



Doctoral Students' Perceptions of Written Feedback and Engagements Markers on Thesis Proposals

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ABSTRACT

Writing a thesis proposal is an essential part of the doctoral students' candidacy. The quality of feedback and the rhetorical resources conveyed in such feedback, especially engagement markers, can have a great impact on students' perception and engagement with feedback. However, doctoral students' perceptions towards types of feedback and engagement markers communicated by supervisors and peers on students' research proposals is thin on the ground. Therefore, this study investigated the types of written feedback and engagement markers EFL and ESL students perceived as useful for their thesis proposal development. A quantitative method in the form of questionnaire was employed with 23 students at University Putra Malaysia. Results indicated that, though EFL and ESL students held quite consistent perceptions toward certain types of feedback and engagement markers, their prior experience, educational and cultural issues, and understandings seemed to shape their different perceptions and affect their receptivity and utilization of feedback. Results from this study offer useful guidelines on how to provide an effective and resourceful feedback to meet EFL and ESL students' requirements and expectations in higher education.

Key Words: supervisors/ peer feedback, engagement markers, thesis proposal, EFL/ESL students' perceptions.

1. Introduction

Writing a thesis proposal is an essential requirement for doctoral students' candidacy and admission to most high-ranking universities (e.g., in Malaysia). However, it is a demanding experience for most postgraduate students, especially those with limited research experience and knowledge of the research genre and disciplinary requirements (Suryatiningsih, 2019; Paran, et al, 2017). Such requirements call for different forms of support including feedback to assist students reach acceptable levels of both academic writing and research experiences.

Previous studies (e.g., Stracke & Kumar 2020; Yu, 2019) have highlighted the scaffolding role of feedback provided by both supervisors and peers on students' thesis. Supervisory feedback (SF) is the main form of instruction that guides the whole process of thesis writing, particularly at the stage of writing a research proposal. Such early comments serve as a communicative mechanism, shaping students' work-in-progress, facilitating mutual understanding, and assisting students to be independent researchers. While past research has focused mostly on the role of SF, current views based on social constructivist approaches view students as active agents in receiving and providing feedback. This new perspective has extended feedback practices to include peers as potential sources of feedback (Nicol et al, 2014). As an instructional tool and collaborative learning for academic writing, peer feedback (PF) offers a social space for communication and negotiating meaning in group work (Pourdana, et al, 2021).

Feedback is usually provided in oral or written format. However, written feedback (WF) has been acknowledged as the most prevalent form of support that supervisors provide to communicate their knowledge and expectations to students (Arts, et al, 2021). Addressing WF as a social communication, it is worth to understand how useful are the rhetorical strategies, especially engagement markers conveyed in WF for communicating views about writing, language and content and to interpersonally negotiating social relations. Engagement markers (EMs) are dialogic metadiscoursal strategies used to enhance interactions between discourse participants and between texts and disciplinary cultures (Hyland & Jiang, 2016). As such EMs can

enhance the effectiveness of WF, students' engagement with it, and their perception of it (Hyland & Hyland, 2019).

A fundamental variation in the effectiveness of feedback is students' perceptions and how effectively feedback meets their needs and expectations. This likely to be mainly true for English as foreign language (EFL) and English as second language (ESL) candidates "whose linguistic proficiencies and cultural expectations may affect either their acceptance or processing of feedback" (Hyland & Hyland, 2019, p. 166). Notably, research on EFL and ESL doctoral students' perceptions towards SF and PF in Malaysia remains scarce. Additionally, to date, inquiry into how types of EMs affect students' perceptions and engagement with feedback has not been investigated thoroughly. Motivated by these gaps in knowledge, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What types of written feedback and engagement markers do EFL and ESL doctoral students perceive effective and useful for their thesis proposals?
2. Do EFL and ESL students have different perceptions towards the types of written feedback and engagement markers provided on their proposal drafts?

2. Review of Literature

a. Students' Perceptions Towards Written Feedback

It has been widely acknowledged that PhD students' perceptions of feedback is under-researched area, compared to the undergraduate and master students' perspectives. Generally, the limited research on students' perceptions revealed students' preference of constructive and positive feedback that enhanced their intellectual independence and self-regulation (Sopina & McNeill, 2015; Hyland & Hyland, 2019). However, limited feedback or unclear, and delivered too late was perceived as the least effective and was rarely implemented (Hadjieconomou & Tombs, 2020).

Another strand of research has approached the pragmatic functions of WF and the impact of language on students' perceptions and engagement (e.g., Strake & Kumar, 2017; East et al., 2012; Xu, 2017). Students in these studies valued praises and suggestions that developed their confidence, offered learning opportunities and maintained positive relationships, but they disliked vague comments and unhedged criticism that undermined their confidence, and their relationship with feedback providers. Notably, research into feedback providers' communicative functions mapped out by EMs is still in its infancy and requires more attention.

Research has also revealed that students' perceptions towards feedback may vary according to the focus of SF (e.g., East, et al, 2012; Nurie, 2019; Manjet, 2016). According to these cited studies students' valued feedback on the content, organization, and argument of their work and not merely on language and formatting issues. Other studies (Can & Walker, 2014; Hoomanfar et al, 2018) found that PhD students were aware of some difficult aspects of their research including arguments, justifications, logical order and transitions, thus they expected to receive WF on them. Hoomanfar, et al (2018) also revealed that EFL students who had high linguistic self-confidence showed less interest for linguistic feedback. It is obvious that the focus of the aforementioned studies was on SF on students' thesis writing. Research proposal has received scant attention compared with thesis writing.

Other line of research highlighted the impact of cultural issues on students' perceptions towards feedback. Nurmukhamedov and Kim (2010) found that ESL students from different cultural backgrounds brought with them their own different emotional perceptions towards critical feedback, thus it was not received and ignored by them. East et al., (2012) found that issues related to constructing arguments and linguistic accuracy were a source of concern, especially with L2 students than native (L1) students. This understanding may provide new insights to this study as the participants in this study are EFL and ESL students whose needs and perceptions may vary accordingly.

Of particular relevance to this study is research on students' perceptions towards PF which has been thin on the ground. The few studies on this line highlighted the influence of prior PF experiences on students' perceptions. Mulder et al. (2014) and Alqassab et al. (2018) found that the perceived value and usefulness of PF changed over time and it decreased after students' participation in PF activity. Other studies indicated students' low motivation to provide PF (Neubaum et al., 2014), and their lack of trust of its quality (Suen, 2014).

Other research (e.g., Fithriani, 2018; Kim & Lan, 2021; Yu & Hu, 2017) has also demonstrated the contextual and cultural influences on students' perceptions. Fithriani (2018) found that EFL students from hierarchical cultures, highly favored tutor feedback over PF since the principles of hierarchical cultures made students prefer to obey and respect tutors who are seen as the highest authority figures and source of knowledge. Similarly, Yang, (2019) confirmed that EFL students' belief in their tutor as the highest knowledgeable authority figure was an obstacle in the PF process.

Research (e.g., Lin, 2019; Zhan, 2021) also found that EFL students culturally preferred providing and receiving indirect feedback in questions and suggestions rather than criticizing peers' work to avoid offending their peers and maintain social harmony. Other research (e.g., Yu, 2020; Yang & Carless, 2013) revealed ESL students' tendency to take a passive stance and focus on the linguistic form rather than content-oriented comments which can be perceived negatively by peers. Additionally, PF has been perceived to be beneficial by EFL students when it addresses global issues and takes peers' face needs into consideration (Yu & Hu, 2017).

b. Engagement and interaction in Written Feedback

Engagement was considerably examined across different genres and disciplines. Relatively few studies have examined the interaction in WF through the concept of ‘metadiscourse’ (e.g., Ädel, 2017; Rodway, 2018). Some studies focused mainly on the linguistic features of WF in terms of *direct* versus *indirect*, *mitigation* and *praise*, *hedging* and *modality* (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Treglia, 2006), *attitudinal stances* (Bastola & Hu, 2021), and *interpersonal aspects* (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2019). According to these studies, the language used to communicate feedback can mediate its effectiveness, simplify students’ engagement with it and enhance productive relationships.

Hyland (2002) found that due to cultural norms L2 students avoided using *imperatives* as they were the riskiest *directive engagement* type that could provoke their supervisors who assess their work and have a superior experience and knowledge. Yakhontova (2019) attributed the high frequency of *directives* and *critical comments* in peer reviews to the potential power inequalities in the reviewee–reviewer relationship, in which the reviewer has a legitimate authority and the right to give commands. Paltridge (2020) also found that reviewers utilized indirect *directives* and *reader pronouns* in their reports to assist students’ engagement and to build a relationship with them.

Basturkmen et al (2014) revealed that supervisors preferred to use *indirect* forms such as *questions* and expounded comments to maintain supervisor–student relationship. However, Lau, et al (2020) found that examiners and supervisors seemed to soften their authoritative persona in the form of *questions* during thesis defenses i.e., the oral viva, by using *suggestions* and *clarifications* as EMs.

Studies that focused on all types of MDs (e.g., Ädel, 2017; Rodway, 2018), investigated the types and frequencies of MDs in teachers’ WF at tertiary level across different disciplines. These corpus-based studies revealed the multifaceted roles of both the teacher and the student in WF according to the purpose of the response of “teacher as reader and dialogue partner” or the pedagogical response of “teacher as knowledge resource” (Rodway, 2018, p. 797). However, these studies included only teachers’ feedback, and did not include PF or document students’ perceptions of WF provided either, leaving a noticeable gap for the present study to address.

3. Methodology

As part of a larger project, this paper presents only the quantitative data, i.e the questionnaire with closed ended questions on students’ perceptions towards the types of WF and the usefulness of EMs in improving their thesis proposals. A total of 23 doctoral students were selected purposefully from various departments at one of the Malaysia’s public leading research universities to participate in this study. They were 10 EFL students (43.5%) and 13 ESL students (56.5%) from Iraq, China, Iran, Palestine, Nigeria and Malaysia, with (65.2%) being male ($n = 15$) and (34.8%) female ($n = 8$), ranging from the age of 21 to 40 years old. Of these participants (60.9%) were in the second semester, (26.1%) in their first semester, and (13%) in their third semester of their doctoral programs. Out of the 23 participants, (52.2%) of them rated their overall academic writing ability as ‘very good’ or (47.8%) as ‘good’.

The questionnaire was adapted from Bitchener et al. (2011); Can (2009); and Lin (2009) and revised by three experienced researchers. It consisted of fifteen questions and divided into three parts: the first part (Part A) on the respondent’s demographic information; the second part (Part B) focused on perceptions towards SF and PF on thesis proposal; and the last Part (Part C) focused on perceptions towards the usefulness of EMs. The overall Cronbach’s Alpha value of the questionnaire was 0.818 ($\alpha = 0.8180$) indicating satisfactory internal reliability. Ethical approval was obtained for this study from the authors’ university (JKEUPM-2021-225) and the respondents were given the options to participate willingly and also able to withdraw from this study any time.

The participants were invited via email with a link of the questionnaire (through Google Forms). The questionnaire took approximately thirty minutes to complete. A total of 30 sets of questionnaires were distributed, but only 23 questionnaires were completed. The data was statistically analyzed using the SPSS statistics program. The data analysis focused on the frequencies and comparison between EFL and ESL students’ perceptions of types of WF, based on Kumar and Strake’s (2007) pragmatic feedback model, and types of EMs based on Hyland’s (2005) Model of Engagement Markers.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Students’ Perceptions About Supervisors’ Written Feedback

As depicted in Table 1, an overwhelming majority (90%) of both EFL and ESL students stated that they ‘very often’ received WF from their supervisors on their proposal drafts. The participants’ overall satisfaction with the frequency of feedback given was relatively low. More specifically, nearly half of both respondents reported being ‘fairly satisfied’, and nearly one tenth of them were ‘very satisfied’. This could indicate that satisfaction levels among students leave substantial opportunity for improvement. These findings substantiated James et

al, (2010) and Holbrook et al's, (2014) results which showed students' dissatisfaction with the amount of feedback they received on their work.

Table 1 also showed that a great majority of students (EFL (70%) and ESL (61.5%) students) thought their supervisors' WF was 'effective', and around (23%) of both groups reported 'of average effective' which were much lower than average, again indicating a need for improvement. These findings resonate with earlier research (Xu 2017; Bastola & Hu, 2021) which demonstrated that students perceived their SF as beneficial and effective. This may stem from students' strong beliefs about the need for more adequate and accurate feedback from a knowledgeable and proficient supervisor in their fields of studies.

Table 1 Students' perceptions about supervisors' feedback

No	Items	N=23(%)		P-Value
		EFL (n=10)	ESL (n=13)	
1.	Frequency of feedback received			
	Rarely	1 (10%)	0	.355
	Sometimes	0	1 (7.69%)	
	Very Often	9 (90%)	12 (92%)	
2.	Satisfaction level on feedback received			
	Fairly dissatisfied	2 (20%)	2 (15.3%)	.964
	Neutral	2 (20%)	2 (15.3%)	
	Fairly satisfied	5 (50%)	7 (53.8%)	
	Very satisfied	1 (10%)	2 (15.3%)	
3.	Efficiency of feedback provided			
	Of average effective	2 (20%)	3 (23.07%)	.899
	effective	7 (70%)	8 (61.5%)	
	Very effective	1 (10%)	2 (15.3%)	

Descriptive statistics for the students' ratings of the usefulness of feedback types are reported in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Students' perceptions about the types of supervisory feedback

No	Types of Feedback	N=23(%)		P-Value
		EFL (n=10)	ESL (n=13)	
1.	Directive Feedback:			
a.	Instruction			
	least useful	4(40%)	5 (38.4%)	.929
	somewhat useful	5 (50%)	6 (46.1%)	
	useful	1 (10%)	2 (15.3%)	
b.	Question			
	somewhat useful	4 (40%)	3 (23.07%)	.673
	useful	5 (50%)	8 (61.5%)	
	Very useful	1 (10%)	2 (15.3%)	
c.	Suggestion			
	somewhat useful	1 (10%)	1 (7.69%)	.910
	useful	3 (30%)	5 (38.4%)	
	Very useful	6 (60%)	7 (53.8%)	
2.	Expressive Feedback:			
a.	Criticism			
	not useful at all	1 (10%)	1 (7.69%)	.961
	least useful	5 (50%)	2(15.3%)	
	somewhat useful	3 (30%)	4(30.7%)	
	useful	1 (10%)	6 (46.1%)	
b.	Praise			
	somewhat useful		1 (7.69%)	.655
	useful	2 (20%)	2 (15.3%)	
	Very useful	8 (80.0%)	10 (76.9%)	
c.	Opinion			
	not useful at all	1 (10%)		.273
	least useful	2 (20%)	1 (7.69%)	
	somewhat useful	5 (50%)	4 (30.7%)	
	useful	2 (20%)	6 (46.1%)	
	Very useful		2 (15.3%)	
3.	Referential Feedback			
a.	Editorial			
	not useful at all		2 (15.3%)	.308
	least useful	4(40%)	7 (53.8%)	
	somewhat useful	5 (50%)	4 (30.7%)	
	useful	1 (10%)		
b.	Content			
	useful	2 (20%)	2 (15.3%)	.596
	Very useful	8 (80%)	11 (84.6%)	
c.	Organization			
	least useful	2 (20%)	3 (23.07%)	.930
	somewhat useful	3 (30%)	3 (23.07%)	
	useful	5 (50%)	7 (53.8%)	

Overall, both EFL and ESL participants showed appreciation of all types of their SF. *Directive-suggestion* feedback was perceived by the majority of students ((60%) EFL and (53.8%) ESL students) to be ‘very useful’, *directive- question* as ‘useful’ (EFL students (50%) and (61%) ESL students), and *directive-instruction* as ‘somewhat useful’ ((50%) EFL and (46.1%) ESL students). This result is consistent with Strake and Kumar’s (2017) study which have shown that PhD students valued *suggestions* and *questions* because they provide both guidance and solutions with a clear roadmap on what were needed to be revised and made them more confident, whereas *directive-instruction* comments were not difficult to deal with and could also hurt.

Besides, a greater size of both EFL and ESL students (80%) chose the subcategory of *praise* to be ‘very useful’ for their initial drafts. This finding reinforces earlier research findings that students valued *praise* as a sign of supervisors’ caring about their work and a sense of achievement which could encourage their learning and participation (Mohd Azkah et al. ,2016; Strake & Kumar, 2017). However, the subcategories of *criticisms* and *opinion* were viewed somewhat differently by both groups, as ESL students (46.1%) showed more enthusiasm to receive *criticism* and *opinion* comments than EFL students. This could be interpreted that ESL students do not lose their self-confidence when they receive such types of WF and valued receiving constructive *criticism* combined with *praise* and *suggestions* (Ghazal et al., 2014). Comparatively, due to cultural factors in terms of face, power distance and educational background, EFL students were much more likely to take *criticism* personally, particularly at the early stages of candidature (Chung & Ingleby, 2011).

Additionally, both EFL (80%) and ESL (84.6%) students rated *content feedback* as ‘very useful’, followed by *organization* feedback. Students’ perceptions might stem from their belief that they need more guidance on certain areas of their work that they thought to be difficult, particularly in the initial stages of writing their proposals. These results echoed those of Hoomanfar, et al (2018) and Banat and Jomaa (2019) who found that PhD students’ valued comments on *content* and *organization* as they were challenging areas for them over *linguistic* feedback.

Also, EFL students (50%) showed a slightly higher preference in receiving *editorial* feedback than ESL students (30%). This could be attributed to that *editorial* feedback might communicate to the students a “lack of interest on the supervisor’s part or, even worse, that the writing and research are too bad to warrant any comments” (Wei et al, 2019, 165). Another possible explanation might be that ESL students may find themselves capable of editing and proofreading their work confidently due to their language proficiency and linguistic self-confidence in English (Nurie, 2019). However, EFL students’ preference for receiving *editorial* feedback could be due to their need of such feedback and their belief that it is supervisors’ responsibility to provide *editorial* to make their work readable. Hoomanfar et al (2018) confirmed that some EFL students have linguistic difficulties and *editorial* feedback was one of the needed and expected feedback, mostly at the early stages of their writing process to improve their research project. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, Bui (2014) also revealed that PhD students’ needs and expectations regarding the type of feedback changed over time, which shaped and challenged supervisors’ approach to meeting their students’ expectations during the stages of their writing.

4.2 Students’ perceptions about peers’ written feedback

According to Table 3, the majority of EFL students (90%) stated that they ‘rarely’ receive WF from their peers on proposal drafts. Whereas, a great number of ESL respondents (76.9%) stated that they ‘often’ receive WF from their peers. This data once again presents a clear picture of another major aspect of WF between EFL and ESL students. Past research findings have similarly proved the limited application of PF practice in the EFL contexts where summative assessment by tutors is the highly dominated source of feedback (Wang, et al., 2020).

Table 3 Students’ perceptions about peers’ feedback

NO.	Items	N=23(%)		Sig.
		EFL (n=10)	ESL (n=13)	
1.	Frequency of peer feedback received			
	Rarely	9 (90%)	0	0.000
	Sometimes	1 (10%)	3 (23.07%)	
	Many times	0	10 (76.9%)	
2.	Efficiency of feedback received			
	Least effective	7(70%)	4 (30.7%)	0.010
	Somewhat effective	2 (20%)	7 (53.8%)	
	Effective	1 (10%)	2 (15.3%)	

Concerning the effectiveness of PF, only (10%) EFL respondents thought it was ‘effective’, and (70%) of them felt it was ‘least effective’. While more than half of the ESL respondents (53.8%) valued PF as ‘somewhat effective’ and (15%) rated it as ‘effective,’ – indicating that they found the PF effective in helping them to improve their proposal writing. What seemed to be more obvious was that ESL students had more experience with PF than EFL students, hence rated it more positively.

Table 4 shows that both groups reported slight differences about the types of PF. The majority (70%) of EFL and ESL students perceived *directive* feedback in *question* forms as ‘very useful’, since *questions* stimulate

peers to seek information on their own, to ask for additional information or explanation, and encourage discussions, thus increase the interactional aspects of the texts of PF. This finding is consistent with Lin's (2019) findings that *questions* help peers think deeply, clarify any confusion about their work, and create actions themselves.

Additionally, a larger proportion of ESL (76.9%) students reported that *directive* feedback based on *suggestions* was 'useful', indicating that students were aware of the importance of receiving suggestions to improve their work. Whereas *directive* feedback based on *instructions* was the third type of PF that EFL students (70%) perceived as 'least useful'. This could be because *instruction* feedback imposes sets of orders that can easily provoke negative affective reactions and threats students' self-esteem. These results corroborated Lin's (2019) findings that due to cultural norms, EFL students preferred *indirect* feedback in *questions* and *suggestions* forms to avoid face-threatening behavior and retain harmony.

Table 4 Students' perceptions about the types of peers' feedback

NO	Types of Feedback	N=23(%)		Sig.
		EFL (n=10)	ESL (n=13)	
1.	Directive Feedback:			
a.	Instruction			
	not useful at all	2 (20%)	0	.139
	least useful	7 (70%)	7 (53.8%)	
	somewhat useful	1 (10%)	4 (30.7%)	
	useful	0	2 (15.3%)	
b.	Question:			
	somewhat useful	1 (10%)		.460
	useful	2 (20%)	4 (30.7%)	
	Very useful	7 (70%)	9 (69.2%)	
c.	Suggestion:			
	somewhat useful	3 (30%)	1 (7.69%)	.314
	useful	5 (50%)	10 (76.9%)	
	Very useful	2 (20%)	2 (15.3%)	
2.	Expressive Feedback:			
a.	Criticism			
	not useful at all	2 (20%)	2 (15.3%)	.795
	least useful	7 (70%)	8 (61.5%)	
	somewhat useful	1 (10%)	2 (15.3%)	
	useful	0	1 (7.69%)	
b.	Praise			
	somewhat useful	1 (10%)	1 (7.69%)	.712
	useful	1 (10%)	3 (23.07%)	
	Very useful	8 (80%)	9 (69.2%)	
c.	Opinion			
	least useful	2 (20%)	1 (7.69%)	.577
	somewhat useful	2 (20%)	1 (7.69%)	
	useful	1 (10%)	1 (7.69%)	
	Very useful	5 (50%)	10 (76.9%)	
3.	Referential Feedback:			
a.	Editorial			
	least useful	2 (20%)	1 (7.69%)	.505
	somewhat useful	2 (20%)	4 (30.7%)	
	useful	5 (50%)	8 (61.5%)	
	Very useful	1 (10%)	0	
b.	Content			
	least useful	4 (40%)	4 (30.7%)	.667
	somewhat useful	3 (30%)	7 (53.8%)	
	useful	2 (20%)	1 (7.69%)	
	Very useful	1 (10%)	1 (7.69%)	
c.	Organization			
	not useful at all	1 (10%)	0	.669
	least useful	5 (50%)	6 (46.1%)	
	somewhat useful	3 (30%)	5 (38.4%)	
	useful	1 (10%)	2 (15.3%)	

A sizeable majority of both groups valued *expressive* feedback from their peers, particularly, *praises* (EFL (80%) and ESL (69.2%) students), and *opinion* comments (EFL (50%) and ESL (76.9%) students) to be 'very useful' in their initial drafts. These findings highlighted that these types of PF have a confidence boosting impact on the feedback receiver and assist students to know more about their own strengths and maintain a harmonious relationship with their peers (Lin, 2019). However, both groups hold very consistent views about *criticism* feedback which perceived as 'least useful' (EFL (70%) and ESL (61.5%) students). Previous studies (e.g., Dahling & Ruppel, 2016; Fong, et al, 2019) confirmed that *criticism* from peers perceived unhelpful and could undermine students' self-confidence and motivation because of its ego-threatening consequences.

However, Joiner et al's (2020) findings proved postgraduates' positive responses when they received less formal criticism from their peers.

The results also showed that ESL (60%) and EFL (50%) students valued *referential* feedback focusing on *editorial* matters as it encourages more substantial revisions. Another plausible explanation could be that PF often focused mostly on the surface level such as syntactic errors rather than on aspects related to ideas and content itself, therefore, the validity of their comments is often questioned. Past studies (e.g., Yu, 2020; Yang & Carless, 2013) confirmed that students focused more on the language form than content, which perceived negatively by the recipients as unhelpful.

Interestingly, half of EFL respondents rated PF on *content* as 'least useful', while ESL students (53.8%) found it 'somewhat useful'. Further, both groups rated PF on *organization* as 'least useful', possibly due to students' reservations about their peers' capacity to make judgments of quality in these aspects, particularly if their previous feedback experiences have been extremely summative and individualistic. These findings corresponded to Melser et al's., (2020) findings that postgraduates perceived PF on *content* as irrelevant and inaccurate for *content* revision because they often find it difficult to evaluate aspects related to content matters compared to technical aspects. However, the findings of the current study contradict those of other studies (e.g., Lin, 2019; Wahyudin, 2018; Saeed & Ghazali, 2017) whose students had negative affective perceptions towards PF that focused on surface features such as highlighting linguistic errors and did not implement it.

4.3 Students' perceptions about engagement markers

Students were asked to indicate how often they use linguistic markers consciously in their responses to WF, and the results showed that ESL students (61.5%) responded 'always', while only (30%) of the EFL students recorded 'always'. It seems that EFL students are more likely to treat WF as simply a source of information more than a site for social interaction. Regardless of the minor differences demonstrated between students, they appear, to some extent, have an awareness of the extent to which they can take part in WF and interact with feedback providers through the use of specific textual features.

Table 5 Students' perceptions about engagement markers

NO.	Items	N=23(%)		Sig
		EFL (n=10)	EFL (n=10)	
1.	The extent of using linguistic markers consciously in feedback			
	Occasionally	4 (40%)	1 (7.69%)	.346
	Often	3 (30%)	4 (30.7%)	
	Always	3(30%)	8 (61.5%)	

As demonstrated in Table 6, both groups found that EMs based on *questions* were 'extremely useful', followed by *reader pronouns* to be 'useful'. Interestingly, more than half of the ESL students (53.8%) rated *directives* as 'somewhat useful', while half of the EFL students (50%) rated them as 'least useful'. This seems to be due to the discursual effects associated with *directives* such as obligations and imperatives which create a more imposing impression on students to follow the required changes in the way preferred by feedback providers. However, it appears that both groups recognized that *questions* give them more freedom in deciding whether or not to do an action, thus they allow them identify gaps in their content and reflect further on their work rather than imposing a predetermined way of thinking (Jiang & Ma, 2018).

Table 6 Students' perceptions about types of Engagement markers

NO	Types of engagement markers	N=23(%)		Sig.
		EFL (n=10)	ESL (n=13)	
1.	Reader Pronouns			
	Somewhat useful	4 (40%)	3 (23.07%)	.424
	Useful	6 (60%)	8 (61.5%)	
	Extremely useful	0	1 (7.69%)	
2.	Directives			
	Least useful	5 (50%)	3 (23.07%)	.011
	Somewhat useful	3 (30%)	7 (53.8%)	
	Useful	1 (10%)	3 (23.07%)	
	Extremely useful	1 (10%)	0	
3.	Questions			
	Useful	2 (20%)	4 (30.7%)	.537
	Extremely useful	8 (80%)	9 (69.2%)	

As Table 7 shows, the most common types of EMs employed by feedback providers were *directives* (Giving instructions) (with EFL (50%) and ESL (46.1%)), followed by *reader pronouns*. The prevalence of *directives* may be attributed to the imbalance of power relations within WF discourse, i.e., as supervisors (in a superior position) and students who are expected to obey their supervisors' instructions. This result matches what Yakhontova (2019) and Paltridge (2020) revealed that *directives* were frequently used in the reviewers' comments as part of their role as authoritarian mentors who attempt to strongly direct students' attention to

a specific point in their drafts or to follow the advice given for further improvement. Paltridge (2020) also found that the dominance of *reader pronouns* used by reviewers were to establish an interpersonal relationship with student writers “at the same time as they delivered ‘bad news’ to them” (p. 4).

Table 7 Students’ perceptions of the usefulness of Engagement markers

Statements			Types of Engagement Markers						Sig.
			Asking for information (Question)	Giving information (Question)	Making a suggestion (Directive)	Making a request (Directive)	Giving instructions/ imperatives (Directive)	Using names/ pronouns (Reader Pronouns)	
1	You receive more from your supervisors and peers	EFL	1(10%)	0	2(20%)	0	5 (50%)	2(20%)	.569
		ESL	1 (7.69%)	1 (7.69%)	1 (7.69%)	1 (7.69%)	6 (46.1%)	3 (23.07%)	
2	Enhance the dialogic communication between you and supervisor/ peers	EFL	4 (40%)	3 (30%)	0	0	0	3 (30%)	.686
		ESL	6 (46.1%)	3 (23.07%)	0	0	0	4 (30.7%)	
3	Enhance a good relationship between you and supervisor/ peers	EFL	4 (40%)	2 (20%)		0	0	4 (40%)	.299
		ESL	3 (23.07%)	3 (23.07%)	1 (7.69%)	0	0	6 (46.1%)	
4	Enhance WF implementation	EFL	2(20%)	3 (30%)	5 (50%)	0	0	0	.700
		ESL	2 (15.3%)	4 (30.7%)	5 (38.4%)	2 (15.3%)	0	0	

Following that, nearly half of both groups felt that it was important to have a dialogic form of communication with feedback providers resulting in *questions* (both asking and giving information) being the most common type of EMs that encouraged such nature of communication, followed by *reader pronouns* (EFL (30%) and ESL (30.7%) students). These engaging devices are the most common types of EMs that rhetorically achieve an effective degree of dialogic interaction (Hyland, 2002). This aligns with findings from Ellegaard et al’s (2018) research that the formulation of feedback by using *questioning* such as open, wondering and leading questions led to productive responses from students due to their dialogical nature. Lafuente-Millán (2014, p.207) also argued that the heavily preferred use of *reader pronouns* is to “emphasize collective thinking over individual thinking”, which enhances interpersonal interactions among participants.

Additionally, the types of EMs that enhance good relationships between students and feedback providers were *questions* and *reader pronouns*. This result can be attributable to that such EMs can minimize supervisor authority and expert–novice boundaries, thus allow students to form close bonds with feedback providers. Once again, these findings coincide with those identified by Paltridge (2020) and Hyland and Jiang (2016) that these EMs help in building solidarity in written texts. Researchers also found that *questions* and *inclusive pronouns* (i.e., we) can reduce the potential threat of *criticisms*, hence promote a peer-to-peer type of interaction between supervisor and students and enhance the process of sharing responsibility among peers, all of which can lead to productive relationships (Bastola & Hu, 2021).

Lastly, *directives*, i.e., *making a suggestion* (EFL (60%) and ESL (46.1%) students), and *question*, i.e., *giving information* (EFL (40%) and ESL (38.4%) students) were perceived as useful to encourage feedback implementation. It seems that EFL students from cultures where providing and receiving *orders* is not common, preferred *suggestions* that sound milder than *orders*, thus increase students’ subsequent action. These results corroborate Lin’s (2019) and Ladyshevsky’s (2013) findings that PhD students valued *questions* and *suggestions* as they aroused their curiosity and attention, encouraged independent search for information, and challenged them to think as knowledgeable equals with feedback providers (Jiang & Ma, 2018) which ultimately enhance students’ cognitive and behavioral engagement.

Conclusion and Limitations

Based on the doctoral students’ perceptions towards WF and EMs for thesis proposal writing, the findings revealed that both EFL and ESL students have positive perceptions toward all types of SF, particularly, *suggestions* and *questions* on *content knowledge* and *organization* over feedback on *editorial* issues. However, some EFL students preferred to receive feedback on *editorial matters* in comparison to ESL students. Besides that, both groups appreciated a balance of *positive* and *criticism* feedback, with ESL students’ tendency to receiving *criticism* more than EFL students.

It has also showed that both groups of students preferred SF over PF. However, ESL students were slightly more optimistic about the efficacy of PF than EFL students. Additionally, both groups felt *praises* were more useful than *criticism* for their initial drafts. Further, students in their first semester expected *editorial* and *questions* from their peers. However, ESL students showed a slightly higher preference for receiving *suggestions* on *content aspects* compared to EFL students.

The findings also suggest that both groups had rather similar perceptions towards EMs. They expressed that *directive* were the most frequent type of EMs used by feedback providers. Nevertheless, *questions* and *reader pronouns* were chosen as the most useful EMs for enhancing dialogic communication and building harmonious relationships between students and feedback providers, whereas *suggestions* and *questions* were chosen as the most useful EMs for encouraging feedback implementation. Although there is a slight upward trend in preferring *suggestions* by EFL than ESL students, the differences were minimal.

After summarizing the findings, it is possible to state that, though EFL and ESL students held quite consistent perceptions towards certain types of SP, PF and EMs, their prior experience, educational and cultural issues, and understandings seemed to shape their different perceptions and affect their receptivity and utilization of feedback.

Some limitations were evident in this study. It can be reported that this study was done with a relatively small sample size within the same university, using only a questionnaire for collecting data. Further studies with a larger and more diverse group of students from more institutions including additional research instruments such as interviews, can provide sufficiently justified conclusions and deeper insights into the surrounding factors affecting students' perceptions. Moreover, this study focused on students' perceptions towards some types of EMs. However, it would be valuable to explore other metadiscourse features employed in WF across different disciplines to show different angles of vision and enrich both the metadiscoursal and feedback studies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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