ORAL FEEDBACK IN FACE-TO-FACE CONFERENCING ON EFL POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' THESIS DRAFTS

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ABSTRACT

Oral feedback (OFB) in face-to-face conferencing plays a crucial role in the supervision process as it helps in scaffolding EFL postgraduate students' thesis work, and in the related academic socialization.Yet, the importance of OFB at the postgraduate level has not been specifically addressed or considered adequately. In view of this gap in the literature, this paper reports a study related to the problems EFL supervisees encounter in OFB face-to-face conferencing. Participants were international students from Yemen studying at a Malaysian public university and specializing in English language studies. This paper discusses the major findings obtained from an analysis of OFB face-to-face conferencing between supervisors and supervisees. The results showed that in the OFB conferencing, supervisors tended to dominate the conversations with their students. Students' lack of fluency in the English language that might be due to a heightened anxiety level in the face-to-face conferencing was a major reason behind passing their turns in the conversations to their supervisors. Another major finding of the study was the lack of rapport between the supervisors and supervisees during the OFB conferencing. The study indicated that OFB face-to-face conferencing was of limited use to postgraduate EFL students in helping them revise their thesis drafts.

Keywords: EFL, face-to-face conferencing, oral feedback, postgraduate supervision, thesis drafts

Introduction

Postgraduate supervision is a crucial academic program aimed at enhancing the students' linguistic and research competence in writing up their theses. Thus, supervisory feedback is an important input that significantly contributes to the students' learning of administering and reporting their postgraduate research in the form of a thesis. The aim of this paper is to investigate the process of OFB and to outline themes that emerged from face-to-face OFB conferencing. The

objective was to shed light on problems students faced in receiving feedback, and the importance of interaction in invdividual conferencing (Zamel, 1985).

OFB is one of the techniques applied by supervisors to promote interaction and resolve confusions. Therefore, OFB in face-to-face interaction has many advantages in writing and in the learning experience at large. Since the focus of this study was on OFB in postgraduate level, a number of related benefits are highlighted here. In the postgraduate level, individual conferencing develops dialogical skills in interaction with supervisors, who engage in debates with their supervisees, set off ideas, help to focus research, help students to meet doctoral standards, and to plan and perform appropriately to complete the thesis work (Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes, & Creighton, 2003). Moreover, OFB conferencing provides opportunities for students to clarify teachers' written feedback (WFB) on their writing (Zamel, 1985). Moreover, students value OFB provided in face-to-face conferencing (McLaughlin, 2009). McLaughlin surveyed her students, videotaped them, and conducted live conferences with them. She found that students highly valued the OFB provided to them in face-to-face conferencing with their teachers. Almost all the participants in her study stated that the advantages of OFB were obvious, and they freely asked for OFB conferencing to help them improve their writing, specifically in word choice, grammar, and punctuation. Therefore in face-to-face conferences, students have the chance to negotiate meaning for clarification and to achieve a better conference benefit and outcome (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Wang & Li, 2011). Wisker et al point out that:

If 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 (2003, p. 385).

OFB has the potential to tailor comments to meet individual student needs. Bitchener et al. (2010) found four reasons for supervisory meetings. First, to WFB provided on drafts. Second, to discuss the next phase of research/thesis writing. Third, to interact with students, and fourth, to highlight any problem found in students' written thesis drafts (Bitchener et al., 2010 p. 28). Successful revisions appear to be related to conferencing. Goldstein and Conrad (1990) found that successful revisions appeared in subsequent drafts when revisions had been discussed with the teachers individually. Some early studies found that students face difficulties in understanding WFB, and those written comments need to be negotiated in face-to-face conversations (Zamel, 1985). Therefore, and for a better product of writing, written comments should be followed by oral discussion. In their study, Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) found that WFB supported by OFB has more significant improvement on students' writing

over time. Therefore, students should confer with their supervisors about feedback and style of guidance suitable to them, and fix agenda for meetings (Abiddin, 2007). Abiddin and West (2007) found that in order to benefit from face-to-face conferencing, seven procedures should be considered. The seven important stages are:

Fixing appointms with supervisors, having a record book or a tape recorder to record the contents of the meeting, start the meeting by asking social question, discssing main agenda, supervisor provide feedback on student's work, meeting should be drawn to a conclusion after sovling most problems, and fixing an appointment for the next meeting (Abiddin & West, 2007, p.31).

OFB may also help students find solutions for their problems to enhance their research and writing competence. During such sessions, students can express their concerns and ideas and get clarification of written comments they may have misunderstood. Therefore, OFB can be effective if students understand teachers' intentions and negotiate meaning with them to develop 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 to supervisors can help in resolving students' dilemmas and improving their ideas (Abiddin & West, 2007). Abiddin and West (2007) point out that "students can become more familiar with their research as well as improving their English language skills if they can do more talking to explain their work to their supervisor" (p. 31).

Having discussed the benefits of OFB and the importance of individual conferences above, some drawbacks should be highlighted here to give vitality to the discussion. OFB conferencing may have some drawbacks that can be hindrances to students' progress in writing. There may lay some reasons behind such hindrances that make OFB harmful, and negatively affects the student's writing outcome. Students' own cultural background and social circumstances may play a role in their writing process. In some cultures, the teacher or supervisor possesses high authority, and as a result students over-respect them to the extent that they avoid discussing their concerns and difficulties with their teachers. They also refrain from asking questions or making comments, and passively accept whatever their supervisors said in the oral sessions (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990). The relationship between supervisors and their supervisees is the core of supervision. The literature suggests that the there are cultural differences as illustrated in the following quote:

[I]n 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).

Therefore, culturally speaking, OFB provided by supervisors in face-to-face conferencing is a sensitive concern that requires more attention. Consequently, it is a great challenge for supervisors to deal with feedback as an essential but sensitive supervisory practice especially when supervising international EFL students with different cultural backgrounds. For their parts, international students face challenges too in their efforts to meet postgraduate expectations and thesis-writing requirements (Wang & Li, 2011). This forms a challenge for supervisors and their relationships with students. In supervising international PhD students, the cultural backgrounds may affect students' perceptions of the relationship in supervision and thus add to the difficulty of understanding and incorporating feedback (Wang & Li, 2011).

There are some drawbacks in the OFB provided by supervisors in a supervisory meeting that may lead to awful outcomes and false reactions by students. Barbara Grant (2008) highlights some drawbacks of supervision meetings. She stated:

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 the student's speech to stop…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 indicates that OFB can be neglected if supervisors excessively dominate the dialogue and give no opportunity for students to positively interact with them if they are not careful about the environment and principles of OFB supervisory practice. Power relationship between supervisors and their students may add to the "complexity of the feedback process" (Wang & Li, 2011, p.103). For example, if the relationship in supervision is a master-slave relation, the distance gap is wide, and hence complexity of the feedback process would be higher. On the other end, if the relationship in supervision is an academic colleague-to-colleague and friendly relation, the gap would be bridged, and problems would be reduced.

Interestingly, some researchers do not believe that OFB is valuable to students. Gulley (2010) found that OFB does not have any significant difference with written feedback as they both have the same effect on students' revision to content, structure, grammar and style. In addition, Hawe, Dixon and Watson (2008) found 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 harmful

to weak or struggling students. Hiatt (1975) suggests that oral face-to-face conferencing may be of value to good students but it harms struggling students. She argued that for an unwilling student a "conferencing can do more harm than good" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 39).

Based on the above discussion, it is argued here that following written feedback and students' revision, there must be an OFB conferencing between supervisors and their supervisees. Most studies investigated the perception of both supervisors and their students but not the "actual supervision interactions" (Grant, 2008 p. 10).

Materials and Methods

This study adopted the descriptive case study design to understand the process of OFB at the postgraduate level in an EFL setting. This design is valuable in "presenting information about areas of education where little research has been conducted" (Merriam, 1998, p. 38). It provides detailed description of the phenomenon at hand. This design was chosen as the researcher's concern was in "insight, discovery, and interpretation" (Merriam, 1998, p. 28). Merriam emphasized that this design is very unique for what it can reveal about a phenomenon, and provide access to inaccessible knowledge (p. 33). It leads to an in-depth investigation of events, processes, activities or individuals (Creswell, 1998). Moreover, the case study design facilitates rich conceptual/theoretical development (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001).

Two individual conferencing sessions for each student participant were recorded. The time of the conferencing ranged from 20 to 30 minutes per session. There were eight recordings for the four participants. The individual conferencing sessions, through which OFB on supervisees' thesis drafts was provided, were audio-taped by using an MP3 recorder. Recording of the OFB face-to-face conferencing was achieved after seeking consent from supervisors and supervisees. There was a gap of time between the first and the second recording for each student. It actually took two semesters to conduct the two sessions of recordings. That was conducted to ensure consistency and to have rich data for the analysis. In total, 79 pages of OFB recording transcription (totaling 23,026 words) that formed the coding scheme of 647 items/entries were examined from the four cases. There were a number of long comments from supervisors but only the salient points of such comments were processed. Then, the points were coded as per their academic evaluative or pedagogic purpose.

A second source of data was the interviews. Typically, interviews in qualitative research are in-depth interviews seeking understanding and experiences of

participants (Seidman, 1991). In this study, the rationale for interviewing was to understand the participants' perceptions and experiences about OFB provided by supervisors. Therefore, the detailed interviewees' experiences were expected to help the researcher connect with their experiences, learn how they were constituted, and get a clear picture of the issues (Seidman, 1991). The data was procured to support findings from the OFB face-to-face conferencing, and to gain insights into the students' perceptions of OFB. All the interviews took place after the OFB recordings. Each interview lasted around 20 to 30 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped.

In qualitative research, searching for themes or patterns in data is the key process for description and explanations (Creswell, 2008). The recordings of the OFB conferencing were closely analyzed and compared within and across each case to find similarities and differences following the constant comparative method of Glaser and Strauss (1967). In this study, the transcriptions of the OFB recordings and the transcriptions of the interviews were coded and analyzed by connecting each item/passage to a theme.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study indicates that feedback goes through supervision practices that follow supervision approaches/models. The Master-Apprentice model seems to present a more systematic style of supervision to postgraduate students. In this model, the master (Supervisor) inducts the new apprentice (Supervisee) into the "mysteries of the craft" (Yeatman, 1995, p. 9). However, there seem to be some disadvantages of this approach. Top of which is that students depend on supervisors' knowledge and experience, and as a result inherit both strengths and weaknesses traits of research. In the Laissez-Faire model, students are more independent and have the potential for self-learning and high creativity. However, there may appear some risks in presenting research as the students may develop sloppy or erroneous research practices without adequate supervision. Models of Developmental Supervision (MDS) seek to gradually develop the student in a systematic way from novice to expert. Graduate students at the novice stage have limited or no prior knowledge of graduate research, academic writing and related scholarly skills. Such a student needs supervisory support in areas such as proposal writing, selecting a suitable methodology and the required tools for analysis

Supervision models presented in this study reflect the working relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee. That is to say, if there is a good working relationship between a supervisor and a student, then the types of feedback in particular and research integrity in general may flourish as students' morale

would be high and supervisor's interest in the research would be strong. Needless to say, when relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee is poor, then feedback would be poor and supervisee is likely to achieve low positive outcome.

Supervisors' Brief Background

Mustafa and Noor were lecturers in the Department of English. At the time of writing, they had been teaching different types of courses to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Mustafa's research interests included second language acquisition, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and language testing. Noor's research interests were: second language writing, composition and practice, and corpus linguistics. Both supervisors were prominently experienced in their fields of studies. However, Mustafa was by far more experienced in language teaching generally, as he had been involved in teaching for about 16 years prior to the study. One of his skills was teaching writing to ESL students. He showed passion towards his research interest and participated in this study willingly. He also showed some interest in my study and provided me with the required data. Unlike Mustafa, Noor did not have the same teaching experience. She finished her PhD 5 years prior to the study. However, she had been teaching undergraduate and postgraduate classes such as thesis writing, discourse analysis (postgraduate courses), skills in grammar, and reading (undergraduate courses).

Background of the Four Cases

The four students were international students from Yemen. They were majoring in English and had completed their bachelor and master's degrees in English. Three of them completed their master's degrees in Malaysia and one pursued it in Yemen. Their age ranged from 30 to 36. All of them speak English as their second language. Nevertheless, all of them came from an environment where English is considered a foreign language with limited use, and hence their proficiency level was limited. The supervisors and their students were from a public university in Malaysia. The students had almost completed their proposals and the first draft of the first three chapters that formed the basis of this study in analyzing the OFB.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the OFB conferencing and the interviews analysis. The analysis of the OFB provided during the supervisory meetings was conducted after transcribing the audio-taped recordings of the OFB face-to-face sessions for each case. The process of coding data and finding themes was conducted to explore the techniques used in providing OFB on students' thesis

drafts. The following sections discuss the emerged themes and patterns of OFB. Based on the theoretical framework of this study, coding categories were inductively driven through iterative reading of the transcribed recordings of the OFB conferencing. Out of the OFB codes identified, a number of interesting themes emerged. The following sections discuss the themes along with examples that reflect each theme respectively.

Supervisors Dominantly Lead Discussions

It was found that supervisors showed dominance over students in discussing WFB on students' thesis drafts. Supervisors did not show any encouragement to their students to freely discuss their concerns and ideas. Even if students were not proficient enough and could not articulate their ideas well enough to discuss their concerns, they should be given a space to speak out during OFB conferencing and encouraged to argue and try to persuade their supervisors with their ideas. Laissez-faire style of supervision could be an efficient method that motivates students to be independent, and at the same time facilitates communication between supervisors and supervisees. On the other hand, developmental supervisory relationship may help ESL students who are not familiar enough with their fields and research in general. A supervisor could merge two or three supervision models according to the type and personalities of students s/he supervises.

In all the recordings of the OFB conferencing, the students seemed to just agree with what the supervisors said. Most of their replies showed their agreement about all comments provided by the supervisor. They tended to use words such as "ok", "yeah", "alright", "I understand", "ok, I will do that", "so that is not in the literature", "that means there is no need for …" etc. Replies of this type even showed that the student was not confident about what s/he was doing. For example, in the transcription of Tariq's OFB conferencing with his supervisor, it was obvious that Tariq was not clear about what he was doing. He was reluctant to discuss and when he spoke, there were many pauses and unclear words:

Excerpt 1
Tariq:	Anxiety, high level of anxiety.
Supervisor:	Look at it individually.
Tariq:	\<unclear\>
Supervisor:	And the literature review a bit.
Tariq:	No need to look at the limited sources or what \<unclear\>
Supervisor:	Limited what?
Tariq:	Sources.
Supervisor:	These are the sources.
Tariq:	I mean this

Supervisor: What is that? You are not looking at the category anymore?
                 But it's ok. It's ok for us to put it in the interview.

In almost the whole OFB conferencing, the supervisor showed dominance over the meeting although there was no clear agenda for discussion. The student was working hard to understand what he was required to do next. It seemed that he did not have a sense of control over his topic. Therefore, it is suggested here that many EFL students need to be trained before the commencement of their study programs. There should be some development centers at universities in the study context that train postgraduate students on the required skills to break the shyness and cultural barrier. Students should be trained to adapt to a new cultural environment, to speak and present to an audience, and to attend workshops on research methods and communication skills. That would help students in their journey of higher studies. Due to the lack of the above mentioned experiences and skills, the participating students did not seem willing to argue, interact actively, ask questions, defend their writing, justify their methods, or even positively reply to the supervisor's explanation and detailed feedback. Based on the recordings, there was clear supervisor dominance while the students were not verbally proficient and lack confidence in the research structures. Power relations, on the other hand, was not a clear factor that might create such dominating discussions.

In the interviews, all the four cases were happy with their supervisors and their relationship with them was good. For example, Maha showed great interest in her relationship with her supervisor and that was so obvious from her reply to the questions I asked her in the interview. To further illustrate that relationship picture, the following excerpt has been identified from the interview with Maha:

Excerpt 2:
Researcher: How would you describe your relationship with your
                supervisor?
Maha: It is really wonderful. I mean my supervisor is aah a
                cooperative person. I like him so much. He always guides me
                and doesn't umm hesitate to help
Researcher: Is it like an instructor-student relationship, or more like a
                colleague-to-colleague relationship?
Maha: It is more like a colleague to colleague relationship you know I
                feel, like he always behaves as if I am his friend or colleague
Researcher: How does your relationship with your supervisor affect your
                interaction with him?

Maha: Actually he is very friendly and helpful as he encourage me to do my best in writing ok

One of the findings in this regard was that students apparently were not linguistically well versed and preferred to keep quiet and gave very short answers. That might be due to their linguistic proficiency level and cultural barriers. This confirms the results of Hawe, Dixon and Watson's study (2008) which stated 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. In this study, participants did not show interest in the dialogue. This may reflect that OFB might generally be of negative value to EFL postgraduate students. The proficiency level is an important factor that could be addressed in relation to the effect of OFB. That is to say when a student's proficiency level is high, the supervisory OFB face-to-face conferencing would be more fruitful as the student appears to effectively interact with his/her supervisor. As Hiatt (1975) suggested, OFB conferencing may be of value to good students but not to struggling students. She stated that "conferences are not automatically beneficial to a student [and] they might even be detrimental" (p. 39). This may indicate that culture and linguistic proficiency influence the efficiency of OFB conferencing. This finding was obviously illustrated in the interviews with the participants. For example, Tariq was to some extent tensed and reluctant to explain much of his worries and difficulties he had faced in expressing his thoughts and concerns to his supervisor.

Excerpt 3:

Researcher: Do you find difficulties in expressing yourself and your concerns to your supervisors?

Tariq: I think so. There are some difficulties like the cultural differences also sometimes cannot argue with the supervisor too much.

Researcher: In your opinion, what is the reason behind that? Is it something related to culture, personality, linguistic competency, supervisor's power?

Tariq: Linguistic competency, communicative competency is a real issue.

Researcher: Most likely may be you don't want to argue with your supervisor or you are afraid of that.

Tariq: Of course, I am not afraid of that but sometimes i feel that i am really arguing.

Researcher: May be you feel that you are not articulate enough to discuss with your supervisor.

Tariq: May be.

Praise and Support

Many supervisors seem to attend to students' poor pieces of writing more than excellent ones and focus mostly on the negative parts of the writing. Praise is however not easy to be provided on students' writing as it should be credible and encouraging and meant for a better product of writing. Therefore, supervisors seem to be cautious about providing praise knowing that false praise may confuse students and discourage them from revisions and redrafting.

Based on the OFB face-to-face conferencing between Mustafa and his students, praise was used to encourage the students to improve their next drafts. Interestingly, Noor, on the other hand, used praise only once during her supervisory meetings with her students. However, there was a sense of rapport in her OFB during the meetings. That might be considered supportive and encouraging as it bridged the gap between the supervisor and her students. Hedged praise was identified as a technique used by Mustafa in providing OFB to his student Mazen during a conferencing at Mustafa's office. It was found that psychological understanding of individual needs and students' traumatic research journey is a crucial matter that may mitigate criticism, and hence create a sense of rapport and good research environment. Mustafa started the OFB conferencing with Mazen by declaring:

Excerpt 4:
I think that is wonderful. So it is just the matter of how you are going to structure it and stuff like that. Definitely, that should be great. Ok, great. So I think that you are on the right track. Definitely on the right track.

This praise may convey a rephrased hedged criticism sometimes to tone down criticism in a way that keeps the supervisor-student relationship away from the threat of direct criticism. The supervisor could say directly that his student's work was wrongly structured and there was no linkage between different sections in the draft or could say "redo' or "rewrite your draft, it is not well structured". Direct criticism may convey a sense of a personal antagonism to some students. Therefore, it is to be recommended here to use hedged criticism and present it in an academic style that informs the students about their faults or mistakes in their drafts nicely and professionally. That would construct effective supervisory channels through which postgraduate students follow peacefully and successfully.

Criticism

Criticism comprised over 14% of all the oral criticisms given by the two supervisors during the supervisory meetings. Criticism could represent a challenge to postgraduate students and hinder their research progress. Therefore, criticism should be given cautiously and carefully. Students may feel that criticism is a sort of attack, which may undermine their confidence and delay their progress in writing their drafts. It was clear from the results of the present study that when supervisors commented orally on students' work, they tended to tone down criticism by using hedged or mitigated criticism. The supervisors seemed aware of the effects of direct criticism that might lead to undesirable outcomes.

Generally speaking, direct criticism can be negative and unwelcomed by students. It is given immediately without postponing. For example, one of the supervisors, Maha, said, "I would say it is linear, flat, linear, you didn't shape your theses, so that the people can see the dimension of it". Another example is a direct criticism delivered by another supervisor, Noor, on Tariq's work. She directly stated that his study title is bad, "bad title, it is not talking about general classroom anxiety".

In writing drafts of thesis, criticism may be used by supervisors to help students be more accurate and make their research productive. Direct criticism in the context of postgraduate supervision means that supervisors tend to directly tell their students that they should rewrite a point, reconsider a concept, change writing style, think critically about the structure of their research, etc.

Mitigated or indirect criticism refers to "the delay of criticism within a turn or across a sequence of turns when it happened in verbal interaction. It was also sometimes foreshadowed by pre-emptive strikes such as an episode of praise" (Li & Seale, 2007 p. 515). For example, Mustafa, commenting on Mazen's draft during the OFB session (see Excerpt 5):

Excerpt 5:
Mustafa: Ok, I think the only comments that I have is in terms of how you are structuring your chapters. You know? I always look at thesis as an argument. You see. I do not have much of a problem with your chapter one, ok. Let me see what the comments are. I think I wrote some good comments on your first chapter and I don't have a problem with that. Chapter 2 that that I think you should be able to...

Mitigated criticism was clearly illustrated in the above extracted supervisor's speech to his student. The use of expressions such as "I do not have much of a

problem" or stating before talking the main point "I think I wrote some good comments" and the use of a phrase like "I think you should" clearly showed that Mustafa was so careful about directly criticizing his student's work. He did some preambles before pressing the button on the main point there. The following excerpt sheds more light on mitigated criticism presented through using some linguistic techniques and rhetorical devices like triggering logic and asking rhetorical questions.

Excerpt 6:
Mustafa: I think this seems to be lacking. And even during I wrote a lot human now and then ok so yah fine. It is good… but I say as a preamble the reader needs to know why human now and then. Why does a reader want to know this? Fine, there is nothing wrong about description and narration.

Students' Anxiety about their Linguistic Competence
Throughout the recordings of the OFB sessions for the four cases, it was found that the four participants did not efficiently engage in the interactions with their supervisors. The rebuttals of the students during the interaction illustrate that they tended to pass their turns by using words like, "ok", "yeah", "alright", and so on. That might be due to some reasons, and top of which was a major theme that emerged from the OFB conferencing data related to students' low competency in the English language. Due to their anxiety over their linguistic competence, they were unable to argue and interact with their supervisors in a desirable manner. The obvious linguistic incompetency led to low confidence on their interaction skills and thesis work. This finding suggests that supportive measures may be taken to lessen students' anxiety and to improve their linguistic competence. Participants felt unsatisfied with the way they communicated with their supervisors during the OFB sessions, leading to avoiding turns in discussion, and consequently taking comments for granted. This is reflected in Mazen's following statement extracted from the interview data:

Excerpt 7:
Sarah: To some extent I sometimes experience difficulties as a result of cultural umm difference and linguistic competence because the power of literacy depends on how someone can express himself orally and written.

Almost all the participants were loaded with bad feelings of reluctance, language inferiority, and fear of embarrassment when being unable to express themselves clearly and confidently. Therefore, they might develop the habit of avoiding positive interaction with their supervisors to escape making linguistic mistakes. Hence, this result came in line with Bitchener's (2010) finding that encourage

postgraduate ESL students "to acquire generic and discipline-specific knowledge and skills if they are to be successfully enculturated into the academic community of researchers and writers" (p. 82).

Experience and Knowledge in Research Methods

Supervisors' knowledge and research experience are a critical issue. For example, some supervisors are qualitative researchers and are not interested at all in quantitative research. Moreover, they may have negative attitudes against quantitative research in general. The same is the case for quantitative supervisors. This condition in the academic community of practice is a critical situation through which postgraduate students may face lots of difficulty in managing their research structure and design. In one of the OFB conferencing, some recurring patterns took place, which showed that the supervisor was not interested in a quantitative part of his student's study. While discussing the WFB he provided on his student's draft, the supervisor said:

Excerpt 8:
Data driven approach, so you need to explain. Ok, that part I tell you. The quantitative, I have nothing to tell you because I do not know what to say. Ok, I just wrote, you know, again, justify the quantitative research question in the literature. Ok, this section needs more elaboration, you must convince your examiner why is this the most appropriate method to use.

The supervisor stated it clearly that he did not know what to say about that quantitative part in his student's draft. That seemed a problem postgraduate students face during their candidature. However, the selection of the right research topic and the right supervisor is an important factor that determines student's study and even life beyond. This is not to criticize supervisors' fields of research methodology but to shed some light on this issue. Every supervisor has his/her own research interest and expertise. However, a supervisor should possess some fundamental qualities in both qualitative and quantitative research, and any lack of it should be mitigated by take training courses and institutional support. Moreover, supervisors are usually heavily loaded with a number of responsibilities and assigned to supervise many doctorate and masterate students. In Britain, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) stipulates that supervisors should have recognized experience in their fields as well as having the required skills to monitor, encourage, and guide postgraduate students' work, and regularly communicate to the students about their progress. The agency stipulates that postgraduate students should get support and guidance adequately to help them succeed in their researches (Lubbe, Worrall, & Klopper, 2005).

Therefore, supervisors need to have a good research background and must be "well versed with the general methodologies required in their research" (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011, p. 36). According to Wadesango and Machingambi (2011):

The twin challenges of limited knowledge and expertise as well as the lack of experience in research supervision by supervisors has grave implications on the quality of graduate research. It is axiomatic that a supervisor with limited knowledge and expertise in the field of study or in research supervision poses numerous problems for graduate research students (p. 36).

Nevertheless, in practice, supervision is hard work through which supervisors encounter "mystifying impasses and unexpected dilemmas" (Grant, 2010, p. 272) while supervising postgraduate students. Supervisors' institutions and students seem to be demanding. Students expect immediate turn-around for feedback on drafts and anticipate their supervisors to do much editing. Institutions are also demanding: "they want us to accept more students (many of whom seem underprepared), take on more and more responsibilities vis-à-vis the thesis, and ensure our students complete on time" (Grant, 2010, p. 272). In fair practice, supervisors should be given adequate time to focus their effort and centralize their interests. For better supervisory practices and much fruitful feedback that ensure success in the community of practice, supervisors should not be overloaded with responsibilities far from postgraduate supervision and research. A supervisor cannot work efficiently if he/she is considered a machine and not a human being. A supervisor cannot work efficiently while he/she is drowned in tremendous work s/he delivers lectures to both undergraduate and postgraduate students, marking papers and assignments, supervising a big number of doctorate and masterate students, in addition to the requirement to publish papers, attend meetings, respond to students on time, conduct or participate in conferencing, workshops and symposiums, do office work and so on. This kind of work life is just too hectic and unbearable to many supervisors.

Flow of Ideas

Postgraduate students face many challenges in writing their theses. One of the biggest challenges is writing their thesis drafts clearly with clear flow of ideas. Flow of ideas in a piece of writing reflects cohesion and coherence. Cohesion is the sense of flow and relationship between sentences, while coherence refers to the sense of flow of all the sentences that create a whole picture of a piece of writing. Therefore, if writers want their audience to follow what they are trying to say, their ideas should be written in a logical and meaningful flow that illustrates a sense of readability. When a reader feels that sentences and paragraphs jibe with each other, a sense of interest for reading the whole

document is created. In the contrary, when a reader finds no link between sentences or paragraphs, s/he loses interest in reading the text. .

In analyzing the recordings of the four cases of the present study, it was discovered that supervisors extensively focused on the flow of ideas in their students' thesis drafts. The following quotes from the transcriptions of the OFB sessions show the supervisors' concern about writing drafts with a meaningful flow of ideas a reader could make sense of easily.

Excerpt 9:
Mazen's Supervisor: And then look at that, at each this section and this section, how do I link? How do I link?
Sarah's Supervisor: Ok please work on transition, sign post. Ask yourself how this paragraph section links to your bigger picture.

The above excerpt shows the supervisor's focus on the flow of ideas and the necessity of providing linkages between paragraphs and sections.

Rapport
Rapport refers to the way a supervisor builds a sense of friendliness and receptivity on the part of the supervisee. Rapport devices are like complimenting, bridging the master-slave gap, asking the supervisee about his/her social life, showing respect, speaking the supervisee's language, and conveying optimism about supervisee's study. These might be some of the most important rapport techniques.

In this study, using the pronoun "we" gave a sense of rapport between the supervisor and his/her supervisee. It made the student feel like having a friend there for doing research. It took out the barriers that might be created in using the pronoun "you" and just giving orders. As a lonely journey, PhD research needs to have the feeling of being in the safe side when working with their supervisors. The positioning shift of "you" to "we" gave confidence to the student and a sense of not being alone. In other occurrences, students seemed to lose ground and confidence while interacting with their supervisors due to authoritative rebuttals and threatening comments. In the OFB session of Noor and her student Tariq, Noor's rebuttals show some dominance and threatening acts. For example, Noor showed dominance by saying:

Excerpt 10:
You understand or not. You must highlight that, you say that the factors were the 2 or 3 other factors. You understand? So, i don't want this. This is not appropriate. Then you have this one, yeah?"

Such authoritative rebuttals and questioning had been a pattern in Cases 3 and 4, i.e. Tariq and Sarah. The connotation associated with such phrases/rhetoric questions seemed negative although it indicated that the supervisor did not deliberately try to threaten her student. It was clear in the recordings of the OFB sessions that she also tried many times to bridge the gap between her and her students. She used praise, indirect criticism, rhetorical devices, and other types of feedback as discussed in the above sections.

Having discussed the findings of the identified OFB types and themes that emerged from the data, the following subsection presents a suggested model for face-to-face OFB conferencing.

Suggested Model for OFB Face-to-Face Conferencing

The participants of this study were still in the first stage of their research journey i.e. writing up the first three chapters before defending their proposals. In this stage, students critically needed their supervisors' frequent advices and support to move to the next stage. From the patterns discussed above, the following model of OFB conferencing was generated based on the overall analysis of the recordings. There are seven issues of OFB conferencing that should be addressed for more fruitful meetings to students and better relationship between supervisors and supervisees. First of all, OFB conferencing should be started with a sense of *rapport* through talking about social issues. This would mitigate the session, and put the student at ease as an ice breaking technique. Second, for a better outcome of any OFB conferencing, predetermined points of discussion should be named before the meeting. Third, supervisors should tackle issues in students' work and provide feedback related to them. Fourth, supervisors should encourage students to discuss and negotiate meanings by giving them chances to talk and defend their ideas. Supervisors can push their students to talk, ask, and explain their view point for a better dialogical meeting. Fifth, the OFB conferencing should draw to the end of the meeting with all problems tackled and recapped. Sixth, setting agenda for the next OFB conferencing is important for meeting targets and for being systematic. Finally, students should be able to take notes or audio-tape the conferencing to make full use of its content, apply the supervisors' comments and to take their advices into account. Supervisors should be able to adjust their supervision style and strategies to fit the level of his/her student

(Burnett, 1999; Cargill, 2000; Grant, 2005; Heide, 1994; Hockey, 1995; Wisker et al., 2003; Yeatman, 1995)
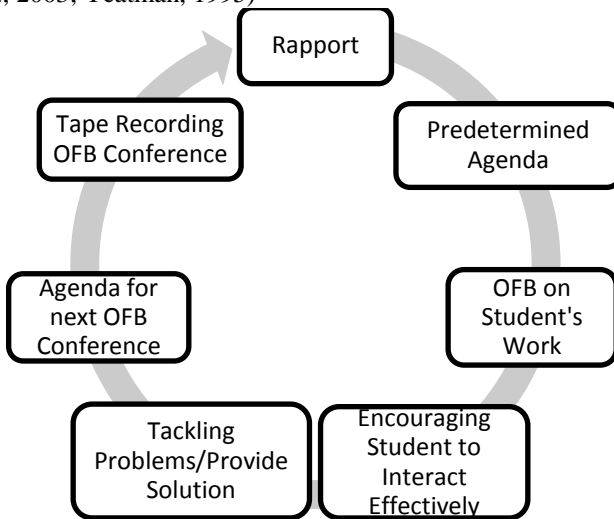

Figure 1 Suggested OFB Conferencing Model

That is to say issues such as regularity of meetings, agendas for meetings, content of drafts, deadlines for submitting drafts, and feedback providing, should be discussed and approved by both parties as a contract. It was found that students may feel discouraged by some types of feedback and hence become frustrated with their writing. Since these students are not native speakers of English, it appeared that they were still struggling to develop their skills in the target language in addition to developing critical thinking about research. Therefore, a caring supervisor would take that into account and provide feedback that help and scaffold his/her student's progress. It is not surprising that students appreciate clear and supporting feedback that leads to successful revision. This would be considered a scaffold in both students' writing and in their relationship with their supervisors, and hence resulting in the successful use of supervisory feedback at the end.

Conclusion

In the process of collecting data from studies on oral feedback at the postgraduate level, it seemed that there was a paucity of literature on oral feedback in doctoral research supervision with international students. However, based on the above discussion, it is argued here that following written feedback and students' revision, there must be a conference or conversation between

supervisors and their supervisees. Most of the studies reviewed found that there is effectiveness of OFB in the form of face-to-face conferences between supervisors and their supervisees in improving students' performance and confidence in writing up their theses. The findings have illustrated the use of OFB as an effective form of feedback that supports postgraduate students' writing processes. Although some studies found some drawbacks of OFB, the importance of OFB has been emphasized in most studies reviewed and this study. However, it is difficult to predict whether the same results could be achieved if those studies were conducted in different contexts and with different samples and different cultures especially in the Middle East where English is a foreign language, and many ESL/EFL students seem to be reluctant to have face-to-face interaction with their supervisors. Moreover, due to cultural pulls, EFL/ESL international students may have a tendency to over respect their supervisors to the extent that they dare not disagree with their supervisors, and prefer to keep silent and falsely agree with everything said by their supervisors. Therefore, it seemed that face-to-face OFB conferencing was of limited use in providing effective oral supervisory feedback to ESL postgraduate students in helping them revise their thesis drafts. To overcome those obstacles and to facilitate interaction, students should be able to positively interact with supervisors.

It has been argued that there is a need for a supervisor-student conversation on feedback, since the data suggested that there is a miscommunication and misunderstanding on written feedback (Hyland, 1998).The findings in this study can improve the supervision practices especially in supervising overseas ESL/EFL students who come from different cultural backgrounds, and with limited linguistic competence. It is no doubt that student-supervisor.

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