeted at individuals or groups) and indirect (as others listen in and reflect on what is said). At the postgraduate level of university study, OFB is conveyed in three directions: supervisor to supervisee, supervisee to supervisor, and supervisee to supervisee. These three directions seem to be necessary and interlinked. The supervisor can construct the language of his/her feedback on students' written thesis drafts in a form that students themselves can employ and appropriate in their discussions and paired peer assessment (See e.g. Topping, Smith, Swanson, & Elliot, 2000).

Successful revisions of the thesis drafts appear to be related to conferencing or meetings between the supervisor and the supervisee when OFB is provided. Goldstein and Conrad (1990) found that successful revisions appeared in subsequent drafts when revisions had been discussed with the teachers/supervisors individually. Some early studies found that students faced difficulties in understanding supervisors' written comments which needed to be negotiated further in face-to-face conversations (Zamel, 1985). It would appear, therefore, that for students to write up their research well, written comments should be provided in tandem with or immediately followed by oral discussion. Bitchener et al. (2005) found that written feedback supported by oral comments produced more significant improvements in students' writing over time. Hence, students are advised to discuss with their supervisor the type of guidance and comment that they would find most helpful, and subsequently agreeing to a schedule of meetings, and initiating supervisory sessions where necessary (Abiddin, 2007).

Needless to say, then, OFB in postgraduate supervision is necessarily constructive and positive, including praise and recognition of the students' work and their achievements, besides enhancing their progress through the provision of timely advice and suggestions. Abiddin and West (2007) observe that for students to benefit from face-to-face meetings with their supervisors, seven procedures are considered: 1) student fixes an appointment with the supervisor, 2) student uses a record book or a tape recorder to record the contents of the meeting, 3) supervisor/student starts the meeting by asking questions, 4) supervisor and student discuss the main agenda, 5) supervisor provides feedback on student's work, and 6) meeting is drawn to a conclusion after addressing most problems and fixing an appointment for the next meeting. Most studies on supervisory feedback have investigated the perceptions of supervisors and their students but not

the “actual supervision interactions” (Grant, 2008, p. 10). A case study by F. Hyland (1998) reports that there is a need for such teacher/student discussion about the written feedback provided by the teacher even at lower levels in the ESL writing class. OFB is usually provided during face-to-face individual conferences and consultations, which are meetings held between supervisors and their supervisees (Hawe, Dixon, & Watson, 2008; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Jordan, 2004; Lochtman, 2002; Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes, & Creighton, 2003). It is a common practice at the postgraduate level where face-to-face individual meeting sessions are held to discuss some issues like the supervisors’ written comments, supervisees’ ideas, negotiate misunderstandings. Such supervisory feedback also includes “feedforward...[that is,] information you provide before sending your primary messages; it reveals something about the messages to come” and which may be verbal and/or non-verbal (e.g. prolonged pause or hand signal for silence before something is spoken) (Devito, 2012, p. 91). Thus, as a specific type of feedback, feedforward constitutes discursive work that refers to students’ capacity to make effective use of the supervisor’s feedback in their subsequent drafts. This dialogical process of sharing inquiry in the form of continuous posing and answering questions (Bakhtin, 1981) enables students to feedforward directives and suggestions or to apply the provided feedback to their thesis drafts.

Bitchener et al. (2005) found that while combining written and oral feedback made for significant improvements in student writing over time, oral feedback had the added potential for making constructive comments to meet individual students’ dynamic needs. Bitchener et al. (2011) in their sample of 35 supervisors and 53 students drawn from three disciplines, Humanities, Science/ Mathematics, and Commerce, in eight New Zealand universities, found that most supervisors gave “hardcopy handwritten feedback as well as oral feedback”; however, supervisors in the non- Humanities disciplines tended to provide more oral feedback than written feedback (p. 26). Bitchener et al. (2011) also recorded four reasons for supervisory meetings: to discuss written feedback provided on drafts, to discuss the next phase of research/thesis writing, to talk and listen to the student, and to highlight any omissions or problems with the student’s work (p. 28). As a major outcome of their study, Bitchener et al. (2011) identified “best practice” in supervisory feedback, “typically explained as that which is most appropriate for an individual student at the time feedback is provided” (p. 5), and which considered the characteristics of individual students such as previous learning, learning style and preferences, as well as the student’s thesis developmental stage. Bitchener et al. (2011) noted that “Sometimes there was a mismatch between what supervisors said they believed or practised and what the textual feedback revealed” (p. 5). The key findings of Bitchener et al. (2011) concerning OFB would seem instructive vis-à-vis its role in providing effective feedback: 1) Similar focus on content in all feedback provided to L1 and L2 students but supervisors sometimes gave more feedback to L2 students on the accurate and appropriate use of language in their writing; 2) WFB was used in tandem with OFB, the latter by way of follow-up supervisory meetings because “written feedback alone could not provide an overview or ‘overall impression’ of how the supervisor sees or evaluates the work”; further, face-to- face interaction allowed “discussion to ‘flesh out’ and clarify points that are made and to help students move forward to the next stage” (p. 39).

2. Some Notes on Methodology of Present Review

The present review explored studies and scholarly commentaries in the area of oral feedback in postgraduate supervisory settings. As Creswell (2004) has noted, the main objective of a review is to summarize the accumulated state of knowledge concerning a particular topic of interest and constituent themes as well as to highlight important issues that the related research may have left unresolved. Such a thematic analysis would also discuss the limitations and weaknesses of current research, and subsequently point up, as it were, directions for future research. As the basic units of analysis in the review, themes emerged inductively from the data as each study or review paper in the literature was examined. The search for related studies was conducted in two stages. The first search was made in electronic databases using descriptors such as “feedback”, “comment”, “oral feedback”, “dialogue”, “conferencing”, “postgraduate supervision”, and “ESL postgraduates”. At the second stage, the search was extended to articles on empirical research as well as reviews that were cited in research reports obtained during the first stage. This was achieved by using the A–Z e-journal database at the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) library. Other electronic databases used for the literature search included Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and Scopus. Some of the outcomes of the review of the role of oral supervisory feedback thus procured have already been presented above in this paper. The remaining themes are discussed in the forthcoming sections as effects of oral feedback and problems affecting its provision, as may be the case, with particular reference to ESL postgraduates.

3. Effects of Oral Supervisory Feedback at Postgraduate Level

In general, the review indicated that supervisory feedback provides ESL postgraduate students with opportunities to explore, discover, and negotiate “in a dynamic exchange...a range of meanings” with their supervisors who “scaffolded the student’s academic writing and learning in a number of ways” (Woodward-Kron, 2007, p. 253). Through this strategy, students and potential learners can be encouraged and motivated to share their experiences and learn from others in an unthreatened manner. The availability of such feedback strategy fosters autonomy, equality, and learning skills among ESL learners (Bitchener, et al., 2011). However, some studies found that the supervisory act of providing OFB on students’ written work is not without some shortcomings and/or somewhat negative effects. The following two main categories and subcategories show the positive effects of and some problems associated with OFB in mainly tertiary level settings based on the literature reviewed.

3.1 Positive Effects of Oral Feedback

OFB is one of the techniques applied by supervisors to promote interaction and resolve confusions and contradictions. Therefore, OFB provided during face-to-face interaction has many positive effects/benefits for postgraduate students’ writing and for their learning experiences at large. A number of related benefits are highlighted here. The categories below illustrate the benefits that emerged from the results of the review.

3.1.1 Providing Clarification

At the postgraduate level, individual conferences develop dialogical skills in students as they interact with their supervisors who engage in debates with their supervisees, generate ideas, help them focus on their research, guide them to conform with dissertation/thesis writing requirements as well as to plan and act appropriately to complete their work (Wisker, et al., 2003). At the same time, OFB provides opportunities for students to seek clarification for their supervisors' WFB on their writing (Zamel, 1985). Moreover, students have indicated that they value the OFB provided in face- to-face conferences, says McLaughlin (2009) who surveyed student perceptions, videotaped students, and conducted live conferences with them. She found that students highly value the OFB provided to them in face-to-face conferences with their teachers. Almost all the participants in her study stated that OFB was clear and when they had questions, they readily asked for clarification. They said feedback was helpful in their writing and revision activity, referring to grammar, punctuation, and word choice as writing features that improved because of the OFB they received. In face-to-face meetings with their supervisors, students are able to negotiate meaning as they seek clarification and generally expect positive outcomes (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Wang & Li, 2011).

3.1.2 Solving Problems and Mitigating Misunderstanding

OFB may also help students find solutions for their problems and through it are generally able to enhance their writing. During such sessions, students express their concerns and put forth ideas and ask questions about some written supervisory comments that they may have misunderstood. Therefore, OFB can be effective if students understand their supervisors' intentions and negotiate meaning accordingly to develop their writing (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Zamel, 1985). In face-to- face interaction, students can "act and complete their work using the appropriate problem-solving, risk-taking, creative, original strategies" (Wisker, et al., 2003, p. 386). Hence, talking with supervisors can help students solve problems and develop their thinking (Abiddin & West, 2007). Abiddin and West (2007) also point out that "students can become more familiar with their research as well as improve their English language skills if they can do more talking to explain their work to their supervisor" (p. 31). Straub (2000) has argued that there must be oral face-to-face conversation between teachers/supervisors and their students towards improving the latter's writing. He adds that the "optimal way of providing feedback to students is by speaking with them directly, in an actual discussion" (p. 29). Through the related discussions and negotiations over students' written text and supervisors' comments, confusion and misunderstanding may be mitigated. Problems of understanding between a supervisor and his/her student may occur if there is no face-to-face conversation. It is acknowledged that misunderstanding may occur frequently if the supervisor and the supervisee are from different cultures (Lee, 2007). Lee (2007) also noted that students often wished that there were other ways of providing feedback besides written comments, particularly by way of face-to-face interaction with their teachers through which they could "have a more active role to play" (p. 191).

3.1.3 Meeting Learners' Needs, Building Confidence, and Enabling Focus and Development
Early studies shed light on students' difficulty in understanding WFB and the potential for discussing meaning in face-to-face conferences to clarify understandings and "negotiate meaning" (Wang & Li, 2011 p. 102; Zamel, 1985). Moreover, OFB has the potential for making comments to meet individual students' needs and build their confidence. It is perceived as a confidence builder for students at the postgraduate level. Caffarella and Barnett (2000) have demonstrated that PhD students perceive face-to-face feedback as helpful and important for building their confidence as academic writers. OFB gives them a chance to discuss, ask of, and argue with their supervisors and thereby creating a collegial environment that gets students involved directly in their academic writing and related research process activities. Students believed that two factors were integral to the feedback process, and which served as the main reasons for strengthening their confidence as academic writers: face-to-face feedback, and the iterative nature of the feedback they received. Wisker et al. (2003) found that "Supervisory dialogues encourage supervisors and students to share, develop the research, and enable focus and development of appropriate research and learning approaches" (p. 395).

3.1.4 Engendering Successful Thesis Revision

Successful revisions of students' theses/dissertations generally appear to be related to the OFB provided during supervisory meetings. Goldstein & Conrad (1990) found that successful revisions appeared in subsequent thesis drafts when revisions had been discussed with the supervisors individually. Some early studies found that students faced difficulties in understanding WFB and the written comments needed to be negotiated in face-to-face conversations (Zamel, 1985). Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) found that WFB supported by OFB tends to produce more significant improvements in students' writing over time. For this reason, they noted that OFB needed to be positive in recognising students' efforts and achievements to date, and developmental in the way that it offered specific, detailed advice to help students progress.

Successful revision seems to be related to the source of OFB. Supervisor feedback and peer feedback seem to have somewhat similar effects on students' performance and this was demonstrated experimentally by Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992). These researchers found that the peer oral-revision group performed as well as the control group which received careful teacher feedback with significant improvements in grammar in the essay task among students in the latter group, and in content, organization, and vocabulary among members of the former group. Having discussed the benefits of OFB and the importance of supervisory meetings with individual students, some drawbacks/problems are also highlighted below to make for a balanced presentation of the issues.

3.2 Problems Affecting Oral Supervisory Feedback

Oral supervisory feedback at the postgraduate level of academic study may encounter problems/drawbacks that may in turn affect students' progress in writing. Such negative impacts may be evidenced from the literature and are presented in the following sub-sections.

3.2.1 Cultural Background Effects

Students' own cultural background and social circumstances, as in the case of ESL postgraduate students, may impinge upon and even intrude into the constructed "intermediary place between two [cultural] positions" (Lo Bianco, Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999, p. 5, cited in Briguglio, 2000, p. 425) in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. In some cultures, the teacher or supervisor possesses high authority and students apparently revere them to the extent that they avoid discussing their concerns and difficulties openly, refrain from asking questions or making comments, and passively accept whatever is said in face-to-face oral interactions (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990). Further, there are cultural differences "in understandings and expectations of postgraduate research supervision between international students and their supervisors [and those] differences are deeply rooted in educational philosophies which underpin teaching and learning systems in students' home and host countries" (Wang & Li, 2011, p. 103). Oral feedback provided by supervisors is considered crucial to learning and it therefore needs to be taken seriously into account by the learners. Consequently, it poses a great challenge for supervisors to deal with feedback as an essential part of supervisory practice especially when supervising international students with different cultural backgrounds. For their part, international students too face challenges in their efforts to meet postgraduate expectations about independent research work and thesis-writing requirements (Wang & Li, 2011). Hence, in the case of international PhD students, their cultural backgrounds may affect their perceptions of the supervisor-supervisee relationship and this adds to the difficulty encountered in students understanding and incorporating feedback (Wang & Li, 2011).

3.2.2 Supervisory Power Relations and Student Reactions

Some aspects of supervisory practice during a meeting may lead to less desirable outcomes and even draw somewhat false reactions from the student(s). Grant (2008) sheds some light on such drawbacks at supervision meetings. She states that "In supervision meetings, lack of preparation by the supervisor, interruptions at the office door, trivial feedback, receiving phone calls, may all be ways in which the supervisor signals for the student's speech to stop" (Grant, 2008, p. 13). She adds that "Students cannot give such overtly repressive signals [as] their scope for action is more likely to be forms of repressed silence such as avoidance, appeasement, false agreement, or refusal" (p. 14). This means that OFB tends to be ineffectual if the supervisor exercises too much control over the conversation and if he/she is not careful about the environment and principles of supervisory practice.

The power relations between supervisors and their students may therefore shape the "complexity of the feedback process" (Wang & Li, 2011, p.103). For example, if the relationship is a master-slave one, the power distance is wide, and hence, the complexity of the feedback process would

be higher. On the other end, if the relationship is an academic, collegial type, the gap in power, as it were, would be somewhat bridged and problems resolved more effectively (Bartlett & Mercer, 2000).

3.2.3 Oral Feedback has Little or No Value

Interestingly, some researchers do not believe that OFB holds much value for students. Gulley (2009) found that OFB does not seem to have any appreciable effect on the developmental aspects of students' revision of content, structure, grammar, or style in their writing relative to WFB effects on the same areas. Hawe, Dixon, and Watson (2008) also claimed that OFB does not address the substantive, profound characteristics of writing and the writing process although feedback is provided in relation to shared learning intentions and success criteria. Moreover, OFB may be even harmful to weak or struggling students. Hiatt (1975) suggests that oral conferencing may be of value to good students but it harms struggling students. She stated that "conferences are not automatically beneficial to a student. They might even be detrimental" in that for an unwilling student, a "conference can do more harm than good" (Hiatt, 1975, p. 39).

4. Concluding Remarks

Based on a perceived paucity of literature on oral supervisor feedback in ESL postgraduate research supervision, the present review has argued a case for OFB following WFB on students' written drafts in that there needs to be face-to-face conference or conversation between supervisors and their supervisees before the latter are expected to undertake revision of the drafts. Most of the studies reviewed have found that OFB provided in this manner help improve student performance and confidence in the writing of their thesis drafts. However, the use of OFB as a form of supervisory practice is contingent upon the fact that it has to be provided effectively because some studies have found that there may be some drawbacks or shortcomings in the process of its execution/use. Put differently, while the importance and utility of OFB has been established in most studies reviewed, it is may be difficult to predict whether the same results could be achieved if these studies were conducted in different cultural contexts using different student/supervisor samples, perhaps especially so in the Middle East where English is a foreign language and many postgraduate students seem to be reluctant to engage in face-to-face interaction with their supervisors. Further, due to the cultural pull factors that such EFL international students bring with them to ENL or ESL settings, there may be a tendency to over-respect their supervisors to the extent they dare not disagree with them, or prefer to keep silent in the face of pressing problems with their work. Undoubtedly, while students can be encouraged to positively interact with supervisors, supervisory "best practice" by way of "professional development for supervisors... in identifying and diagnosing problems in students' writing" (Bitchener, et al., 2011, p. 5) would clearly be the way forward.

As Wisker et al. (2003) point out, "[I]f the student is to be successful, the supervisory relationship to work, and the research outcomes to be at the appropriate level to make a real contribution to knowledge, then negotiating interaction, and learning conversations based on

good use of training, development and experience are essential” (p. 385). It has been argued that there is a need for supervisor-supervisee conversation on research writing via OFB sessions since the data suggest that there is miscommunication and misunderstanding about WFB (Hyland, 1998). In facilitating the ongoing conversation in collegial fashion, the concomitant role of OFB cannot be overstressed as a means for providing instructional input on students’ linguistic competence as well its serving as a medium for them to participate discursively in the language of academia. Empirical research in these aspects of OFB vis-a-vis the supervision of ESP postgraduates would seem imperative to further enhance best practice.

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