



## INVESTIGATING TESOL GRADUATE STUDENTS' MULTIDIMENSIONAL FEEDBACK ENGAGEMENT IN A DIALOGIC SUPERVISORY FEEDBACK PRACTICE

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**Abstract:** This qualitative case study seeks to uncover how four graduate TESOL students engage in dialogic supervisory feedback about three-dimensional levels of engagement: affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. Four TESOL graduate students involved in the same supervision group from a public university in Indonesia were recruited for this study using purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews and students' commented proposals were used to collect data, and the data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings were thematized following three dimensions of student engagement. The findings of this study bring insights into the potential of dialogic feedback in graduate students' thesis writing development and provide implications for supervisory feedback practices in similar ESL/EFL settings.

**Keywords:** *dialogic feedback, feedback engagement, supervisory feedback, thesis writing.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Supervisory feedback is essential for the process of graduate students' thesis writing. Feedback commonly fails to match the students' needs (Carless, 2015), and most of them are discarded or never seen (Evans, 2013; Price, Handley, & Millar, 2011). Students typically find it difficult to clearly understand feedback signals (Holmes & Papageorgiou, 2009). Supervision is viewed as a complex teaching practice focused on learning (Atkins, Brown, & Brown, 2002; Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007). The notion of feedback is frequently characterized as the least satisfactory aspect of the students' learning experience (Mulliner & Tucker, 2017). The sole purpose of supervision is to educate students not just the skills but also to shape them to become autonomous researchers (Manathunga & Goozée, 2007; Manathunga, Pitt, & Critchley, 2009). The supervisor's role in providing feedback to the students is an essential aspect of preparing them for the academic field (Stracke, 2010; Wang & Li, 2011). Wang and Li (2011) discovered that students who were frustrated or unclear about the feedback viewed their supervisor as the one who is in charge of giving the quickest way to solve the problem. Students must independently research while also considering the supervisor as their assistance and constant support.

Feedback is viewed as “a continuing dialogue between the feedback provider and the feedback receiver” (Filius, de Kleijn, Uijl, Prins, van Rijen, & Grobbee, 2018), in which all of the people involved in the discussion be responsible for building meaningful feedback practices. The idea of feedback is particularly problematic and conflicting (Rand, 2017). Several findings (Agricola, Prins, van der Schaaf, & van Tartwijk, 2021; de Kleijn, Mainhard, Meijer, Brekelmans, & Pilot, 2013) show that students struggle to comprehend the feedback given by the supervisor due to the academic terms used, and this resulted to the incomprehensible direction for students. Thus, receiving constructive feedback in the supervision meeting is a key thing for graduate students' academic work (Basturkmen, East, and Bitchener 2014; Xu 2017). Even then, supervisory feedback practices are still conducted with the focus on monologic feedback, resulting in the tendency to lower students' level of engagement with feedback given (McConlogue 2015).

The old paradigm of feedback which sees feedback only as the transmission of comments, would not open room for students' active participation. In fact, there is a need for students to engage in feedback dialogue rather than sit passively and remain silent. Instead, students could initiate discussion, come up with questions, express their opinion, and defend their standpoint. By doing so, students could contribute to the success of the supervision meeting. Hence, the interaction between supervisors and students is perceived to be critical. Drawing from these issues, Nicol (2010, p. 503) proposed that “[f]eedback should be conceptualised as a dialogic and contingent two-way process that involves co-ordinated teacher-student and peer-to-peer interaction as well as active learner engagement”.

Dialogic feedback, as the new paradigm of feedback approach, is defined by Carless (2013a) as interactive interactions in which there is a process of interpreting, negotiating, and clarifying meanings. It is facilitated through the trust connections between the students and the educator. The discussion of dialogic feedback has gained attention in the field of assessment in higher education. Recent research addresses the way and the reasons for students' interaction towards feedback, ways to effectively engage the students with feedback, and evaluation of its influence (Henderson, Ajjawi, Boud, & Molloy, 2019). Green (2019) discovered in a recent case study that postgraduate TESOL course participants had only a "vague sense" (p.89) of how to apply comments and suggestions received. Drawing from this finding, there is a need to invite the students into dynamic conversations to understand feedback and provide more active and purposeful learning opportunities (Ellegaard et al., 2018).

To bridge the above-mentioned gaps, this study intends to scrutinize how four graduate students engage with dialogic supervisory feedback on thesis writing. However, literature is absent on how dialogic feedback engagement is enacted in supervision meetings. Although the importance of supervision meetings is generally recognized, the quality of supervision meetings has not gotten much interests. There is a scarcity of supervision meeting empirical research. The following research questions guided this study: In what ways does dialogic feedback engage TESOL graduate students to revise their thesis?

### **1.1. Dialogic Feedback**

Feedback as a monologue, or what Carless (2015) defined as the ‘old paradigm’ of feedback, positions students in the place of passive recipients of knowledge and does not provide opportunities for discussion. This monologic feedback approach seems to omit the interactive process of learning (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In contrast, from the lens of the 'new paradigm' standpoint, feedback is seen as a continuous

process. The dialogue between those who provide feedback and those who receive it allows the receivers to discover and interpret the meaning from their perspectives. (Ajjawi and Boud 2017; Nicol 2010; Orsmond & Merry, 2013; Yang and Carless 2013;). This view of feedback under this paradigm resonates with constructivist theories of learning. Driving from this point of view, feedback is indeed a "dynamic," "interpretive" discussion, and thus a "social and constructed phenomenon" (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017, p.253). As a dialogic process, feedback could help students monitor, measure, and control their learning through continuous and improved dialogue engagement (Ajjawi & Boud, 2018; Carless, 2016; Nicol, 2010). Students could generate meaning from feedback and decide on learning activities simultaneously to improve learning and performance levels by engaging them in dialogue (Yang & Carless, 2013). Through this approach, students are not framed as "disempowered apprentices" (Hyatt 2005, p.351)

## **1.2. Dimensions of Feedback Engagement**

Students' engagement with dialogic feedback is pertinent as feedback processes can only evolve beyond the transfer of comments through their engagement and acts. Price, Handley, and Millar (2011, p. 894) asserted that "Feedback without engagement is completely unproductive". In general, feedback engagement has given multidimensional insights into the spectrum of affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. In this study, behavioral engagement entails the students' participation, attendance, and completion of work. It is mainly concentrated on the observable behaviors of students' involvement and response to the feedback and how they apply to revise their thesis writing (Ellis, 2010; Han & Hyland, 2015). Affective engagement relates to students' various emotional responses toward the supervisor, peers, or the supervision meeting situations. The kinds of emotional reactions in which the students feel happy, bored, frustrated, or anxious may appear differently in different environments, circumstances, or with specific individuals (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Put it bluntly, and it describes how the students feel about attending supervision meetings. Cognitive engagement focuses on the students' cognitive process as reflected by how they cognitively respond to the feedback (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Even though these three dimensions are conceptually distinct, it is vital to emphasize that these three components are dynamically interconnected inside the individual; they are not separate processes (Fredricks et al., 2004).

## **2. METHOD**

The current study used an exploratory case study approach to gather data to help us better understand how graduate students monitor, practice, and perceive dialogic feedback on their thesis proposal writing. Case studies are a sort of research design described by Duff (2008) as "attractive, ...having a high degree of completeness, depth of analysis, and readability" (p. 43). This case study is used as the research design to get in-depth knowledge, clear reality, and significance for the participants involved from a holistic perspective.

A total of four students were recruited for this study using purposive sampling. The participants were enrolled in an English Teacher Education Master's degree program at a university in Indonesia. All of them were members of a supervision group, which was guided by the same supervisor. Participants had signed a consent form and they would be kept anonymous in order to maintain confidentiality.

As for data collection, the qualitative semi-structured interview was used to obtain the data. The semi-structured interview was also conducted three to four times through a virtual

meeting using the Zoom platform. This is designed to prompt and assist participants in recalling their experiences with feedback reception, which may need a continuous deep-thinking process in order to intentionally articulate and express their opinions successfully. Furthermore, students' drafts and the commented proposals were gathered for study to gauge the extent to which the supervisor's comments assisted the students in improving their thesis writing. As for data analysis, the researchers use an approach that offer a description and interpretation (Willig, 2013).

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents and discusses the findings into three dimensions of engagement: cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement.

#### **3.1. Affective Engagement**

The affective dimension of feedback engagement is demonstrated in three indicators, namely positive relationships, positive emotions, and negative emotions. The positive relationship happened with the supervisor and also among the students themselves. Student A described her trust and positive attitude toward the supervisor through the following excerpts:

*"His role is not only just correcting my work, but you know he also praised my writing or simply my efforts, like he valued how disciplined I am. It makes me motivated". (Student A)*

*"He asked me how is my progress, like he called us one by one, and then give us motivation" (Student D)*

In this sense, Student A and Student D felt that their supervisor cares about them. The supervisor showed intentional efforts to know students' progress and condition. Student B and Student C raised an example of a positive relationship between peers that is experienced by her in the supervision meeting as follows:

*"I trust my friends. We fellow students do not judge each other" (Student B)*  
*"we conducted a zoom meeting or just call each other when things are getting hard." (Student C)*

Here, Student B emphasized a feeling of trust with her peers in the same group of supervision meetings. Further, Student C also added that she perceived that positive relationships are valued and maintained in the group. In addition, this evidence also shows that the students feel emotionally safe in the environments they are in and the interactions with the supervisor as well as peers. They see this group beyond just a matter of supervision group, not just a student-supervisor, or student-student, but also as a human being. There are no bullying issues in this supervision group. All of the people in the supervision group contribute to establishing welcoming and supportive environments.

Although positive relationships dominate this affective dimension, they cannot neglect that negative emotions also appeared and are experienced by all of them. As an example, Student D encountered some feelings of frustration during her writing journey under her

supervision. Another student showed a different portrayal of negative emotions, student A sometimes feels anxious when it comes to giving a draft to her supervisor.

*"Of course, there were times when writing block happened like I know my error, but I got stuck. I cannot think of any idea and it makes me frustrated with myself" (Student D)*

*"He is an expert and I am just a novice researcher, my master's study is completely different from my undergrad, so see the difference? I wondered how embarrassing it is to show my paper to my supervisor as an expert." (Student A)*

Furthermore, there were also some occasions where the students got many comments and red ink on their papers. Some students uttered that they felt sad because they could not fulfill the supervisor's expectations. However, interestingly, all of the students could manage their emotions quite well. Instead, they felt motivated and happy because they got a lot of new knowledge and insight from the supervisor's feedback dialogue.

From the point of view of this affective dimension, we can conclude that the dialogic feedback practice affects the way the students see themselves, and their identity. Further, Chanock (2000) stated that constructive feedback engagement could be "obscured by emotional static" (p. 95). This means that the students' emotions can obstruct cognitive understanding of feedback dialogue (Boud, & Falchikov, 2007). However, within dialogic feedback, we found that the students could maintain their positive attitude and emotions towards the feedback given. This is portrayed when the students felt motivated and kept doing their best even though they got lots of red comments on their papers and a bunch of comments during feedback dialogue on a zoom meeting. This finding resonates with Carless' and Boud (2018) statements that feedback-literate students could manage their emotions when hearing critical feedback, as well as establish positive and sustainable behaviors.

### **3.2. Behavioral Engagement**

This section demonstrates two indicators of behavioral engagement portrayed from the data. They are students' participation and effort during supervision meetings. As shown in the interview data, there was a lot of conversation in the supervision meeting between the supervisor and the student. Some of the students considered that their conversation livens up the supervision meeting atmosphere. Student B conveyed her opinion through the following excerpt:

*"We converse with our supervisor freely in the supervision group, just as we do with other students. You know, it makes the meeting more vibrant, lively you know, even if it is held online." (Student B)*

As all of the students considered their supervisor as an expert in the field of research and publication, they always see each supervision meeting as an opportunity for them to get new insight. Thus, many of them usually have prepared some questions or things to discuss before they met their supervisor, like what was indicated by student C and Student D.

*"Well, sometimes I have already prepared my question or things that I really need to know before the meeting. I am fully aware that my supervisor has a lot of things to do, and I do not want the meeting wasted in vain, so I always come up with questions." (Student C)*

*"Yes, I had prepared everything before the meeting began. For example, tomorrow's meeting will discuss things related to the research method. I came up with some articles and I asked him whether the method on the articles is suitable for my research context or not. Or simply when I do not really sure about something, I always ask for his confirmation. I need to clarify my understanding" (Student D)*

Drawing from the findings above, behavioural engagement that is portrayed in this case is concerned with effort, perseverance, and focus. From some researchers' point of view, the degree to which students are engaged (that is, embrace their studies, apply strategic thinking, and work hard) has a major impact on how much they learn (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009).

*"It always feels nice to talk with my supervisor or my friends, you know, by being active in the discussion, it can liven up my mood to write or to revise my thesis" (Student C)*

Furthermore, some students also conveyed that they felt motivated after having a feedback dialogue with the supervisor. Guthrie, Wigfield, and You (2012) contend that students' behavioral involvement impacts the success of their learning experience with the drive of motivation.

### **3.3. Cognitive Engagement**

The third dimension of engagement that is presented in this finding is cognitive engagement. Drawing from the interview data, it is revealed that students' cognitive engagement vividly appeared in students' understanding of the feedback, self-evaluating and reflecting feedback process after they received feedback. All of the students implied that most of the time, the supervisor's feedback was comprehensible to them and they could notice the errors they made right away. The clear directions uttered by the supervisor were explained by Student B.

*"He gave us direction for the errors in my writing. Well actually the direction itself is enough for me, but he then he demonstrated to us on how to revise it, it makes me, even more, understand" (Student B)*

From her utterances, it shows that Student B could understand the feedback from the supervisor clearly through the example that the supervisor demonstrated. Student A, Student C, and Student D also have the same opinion as student B. However, there were some moments when the feedback sounds too general for the students and it can be solved through the interactions they had with the supervisor and peers. This experience was implied by Student D. In the following excerpt from an interview, she commented:

*"there were also some moments when I did not really understand what he meant like you know he gave a kind of general comment like he said that a specific paragraph needs elaboration, but I was confused on how should I elaborate it, and then I asked him what kinds of aspects that I need to add, he then explained it to me in detailed, so I guess the benefits of having interaction with my supervisor, incomprehensible parts could be clarified right away" (Student D)*

All of the students also showed their cognitive engagement in terms of self-evaluating and reflecting. Student C described the evaluation and reflection process in the following excerpt:

*"Usually, my supervisor led us to reflect on the supervision meeting, like what have we learned on that day, how did we feel like that". (Student C)*

Even though this reflection process was first initiated by the supervisor, the students could activate their cognition to reflect on the learning process from the supervision meeting. Besides, Student A also added that their supervisor sometimes pointed one of them to lead the discussion. In this sense, the supervisor also tried to cultivate the students' agency in leading the discussion and reflection. We further tried to dive deep into how this process impacts them. Interestingly, Student B and Student D revealed that unconsciously they apply this reflection process even when they are not asked to do that.

*"Sometimes I check for improvement of my writing as I look back again at my very first draft of my writing, and I see that I have improved, like a lot" (Student B)*

Student B usually did it by comparing the current performance or writing to past performance or writing. Furthermore, Student D even implemented this approach in her classroom as she is a teacher, too. Taken all together, the cognitive side of student engagement in our findings is consistent with Coates' (2006) assertion that learning environments that encourage students to use higher-order cognitive skills could increase engagement and strengthen learning. It includes how the supervisor and students reflect and relate new knowledge to their existing knowledge.

## **CONCLUSION**

Finally, the conclusion part of this study refers back to the research goals and gives a summary of the major results. The current study explored the multi-dimensional engagement of a dialogic supervisory feedback practice in the case of TESOL graduate students. This study sheds light on the emerging approach to supervisory feedback. From this study, it is shown that the dialogic feedback approach could enhance the three aspects of student engagement. The results of this study show that good relationships, positive feelings, and negative emotions are three markers of feedback engagement's affective dimension. While the behavioral dimension depicts two markers of behavioral engagement based on the data. They are the students' involvement and effort during supervision meetings. Lastly, students' cognitive engagement was evident in their understanding of the feedback, self-evaluating, and feedback reflection. The current study makes an important contribution to practice in the field of English language teaching in higher education as this kind of dialogic approach could be potentially applied in a similar setting. However, this research has certain limitations. One limitation is that this study was conducted on a smaller scale, with only a small sample of supervisors engaged. Richer data and more participants may be useful in future research. Additionally, a long amount of time and observation for data collection may be beneficial in capturing their involvement in the supervision meeting.

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