



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***SUPERVISORY ORAL AND WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON  
POSTGRADUATE EFL STUDENTS' THESIS DRAFTS***

**MOHAMMED MOHAMMED ALI ABDULKHALEQ**

**FBMK 2014 30**



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**By**

**MOHAMMED MOHAMMED ALI ABDULKHALEQ**

**This thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,  
in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**April, 2014**

**DEDICATED TO**

**My beloved parents**

**My wife and children**

**My brother Mustafa**

**My sister Rokiah**



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment  
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In the case of the supervisors who participated in the study, it was found that they used rhetorical devices such as logic, euphemism, rhetorical question, and speech functions such as criticism, praise, and information regarding content. They appeared to focus their feedback mainly on matters related to thesis structure, writing style, flow of ideas, and organization of the thesis. These main categories provided the bases for other sub-themes that emerged from the data. Together these were then used to form a new model that can be used by supervisors to provide effective draft feedback. As might be expected, the students involved in the study generally perceived their supervisor feedback as useful and helpful. However, students' perceptions of, and their incorporation of, supervisors' feedback were convoluted and entangled with not only supervisors' feedback practices and methods, but also other factors such as a student's cultural background, language proficiency level, and research experience. It was apparent that the participants generally appreciated the supervisors' feedback and showed a keen interest in applying the feedback given to them on their drafts. However, the students did not appreciate the feedback given on grammar and punctuation, or feedback that carried ambiguity. It was also found that oral feedback conferencing was of value to good students but not to struggling students.

It was concluded that supervisor-supervisee rapport plays a crucial role in improving the overall quality of supervision. Improving rapport helped establish a good dialogical environment that led to better relationships and hence better outcomes. In summary, the present study provided insights useful to postgraduate EFL students as well as their supervisors on how to make feedback more effective in postgraduate supervision. The findings are also deemed to have implications for the development of written and oral feedback models in postgraduate supervision.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

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**MOHAMMED MOHAMMED ALI ABDULKHALEQ**

**April, 2014**

**Pengerusi: Profesor Madya Dr. Faiz Sathi Abdullah, PhD**

**Fakulti: Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi**

Pemberian maklum balas penyelia ke atas draf tesis para pelajar siswazah yang menggunakan bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing (*EFL/English as a Foreign Language*) adalah amalan yang amat penting yang membantu pelajar bertambah maju dalam penulisan mereka. Para pengkaji dalam bidang penulisan *EFL* pula berusaha untuk memahami maklum balas yang diberikan kepada pelajar secara lisan dan bertulis daripada aspek pragmatik dan/atau retorik khususnya daripada segi amalan penyeliaan. Kajian ini telah menyelidik pelbagai jenis maklum balas bertulis dan lisan yang di beri oleh penyelia di peringkat pengajian siswazah, pengagihan maklum balas meresntasi beberapa jenis fungsi dan alat retorik pada bahagian tesis dalam perkembangan fasa pertama, persepsi pelajar terhadap maklum balas penyelia ke atas draf bertulis, dan ke tahap mana maklum balas tersebut di gunakan untuk menyemak draf mereka.

Berdasarkan rangka teori yang luas dalam model-model kajian penyeliaan, pembelajaran bersituasi dan komuniti amalan, kerangka fungsi pertuturan, dan strategi retorik, maklum balas secara bertulis dan lisan yang di beri oleh dua penyelia dan tesis draf daripada empat orang pelajar yang diselia telah di kaji berkenaan dengan kualiti, seiringan dengan bagaimana dan tahap mana pelajar menyemak draf-draf tesis mereka. Kajian ini telah menemui bahawa penyelia-penyelia yang mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini menggunakan alat retorik seperti logik, eufemisme, soalan retorik dan fungsi pertuturan seperti kritikan, pujian, dan maklum

balas ke atas kandungan deraf tesis pelajar mereka. Di dapati bahawa maklum balas di-fokuskan terutamanya ke atas perkara-perkara berkenaan struktur pembelajaran, gaya tulisan, aliran pemikiran, dan penyusunan tesis. Kategori-kategori utama ini telah menjadi asas bagi sub-tema yang muncul dari data untuk membentuk satu model baru yang mungkin di guna pakai dalam memberi maklum balas yang berkesan dalam penyeliaan.

Seperti yang dijangkakan, secara umumnya, pelajar melihat maklum balas dari penyelia mereka sebagai suatu yang berguna dan boleh membantu. Walau bagaimana pun, tanggapan pelajar untuk penggabungan maklum balas dari penyelia telah menjadi berbelit dan kerosot bukan sahaja oleh kerana amalan maklum balas dari penyelia dan kaedah-kaedah mereka, tetapi juga ke atas faktor-faktor lain seperti latar belakang budaya pelajar, tahap kefahaman pelajar, dan latar belakang kajian seseorang pelajar. Adalah jelas bahawa pelajar-pelajar menghargai maklum balas dari penyelia-penyelia mereka dan telah menunjukkan minat untuk mengaplikasikan maklum balas yang di beri ke atas deraf-deraf mereka. Walau bagaimana pun, mereka tidak menghargai maklum balas ke atas tatabahasa dan tanda-tanda dalam penulisan dan maklum balas yang membawa kekaburan.

Lagi pun, maklum balas persidangan secara lisan mungkin mempunyai nilai kepada pelajar yang baik tetapi mungkin tidak, kepada pelajar yang mengalami masalah. Kesimpulannya, “hubungan yang erat” telah di kenal pasti sebagai satu strategi yang sempurna dimana perhubungan sosial di antara penyelia dan pelajar boleh di perbaiki. Ini dapat menolong mengukuhkan satu persekitaran dialog yang baik dan boleh membawa kepada hubungan yang lebih baik, dengan itu memberi hasil yang lebih baik. Pengajian ini telah memberi tanggapan pendapat kepada pelajar-pelajar sarjana EFL dan juga penyelia mereka ke atas penggunaan maklum balas yang berkesan di dalam penyeliaan sarjana. Kesimpulan yang dicapai dari hasil penyiasatan juga dipercayai dapat memberi implikasi kepada penambahan dan proses memperbaiki maklum balas bertulis dan lisan khususnya, dan model amalan penyeliaan umumnya.

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Lastly, and most importantly, I wish to thank my parents, Mohammed Mahdy and Najeebah Ali. They raised me, supported me, taught me, and loved me. To them I dedicate this thesis.



I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 22<sup>nd</sup> of April, 2014 to conduct the final examination of Mohammed Mohammed Ali Abdulkhaleq on his thesis entitled “Supervisory Oral and Written Feedback on Postgraduate EFL Students’ Thesis Drafts” in accordance with Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U. (A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

WFB	Written Feedback
OFB	Oral Feedback
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
SF	Speech Function
PG	Postgraduate
AMM	Apprentice-Master Model
LFM	Laissez-Faire Model
CCM	Collaborative Cohort Model
DM	Developmental Models of Supervision



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**Fakulti: Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi**

Pemberian maklum balas penyelia ke atas draf tesis para pelajar siswazah yang menggunakan bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa asing (*EFL/English as a Foreign Language*) adalah amalan yang amat penting yang membantu pelajar bertambah maju dalam penulisan mereka. Para pengkaji dalam bidang penulisan *EFL* pula berusaha untuk memahami maklum balas yang diberikan kepada pelajar secara lisan dan bertulis daripada aspek pragmatik dan/atau retorik khususnya daripada segi amalan penyeliaan. Kajian ini telah menyelidik pelbagai jenis maklum balas bertulis dan lisan yang di beri oleh penyelia di peringkat pengajian siswazah, pengagihan maklum balas meresntasi beberapa jenis fungsi dan alat retorik pada bahagian tesis dalam perkembangan fasa pertama, persepsi pelajar terhadap maklum balas penyelia ke atas draf bertulis, dan ke tahap mana maklum balas tersebut di gunakan untuk menyemak draf mereka.

Berdasarkan rangka teori yang luas dalam model-model kajian penyeliaan, pembelajaran bersituasi dan komuniti amalan, kerangka fungsi pertuturan, dan strategi retorik, maklum balas secara bertulis dan lisan yang di beri oleh dua penyelia dan tesis draf daripada empat orang pelajar yang diselia telah di kaji berkenaan dengan kualiti, seiringan dengan bagaimana dan tahap mana pelajar menyemak draf-draf tesis mereka. Kajian ini telah menemui bahawa penyelia-penyelia yang mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini menggunakan alat retorik seperti logik, eufemisme, soalan retorik dan fungsi pertuturan seperti kritikan, pujian, dan maklum balas ke atas kandungan draf tesis pelajar mereka. Di dapati bahawa maklum balas di-fokuskan terutamanya ke atas perkara-perkara

berkenaan struktur pembelajaran, gaya tulisan, aliran pemikiran, dan penyusunan tesis. Kategori-kategori utama ini telah menjadi asas bagi sub-tema yang muncul dari data untuk membentuk satu model baru yang mungkin di guna pakai dalam memberi maklum balas yang berkesan dalam penyeliaan.

Seperti yang dijangkakan, secara umumnya, pelajar melihat maklum balas dari penyelia mereka sebagai suatu yang berguna dan boleh membantu. Walau bagaimana pun, tanggapan pelajar untuk penggabungan maklum balas dari penyelia telah menjadi berbelit dan kerosot bukan sahaja oleh kerana amalan maklum balas dari penyelia dan kaedah-kaedah mereka, tetapi juga ke atas faktor-faktor lain seperti latar belakang budaya pelajar, tahap kefahaman pelajar, dan latar belakang kajian seseorang pelajar. Adalah jelas bahawa pelajar-pelajar menghargai maklum balas dari penyelia-penyelia mereka dan telah menunjukkan minat untuk mengaplikasikan maklum balas yang di beri ke atas deraf-deraf mereka. Walau bagaimana pun, mereka tidak menghargai maklum balas ke atas tatabahasa dan tanda-tanda dalam penulisan dan maklum balas yang membawa kekaburan.

Lagi pun, maklum balas persidangan secara lisan mungkin mempunyai nilai kepada pelajar yang baik tetapi mungkin tidak, kepada pelajar yang mengalami masalah. Kesimpulannya, “hubungan yang erat” telah di kenal pasti sebagai satu strategi yang sempurna dimana perhubungan sosial di antara penyelia dan pelajar boleh di perbaiki. Ini dapat menolong mengukuhkan satu persekitaran dialog yang baik dan boleh membawa kepada hubungan yang lebih baik, dengan itu memberi hasil yang lebih baik. Pengajian ini telah memberi tanggapan pendapat kepada pelajar-pelajar sarjana EFL dan juga penyelia mereka ke atas penggunaan maklum balas yang berkesan di dalam penyeliaan sarjana. Kesimpulan yang dicapai dari hasil penyiasatan juga dipercayai dapat memberi implikasi kepada penambahan dan proses memperbaiki maklum balas bertulis dan lisan khususnya, dan model amalan penyeliaan umumnya.

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Lastly, and most importantly, I wish to thank my parents, Mohammed Mahdy and Najeebah Ali. They raised me, supported me, taught me, and loved me. To them I dedicate this thesis.



I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 22<sup>nd</sup> of April, 2014 to conduct the final examination of Mohammed Mohammed Ali Abdulkhaleq on his thesis entitled “Supervisory Oral and Written Feedback on Postgraduate EFL Students’ Thesis Drafts” in accordance with Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U. (A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

WFB	Written Feedback
OFB	Oral Feedback
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
SF	Speech Function
PG	Postgraduate
AMM	Apprentice-Master Model
LFM	Laissez-Faire Model
CCM	Collaborative Cohort Model
DM	Developmental Models of Supervision

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background to the Study

In recent years the nature of feedback in postgraduate supervision and support has become an area of research interest (Can, 2009). The quality of feedback at this level of academic study, and the quality of supervision are considered essential factors in enabling postgraduate students to progress towards the successful completion of their theses (Can, 2009; Li, 2007). Postgraduate research can be an intricate journey that needs persistence, dedication, cooperation and understanding by both supervisor and supervised (Li & Seale, 2007a). During this journey, providing feedback as an external learning condition, either written or oral, is a crucial factor in encouraging and supporting scholarly development and learning experiences (Li & Seale, 2007; Stracke & Kumar, 2010). At the postgraduate level, feedback plays a prominent role in making student's academic research a success. It gives a student an awareness of what they have done in their thesis, and sheds light on the desired goals and achieved ones in the course of completing the research project.

Supervisor feedback is a form of communication because there is a sender of a message (supervisor) and a receiver of this message (supervisee) (Stracke & Kumar, 2010). The message itself is in the feedback that is given. The notion that feedback is a form of speech is highlighted in Chapter 2. Feedback is also vital to the practice of writing. Taken as a process, writing may be viewed as comprising three sub-processes or stages: prewriting, writing, and rewriting (Murray, 1972). In the prewriting stage, a writer usually brainstorms and plans. The next stage is "writing" which is the act of producing a text. Finally, there is the stage of rewriting during which a writer rethinks, reorganizes ideas and also edits the first draft. Together, the three stages may be characterized as "the recursive process" of writing in that writers tend to shift back and forth across these sub processes of writing (Flower, 1981). It is through this recursive process that a writer learns how to write and discover meanings (Stracke & Kumar, 2010). In the recursive writing process, feedback plays an intervention role. As postgraduate students go through these processes producing their drafts, supervisors may be said to intervene, as they provide written feedback (WFB) and oral feedback (OFB) (Bitchener, Meyer, East, & Basturkmen, 2010).

Given that supervisor feedback is a crucial element in postgraduate students achieving an acceptable level of writing, the feedback providers are key players in the preparation of thesis drafts. They are "coaches, encouragers, developers and creators of environment

in which students can experience the process of writing for themselves” (Murray, 1972, p. 5). Feedback could be in the form of a dialogue that helps students to communicate with their supervisors. At the postgraduate level, supervisors may conduct regular meetings with their students to discuss theses. It is through a dialogical learning environment that “students can effectively feed forward feedback” (Sutton, 2009, p. 1). Feed forward is described as the acquisition of the capacity to effectively use feedback. Making feedback more dialogical eases the feed forward process and makes students more reflective critical learners (Sutton, 2009). Dialogue is a process of sharing query that involves continual discussion and responding to questions and in so doing enables students feed forward feedback (Bakhtin, 1981). It indicates the ways meanings are established and comprehended in spoken and written communication (Wegerif, 2006). Dialogic here does not reflect the usual dialogues between people in everyday life. Rather, it indicates the ways through which meaning is understood and created in written and spoken discourse (Wegerif, 2006, p.59). At the school or even undergraduate level students may not pay full attention to teachers’ feedback. They may be very much concerned with grades and confused about the feedback they get from their teachers. And, even when they understand corrections, they may not necessarily master the corrected form or act upon it (Truscott, 1996). However, at the postgraduate level, students should be more mature and value their supervisors’ feedback, as they have to act upon it in order to meet their desired goals. Therefore, at the postgraduate level, feedback is dialogical in the sense that the feedback providers and receivers interact to negotiate meanings in orchestrating a text (Sutton, 2009).

The past two decades has seen a plethora of literature on teacher feedback at the different educational levels. However, most feedback studies in the area of the second/foreign language have focused on feedback in the second language writing context. In the same vein, most of the studies have been conducted at school and undergraduate levels. Throughout, the importance of providing feedback either at the L1 or L2 writing classes has remained a constant (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013; Reid, 1993). Ferris et al. (2012) pointed out that, besides the need for a clear picture about written corrective feedback (WCF), “there is a specific gap in the recent research base that is so obvious it is almost startling: the lack of careful consideration of individual learner characteristics as they receive, process, and apply WCF” (p. 2). Therefore, research should give attention to the differences among students and the individual characteristics and specific backgrounds that may have effects on their processing of the different types of provided feedback. It has been argued that providing feedback in both first and second languages provides modest verification so as to assist a student’s writing (Leki, 1990). Knoblauch and Brannon (1981) found that none of the different types of feedback in L1 writing (e.g., oral vs. written, praise vs. criticism) contributed to improvement on subsequent writing drafts. In L2 context, however, many researchers have found positive impacts on the writing process (Bitchener et al., 2010; Ferris, 2004; Kumar & Stracke, 2007; G. Lee & Schallert, 2008). Earlier, some researchers have

criticized the way teachers respond to their EFL students. For example, Zamel (1985, p. 86) argued that:

EFL writing teachers misread student texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, make arbitrary corrections, write contradictory comments, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to texts as fixed and final products, and rarely make content-specific comments or offer specific strategies for revising the text.

For L1, studies have pointed out that teachers' feedback has little impact on students' writing ability (Hillocks, 1986). In a survey of works into L1 and L2 feedback influence on revision and improvement of the students' writing, Berger (1991) states that numerous L2 studies tended to confirm that teachers' feedback enhances students' capabilities to suitably revise their drafts. In comparison, in a survey of research conducted in 1990 on L1 feedback, Leki noted that L1 students not only dedicate very little time and effort to teacher feedback but also possessed limited understanding of the phenomenon. Likewise, a number of researchers have studied the impact of L1 and L2 feedback contexts on students' dissertation writing ability. Their studies have been aimed at discovering the student's own ideas and capacity to generate coherently worded dissertation drafts (Murray, 1972).

Still other studies have found that students' ability to revise drafts is a critical factor for developing L1 and L2 writing skills (Hillocks, 1986; Jenkins, 1987; Zamel, 1985). Other studies attribute the degree of success to the author's level of competency and efficiency in handling the feedback being given (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Faigley & Witte, 1981; Ferris et al., 2013).

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Since the 1980s, many researchers have investigated feedback provided on students' written texts. In the case of L1, Knoblauch & Brannon (1981); and Sommers (1982) should be recognized; and for L2, Bitchener & Basturkmen (2006); Bitchener, Young, & Cameron (2005); Cumming (1992); Enginarlar (1993); Ferris (1999); Ferris et al. (2013); Ferris & Roberts (2001); Hyland & Hyland (2001); Lee (2004); Leki (1990); Wang & Li (2011); and Zamel (1985) should be recognized. In the L2 contexts, a substantial body of research has been conducted on feedback from different perspectives. Some studies considered students' preference and reactions towards feedback (Ferris, 1997; John Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Leki, 1991) while other studies focused on teacher's feedback practices (see Cumming, 1992; Ferris et al. 1997;

Zamel, 1985). Some other studies have paid attention to the effects of different forms of feedback (e.g., form-focused feedback, content-focused feedback) given by teachers (Lalande, 1982). Overall, however, most feedback related studies appear to have focused on classroom writing in schools or on the writing of undergraduate students. Some researchers have worked at the postgraduate level: a number of these studies have explored students' perceptions about the intricacies of L2 postgraduate writing and the types of comments found in written feedback given by supervisors (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; McLaughlin, 2009; Mirador, 2000). However, little insight has been gained on the types of written and oral feedback and the use of speech functions and rhetorical devices by supervisors with different styles and with various attention foci. Overall, feedback practices in "doctoral research supervision with international students" (Wang & Li, 2011, p. 103) has received scant attention. Additionally, postgraduate environment as a community of practice and the supervision models were not taken into consideration in the aforementioned studies so they fail to comprehensively explain feedback practices. The design of feedback at this level requires supervisors' understanding of their students' internal learning conditions e.g. perceptions and revisions (Bitchener et al., 2010; Gagne, 1985; Kumar & Stracke, 2007).

Moreover, besides taking into account how effective/ineffective the feedback is to the receiver, as Bitchener and Basturkmen (2010) emphasize, appropriate time of providing written feedback in supervision needs adequate research attention. It should be noted that at the postgraduate level, WFB is normally supported with OFB. Together, WFB and OFB "grapple with the challenge of producing a good – even better and, a brilliant – thesis" (Grant, 2008, p. 12). This being the case, the effectiveness and appropriateness of both written and oral feedback from the perspective of postgraduate EFL students is also among the many areas that needs further investigation. Despite the pivotal function of feedback in relation to supervision practices in postgraduate education, there still seems to be inadequate awareness and lack of clear perspectives on various dimensions of this phenomenon. It is important to bridge the gap in the literature in order to obtain more persistent outcomes in practice. Therefore, the intent of this study is to pragmatically and rhetorically analyze the types of OFB and WFB that are used as tools for the interactions between supervisor and postgraduate student, and how they affect the perceptions and attitudes of the supervised in the postgraduate community of practice.

This study gains its significance from dealing with the nature of supervisor feedback as one of the major involvements of postgraduate students in developing their research thesis. Analysis of different types of feedback and their usefulness to students and how students perceive and apply different types of supervisor feedback in their theses drafts can provide salient insights into postgraduate education and research. For the student, feedback is crucial as, in the postgraduate teaching and learning environment: "It replaces the type of instruction other students receive in lecture and classroom

approaches” (Bitchener et al., 2010, p. 6). Kumar and Stracke (2007) believe that feedback “lies at the heart of the learning experience of postgraduate students as it helps students understand and improve their academic writing skills” ( p. 462). Given its importance, it seems worth further investigating feedback as a tool at the postgraduate level, particularly in relation to the needs of EFL students. Supervisors and postgraduate students need a description that identifies and categorizes the most useful and effective postgraduate feedback practices. Informed by the objectives of the study, analyzing the speech functions and the rhetorical strategies used by two Malaysian supervisors in their feedback along with their postgraduate EFL students’ perceptions on and incorporation of feedback, creates awareness on how the supervisors’ feedback strategies influence its incorporation. The study also sheds light on the recurring feedback strategies applied by supervisors that generate most action. Findings from this study may also help researchers, supervisors and supervisees to develop better understanding and to identify potential issues that arise in the unique teaching and learning environment of supervision.

### **1.3 Purpose and Scope of the Study**

The present study investigated postgraduate EFL students’ engagement in supervisors’ feedback by analyzing the recorded dialogues/conversations (OFB) received by students during supervisory meetings and also participants’ perceptions on different types of feedback. There were two main purposes: First, it investigated different types of feedback based on supervisory models, pragmatic functions, and rhetorical strategies as situated in the academic postgraduate community of practice. Second, it was to determine the perceptions of the supervisors’ students regarding the written and oral feedback provided to them, and how they incorporated the feedback into their thesis drafts. To address these objectives, four data sources were used. The first was students’ thesis drafts with supervisors’ WFB, including marginal, in text, or summative comments. The second source was the recorded supervisory individual conferences. The third comprised the researcher’s interviews with supervised postgraduate students. The fourth was the evaluation sheets distributed to supervisors included in order to make the picture complete and clear about the participants’ practices and progress. Finally, global interviews were conducted in order to support the findings and confirm the students’ general views and perceptions. Thus, the study focused on an important area that has not yet been researched thoroughly. It examined and described the OFB and WFB provided by supervisors to their international postgraduate EFL students at a Malaysian state university.

It should be recalled that the written form of feedback described as effective comments that are focused, clear, applicable and encouraging (Lindemann, 2001) which is provided by supervisors on students’ thesis drafts can be either in the form of

handwriting or through comments and changes to the electronic version of students' thesis drafts.

By comparison, OFB covers the comments students receive while in individual conferences with their supervisors discussing the research and writing progress. It is in the form of a conversation or a dialogue between a supervisor and his/her supervisee. At the postgraduate level, effective supervision relies mostly on supervisor involvement in the ongoing research and publication (Phillips & Pugh, 2005). Thus, the central phenomenon of this study is the feedback provided by supervisors to their supervisees as an interactional process in postgraduate education. Hence, the purpose of this research is to gain deeper understanding on the two feedback modalities and their various types, especially in regard to the speech functions and the rhetorical strategies of feedback. It is also possible to gain insights into the students' perceptions and revision acts.

Analysis of data was restricted to oral/written feedback provided by supervisors over the first three chapters of the thesis. The restriction on the amount of data selected for examination was for reasons of manageability. Most PhD research projects take about 4-5 years to complete; other reasons are discussed in Chapter 3. This qualitative study was exploratory in nature providing detailed interpretations and insights into postgraduate EFL students' perceptions concerning incorporation of the feedback given. The theories and models used in this study cover a wide variety of disciplinary and professional contexts such as supervision, writing, and writing outcomes. However, the study did not intend to investigate students' writing outcomes and how they developed writing skills after incorporating supervisor feedback. Likewise, the study did not cover all feedback modalities including peer feedback, media feedback, feedback over the phone, and such like. By the same token, feedback and supervision practices in disciplines other than social sciences were not within the foci of the study.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

Based on the intensive literature on supervisory feedback and through the developed conceptual framework of the study, the following research questions were formulated for the present study:

1. What are the different types of written feedback and oral feedback provided to EFL postgraduate students on their thesis drafts in terms of the pragmatic and rhetorical functions in evidence?
2. What aspects of the thesis draft does the supervisors' feedback focus on?
3. What is the supervisors' style of providing different types of feedback?

4. What types of written feedback and oral feedback do postgraduate EFL students perceive as the most effective?
5. To what extent do postgraduate EFL students incorporate their supervisors' written and oral feedback into their thesis drafts and under what conditions?

### **1.5 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the study illustrated in Figure 1.1 is drawn from the theoretical perspectives discussed in Chapter Two. Using the related theories as descriptive and interpretive lenses, there is an underlying belief that effective and constructive feedback practices for postgraduate EFL students is a core processes in the development of postgraduate students' research and writing skills. To make feedback an effective and successful academic practice, feedback providers must ensure that feedback is not only an interactive mechanism but also it reflects the ideals of a particular academic community of practice in which it is conducted. Supervision models: the Master-Apprentice Model, the Laissez-Faire Model, and the Developmental Model were considered as making up the complex social context as well as social conditions for effective feedback. Effective feedback helps "reduce discrepancies between current understanding and performance and a goal" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 86). It would seem that supervision models used are in line with and correspond to the academic needs and levels of supervisees as postulated in the Integrated Developmental Model (IDM). IDM outlines three distinct stages of development for supervisees: level one supervisees or new entrants, level two supervisees who are mid-level students with fluctuating confidence and motivation, and level three supervisees that refer to mainly experienced candidates.

The Master-Apprentice model seems to present a systematic style of supervision to postgraduate students. This model involves the master (Supervisor) inducting the new apprentice (Supervisee) into the "mysteries of the craft" (Yeatman, 1995, p. 9); however, there seem to be some disadvantages to this approach. In particular, the students are seen as being dependent on the supervisors' knowledge and experience and, as a result, inherit both the strengths and weaknesses of the supervisor's knowledge and experience of research. In the Laissez-Faire model, students are regarded as more independent and have the potential of self-learning and high creativity. However, there appear to be some risks in presenting research in a Laissez-Fair way as the students may develop sloppy or erroneous research practices. It may be, in fact, that students actually are without adequate supervision. Supervisors who follow the Models of Developmental Supervision (MDS) in their practices seek to gradually develop the student in a systematic way from novice to expert. This model is based on the assumption that graduate students at the novice stage have limited or no prior knowledge of graduate research, academic writing and related scholarly skills. Novice students need more supervisory support in areas such as writing a proposal on the basis of suitable

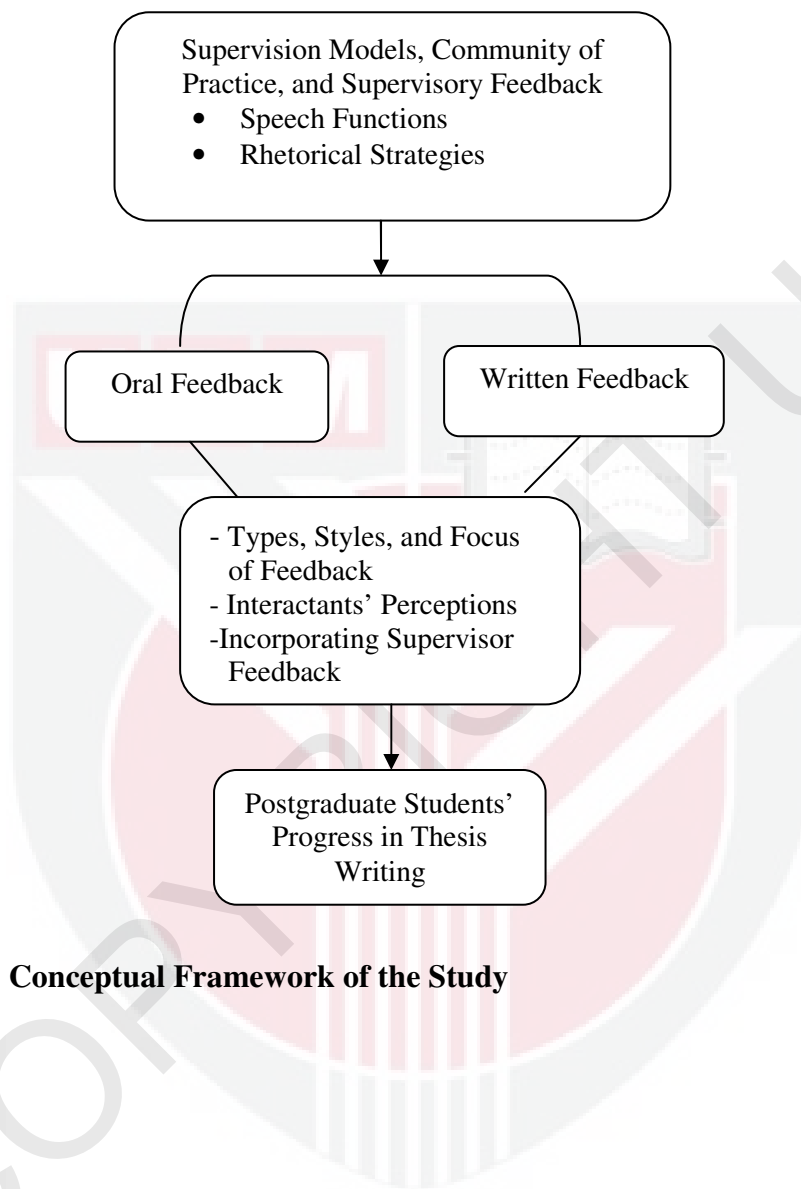


methodology and appropriate tools for data analysis, and generally meeting the requirements of their discourse community's practices and associated conventions.

Bitchener, Basturkmen, East, & Meyer (2011) in their recent treatise on best practices in supervisory feedback to thesis students outline two theoretical perspectives that are pertinent to the student needs mentioned in the foregoing paragraph. Their first perspective highlights the discourse structure of academic genres (Hyland, 1998, 2005; Paltridge, 2001; Swales, 1990) such as the thesis and its sub-genres as well as "the importance of understanding the discourse requirements and expectations of one's discourse community" (Bitchener et al., 2011, p. 8). In their second perspective, Bitchener et al. (2011) draw on Vygotskian sociocultural theory and the use of scaffolding to benefit students with "explicit instruction and feedback, 'model' text analysis, and supervised draft writing" (p. 8).

Hence, the supervision models presented in this study reflect a working relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee that aims to benefit the latter. 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 the students' morale will be high and supervisor's interest in the research strong. Needless to say, when the relationship between a supervisor and a supervisee is poor, then feedback is also likely to be poor, and there is likely to be a low positive outcome for the student.

The provision of feedback therefore, "lies at the heart" of postgraduate supervision (Kumar & Stracke, 2007, p. 462). Interaction is seen as central to understanding this issue, as it is through this interaction, the interaction in which written and oral feedback are provided, students process the given feedback and constitute and reconstitute their perception and incorporation.



**Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework of the Study**

In Figure 1.1, the conceptual framework of the study is as presented, demonstrating how the interactions between the supervisors and their supervisees within the supervision discourse and models and through various types and styles of feedback practices which lead to a postgraduate student's incorporation of the feedback into their dissertation and thereby progresses in their thesis writing development. The feedback practices include supervisors' written and oral feedback along with supervisees' perceptions on feedback practices in their community of practice, and the social processes in which the supervision models and the context in which supervision occurs. Supervision involves the interaction that takes place between a supervisor and his/her supervisee. Interaction is a social practice that encompasses both academic and cultural practices within the postgraduate community of practice. Power relationships, emotional intelligence, motivation, and culture are key factors that influence supervision (Dolorieet, Sambrook, & Stewart, 2012; Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes, & Creighton, 2003). Disciplinary and social "milieu surrounds any supervision dialogue" (Grant, 2005, p. 167). The supervisees' perceptions of the feedback provided influence the candidate's performance of the tasks and interactions. Some of the main tasks include receiving and applying feedback from internal sources, such as local postgraduate committee members or, from external sources such as peers and/or journal review board members. Interaction is also an important factor in the quality of the performance of those who receive feedback. Based on our knowledge of speech functions (Holmes, 2001), the type of language used in these interactions also plays an important part. The quality of the feedback process ultimately determines the extent to which the candidate incorporates the comments into their work and hence his/her professional achievement during candidature.

## **1.6 Definition of Terms**

### **1.6.1 Feedback**

Feedback is considered as "information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way" (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4). The system parameter is the student's writing. The "reference level of the system parameter" is the required writing style of a particular level. The actual level is the student's writing. Ramaprasad further elaborated his definition by showing how feedback can focus not only on the output of parameters but also on the amount of effort exerted on a job (input), and on work procedures (process).

Feedback is also defined as "any information a learner receives as a result of his trials" (Moffett, 1968 p. 188). Based on this interpretation, feedback seems to be the process of correcting learner mistakes without looking at the student's response to that feedback. By comparison, Lamberg (1980) defined feedback as the "information of 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). Feedback may also be considered a means of communication that provides a load of information to the receiver in order for the receiver to improve his/her writing in the learning process (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). This improvement occurs only when effective feedback is provided. Effective feedback is claimed to be comments that are focused, clear, applicable and encouraging (Lindemann, 2001). Kepner (1991) looks at feedback generally as “any procedures used to inform a learner whether an instructional response is right or wrong.” Feedback on assignments thus indicates the WFB and OFB provided by teachers in responding to their students’ written assignments.

The terms feedback or comments, OFB or conferencing, incorporation or revision acts, student or supervisee are used interchangeably in this study and they share the same meanings and have no differences. The use of the terms WFB and OFB in this study does not reject other types of feedback such as peer feedback even if it has implications for the outcomes of EFL writing and may lead to significant results in thesis writing. More about WFB will be presented in Chapter 2.

Written comments on students’ writing are called “written feedback”. WFB is “likely to remain the most viable and common form of response to student writing and thus needs careful analysis and evaluation” (Ferris, 1997). Typically, students write their drafts and hand them to their teachers who read them and provide written comments in response. Comments can be in the form of handwriting or through comments and changes to the electronic version of student’s thesis draft. If it is handwritten, it can be in-text, marginal, or summative WFB. If Word is used, then it can also be in-text (by using “Track Changes” from the Review drop down list in Word, marginal by using New Comment, or summative by typing. Track Changes function is used to make revisions (feedback here) to documents that allow others to see, and add comments in the document in Word 2007.

Students are expected to feed forward/ revise their texts based on their teachers’ WFB. Most of the studies on feedback emphasize the positive effectiveness of feedback (Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Hyland, 1990; Kepner, 1991; Leki, 1991). However, although other studies argue that WFB does not help EFL learners (Truscott, 1996, 1999), most of the studies widely argue that written comments have a positive influence on students’ developmental writing (Ferris, 1997; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Leki, 1991; Zhang, 1995).

Oral feedback (OFB) is usually provided during face-to-face individual conferences and consultations, which are meetings held between a supervisor and his/her supervisee (Hawe, Dixon, & Watson, 2008; J. Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Jordan, 2004; Lochman, 2002; Wisker et al., 2003). It is a common practice at the

postgraduate level; face-to-face individual conferences are held to discuss issues like the supervisors' written comments, the students' ideas, and to negotiate misunderstandings. In this type of feedback, feed forward on students' work can be discussed and suggested. Feed forward refers to students' capacity to make effective use of feedback in their subsequent drafts. This dialogical practice of asking and answering questions enables students to engage in feed forward of feedback or apply the provided feedback (Bakhtin, 1981) for reviewing their own practice.

### **1.6.2 Speech Functions**

Speech function refers to the purpose of talk (in this study talk refers to the context of WFB and OFB) that affects its form. Talk is adapted to be appropriate to receivers and thus we use language differently in different contexts, different speech communities and cultures, and with different classes of people. It has been noted that “different speech communities emphasize different functions, and express particular functions differently” (Holmes, 2001, p. 270). Holmes categorized utterances into six categories namely; Expressive, Directive, Referential, Metalinguistic, Poetic, and Phatic utterances. It should be made clear here that these functions are not all encompassing. Other functions may arise from a particular interest of research or “the focus of a particular study” (Holmes, 2001, p. 272). Details of this matter are discussed in Chapter 2.

### **1.6.3 Rhetorical Strategies**

Before defining rhetorical strategies used in supervisor feedback, the word “rhetoric” should be defined. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, rhetoric means the art or study of using language effectively and persuasively. It is also defined as primarily an awareness of the language choices we make. Education in rhetoric enables a communicator in any facet of any field to create and assess messages effectively. Being rhetorical is an “art that includes written language and body language” (Weisser & Grobman, 2012, p. 50). Rhetorical ability includes not only the ability to be “verbally sophisticated and careful in written communication”, but also to be “ethical, broad minded, and considerate of other perspectives” (Weisser & Grobman, 2012, p. 53). In this study, the following six rhetorical devices were identified as part of the theoretical framework: logic, euphemism, ambiguity, rapport, rhetoric, and rhetorical questions.

#### **1.6.3.1 Logic**

Logic is a rhetorical appeal that is based on reasoning or logic. The basic term used for this rhetorical device is “Logos”.

### **1.6.3.2 Euphemism**

Euphemism is a milder or indirect or less harsh way of expressing unpleasant information. For instance, it is much nicer for a person who has just been given a pink slip to hear that she has been made redundant, rather than she has hereby been terminated.

### **1.6.3.3 Ambiguity**

Ambiguity refers to the use of language in which multiple meanings are possible. It can be unintentional through insufficient focus on the part of a supervisor but regardless of intention receipt of ambiguous information means the information has more than one meaning and so cannot be understood by a supervisee.

### **1.6.3.4 Rapport**

Rapport in the study refers to how a supervisor goes about building a sense of friendliness and receptivity on the part of the student. For example, the use of expressions such as “how is your family?” showing respect by sitting beside the student, complimenting the student, speaking the student’s language, and conveying optimism are ways of establishing positive rapport. These are important communicative techniques! Rapport is important and an awareness of its use is necessary in persuasive contexts.

### **1.6.3.5 Rhetoric**

Rhetoric is the art of using words to persuade, and may be used in writing or speaking. All types of writing may seek to persuade and rhetoricians study these genres for their persuasive qualities.

### **1.6.3.6 Rhetorical question**

A rhetorical question is a question asked simply for the sake of stylistic effect and an answer is not expected.

## **1.6.4 Community of Practice**

Communities of practice (CoP) are communities of people who have a common “concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis”. When these groups of people “accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together”. These groups of people “develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices, and

approaches”. Over time, these groups of people “develop personal relationships and establish ways of interacting. They may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a community of practice”. (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4).

Communities of practice exist when communities share the same form or styles of practice but vary from one context to another. Wenger (1998) stated that the term “community” does not mean a “community of practice” as there are three crucial features that need to be present to make a community a community of practice. These features are: “the domain, the community, and the practice”. Combining these feature and developing them in parallel constitutes a CoP. In this study, the domain of practice is found on feedback provided on theses drafts, the supervisory practices in effect, and the community that consists of the supervisors and their supervisees.

### **1.6.5 Style**

The term style refers to the “activity in which people create social meaning, as style is the visible manifestation of social meaning.”(Eckert, 2003, p. 43) A writer or speaker may communicate with a style in a way that sounds formal in some context—to show seriousness, to show deference to another, to show an identity, to create distance (Eckert, 2003). Style is in fact central to the construction of social categories and meaning either in language, in behavior or in dress (Eckert, 2003). Style in language/ speech is related to context and hence it is to be interpreted as “contextualization cues which speakers use to achieve a (new) contextualization, and which are interpreted by the recipient relying on conventional and/or interactively negotiated co-occurrence expectations on different levels” (Selting, 2010, p. 106). When language is used in order to interact and constitute social and interactive meaning, this can be interpreted as stylistic (Selting, 2010). In this view, language style is looked upon as a resource for interacting members of a particular community to constitute meaning in discourse. Therefore, style is “intrinsic to language use and it has no neutral manifestation” (Mesthrie, 2011, p. 5).

The term ‘feedback style’ in this study refers to the way an author uses words, phrases and sentences to establish meaning in a text. Style, is involved in all interactions either written or verbal that can be analyzed with respect to style. Style in the context of this study is concerned with how supervisors present their feedback on students’ thesis drafts. It describes the tone of a supervisor’s response and ideas to a student’s thesis draft as a way of using language.

Feedback is a form of communication and communication is fundamental to a “productive work environment”. The two most common forms of communication styles are direct and indirect communication (Manker, 2013). For example, in this study supervisors’ style of feedback was mainly ‘Direct’, and ‘Challenging’ in

nature. Other themes such as encouraging, hedged, and supportive comments registered remarkable occurrences too.

Some previous studies adopted other terms such as ‘mode’, ‘manner’, ‘tone’ of feedback. For example, Can (2009) adopted the term ‘feedback tone’ and found that the doctoral students who participated in his study did not only consider the content of the WFB but also the tone of the WFB. He found that 62% of the participants were emotionally affected by negative tone of feedback (Can, 2009, p. 144). Themes emerged from Can’s data under ‘Tone and manner of written feedback’ showed that manner of feedback were authoritative, suggestive, straightforward, encouraging, instructive, enthusiastic, indifferent, formal language and informal language (p. 61).

Adopting interactive style of feedback may help students understand and process what is being said. This style “might be adopted in the sincere belief that it will enhance the reception of feedback”(Mutch, 2003, p. 36). Style then shows the way or manner the feedback is provided on students’ thesis drafts and that has an impact on students’ perception and hence incorporation of feedback.

### **1.7 Outline of the Chapters**

The thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter One provides an introduction to research in the field of feedback and writing and argues that there is a paucity of research on oral and written feedback and its effects at the postgraduate level. It gives a clear idea about the research scope, the questions, and the theoretical framework of the study. The study uses supervision models, a speech functions model, rhetorical strategies, and CoP theory.

Chapter Two discusses the importance of feedback on writing in relation to the theories discussed in the theoretical perspectives section. It argues the importance of feedback, either written or oral, at the postgraduate level as a form of communication. Chapter Two highlights recent developments in the field of feedback research by discussing issues like positive research outcomes, negative research outcomes, feedback and supervision, and feedback and community of practice. In this chapter, it is argued that the existing research has not taken into account the role of feedback at the postgraduate level based on supervision models and speech functions theory. The existing models have also not taken WFB or OFB on board as a dialogical instrument that may help students develop their writing.

In Chapter Three, the methodology that was used to gain deeper insights into the types of feedback provided by supervisors to their students is discussed and so is how participants perceive and incorporate the different types of feedback. Data are



collected from supervisees' written drafts with supervisors' WFB on them, recordings of oral conferences between the participating supervisors and their students, and interviews with supervisees. The chapter presents a thorough account of how participants were chosen for this study. Finally, I discuss how data were analyzed and managed to extract findings for the study.

In Chapter Four, a detailed analysis of the different types of WFB and OFB as a form of communication and the use of rhetorical devices is argumentatively presented. The chapter presents a detailed account of the study cases and the types of feedback the participating students' received on their theses drafts.

Chapter Five presents a comprehensive profile of the participants, their perceptions of the different types of feedback they received from their supervisors and the extent to which they incorporated the feedback into their drafts. Finally, there is insight provided into the participants' thoughts, ideas, and experiences as they engaged with supervisors' feedback.

Chapter Six discusses the findings of this study and also identifies the limitations. Conclusions drawn from findings are presented with a discussion of the implications. Finally, suggestions for further research in the field of the study are presented.

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