

SUPERVISORS WRITTEN FEEDBACK ON JORDANIAN MASTER'S STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Providing feedback to students on their writing represents perhaps the most important task. It discussed the importance of supervisors' written feedback on Jordanian master's students. It discusses the feedbacks in terms of content, and methods. The purpose of this paper was to discover the types of errors that Jordanian master's students who are majoring in English language at Yarmouk University made when they write their master's thesis. The researcher analyzed 9 Jordanian master theses based on their supervisors' comments. The researcher has discovered three main themes such as coherence problems, mechanism problems of writing, and problems with organizing the thesis.

Keywords: Jordanian master students, Error analysis, Yarmouk University, Written Feedback.

INTRODUCTION

Feedback is very important issue in writing skill. It defines as "information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of the learning task, usually with the objective of improving their performance" Ur (1996, 242). Usually second or foreign language learners prefer written feedback rather than oral or peer feedback (Zhang, 1995). The previous research focused on the types of comments was the most effective. They found that error correction type was the most popular in L2 writing contexts. Other researcher such as (Truscott, 1996) has not agreed with benefits of error correction. He believes that this kind of feedback might be harmful to students and the quality of their writing.

On the other hand, Researchers such as (Ferris & Roberts, 2001) error correction is the best way for L2 students to get benefits of their writing. Their study discussed the effects of feedback on ESL students in terms of the percentage of errors when they edited their writing on three feedback conditions: (1) errors marked with codes; (2) errors underlined with no codes; and (3) no error feedback at all. The results were agreed with the first and second groups' feedback. Other study done by Lee (1997) on ESL college students in Hong Kong discovered that when errors were underlined, the students corrected more errors. He also discovered that students prefer to get error marked with teachers' codes as it is more easy to edit them. On the next section, the researcher will highlight the supervisors' perspectives on writing thesis.

SUPERVISORS' PERSPECTIVE ON WRITING THESIS

In the last two decades, studies by Casanave and Hubbard (1992) looked into supervisor's perceptions of the postgraduate student's (L2) difficulties during thesis writing. Supervising postgraduate students poses some challenges to both students and supervisors alike all over the world (Andrade, 2006; Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt, 1999). A related survey conducted by Casanave and Hubbard (1992) involved 85 supervisors from 28 departments at Stanford University, located in Palo Alto, California. The study revealed that L2 doctoral thesis

students encounter more problems compared to native speakers and these problems were clearer at the sentence level including grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, apprehension, spelling and punctuation accuracy.

Another study done by Cooley and Lewkowicz's (1995) involved 105 supervisors from nine faculties in Hong Kong University revealed that while supervisors found difficulties with forms and structures; it took second place of difficulties impacting the development of clear ideas and arguments. The researchers also identified difficulties such as lexical choice. Moreover, 26% of the 12 students believed that they had problems in using English particularly in organizing ideas and arguments, utilizing the suitable writing style and expressing themselves in English along with writing apprehension.

In the context of thesis writing, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) investigated the difficulties of postgraduate students in writing their thesis in English. Their study used interviews with pairs of supervisor and student in a comparative method, concentrating on the difficulties faced by the students in writing and discussing the results of their thesis. The students were inclined to view the difficulties based on limited English proficiency while supervisors viewed them as lack of understanding of the rhetorical and structural requirements of a thesis. The results of this study are invaluable as it clarifies the importance of guidance and modelling to make students understand the requirements of writing various parts of the thesis. This requires further investigation into the underlying reasons for the difficulties of international students in thesis writing of which extant literature has shed only some light on. The study succeeded in identifying issues and challenges faced by international students during their thesis writing process.

In another study, James (1984) observed the impact of difficulties on a more comprehensive communicative success. The study revolved around Brazilian PhD students studying at the University of Manchester where the author categorized the impacts based on breakdown of meaning, a blurring of meaning and distraction of meaning. James (1984) considered sentence level difficulties as distractions of meaning for the reader while inefficient ordering of propositions, inappropriate weighing of propositions and functional incoherence were considered to blur intended meaning, although he noted that some difficulties at the sentence level also led to the breakdown of meaning. These are characterized as long, complex sentences, faulty referencing, lexical difficulties associated with specialized vocabulary, and signposting weaknesses.

Furthermore, most supervisors find their postgraduate students having difficulty when writing their theses. Several studies (Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995; Jenkins, Jordan & Weiland, 1993; Parry, 1998) concentrated on structuring an argument over a prolonged stretch of discourse with both consistency and balance. The researchers noted that the students found it difficult to understand the content that is suitable for individual chapters and sections of a chapter and they were uncertain as to how they should be organised. While Jenkins, et al. (1993) associated these difficulties to a certain extent, to lack of clear and logical thinking, Paltridge (2002) believes that difficulties were due to limited knowledge of the genre characteristics and the expectations of their supervisors.

The positioning of arguments relating to wider literature is also one of the main difficulties that supervisors have cited. For instance, supervisors reported that their students overstate or understate the implications of their findings according to the published literature. In addition, some supervisors reported that, to some extent, this problem was related to the failure to use the suitable modal verbs when making claims regarding the research findings (Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995; Parry, 1998;). On the other hand, other supervisors thought that the positioning problems occur when students had a distinct conceptualization of the new

academic community compared to theirs or the students were unclear of their audience and their expectations (Belcher, 1994; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001).

Belcher's (1994) case study revolved around three L2 students from varying disciplines – Chinese Literature, Applied Mathematics and Human Nutrition. He noticed the discrepancy in the supervisor's and student's understanding of writing goals and audience expectations. The supervisors claimed that these mismatches in understanding occur more in less successful students as opposed to their successful counterparts. In some studies such as Lillis (2001) and Prior (1994) attempted to assist students in understanding the academic community's expectations by stressing on the importance of the on-going communication between the supervisor and the student. Other studies like Smith (1999) confined their investigation to Chinese students and revealed that the postgraduate students faced difficulties in developing arguments and counter-arguments through the use of evidence to support arguments, and the critical evaluation of theories models and methodologies. They attributed these difficulties to the Chinese students' propensity to respect and not question their academic superiors' ideas and opinions. The researchers cited many reasons why students failed to develop explicit knowledge of the functions, content and organization of the thesis. Some researchers (Lillis, 2001; Parry, 1998; Prior, 1994) associated the failure to the supervisors tacit as opposed to explicit knowledge of the features of the thesis in their disciplines and hence, this may be a barrier to their clear articulation of thesis requirements to their students.

On the other hand, some researchers argued that students might be successful in completing their research method course prior to initiating their thesis writing and they might have had the opportunity to apply the knowledge gained from the course in short research projects but this does not mean that they will be successful in applying the same knowledge to their thesis writing (Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz & Nunan, 1998). Some other researchers also claimed that students might have had the chance to refer to research articles related to their field of study prior to thesis writing but they might not have kept in mind certain features of articles or differences that might occur within and across disciplines and types of journals. In addition, a few of them might have had the chance to read the studies identifying varying features of different sections of articles such as those introductions written by Samaraj (2002) or result sections written by Williams (1999). Students might have also had a chance to go through published guides and handbooks on thesis writing but this advice is who confined to and did not really delve into particular thesis sections (Basturkmen & Bitchener, 2005; Paltridge, 2002).

In sum, from the above review of literature, it is evident that postgraduate L2 students face many difficulties at sentence and paragraph levels, and in understanding and meeting the needs of the thesis genre. Due to the varying sections of the thesis, students may face difficulties in writing some sections compared to others. In addition, while literature has cited varying supervisor and student perceptions of the difficulty types that L2 students face during thesis writing, studies have failed to focus on specific difficulties experienced by the students and finally, the literature only reports the perceptions of supervisors and students regarding these difficulties but in separate groups – in other words, studies have failed to consider the level of shared understanding of the difficulties in pairs of supervisors and students.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The following question guided this study: What types of feedback are made by supervisors on students Master's thesis?

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study is used a qualitative case study to enable the researchers to understand the error correction that made by supervisors on students writing. Creswell (2012, p.46) defines a qualitative research as “a type of educational research in which the researcher relies on the views of participants, asks broad, general questions, collects data consisting largely of words (or text) from participants, describes and analyzes these words for themes, and conducts the inquiry in a subjective, biased manner”. Then Merriam (1998) defined a qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (p.27).

Participants

The study examined supervisors feedback of the nine master's theses in the areas of grammar, organization, and content. In addition, the study examined the types of comments given in written form. The research findings were qualitative in nature.

Data Analysis

The data collection technique that was used in this study is document analysis. Holsti (1969, p. 14) defines document analysis as “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages”. Document analysis may involve examining a sample of films, books, newspapers, or television programs and attempting to categorize the messages that are being conveyed to them (Jackson, 1999). The analysis provides the researcher “a mean by which to learn about how subjects or authors of textual materials view their social worlds and how these views fit into the larger frame of how the social sciences view these issues and interpretations” (Berg, 2009, p.343). This study chose Jordanian master's students who had already defended their master thesis because he needed to analyze their thesis as part of document analysis.

At the beginning of the research, the researcher asked for the students’ consent to allow him to make photocopies of the written feedback sheets. Additionally, the researcher asked them to bring their supervisors’ written feedback on their thesis. These pieces of work helped the researcher to gain familiarity with their writing and contextualizing the interviews around their proposals. The theses were analyzed in terms of the length and feedback (i.e. content vs. form comments).

The researcher chose document data because one important advantage of using document analysis is stability (Merriam, 1998). Analysis of this data source “lends contextual richness and helps to ground an inquiry in the milieu of the writer. This grounding in real-world issues and day-to-day concerns is ultimately what the naturalistic inquiry is working toward” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 234).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research question: What types of feedback are made by supervisors on students Master's thesis? Three main types of supervisors' feedback were emerged in this study: Problems with coherence, Problems in mechanism of writing and Problems with organizing the thesis. Table 1 displays the comments that has made by the participants. The researcher categorized these three types as Problems with coherence which included problems with writing flow, conjunction words, unrelated sentences, repetition, and sentence length, incomplete ideas, linking sentences. The second main type was Problems in mechanism of writing which included grammatical mistakes, reporting verbs, punctuation, spelling, paraphrasing, using

articles and Capitalization. The last main type was Problems with organizing the thesis which included writing thesis, and writing style.

Table 1. Supervisors feedback on students' thesis

Problems with coherence (Writing flow, conjunction words, unrelated sentences, repetition, and sentence length, incomplete ideas, linking sentences)
Problems in mechanism of writing (Grammatical mistakes, reporting verbs, punctuation, spelling, paraphrasing, using articles and Capitalization).
Problems with organizing the thesis (writing thesis, writing style)

Problems with coherence

Five documents out of nine documents showed problem with coherence. Analysis of the documents shows the problems with coherence such as problems of writing flow, using conjunction words, length sentences, and way to express ideas, to rewrite the same ideas in the context, in organizing the paragraphs, in writing unclear paragraphs or incomplete sentences, paragraphs or sentences which need more explanation. For examples, the researcher found in document number 6, whereby the participant wrote some paragraphs in some awkward manner to the reader which led to some confusion in his writing. His supervisor commented:

"This research attempts to contribute and help government to improve and implement e-government initiative more effectively by the business communities. This research hopes to narrow the knowledge gap that exists due to the scarcity of studies in the field of e-government adoption and implementation prerequisites of e-government success" (Document 6).

Another example was obtained from the same participant in relation to incomplete sentences. He wrote incomplete ideas as such:

"The previous study by Ramdani et al., (2009) obtained average alpha reliability of 0.95 for the relative advantage and 0.92 for the compatibility" (Document 6).

Document 1 showed that the participant repeated his ideas many times in a sentence such as:

"As stated earlier in chapter 1, the main objective of the present study is to examine the relationship between organization variables namely, human resources practices, and leadership style on cyber-deviance, and the effect of mediating variable (organizational commitment) on human resources practices, leadership style, and cyber-deviance" (Document 1).

Similarly, another example:

"This study is conducted at three telecommunication companies in Jordan, which is contain three companies, whereby all located at the capital city at Amman" (Document 1).

Likewise, some other documents showed that the students did not provide enough details in their writing. The researcher found in document 9 whereby the participant did not provide enough details about his topic. He wrote:

"The multichannel integration process in which value-adding activities are created with customers based on the outputs from the strategy development process and the value creation process (Payne & Frow, 2005). This process is neglected from the categorization of Plakoyiannaki & Saren, 2006. (Explain more what multichannel integration process is...)" (Document 9).

Furthermore, some students were facing problem in summarizing their write-up. The following is the comment from the supervisor of document number 5:

"The summary section is too short and inappropriate. It should be enhanced to include the major issues of the chapter and their outcomes to the study. Chapter two discussed literature related to e-government IS adoption. It highlighted some of issues that are linked to characteristics of e-government adoption, factors that drive its adoption and the impacts on businesses performance. The literatures provide the foundation for the development of the research framework for this study which is discussed in the next chapter" (Document 5).

Conjunction words

The thesis documents showed that the participants were struggling to use conjunction words, and they had limited number of conjunction words or they did not use them at all. For example, Document number 1 used the conjunction *and* in the wrong place. He wrote:

"The collection and of data will be carried out as follows" (Document 1).

Another example, document number 5 used *and* many times in the same paragraph. He wrote:

"Mayer et al., (2004) redefines emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive emotions accurately, and to access and generate emotions, appraise and express feelings, to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions and intellectual growth" (Document 5).

For example, document number 1 started a new paragraph using *because* to link with the previous paragraph:

"Because behaviors must be purposefully toward the organization goals, actual behaviors are expected to help achieve organizational effectiveness and efficiencies" (Document 1).

Linking sentences

Another example showed that the students did not know how to link the sentences. Document number 8 wrote:

"Robinson and Bennett, (1995) refer to organizational deviance as grouping of behaviors between the individual and the organization that involves such things as theft, sabotage, lateness, or putting little effort into work. Previous scholars have identified cyber-deviance under the organizational deviancy category" (Lim, 2002 and 2005), (Document 8).

Other students wrote incomplete information. One supervisor was unsatisfied with his writing as there was lack of explanation, so he commented: Explain more what multichannel integration process is.... He wrote:

The multichannel integration process in which value-adding activities are created with customers based on the outputs from the strategy development process and the value creation process (Payne & Frow, 2005). This process is neglected from the categorization of Plakoyiannaki & Saren, 2006." (Document 9).

Problems in Mechanism of Writing

Almost all of the documents, 8 out of 9 showed that the students made a lot of grammatical mistakes such as capitalizing all the proper names, using the wrong tenses, wrong subject-

verb agreement, wrong proposition, making spelling mistakes, using wrong punctuation, and using the wrong articles. Here are some examples from the documents.

Grammatical Mistakes

Document 1 found that, the participant made many mistakes in tenses, and verbs. He wrote in his thesis, “*The four types of deviant behavior are*”; but the correct phrase should be depend on his supervisor view was “*The four types of deviant behavior can be seen in*” (Document 1). Another example, participant 4 wrote: “*This method of data collection will be use in this study*” but the correct sentence is “*This method of data collection will be used in this study*” (Document 2).

Participant 5 used two verbs in the same sentence. For example: “*This chapter aims to explain the research methodology*”, but the correct sentence from his supervisor was “*This chapter explains the research methodology*” (Document 3). At the same time, one of the documents showed that the participant made a lot of mistakes of using the subject verb agreement in the context. For example: “*These teachers teaches various major of study*”. But the correct sentence from his supervisor was “*These teachers teach students from various majors*” (Document 7).

Capitalization

The researcher has found many mistakes regarding to capitalization. Some supervisors were giving such comments. Some participants could not identify the proper names which needed to be capitalized. For example: Some students didn’t capitalize the proper names such as “Jordan and Amman”. The names of the companies in Jordan such as “Zain, Orange, Express, Ummiah” and author names such as “Sekaran, Ismail” (Document 1).

Spelling

The researcher has found mistakes in regarding to the spelling of some words. One of Participants made a spelling mistake in terms of the meaning of words such as lift and left. He wrote in his thesis: “*The lift side of the model*”. It is supposed to be “*The left side of the model*”. (Document 2). In addition, another documents found spelling mistakes because he was confused with the meaning of words. In his thesis, the participant wrote “here” instead of “her” (Document 2).

Articles

Using articles was one of the proper mistakes among the participants. One of the participant made mistakes when using articles such as a, an, and the. He wrote: “*The second stage of the research is a prototype construction and development*”. The correction was “*The second stage of the research is the prototype development*” (Document 3).

Punctuation

Punctuation is very important in academic writing. Some participant used the punctuation marks many times in their writing. For example, the researcher found that in document 7, “*For my research, I use the general methodology in research design, the reason I choose this methodology because, it offers*”. The sentence is supposed to be based on his supervisor correction: “*I use a general methodology for my research because it is the most suitable one*” (Document 7).

Problems with Organizing the Thesis

A problem with research methodology was the third main theme which emerged from this study. It contains organizing the thesis and writing style. About half of the participants (5 out

of 9; 44%) mentioned that they faced problem in organizing the thesis whether in making a smooth flow in the methodology chapter or in numbering the sub-headings in the thesis. Some of the supervisors comments were on the structure of the chapters, others had problem with the instrument, how to choose the questionnaire and failed to number the sub-headings for the thesis. Other problems mentioned by the participants were related to writing the research questions and objectives, writing the problem statement, writing the hypothesis, writing the literature review, and writing the conclusion. As mentioned earlier, the students were having problems in writing the introduction section. The participants in this study admitted that they did not know exactly what they were supposed to write in the introduction. For example, document 3 always wrote a short introduction of each chapter and he always received comments from his supervisor to elaborate on it. This is a sample of his introduction to Chapter 3 from his thesis:

"The present chapter provides a description of the research methodology of the study. It begins by the hypothesis, and type of study, then the research design by explaining specifically how the sample was selected, data collected, variables measured, and data analyzed". (Document 3).

On the other hand, document 8 lacked the ability to write a brief introduction for each new idea such as:

"The frequent recourse to arbitration to solve disputes arising from international business transaction involving state". The correction was "It has to be acknowledged from the very beginning that the frequent..." (Document8).

Furthermore, some documents had problem in writing the research questions and the objectives correctly. Document 6 received a comment from his supervisor who said that this participant could not follow the correct order of presenting questions and objectives which should be from research problem, to research objectives and then research questions. An example of this is:

"What is the impact on firms' performance after e-government adoption by business?". After revision the questions becomes, "What is the impact of e-government adoption among businesses on firms' performance?" (Document, 6).

Similarly, document 2 had problem in writing the research questions. For example:

"Which are the technological factors that influence the uptake of e-learning among working adults in Jordan"? The correction was "What are the technological factors that influence the uptake of e-learning among working adults in Jordan"? (Document, 2).

The researcher analyzed 9 theses. It was discovered that 8 out of 9 theses had problem with writing style that is following the APA style and in-text citation when they were writing their master's thesis. Here are some examples from the documents. All the participants were confused how to write the references correctly using APA style and on how to write the in-text-citations. For example, the researcher found the document 8 had problem when to use "et al" or how to write the citation at the end of the sentence.

"According to Teseema & Scoeters (2006),... Meyer and Allen developed a framework that." ... (Meyer and Allen, 1990), (Document, 8).

While analyzing the documents, the researcher found 3 out of 9 of the documents had problem in numbering the points. Participants 3, 4 and 20 claimed that they used numbering to explain their points instead of writing it in a paragraph form. For example, participant 3 wrote:

"The collection and of data will be carried out as follows: 1- The researcher contacts the telecommunication company managers and fixed a date to distribute the questionnaire. 2- The researcher will meet the managers to explain their roles in answering the questions before disturbing the questionnaire. 3- On average, it takes the respondents 15-20 minutes to answer the questionnaire". (Document, 1).

CONCLUSION

Supervisors should be aware of the importance of providing effective feedback for the development of L2 learners' thinking and writing. Feedback can encourage and advance student learning if it focuses on improving students writing. To make use of its full potential, students must be able to self-manage learning and lecturers have a role in encouraging and motivating this ability within students. Thus, supervisors may present themselves as helpful facilitators offering support and guidance. Supervisors' written feedback for L2 aims to give effective feedback to students to improve their written accuracy, classroom realities and the preferences of students must be considered. When supervisors give feedback, they should show students examples of how they can apply to improve their writing. In addition, written feedback must be done politely. This article aims to introduce the supervisors' written feedback on Jordanian masters' students. The main objective of this paper was to discover the types of errors that Jordanian master's students who are majoring in English language at Yarmouk University made when they write their master's thesis. The researcher analyzed 9 Jordanian master theses based on their supervisors' comments. The researcher has discovered three main themes such as problems with coherence, problems in mechanism of writing, and problems with organizing the thesis.

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