Doctoral Students' Perceived Needs and Preferences for Supervisors' Written Feedback

Yenus Nurie
Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia
Email: Yenusn@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines doctorial students' needs and preferences for written feedback on thesis writing from supervisors. Several studies have explored students' preferences for written feedback to respond to students writing in the classroom. However, relatively little or no research has been previously reported about what aspects of written feedback (content, generic or linguistic) are preferred by PhD students to thesis writing in the Ethiopian context. A questionnaire was administered and collected from fifty one doctorial candidates who were currently pursuing their projects in four disciplines. Participants were purposefully selected to complete a questionnaire. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data. The findings of this study found that PhD students tend to prefer feedback on Content knowledge to feedback on Genre knowledge –and Linguistic accuracy and appropriateness. The study found a wide range of PhD students'

perceived needs regarding specific categories of feedback, which they valued written feedback on content most, and this preference was consistent throughout all the four disciplines. The practical implications of these findings for higher education supervision, and future research directions are then presented.

Keywords: Preferences, feedback, perceived needs, dissertation, supervision

Introduction

PhD students' supervision has been one of the most challenging aspects of the teaching profession in higher educations. Particularly, this is more daunting for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) PhD students as they lack the linguistic competence to adequately address each aspect of the research. This problem, coupled with the doctoral student's preparation on the broad range of academic practice, including research, teaching, and service (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008), has made supervisory practices be more complex. Carrying out a doctorate is a 'special experience (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). This is because doctoral students are expected to focus not only on promoting engagement within their academic job but also conducting research. Armstrong (2004) supports this assertion and posits that supervision is the most complex and subtle form of teaching in which academics engage.

The ultimate objective of a PhD program is to prepare the candidate to be a knowledgeable future academician and a researcher who will fit into demanding professional practices. As a result, there is a growing demand for improvement in research in doctoral programs, specifically the quality and quantity of academic writing products (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). These objectives can be realized when supervisor feedback focuses to develop students' research skills as students are also expected to contribute to their discipline by writing professional and

publishable products (Kamler & Thomson, 2006) that add to their field of study. As doctoral programs require students to engage actively in academic writing, and look towards improving their writing through the application of quality standards and evaluation (Walker, et al., 2008), developing scholars with good academic writing skills is also one of the main goals of doctoral education (Eyres, Hatch, Turner, & West, 2001).

Research has indicated potential problems regarding doctoral students' writing and graduate level writing as a whole (Can & Walker, 2011). With respect to graduate students, research has also showed that doctoral students exhibited organizational problems in their writings (Alter & Adkins 2006; Surratt 2006), and social science doctoral students are even far less successful in refereed publication compared to science doctoral students (Kamler 2008).

In another study, postgraduate students experience difficulty with the sequencing and development of propositions and with the use of transitions between propositions and topics (Dong, 1998), and some have difficulty with grammar, punctuation, and word-choice (Surratt 2006). In his case study of Brazilian PhD students at the University of Manchester, James (1984) reported that both L1 and L2 students find argument construction as a challenge. Bitchner et al. (2011) also asserted that coherence and cohesion in argument creation as graduate students' writing difficulties in thesis-writing. Cumulatively, the problems and challenges of PhD students in their academic writing reviewed so far justify the need to increase supervision in higher institutions to steer quality research.

It is worth pointing out that in many universities; supervision has been developed and employed in an attempt to bridge this gap. Feedback is the most powerful factor that affects students' achievement, and provision of effective and high quality feedback has been identified as a key element of quality teaching (Rowe & Wood, 2008). Research supervision has been identified by graduate students as the single most influential factor on PhD satisfaction and has also been linked with time to completion

(Taylor & Beasley 2005). It is vital to provide effective and quality feedback to achieve quality teaching and supervising (Rowe & Wood, 2008).

Feedback assists graduate students to determine the parts of writing that is correct, and the parts that need correction for improved writing as well as alerting students of their strengths and weaknesses in academic writing (Manjet, 2016). Further, Engebretson, Smith, McLaughlin, Seibold, Teret and Ryan (2008) stated that the quality and appropriateness of research supervision is critical, and supervisors' constructive and detailed feedback on written work has been identified as a key characteristic of good research supervision.

Empirical Research Evidence on the Values of Supervision

Feedback helps in stimulating critical thinking among students to ensure the development of constructive ideas for writing (Manjet, 2016). Feedback 'lies at the heart of the learning experience of a PhD student …… it is through written feedback that the supervisor communicates and provides advanced academic training, particularly in writing, to the supervisee' (Kumar & Stracke, 2007, p. 462). Written feedback by the graduate students' supervisors and lecturers is a fundamental source of input for academic writing such as thesis writing (Bitchener, Basturkmen & East, 2010).

The growing research on supervision practices has revealed the focus of supervisors in response to student thesis writing. Bitchener et al (2010) indicated that feedback on gaps in their students' coverage of the literature was mentioned more frequently than feedback on the other areas. Further, across all three disciplines, feedback on gaps in their students' coverage of content is mentioned most frequently. Casanave and Hubbard (1992) and Dong (1998) revealed that identifying difficulties at the sentence and paragraph levels was the focus of supervisors on student thesis writing. Recently, research has indicated that many supervisors' focus of feedback has mainly been on content (Bitchener et al., 2011; Kumar & Stracke, 2007). The study of

Hyatt (2005) found that comments on content, style and development were most frequent, whereas comments in the other categories, such as comments on organization, were infrequent.

The general focus of advisors has also been reported written feedback on micro-level (Bitchener, Basturkmen & East, 2010) and to struggle to articulate implicit knowledge (Paré, 2011). Similarly, Bitchner, et al (2011) revealed that…… "humanities students appeared most often to receive feedback that alerted them to the extent to which their developing arguments were related to literature, in contrast to neither the Sciences / mathematics nor the commerce students noted that they received feedback in this area. It was also noted by 1 in 4 students of humanities and Sciences / mathematics that feedback that supported them in finding appropriate literature or developing an appropriate methodology was given. Curiously, those in commerce disciplines did not note that they received feedback in any areas of content or subject-matter." (p. 37).

Manjet (2015) stated that graduate students face challenges in their academic writing practices in the context of expressing ideas, linking ideas, sequencing their assignment and ensuring clarity in their writing. As such, constructive written feedback from their lecturers is utmost important to develop their academic writing skills. Other aspects that students frequently need feedback were logical order and organization of information and ideas, and transition and flow between sentences, paragraphs, or sections. Additionally, the respondents were also having difficulties in maintaining transition and flow of content (Manjet, 2015).

Similarly, Gulfidan (2009) also reported that PhD students were aware of these difficulties and tended to expect receiving feedback on how they can improve transitions between sentences, paragraphs and section (As cited in Manjet, 2016). Bitchner et al. (2011) asserted that coherence and cohesion in argument creation were difficulties for some thesis-writing students. Despite a reasonably substantial research on the focus of supervisors' written feedback to student thesis, relatively few studies have

investigated graduate students' needs on their supervisors' written feedback. Therefore, in order to understand the role of supervision in higher education, it is worth investigating whether feedback practices meet with graduate students' perceived needs and preferences as not all types of feedback might be equally wanted by the students.

Manjet (2016) indicated that graduate students preferred the content of their academic work to be emphasized in the feedback and not merely focusing on language and formatting issues. Further, PhD students wanted their supervisors to focus on relevance to literature, the way the work is being presented, literature decisions, appropriateness of methodology and material decisions (Bitchener, Basturkmen, East, & Meyer, 2011). Can and Walker (2014) showed that arguments and justifications in dissertation was what PhD students preferred most in their thesis writing. Conversely, the students showed least interest for linguistic elements, such as grammar, formatting, and referencing.

The main purpose of feedback is to reduce discrepancies between current understandings and performance and a goal (Hattie &Timperley, 2007), indicating the need to consider appropriate feedback by realizing student needs and expectations. In a more recent study, Hoomanfard, Jafarigohar, Jalilifar and Hosseini (2018) reported three factors (genre knowledge, content knowledge, and appropriation) that affect Iranian TEFL graduate students' perceived need for the type of written feedback in the interview with PhD students. The questionnaire results of their study also revealed that PhD students gave overriding need for feedback on arguments and justifications, logical order and organization of information and ideas. However, students were not enthusiastic to receive feedback on *where certain units of content should be placed within a chapter,* and they found themselves capable of deciding what to include in the different sections of their dissertations.

The role of feedback has been discussed at greater length from the theoretical and previous empirical evidence; however, what types of feedback do PhD students perceive to be the most

important in thesis writing has remained in question. Students' academic writing cannot improve if students' needs and preferences are not met with their supervisors' written feedback. The impetus for the present study stems from the notion that understanding a great deal about the perceived needs and preferences of PhD students helps ensure high quality supervision practices, thereby increasing quality of academic writing.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The role of supervision in facilitating student learning is supported by many theoretical and pedagogical grounds where research writing is seen as a contextualized social practice (Lillis, 2001; Lea 2005). Constructivist theorists conceived that the learner needs to actively engage in the learning process with information and feedback from teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Vygotysky (1978) posits that a social interaction between a more able person and a less competent person plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Constructivist theorists conceived that the learner needs to actively engage in the learning process with information and feedback from teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Vygotysky also proposed that while the individual actively learns, he/she needs to be assisted by the other, which he termed the setting as the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), the area of exploration for which the student is cognitively prepared, but requires help and social interaction to fully develop. A teacher or more experienced peer is able to provide the learner with "scaffolding" to support the student's evolving understanding or development of complex skills. Collaborative learning, discourse modeling, and scaffolding are strategies for supporting the intellectual knowledge and skills of learners and facilitating intentional learning. Taken together, research writing is a contextualized social practice in that supervision and writing practices have implications for the development of individual research writers (Lillis, 2001).

Rationale for the Study

There is currently limited research on the perceived needs of student researchers through written feedback as most of the previous research on written feedback focused on teachers' written feedback to respond to their students writing in the classroom rather than to student thesis writing (Diab, 2005; Katayama, 2007; Noora, 2006; Riazi & Riasti, 2007; Wang, 2010). Further, despite the fact that there is a general agreement on the importance for supervisor written feedback to the development of student writing, what aspects of written feedback (content, generic or linguistic) are preferred by PhD students remained in question, especially in the Ethiopian higher education context.

The conflicting pressures from research reports and documented problems on the one hand, the increasing demands to quality research to substantially prepare knowledgeable, skilled manpower, on the other hand underscore the dire need to support students with their writing (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007). In light of these concepts and the empirical evidence reviewed for this study, therefore, the present study proposed that current concepts of supervision practices in higher education need to be re-interpreted into a more mutual understanding between supervisors' practices and student researchers' expectations. This is because without understanding students' feedback needs, the efforts made to respond to their thesis writing can be inconceivable, and hence is doomed to failure. In light of the literature and the empirical evidence collected, the following research questions were formulated.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceived needs and preferences of PhD students for their supervisors' written feedback?
2. Do PhD students' perceived needs and preferences for supervisors' written feedback differ across disciplines?

Methodology

Participants

Doctoral students in six disciplines were asked to take part in the study, but the participants were drawn from the four discipline areas either due to unavailability of doctoral students during data collection, or due to reluctance to participate in the study. Data collectors were recruited for each discipline. Fifty one PhD candidates who were currently working their projects in four disciplines: 20 students from the Humanities, 12 students from the Social Science, 7 students from the Natural Science and 12 students from the Institute of Technology (IOT) were invited to participate in this study. Out of fifty one PhD students who participated in the questionnaire, 12 PhD students were selected for the interview using a quota sampling method. The sample consisted of 4 students from the Humanities, 3 students from Social Science, 2 students from Natural Science and 3 students from the Institute of Technology.

Design and Procedure

The present study employed a mixed approach design to collect data. A questionnaire was administered to fifty one students. The following themes were included in the survey: Written feedback on linguistic, content or genre. Quantitative research method was used to obtain information about the students' perceived needs and preferences towards their supervisors' written feedback to dissertation writing employing a survey questionnaire, which purposive sampling was used to obtain data from the questionnaire.

The qualitative data, which was obtained from students who were selected using quota sampling for the interview was used for the purposes of triangulation. Informed consent was obtained from candidates to participate in the study that aimed to understand what type of written feedback PhD students prefer to get from their supervisors in thesis writing. Then, they were asked to freely explain what type of supervisor written comments in

response to their thesis writing they need, and why they needed a particular feedback most.

This explanatory sequential design typically involves primarily the quantitative instrument, which was followed by a qualitative data to augment the quantitative outcomes of the study. The quantitative part was obtained from a questionnaire about doctoral students' written feedback preferences, whereas the qualitative part included students' interview to trace students' preferences regarding feedback and provide a comprehensive understanding of the results and explain thoroughly what the numerical data means.

Data collection Instruments

Students' questionnaire was administered to respondents to to collect data about their preferences towards various types of feedback provided by their supervisors. A questionnaire that consists of a five-point Likert scale items (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) was adapted from the study of Bitchner et al (2010). This instrument was used, for it was field tested. The authors investigated what supervisors said they focused on when giving feedback to graduate students' theses in relation to content knowledge, genre knowledge, rhetorical structure and organization**,** writing coherence and cohesion and linguistic accuracy and appropriateness.

The researcher was cognizant of the inclusiveness of *organization* into *genre knowledge*, and *writing coherence and cohesion* into *linguistic accuracy and appropriateness.* Therefore, a questionnaire that contains the three major aspects of feedback: content knowledge, genre knowledge and linguistic accuracy and appropriateness were modified and used for the sake of brevity and purposes of the present study. The unstructured interview was used to prompt candidates for further discussion about the reason why they said they expected their supervisors to focus a particular feedback in thesis writing over the other, and hence to provide some additional insight into this study

The Study Setting

This study was conducted to examine the supervisory written feedback in response to PhD students' thesis writing at Bahir Dar University. Dissertation writing is a compulsory course offered to graduate students as a partial fulfillment of the requirement for PhD degree. The students' research writing, which lasts for more than a year, is assisted by advisors who are assigned to supervise the overall research project or writing of a dissertation proposed by the student researchers. Supervision, which includes responding to the first draft and revision, is carried out throughout the year(s) until the final submission of dissertation to their respective department is made.

Data Analysis

The first stage of data analysis involved the quantitative data that was obtained from the survey instrument was tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data that was obtained from PhD candidates' interview was collected coded and analyzed pertaining to the three aspects of written feedback. Specifically, the students' preferences for supervisors' written feedback was examined in relation to three major areas: Content knowledge – its accuracy, completeness and relevance, Genre knowledge – the functions of different parts of a thesis and Linguistic accuracy and appropriateness (Bitchener,et al 2010). In order to determine the students' perceived needs and preferences, the means, standard deviation of the students' responses for the questionnaire were calculated. The data obtained from the students' interview was analyzed qualitatively. The table below shows the types and the categories of written feedback supervisors provide in response to student dissertations.

Table 1: Written Feedback based on the three categories of written feedback

Feedback Type	Examples
Content knowledge	Gaps in theoretical understanding and coverage on the literature
	Comments on irrelevance that was not related to the research of the thesis
	Comments on the wider significance of the work
	Comments on gaps in the justification or explanation of arguments
Genre knowledge	Comments on the structure of what goes where and examples of what is expected
	The purpose behind including particular units of content in a particular part-genre
	Feedback about the skills required for each genre
	Feedback on Rhetorical structure/organization
Linguistic accuracy and appropriateness	The appropriateness of vocabulary choice, style, voice and academic register
	Feedback that focuses on systematic errors
	Feedback on writing coherence and cohesion
	Feedback about how to develop ideas with supportive and counter evidence

Results and Discussions

Feedback Preference on content

Table 2: Students' Feedback Preferences on content across disciplines

Social Science	Humanities		Social Science		Natural Science		IOT		Total
Content Elements	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean
Gaps in the literature	3.46	1.474	4.25	0.754	3.25	1.215	3.43	1.134	3.60
Irrelevance to the thesis	2.21	1.560	3.42	1.443	3.17	1.697	3.86	1.069	3.17
Wider significance of the work	2.92	1.442	2.08	1.084	3.75	1.138	2.14	0.900	2.72
Gaps in the justification or arguments	3.79	1.069	3.75	0.866	2.50	1.087	3.71	1.380	3.44

Descriptive statistics for the students' responses to their preferences for each type of written feedback was calculated. The students' response on feedback preferences on specific parts of content feedback was indicated in the previous table. Participants were asked in the questionnaire to decide how important it is to them for their supervisor to point out the sub-categories of *feedback on content* in their thesis writing. The data obtained from the students' response on the first part of the questionnaire revealed that with a mean of 3.60, the students preferred *"Gaps in the literature" as* the most important feedback they expected from their supervisors. The result that most students preferred to receive feedback on this aspect is consistent with the findings of previous research on other EFL PhD students' preference for a comprehensive feedback on *gaps in the literature* (Bitchener, Basturkmen, East, & Meyer, 2011).

Feedback on content was an area for which similar priorities were expressed by all the students in the four discipline areas. However, when the participants' expressed priorities were compared, social science students expressed significantly higher levels of need for this feedback than PhD students in other discipline areas. Given the role of the literature in providing both theoretical and empirical evidence for research, the focus of the students on this item is promising. Hart (1999) posits that the literature review synthesizes the understanding a student has on their particular subject matter, stands as a testament to the student's rigorous research dedication, justifies future research (including the thesis itself), and welcomes the student into scholarly tradition and etiquette. In a doctoral dissertation, the literature review further increases this demand on the reviewer, and serves as a justification for the novelty of the student's work and facilitates future academic discussion (Okoli, 2010).

The results of this study were, therefore, partially consistent with what Bitchener et al (2011) reported on a study conducted to investigate what supervisors and their students in New Zealand universities identified as best practice in the feedback that is typically given in three main discipline areas:

Humanities, Sciences/Mathematics, and Commerce. The findings of their study revealed that humanities students reported that they preferred feedback that alerted them to the extent to which their developing arguments did not relate to the literature, in contrast neither the Sciences/mathematics nor the commerce students noted that they received feedback in this area.

As previously indicated in table 2, "*Gaps in the justification or arguments*" was the students' second major concern that they expect their supervisors to focus on. Regarding this, therefore, a lot of the students chose it to be their second most important feedback. Almost all the students across the four disciplines stated that they would prefer their supervisors to provide them feedback on *"gaps in the justification or arguments"* (with a mean of 3.44), which was second to feedback on "*gaps on the literature* (3.60), indicating that developing a logical argument was also the students' overriding concern.   Given "argument" is the highest level of knowledge that requires the writer their logical reasoning, the choice of the students as their second most preferred feedback on "*Gaps in the justification or arguments*" was not surprising as their need might emanate from the difficulty of the task.

The strong preference for the feedback type "G*aps in the justification or arguments"* expressed by students in this study reiterated the results of a plethora of research which asserted that *arguments and justifications* in dissertation was what PhD students preferred most in their thesis writing (Can & Walker, 2014; Hoomanfard, et al, 2018; & Manjet, 2016). The extent to which the students reported "*gaps in the justification or arguments*" as their major concern indicates that the students had difficulties with argument construction skills, which have been well reported in the literature (Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995, 1997; Dong, 1998; James, 1984; as cited in Bitchener, 2010), and argument was regarded as a difficult area requiring more supervisor feedback and guidance (Hoomanfard, et al, 2018).

Feedback on Part-genres

Table 3: Students' Feedback preferences on genre requirements/ expectations

Genre elements	Humanities		Social Science		Natural Science		IOT		Total
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean
Structure of what goes where and examples of what is expected	2.75	1.189	1.92	1.084	3.25	1.231	3.29	1.113	2.66
Purpose behind including particular units of content in a particular part-genre	3.67	1.129	3.92	.996	3.67	1.073	4.00	1.155	3.82
Skills required for each genre	2.17	1.167	2.58	1.443	1.83	.937	2.00	.816	2.15
Rhetorical structure/ organization	3.21	1.285	3.67	1.155	2.92	1.165	3.00	1.291	3.20

As indicated in table 3 above, concerning the supervisors' written feedback related to part-genres, the majority of the students across the four disciplines chose *"Purpose behind including particular units of content in a particular part-genre"* (with a mean of 3.82) *as* their most preferred written feedback. Across the four disciplines, PhD students' rating to the item was similar and high, indicating that it was regarded as a more difficult part-genre requiring more feedback and guidance. Regarding preferences of written feedback on part-genres., all of the PhD students in the Humanities, Social science, Natural Science and

Institute of Technology (IOT) held almost similar opinions with a mean score of 3.67, 3.92, 3.67 and 4.00 respectively.

Based on the result of this study, one may conclude that the students' highest preference for *Purpose behind including particular units of content in a particular part-genre may be due to* their limited knowledge and skill in the area. Despite minor differences in ranking, the results of this study regarding the item were partially consistent with the study of Hoomanfard et al (2018) that examined supervisors' and graduate students' needs for written feedback on thesis/dissertation and juxtaposed them to see how each group views feedback. The findings showed that *including particular units of content in a particular part-genre* such as introduction, purpose and significance of the thesis/ dissertation were what PhD students expressed as their priorities. With respect to overall content feedback, the participants' second most preferred feedback related to part-genres was *Rhetorical structure/organization* with a mean score of 3.20. The overall choice of "*Rhetorical structure/organization"* as the students' most favored *part-genre* feedback might be interpreted in that the students had a problem of organizing and structuring their writings.

The data from the interview also show that students across the four disciplines acknowledged receiving feedback on an aspect of part-genre: *The purpose behind including particular units of content in a particular part-genre.* Four students in each faculty stressed that they would prefer their supervisors to comment on knowledge where each part-genre be placed as they commonly shared:

> "On the whole, our preference among the various genre knowledge comments is that when our supervisors help us in comments that show the sole purpose of each genre in their thesis writing. This was partially due to the fact that we did not take adequate research courses; we are not familiar with what should be inserted in each component of research"

Furthermore, feedback on rhetorical structure/organization was also the big concern that mattered for many students in each discipline. Apart from *purpose of each genre in their thesis writing,* the students reported that they had trouble linking the whole issues in their thesis together, and wished good opportunity for feedback that show how to organize their arguments together. The following student's verbal account in the interview result highlighted the value of written feedback on the *organization and structure of content* within chapters and sections.

> *"I am very much interested if my supervisor comments me to systematically consider and organize the structure my dissertation."*

On the contrary, it was observed that other *part-genre* feedback types, such as *feedback about expected word count and feedback about the skills required for each genre were* disregarded by almost all the students in each discipline. The students shared many reasons for why they were not interested in receiving feedback. A student elaborated that

> "It is worth less to expect this type of feedback from supervisors as they are not as such difficult to manage for a PhD level where simply reading about them can do it. I need my supervisor to focus on specific areas for fear that my supervisors may not fully address all my problems due to heavy workload"

Granted that selective feedback has recently received considerable attention in the writing research, (Bitchener et al., 2005; Ebadi, 2014; Ellis et. al, 2008; Sheen, 2007), the students' preference narratives could be taken as most beneficial indicators for their supervisors to emphasize on feedback that helps students improve their writing problems. This may also lead us to the point that different feedback categories constitute distinct domains of student preferences that can be provided through different settings to deal with individual student problems. The other most

interesting reason why the students consider these feedback aspects as "unimportant" is because they worry that their supervisors would not give value for the most helpful feedback types if supervisors are always overpowered by such "trivial" comments, indicating that supervisors need to design appropriate feedback that can accurately entertain their students' perceived needs.

As indicated in Table 3, PhD students in the Social Science (with a mean score of 3.67) showed more enthusiasm to receive such feedback than the students in the Humanities, Natural Science and Institute of Technology noted. Various reasons might underlie why Social Science students' perceived needs on the item was higher than the students in other disciplines. However, it may be possible to conclude that *"Rhetorical structure/organization"* was the major concern expressed by Social Science students, indicating that it was difficult for them to produce organized and well-structured texts in their dissertation, which might stem from the students' writing proficiency. The result of this study, therefore, lends us to the assertion that difficult areas require more supervisor feedback and guidance (Hoomanfard et al, 2018). As a result, with respect to graduate students, research has showed that doctoral students exhibited organizational problems in their writings (Alter & Adkins 2006; Surratt 2006), and social science doctoral students are even far less successful in refereed publications compared to science doctoral students (Kamler 2008; Lee & Kamler 2008).

Feedback on Linguistic Accuracy and Appropriateness

Table 4: Students' Feedback Preferences on Linguistic accuracy and appropriateness

Linguistic elements	Humanities		Social Science		Natural Science		IOT		Total
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean
The appropriate ness of vocabulary choice, style, voice and academic register	1.83	1.204	2.83	1.337	4.29	.756	3.33	1.303	3.07
Focuses on systematic errors	3.04	1.160	2.75	1.485	2.58	1.57	1.134	1.443	2.49
Writing coherence and cohesion and quality of writing	4.29	.624	3.92	1.084	3.00	1.348	3.00	1.291	3.55
How to develop ideas with supportive and counter evidence	4.08	.881	2.42	1.165	2.25	1.545	2.29	1.113	2.76

Table 4 above demonstrates that the students' preferred linguistic element and they wanted their supervisors to provide feedback to their thesis writing. Regarding linguistic feedback, the students have different opinions regarding their supervisors' focus of attention when providing written feedback to their thesis writing. The majority of the students with a mean score of 3.55 indicated that they wanted their supervisors to address the "*Writing coherence and cohesion and quality of writing* in their thesis writing. The second item that received a mean score of 3.07

was *the appropriateness of vocabulary choice, style, voice and academic register.* On the other hand, only a few students with a mean score of 2.49 wanted to receive feedback on "Focuses on systematic errors".

Feedback on "*The appropriateness of vocabulary choice, style, voice and academic register*" was the least preferred linguistic feedback by students in Humanities with a mean score of 1.83, whereas the students in Social Science, Natural Science and Information Technology show high interest on the item with a mean of 3.33, 2.83 and 4.29 respectively. In the interview, three out of four students in the Humanities responded that they did not like their supervisors comment on mechanical errors, and asserted that they were able to edit and proofread their papers confidently. Conversely, other students in the remaining three disciplines expressed their linguistic difficulties in thesis-writing and overstated the significance of surface-level feedback to improve their writing. The interview also showed that students in the humanities confirmed that they were no longer interested in feedback with respect to grammar. The most frequently cited reason for this seemed to be the students' high linguistic self-confidence that they developed in the previous levels. As illustrated by one Humanities student,

> "Feedback on surface level errors at this level should not be expected because if the supervisor is more concerned about grammar comments, I rather feel that another more complex feedback that needs to be addressed, such as the cohesion and organization that make the core components of research can be neglected"

Concerning students' preference in relation to feedback on mechanical errors, the finding of this study indicate that PhD students found grammar as one of the least needed areas of feedback. The students' low level of perceived need for this item was in line with the findings of the previous studies that

investigated PhD students' preferences for written feedback provided by their supervisors, and found that the students' rated grammar feedback as their least perceived need (Bitchener et al., 2011; Can & Walker, 2014; Hoomanfard et al., 2018). A plausible reason for this result may be attributed to the students' linguistic ability and linguistic self-confidence that could affect the students' perceptions of the need for feedback on thesis/dissertation (Hoomanfard, 2018).

General Feedback Preferences

Table 5: Students' General Feedback Preferences

	Humanities		*Social Science*		*Natural Science*		*IOT*		*Total*
Feedback Type	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D	Mean
Content	3.10	2.716	3.38	2.067	3.17	3.200	3.29	1.773	3.24
Part-genres	2.95	3.401	2.69	2.701	2.77	2.999	3.07	1.254	2.87
Linguistic Accuracy and appropriate ness	3.31	2.400	3.12	2.811	2.96	2.038	2.86	2.440	3.06

The students showed the priorities given to the overall written feedback, such as content, genre and linguistic related written feedback. As Table 5 above indicates, the participants' level of the need for *content feedback* was higher than that of genre or linguistic written feedback in this study. In comparison, relatively fewer students wanted to receive feedback on language form with a mean score of 3.06 or part-genres feedback with a mean score of 2.87, the vast majority of the students with a mean score of 3.24 expect their supervisors to focus on feedback on content. The result of this study is, therefore, partially consistent with the study of Lee (2008) which revealed that students wanted to receive comments on content and the ideas underlying their writing. On the other hand, this finding is also at odds with the empirical evidence from the student perspective that suggests that

students' primary concern was to receive written feedback on quality and choice of language (Bitchener et al, 2011).

The comparison results of the students' priorities for the three feedback types showed discrepancies across the four disciplines. While students in the Social Science held a belief that they considered feedback on content as their most important feedback (with a mean of 3.38), the responses of students in the Institute of Technology with a mean of 3.07 showed that their most important perceived need as "*Feedback on Part-genres*". The students' preferences to "*Feedback on Linguistic Accuracy and Appropriateness*", with a mean score of 3.31) was the most preferred written feedback for students in Humanities and the least preferred feedback for students in the Social Science, Natural Science and Information Technology with a mean score of 3.12, 2.96 and 2.86 respectively. Generally, the majority of the students who participated in the interview acknowledged that they had inadequate argumentative skills and rated the priority of feedback on content as it helps them decipher the areas of their research project logically and critically. One of the students expressed:

> "Until I began PhD classes, I had several problems in academic writing skills, particularly in reflecting on critically, so I maintained that I needed to receive feedback on Comments on gaps in the justification or explanation of arguments"

The interview results of this study also show that PhD students' preference for written feedback was dependent on the students' specialization or backgrounds. In other words, students across disciplines reported differences regarding their preferences of the written feedback. For example, unlike the rest of PhD students, the students in the Humanities stated that they were happy to have their supervisors polished matters of linguistic accuracy than on other areas requiring feedback. A student in the social sciences also elaborated:

> "I need feedback on content most because I believe that it would help me learn how analysis and interpretations of my research project could be used....I think, it is also vital to develop a well-organized and structured argument in my thesis"

Likewise, another PhD student from the Humanities reflected:

> "I believe that I could learn a lot from my supervisor's feedback on coherence and cohesion when he shows me how to build a coherent writing in my thesis. This is because...I think that this is the most essential part of writing an academic paper, like dissertation"

A comprehensive review of research has showed that students' prior experience as one of the most important factors that affect the process of feedback exchange and its effect on students' perceptions and the success of feedback activities (Fritz & Morris, 2000; Maclellan, 2001; Weaver, 2006). Given both groups of students study different courses, the results of this study that showed discrepancies among students' preferences across disciplines was not surprising as students' prior experience can be a factor that affect the perceived need of the students. To illustrate, most of the students who study language courses showed their preferences for linguistic related feedback. Students who study language-based courses prefer to receive feedback on language while non-language based course students opt to receive less feedback on language. On the other hand, the vast majority of the students who chose this *feedback on content* as their most preferred written feedback could be similarly interpreted that the students who participated in this study other than students in Humanities were taking discipline-based courses. This result is reminiscent of the study of Leki (2006) which revealed that students, who were taking discipline-based courses, complained that they did not receive enough comments on content.

Unlike other studies that revealed most graduate students' feedback preferences on the refinement of their English language, which only some of them valued feedback on content and conceptual clarity (Ghazal, Gul, Hanzala, Jessop, & Tharani, 2014), many of the students in this study explained their reservation towards this type of feedback. The following excerpt from three students in the social science, Social Science, Natural Science, Institute of Technology asserted that the students liked their supervisors to focus on content rather than feedback on linguistic or genre-parts. A student from the Social Science explained:

> "I need my supervisor to emphasize the overall content of my paper. This is because such feedback is very helpful for me to clearly address the major areas that I am supposed to do."

A student from the college of Natural Sciences elaborated:

> "*I think that content is the essence of research, and it is what research is all about. Therefore, I like my supervisor to comment on feedback on content most*"

A student from the Institute of Technology stated:

> "We can improve our research skills necessary to accomplish the research project if and only if we clearly understand what we are doing. Thus, the remaining feedback (Feedback on part-genres and feedback on linguistic aspects need to come next to feedback on content"

Taken together, the data obtained from the students' responses to the questionnaire indicated that nearly all PhD students wanted their supervisors to comment content aspects on their theses. This finding was also triangulated by the analysis of the students' interview excerpt. Thus, this result may lend us to

support the findings of studies which revealed that feedback should be more focused on the content and its clarity (Ghazal et al., 2014), and students favored feedback on content, organization, and rhetoric than linguistic accuracy (Evans et al., 2010).

Conclusion

This study examined the perceived needs and preferences of PhD students for their supervisors' written feedback in relation to three major areas. The survey data revealed that PhD students tend to prefer feedback on Content knowledge to feedback on Genre knowledge –and Linguistic accuracy and appropriateness. PhD students in this study valued written feedback on content most, and this preference was consistent throughout all the four disciplines. The study also showed that students across the four disciplines showed a wide range of preferences regarding the sub-categories of supervisor written feedback. In one respect or another, the interview results also showed that feedback on content was generally seen as a big issue for all PhD students in each discipline. This study also indicated that the students' prior knowledge could affect the students' perceptions of the need for feedback to their dissertation writing. In other words, students who study language-based courses wanted to receive feedback on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness while non-language based course students preferred feedback on content or feedback on genre. The types of feedback students are provided and their genuine expectations need to be taken together as students' needs impacts directly on the quality of their writing. Therefore, feedback can be one of the most powerful influences on writing a dissertation provided that supervisors are aware of this responsibility and incorporate their students' voices.

Pedagogical Implications

By examining PhD students' preferences regarding supervisors' written feedback, this study provides insightful contributions for higher education supervision and learning

processes. The findings of this study may help supervisors be aware of their students' perceptual needs in response to student thesis writing. Understanding the students' needs, improving their motivation, and highlighting communication between students and teachers could offer a valuable insight into research on the students' views regarding feedback (Ferris, 2010). This study makes a significant contribution, and hence may serve as a baseline for researchers who intend to examine various aspects of written feedback in thesis writing. This study suggests that supervisors should analyze students' needs in order to address their needs and expectations about feedback to thesis writing, and they should not be constrained by a rigid order of feedback focus (Ferris, 2007). Moreover, supervisors need to assist doctoral students pertaining to a well-examined needs analysis and preferences for written feedback, which in turn, facilitates positive relationship between students and supervisors. Taken together, students who come from various discipline areas in this study were found to be divided in their opinions towards some aspects of feedback. Thus, the present research recommends higher education to integrate training programs based on student background needs.

Limitations of the study

Due to certain limitations, future research should examine the issue including other data gathering tools, such as focus-group discussions and text analyses of student dissertation. Another limitation was that this research was not a comprehensive study, and was carried out with a modest scale where the sample size in four of the discipline areas was not fairly represented. To illustrate, the sample size in the faculty of humanities was more largely represented than the students participated in the other disciplines. On the contrary, the number was rather modest in the natural science discipline area, only 7 students involved due to absence. This may make the inter-disciplinary comparison among the four discipline areas be difficult, and hence have implication for future research to

examine students' preferences with a fair representation of the areas.

The author

Dr.Yenus Nurie Bogale is an assistant professor of the Department of English Language and Literature at Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia. His research interests include EFL written feedback, Scaffolding reading, and interpersonal communication.

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