

# A Comparative Study of Graduate Students' Self-Perceived Needs for Written Feedback and the Supervisors' Perceptions<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The present study attempted to examine the supervisors' and graduate students' needs for written feedback on thesis/dissertation and juxtaposed them to see how each group views feedback. A mixed-method design was employed to collect data. Questionnaires and interviews were deployed to collect the data from 132 graduate TEFL students and 37 supervisors from 10 Iranian Universities. The results indicated that there were similarities (argument, logical order, transition, clarity, & references decisions) and differences (inclusion of information, formatting, grammar, conclusion, introduction, & consistency) between the priorities given by MA and PhD students. Moreover, the findings indicated that the MA students' expressed priorities were not similar to those of the supervisors except in three areas (argument, formatting, & grammar). On the contrary, the supervisors' priorities were close to those expressed by PhD students in almost all cases. Different factors underlying the perceptions of students and supervisors were also extracted and presented. Some implications and suggestions for further research were also proposed.

**Keywords:** Written Feedback; Thesis; Dissertation; Graduate Students; Supervisors, TEFL

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## 1. Introduction

Different means such as writing courses, peer tutoring sessions, and the supervisor or advisor-generated feedback are employed to scaffold graduate students' academic writing ability. Many scholars have emphasized the significant role of supervisor feedback in graduate students' academic writing ability development (Carless, 2006; Ramsden, 2003). Supervisor feedback is one of the scaffolding tools that graduate students need in order to improve their writing and academic abilities (Cafarella & Barnett, 2000; Hattie & Timperley, 2006). To be more precise, supervisor feedback can be regarded as the most effective vehicle to minimize the gap between a learner's developing performance and the intended objective within their Zone of Proximal Development (Bitchener, Basturkmen, East, & Meyer, 2011; Ferris, 2003; Kumar & Stracke, 2007).

The written comments, provided in the form of in-script or marginal notes, have increasingly gained significance in recent years. As Mhunpiew (2013) stated the changes in the type of communication in the third millennium have led to the provision of more frequent written feedback by supervisors. The employment of the Internet and its pertinent technologies have changed the way supervisors and students interact to fulfill the task (Surry, Stefurak, & Kowch, 2010). Furthermore, by the popularization of distance education universities and the increasing number of international students, the number of learners who are geographically distant from their supervisors is on the rise. The amount of written comments is increasing because written comments through email services have replaced office meetings (Mancuso-Murphy, 2007).

Although the significance of written feedback on graduate students' theses/dissertations is well-established in the literature (Bitchener et al., 2011; Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Yu, & Lee, 2013), it is still an under-examined area of research. One of the voids in the literature, which is not well-investigated, is the study of graduate Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) students' perceived needs for academic written feedback and the extent to which they are in line with the supervisors' perceptions. The present study attempted to occupy this niche by studying the perceptions of these two major interactants in the process of completing a thesis/dissertation in Iran where English is the students' foreign language.

As Ferris (2003) and Bitchener and Ferris (2012) have pointed out, one of the major research lines pertinent to feedback has to do with the investigation of different interactants' perceptions. These perceptions are of significance as they can affect the process of exchanging comments, lead to positive or negative feelings, and affect learners' acquisition level (Leki & Carson, 1994; Mahfoodh & Pandian, 2011). Cohen (1991, p. 138) stated that there is a danger of misfit between what students

like to get and what teachers provide. The study of learners and their supervisors' perceptions of feedback can give us a better understanding of this misfit, which can jeopardize the whole process of feedback exchange.

While many studies have investigated students' feedback in private institutes and undergraduate level (e.g., Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Rahimi, 2010, 2013; Zacharias, 2007), there is a paucity of investigation into supervisory feedback. With regard to probing into graduate students' perceived needs, two studies have been conducted. Can and Walker (2014) surveyed PhD students of different majors in America, and found out that PhD students prioritized the areas as follows: arguments, conclusion, clarity and understandability of the statements, inclusion or exclusion of information, introduction, consistency in the overall paper, logical order of ideas, transition, paragraphs, or sections, grammar, formatting, and references. They noted that PhD students' ratings were lower for more mechanical aspects such as grammar, formatting, and referencing.

In another study, Bitchener et al. (2011) investigated the perceptions of PhD students from three different disciplines. Their findings revealed that PhD students respectively gave priority to organizational specifics, vocabulary and register, grammar, spelling and punctuation, overview of organization, relevance to literature, the way the work is being presented, literature decisions, appropriateness of methodology and material decisions.

Previous studies (Carless, 2006; Chanock, 2000; James, 2000) have shown that graduate students are not satisfied with the written feedback provided on their theses/dissertations. In spite of this dissatisfaction, the number of studies investigating graduate students' perceived needs of feedback on their theses/dissertations is highly limited. Furthermore, previous studies were conducted in English-speaking countries (the US & Australia); however, as Alonso, Alonso and Marinas (2012) stated, since non-native students require more writing ability assistance, the nature of supervising native and non-native students can be different because the focus of supervision would change when students' needs and wants are different. To the researcher's knowledge, to date, no study has investigated the needs and wants of students in a context where English is a foreign language. The present study attempts to occupy this niche in the literature. In addition, the previous studies have focused on PhD students and have excluded MA students' perceptions. Furthermore, Cohen (1991) has cautioned researchers against the consequences of misfit between the perceptions of feedback providers and receivers. This misfit can lead to students' failure to apply comments, breakdown in their learning process, and decrease in their motivation level. Goldstein (2004) stated clearly that feedback exchange, as a social interaction, is effective only when the feedback provider is cognizant of perceptions and needs of learners. Boud (1991) stressed that the success

of a feedback exchange process depends heavily upon the extent to which the comments are compatible with the students' and not supervisors' perceptions and needs. Although the significance of this compatibility has been reiterated in the literature (e.g., Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Boud, 1991; Cohen, 1991; Ferris, 2003; Ferris & Goldstein, 2004, Rahimi, 2011), to the best of our knowledge, studies that have investigated the possible differences between graduate students' perceived needs and their supervisors' perceptions quantitatively and qualitatively are still sparse. Another feature of the present study is the comparison of MA and PhD students' perceived needs which has been overlooked in previous studies. This comparison can inform supervisors about MA and PhD students' possible diverse perceived needs, and accordingly help them tune their feedback practice based on the expressed needs. Furthermore, policy makers and curriculum developers can get insights into students' perceived needs and provide MA and PhD students with appropriate scaffoldings prior to their thesis/dissertation phase of their education.

The present study attempted to address certain niches in the literature by answering the following research questions:

1. Do MA and PhD students have the same perceived needs for written feedback on their theses/dissertations?
2. To what extent do the graduate students' perceived needs of feedback on their theses/ dissertations match the perceptions of their supervisors?

## **2. Research method**

The present study employed the mixed-methods research design to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation as quantitative and qualitative studies inform and support each other (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sandelowski, 2003). The study deployed a questionnaire and interviews to collect the data between January and March, 2016. The interviews followed the administration of the questionnaire to unveil the unknown aspects.

### ***2.1. Participants***

The participants comprised both graduate students and supervisors, including 132 graduate students majoring in TEFL, who had either finished or were in the process of composing their theses/dissertations (and had received at least two rounds of feedback). Ninety-five MA and 37 PhD students who were between 24 and 36 years of age and of both genders: female (n= 72, 54.54%) and male (n= 60, 45.46%) participated in this study. These participants were selected based on convenience sampling procedure; however, to compensate for this type of sampling, the researchers selected the participants from different universities and different

provinces to iron out possible contextual factors. All PhD and 17 MA students had published at least one scientific paper in peer-reviewed journals.

Thirty seven faculty members, who were the supervisors of the above-mentioned students, took part in this study. Fourteen of them supervised both MA and PhD students while 23 were just the supervisors of MA students. Both male (22) and female (15) supervisors with two to 27 years of supervisory experience participated in the study. To have a representative sample, the researchers selected students and supervisors from different provinces in Iran and from 10 universities (State universities, Islamic Azad University, & Payame Noor University). The sample size was determined using Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh's (2006) and Sampsizel (2005) criteria, which resulted in the inclusion of at least 96 graduate students and 39 supervisors. Although the number of students in the study was more than what was required by the formulas, two more supervisors were required to meet the set standard of sample size.

## 2.2. Questionnaire

In order to collect the quantitative data, the researchers employed the questionnaire developed by Can and Walker (2014). The Cronbach Alpha reliability of the *needs for written feedback* section of this questionnaire was .79; Pallant (2007) argues that when the number of questions is limited, the reliability index is underestimated. As a substitute, the employment of the mean inter-item correlation for the items is proposed, which should range from .2 to .4 to be optimal. In the present study, the mean inter-item correlation was .301. This questionnaire included 11 items and was administered in English.

Three PhD holders and two PhD candidates in TEFL examined the questionnaire with regard to face validity. Furthermore, to check the underlying variables of the questionnaire, principal component analysis was employed, the result of which indicated that the questionnaire focused on three major factors. The first factor, called *main idea and contribution* (labeled by Can & Walker, 2014), included items 8 and 10 (see Table 1 for items). The second factor, *addressing overall writing*, included items 6, 7, 4, 1, 2, and 5. Items 3, 9, and 11 comprised the third factor, *formatting and references*. The only difference between the results of the present study and those of the questionnaire developers is that Iranian students put consistency of the paper in formatting section without which the text is not of an acceptable format. However, in the study by Can and Walker (2014), consistency of the paper in formatting section was found in the overall writing factor. It should be mentioned that in the present study, this item was also seen in the overall writing factor with a lower loading.

### 2.3. Interview

To have a better understanding of the issues, the researchers interviewed 20 supervisors and 70 students (50 MA & 20 PhD). The interviewees' participation was voluntary and they had the right to decline to answer any question. The interviews were utilized to qualitatively examine the way students and supervisors prioritized written feedback needs and possible underlying reasons. Semi-structured interview was selected to give the researchers the chance to delve into the issue flexibly by raising new queries as the interviews progressed. The interviews, each taking about 20 to 30 minutes, were conducted in Persian, the interviewees' native language. The recorded interviews were then transcribed for further analyses.

### 2.4. Procedure

Upon selecting the participants from different universities, the researchers generated and implemented student and supervisor versions of the questionnaire to collect the quantitative data after obtaining the participants' consent. The supervisors and their students completed the questionnaire in less than ten minutes. After analyzing the questionnaire results, the researchers started collecting the qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews. The supervisors and students were contacted and interview meeting times were set. The researchers interviewed the participants of both genders. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. The whole procedure of data collection and analysis lasted for nine months.

## 3. Questionnaire results

Table 1 displays the way MA and PhD students prioritized their needs for written feedback on their work and the significance of the difference between their responses. Table 2 provides the way supervisors have decided about the priority of different feedback areas for their MA and PhD students. These results are obtained from a Likert-scale questionnaire with the four levels of never, seldom, sometimes, often. The mean scores of each item can vary between 1 and 4.

Table 1. *TEFL Students' needs for written feedback: Students' perspective*

	MA		PhD		U	P
	Mean (SD)	Priority	Mean (SD)	Priority		
Inclusion or exclusion of information	3.33 (.53)	1	2.29 (.7)	8	515.5	000
Arguments and justifications in my thesis/dissertation	3.31 (.55)	2	2.78 (.71)	1	1062.0	000

Formatting (tables, figures, page design, fitting APA style, giving citations, etc.)	3.29 (.86)	3	1.91 (.92)	11	558.5	000
Grammar and sentence structure	3.17 (.68)	4	2.10 (.65)	10	535.0	000
Logical order and organization of information and ideas	3.15 (.60)	5	2.67 (.81)	4	1190.5	001
Transition and flow between sentences, paragraphs, or sections	3.13 (.66)	6	2.56 (.68)	7	1026.5	000
Clarity and understandability of the statements	3.10 (.57)	7	2.62 (.82)	6	1147.5	001
Conclusion	3.04 (.75)	8	2.75 (.83)	2	1432.0	.077
References and literature decisions	2.97 (.72)	9	2.13 (.71)	9	770.0	.000
Introduction, purpose and significance of the thesis/ dissertation	2.85 (.77)	10	2.72 (.73)	3	1610.0	.420
Consistency in the overall thesis/dissertation	2.8 (.89)	11	2.64 (.82)	5	1547.5	.251

As indicated in Table 1, PhD students gave higher priorities (2 & 3) to the two items pertinent to main idea and contribution (items 8 & 10) as compared to MA counterparts. As indicated in Table 1, PhD students gave higher priorities (2 & 3) to the two items pertinent to main idea and contribution (items 8 & 10) as compared to MA counterparts. The result of Mann-Whitney U showed non-significant differences between MA and PhD students' introduction and conclusion mean scores ( $U=1610$  &  $U=1432$ ,  $p<.05$ , respectively). Although the mean score of MA students' need for this type of feedback was more than that of PhD students, they gave lower priority to this factor. It might seem contradictory, but since MA students' level of the need for feedback was higher in all cases, there can be instances for which the mean score is higher, but the rank is lower.

With regard to overall writing factor, as depicted in Table 1, MA students expressed significantly higher levels of need for feedback in all cases ( $U_{inclusion}=515.5$ ,  $U_{grammar}=535.0$ ,  $U_{argument}=1062.0$ ,  $U_{logical\ order}=1190.5$ ,  $U_{transition}=1026.5$ ,  $U_{clarity}=1147.5$ ,  $p<.05$ ). As for priority, the positions given to these items by MA students were either close to the ranks given by PhD students (items 2, 5, 6, & 7), or higher than those of PhD students (items 1 & 4).

The other three items, put under the same category, were formatting, consistency and references and literature decisions. TEFL MA students found feedback on consistency in the overall thesis the least needed type of feedback, whereas TEFL PhD students felt the need to receive this type of feedback and put it on the fifth priority. An item which was given the same priority (9) by both MA and PhD students was references and literature decisions; however, the mean score of MA group was significantly higher than that of PhD students ( $U=770.0$ ,  $p<.05$ ). The last item of this factor dealt with formatting; MA students indicated a significantly higher level of feedback need on this area ( $U=558.0$ ,  $p<.05$ ). They also expressed feedback on formatting as their third priority which shows their real enthusiasm to be assisted in this area.

Table 2. *TEFL Supervisors' perceptions of graduate students' needs*

	MA Mean(SD)	Priority	PhD Mean(SD)	Priority
Arguments and justifications in my thesis/dissertation	3.56 (.5)	1	3.64 (.49)	1
Conclusion	3.51 (.5)	2	3.5 (.51)	2
Introduction, purpose and significance of the thesis/ dissertation	3.48 (.6)	3	3.07 (.61)	3
Formatting (tables, figures, page design, fitting APA style, giving citations, etc.)	3.45 (.69)	4	1.71 (.61)	11
References and literature decisions	3.42 (.5)	5	2.64 (.63)	4
Grammar and sentence structure	3.40 (.49)	6	1.85 (.53)	10
Inclusion or exclusion of information	3.21 (.47)	7	2.21 (.69)	7
Consistency in the overall thesis/dissertation	3.05 (.74)	8	2.21 (.57)	8
Transition and flow between sentences, paragraphs, or sections	2.94 (.62)	9	2.14 (.66)	9
Clarity and understandability of the statements	2.94 (.7)	10	2.28 (.72)	6
Logical order and organization of information and ideas	2.91 (.75)	11	2.57 (.64)	5

As shown in Table 2, supervisors gave the second and third priorities to conclusion and introduction items for both MA and PhD students. Comparing the priorities given by supervisors and students, we could witness that while MA students gave the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> priorities to conclusion and introduction areas, their supervisors gave higher priorities to them (2 & 3). However, the supervisors' and PhD students'



perceptions were found to be similar to each other and both groups ranked these two items as their second and third priorities, which mirrored the fact that both groups considered these two items important.

Table 2 indicates that the priorities given to the overall writing factor items for MA and PhD students were similar in some cases and different in others. The supervisors found feedback on argumentation the most needed feedback area for both MA and PhD students (1<sup>st</sup> priority). The comparison of the supervisors' and students' perceptions indicated that both groups found this area significant. The supervisors gave the same priorities (7) and (8) to inclusion of information (7) and transition (9) for both MA and PhD students. Unlike MA students who asked for feedback on the inclusion of information more than any other area (1), their supervisors gave much lower priority (7) to this area. However, the supervisors' and students' priorities given to this area were similar (7 & 8, respectively).

As shown in Table 2, the supervisors gave different priorities to some items pertinent to overall writing such as clarity, logical order and grammar for MA and PhD students. The supervisors indicated that comments on clarity and logical order were their MA students' least needed feedback areas (10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup>); however, the supervisors expressed that their PhD students needed feedback on these areas more than their MA counterparts and gave them the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> priorities. The comparison of the PhD students' and their supervisors' perceptions indicated that both groups gave similar priorities to clarity and logical order, but the priorities given by the students to clarity (7) and logical order (5) were higher than those given by the supervisors (10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup>). The last area which was given different priorities was grammar. The supervisors found MA students more in need of feedback on grammar (6) than their PhD students (10). These perceptions were similar to those of the students; MA students gave the 4<sup>th</sup> priority to feedback on grammar, and PhD students found grammar one of the least needed areas of feedback (10).

Formatting, references and literature decisions were the last items to be investigated. The priorities given by the supervisors (4<sup>th</sup> for MA & 11<sup>th</sup> for PhD) to formatting were so close to those given by their students (3<sup>rd</sup> for MA & 11<sup>th</sup> for PhD). A similar pattern was found for the references and literature decision area. The supervisors gave the 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> priorities to this aspect for MA and PhD students; similarly, MA and PhD students prioritized references and literature decisions as the 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> needed areas. The possible reasons for this prioritization were investigated in interviews and are reported in the following section.

## **4. Interview results**

### ***4.1. Argumentation***

Both MA and PhD students mentioned their overriding need for feedback on argument but the reasons they stated in the interviews were different. More than half of the MA students (58%) talked about their difficulty in arguing propositions; some of them (8%) found themselves totally unable to argue ideas. Around two-thirds of the students (72%) stated that they needed this type of feedback because they had not had any prior academic writing experience requiring them to argue ideas. PhD students, however, mentioned that the feedback received from academic journals (45%), and the comments that they had received while composing their MA theses (30%) made them have a good grasp of the significance of argumentation. However, the difficulty of argumentation necessitated them (75%) to ask for comments on argumentation to become academically-proficient writers.

The supervisors mentioned three reasons for the students' high level of argumentation feedback need. A large number of supervisors talked about the difficulty of argumentation activities (65%). They believed that this activity was difficult in nature and, consequently, their students required substantial assistance to accomplish argumentation. Around one-third of the supervisors (35%) found Iranian MA students unprepared for complex argumentation; they believed that argumentation is not well-practiced in secondary and tertiary levels; thus, students have difficulty arguing ideas. Another factor that made supervisors feel that their students wanted argument feedback was their personal experience. More than half of the supervisors (55%) indicated that they themselves had trouble arguing ideas when they were students. Taking a sympathetic approach, they felt that their students might undergo the same difficulty.

### ***4.2. Logical order, transition, clarity, consistency***

The only noteworthy point traceable to these items in the students' interviews was the fact that while PhD students found the consistency of different parts of their dissertations significant (65%) and found themselves in need of feedback to ensure the high quality of their dissertations (40%), MA students were reluctant to receive feedback on this area. Some students (46%) found obtaining the consistency an easy task which needed the least amount of assistance, and some others (32%) found consistency the least important criterion; thus, feedback on it was consequently unnecessary.

A factor which seemed to affect the supervisors' perception was their lower standards for the MA students' writing ability in comparison to that of their PhD students. Some of them (35%) mentioned that they did not expect their MA students

to reach very high standards because they were still in the process of learning and they might be demotivated by a large number of comments on writing areas. With regard to PhD students, supervisors ranked these areas somewhere between abstract areas such as argumentation and main idea and the more mechanical aspects such as formatting or grammar.

### ***4.3. Inclusion or exclusion of information***

Three factors of genre knowledge, content knowledge, and appropriation were found, in the interviews, to affect graduate students' perceived need for this type of feedback. A large number of MA students (74%) found themselves unable to complete the section that they were writing because they had no idea what to include in each chapter or subsection. The majority of MA students (62%) felt they needed to be guided by their supervisors to decide what to include in each section as it was their first academic writing experience. These findings suggest that MA students were not fully familiar with the thesis genre and the stages of different moves (see Swales & Feak, 1994) that should be followed so as to write an acceptable thesis.

Another factor mentioned by MA students for their need for inclusion/exclusion of information comments was their lack of content knowledge. More than half (56%) of MA students mentioned their lack of content knowledge about their thesis topics. When asked about the possible reasons of this lack of content knowledge, two major reasons were enumerated, one of which was the students' insufficient reading of the pertinent materials (64.28%). The second stated cause of the lack of content knowledge was the selection of the thesis topic by the supervisor (35.72%). The latter was reported to have an adverse effect on students' motivation when the topic was not desirable to a student or did not stem from the learners' internal curiosity.

However, PhD students might not be enthusiastic to receive such feedback. It seemed that PhD students found themselves capable of deciding what to include in the different sections of their dissertations. The majority of PhD students (85%) believed that they were cognizant of the dissertation genre and knew the necessary stages of each dissertation section. However, they (60%) still believed that although they did not need this type of feedback, it could be taken as a suggestion to be examined because they firmly claimed the ownership of their texts, which they didn't want to be usurped by the supervisor.

The analysis of the interviews indicated that the supervisors found this feedback crucial since their MA students were not familiar with the genre of thesis and its components (60%), and the students suffered from a lack of content knowledge (55%). When asked about the causes of these deficiencies, they made a mention of the inefficiency of academic writing courses in BA and MA programs

(60%), lack of academic writing experience (25%) and students' insufficient exposure to similar texts (20%). With regard to content knowledge, all supervisors blamed their students for their insufficient reading of pertinent materials. It seemed that they found themselves innocent in this case.

Around half of supervisors (45%) found genre comments necessary when PhD students were not familiar with dissertation genre. They indicated the differences between a thesis and a dissertation, and qualitative and quantitative studies as the possible causes of a PhD student's lack of familiarity with the genre. In regard to content knowledge, supervisors did not find PhD students in need of this type of comment as the students usually know what to write about a specific topic.

One of the issues related to writing is ownership/ authorship, referring to "the act of assuming that one is the owner of one's own text" (Fordham, 2017, p. 23). When a student's text is appropriated by the reviewer (supervisor in this case) with comments which change the direction of the content or style, the students' ownership of the text is in danger. With regard to the students' ownership of the text, around half of the supervisors (55%) denied usurping their students' ownership at all.

They found these comments as a part of their supervisory activities; one of them for example said:

*As a supervisor, I have to monitor the way my PhD students are stepping. Sometimes the path my students take is doomed to failure, so I have to intervene, and ask them to include or exclude sections from the text to reach the standards. It should be done whether they like it or not!*

These supervisors believed that in order to compose a dissertation, the student co-authors with his supervisor and the product is the result of a group work. But some others (45%) mentioned that sometimes the control of the text was taken by the supervisor which was accompanied by its negative affective impacts but they still found this type of feedback inevitable.

#### **4.4. Grammar**

The findings revealed that the students' linguistic self-confidence affected their perceived need. For instance, an MA interviewee who had been teaching in language institutes for five years stated:

*I've been teaching English for five years. I don't think I'm in need of this type of feedback.*

However, another MA student mentioned his need for structural comments as follows:

*For sure I need this type of feedback; I think all of us do. We have to write and write for years and be provided with comments to get familiar with the structural knowledge of the academic genre.*

Two terms which can be used to examine the students' linguistic self-confidence are error and mistake. In linguistic studies, deviant items are divided into two categories of error and mistake. The former results from incomplete knowledge and the latter stems from one's carelessness, fatigue, lack of attention, etc. (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 201). When asked about the percentage of their mistakes and errors, on average, MA students indicated that 63% of their deviant items were errors and 37% of them were mistakes. PhD students, however, found 21% of their deviant items errors and 79% mistakes. These findings can explain the MA and PhD students' expressed levels of grammar feedback need.

Grammar is another area for which similar priorities were expressed by supervisors and students. MA students gave the 4<sup>th</sup> and their supervisors gave the 6<sup>th</sup> priority to this area. Both PhD students and their supervisors ranked grammar as the 10<sup>th</sup> priority. When asked about the nature of deviant items, the supervisors believed that 58 % of the MA students' deviant items were errors, and 42% were mistakes. However, for the deviant items of PhD students, supervisors thought that less than one third of them were errors (24%) and the rest of them were mistakes (76%).

#### **4.5. Introduction and conclusion**

According to the interview findings, the three factors which had signified the importance of main idea and contribution for PhD students were the comments on their MA theses (40%), the comments received during the defense session (25%) and the feedback provided by academic journals (65%). One of them stated:

*The comments that I have received from journals have taught me that it's not important how good your grammar is, they put your paper in a bigger picture of the literature and check whether you add something to the body of knowledge.*

Another said:

*Conclusion is important as you have to make a connection between your own paper and the real world. If you like to get your paper published, you have to make this tie strong. That's what journals want you to do.*

The analysis of supervisors' interviews indicated that all supervisors emphasized the indisputable roles of conclusion and introduction in relating the study to the pertinent literature. Furthermore, around half of them mentioned the role of journals' comments (45%). As the students in Iran are required to publish a report of

their theses or dissertations in an indexed journal, the supervisors believed that these comments should be given to avoid any problem in the process of publishing. The third reason was their own experience as students. Around (40%) of the interviewed supervisors recounted their own difficulties in these two areas, and their own need for comments about relating their study to the related literature.

#### **4.6. Formatting**

The results of interviews indicated that the PhD students' low level of perceived need for this type of feedback stemmed from their prior experience gained in writing classes (40%), reading similar texts (55%) and comments received from journals (70%). MA students indicated their need to receive comments pertinent to the formatting of their theses. Around half of the students (44%) mentioned that due to the large number of criteria, it was difficult for them to follow all items, so the need for feedback on this area is inevitable. The majority of MA students (66%) believed that meeting the formatting requirements needed extensive practice during the BA and MA programs, which was missing and (84%) of them found the number of academic writing classes in their syllabus insufficient. One of the MA students said:

*We reviewed the formatting criteria just in one session during the semester. Then we wrote a short literature review which was corrected by our instructor. I don't think this is a good way to teach all those items.*

Some of the PhD students (60%) indicated that the academic writing classes were not informative enough. When asked how they learned about formatting items, 45 percent of them mentioned the journal comments, 55 percent of them talked about the effect of the process of composing their theses, and 30 percent of the PhD students indicated the effect of reading journal papers.

On the other hand, the supervisors put formatting in the 4<sup>th</sup> priority for MA students. When the supervisors asked about the MA students' need for formatting feedback, 70 % of them talked about the inefficiency of the academic writing classes. They believed that since the students were not prepared for writing their thesis, the supervisor had to spend more time on the mechanical aspects of writing. The reasons that supervisors mentioned for the PhD students' low need for formatting feedback were the same as the ones mentioned by their students. Sixty five percent of the supervisors believed that the process of composing MA thesis could and did teach the students about formatting. They (40%) talked about the feedback that they had received from journals, and 20% of them found the reading of similar papers effective in lowering the PhD students' need.

#### ***4.7. References and literature decisions***

The results implied that Iranian TEFL graduate students did not find receiving this type of feedback urgent. Both MA and PhD students (77.14%) indicated the facilitative role of the Internet in the process of finding and selecting pertinent literature to their studies; they believed that by the use of search engines, they were just a few clicks away from necessary references; thus, they preferred to receive comments on other areas.

Around half of the supervisors (45%) talked about their difficulty in finding their reference through library shelves or even on the internet when they were students. It seemed that the supervisors' prior experience had an effect on their perception about their own students' needs. Furthermore, the analysis of the interviews indicated that supervisors believed in a connection between this area and inclusion/ exclusion of information. Forty percent of the supervisors stated that when their students are directed to the right references, their need for inclusion/exclusion of information feedback is eliminated. In other words, it seemed that they reckoned that when their students were exposed to the appropriate literature, they did not need inclusion/exclusion comments because students could obtain a good understanding of the topic and genre.

### **5. Discussion**

The present study had two main goals. The first one was to compare the MA and PhD students' perceived needs of supervisor feedback on their theses/dissertations. The findings indicated that while both MA and PhD students asked for feedback on all areas, the extent of the need for feedback perceived by MA students was significantly higher than that of PhD students in 8 out of 11 areas. This result empirically proved the famous notion that as graduate students go further in their education, it seems that their perceived needs for feedback decreases. This gradual decrease in their perceived need might stem from the extensive socialization into the community of practice and their increased self-efficacy. In the literature, the writers with high self-efficacy have been reported to employ mastery experience, social modeling, social persuasion, and stress management (Belcher & Hirvana, 2005; Graham, 2006; Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008). As the interview results consistently indicated, PhD students took advantage of these strategies; as for their mastery experience, they benefited from the process of completing their MA thesis; they enjoyed social modeling through reading similar papers and dissertations to socialize with the academic community; and they profited from the social persuasion through the comments they had received on their MA theses or papers.

The findings of the present research were in line with those of the two previous pertinent studies, namely Bitchener et al. (2011) and Can and Walker (2014) except in one area. The low level of the need for grammar feedback expressed by PhD students was also witnessed in Can and Walker's (2014) study; however, a minor difference was traced between the findings of this study and those of the Bitchener et al. (2011). In their study, the TEFL students put their need for grammar feedback somewhere in the middle of the ranking, but in our findings, just like those of Can and Walker (2014), feedback on structure was at the bottom of the list. The higher level of need in the findings of Bitchener et al. (2011) might stem from their students' dissatisfaction with the grammar comments they had received; they found those comments too general and incomprehensible. They, therefore, might have asked for more comments to compensate for the inefficiency of current practice. Furthermore, it should be noted their study included non-native speakers of English, who welcomed more comments on grammatical issues.

The findings indicated that in the majority of cases (8 out of 11), MA students expressed significantly higher levels of need for feedback than their PhD counterparts. When their expressed priorities were compared, there were some cases (argument, logical order, transition, clarity & references) which were given the same or similar places in their ratings, and there were some areas (including or excluding information, consistency, formatting, grammar, introduction & conclusion) given dissimilar priorities. Furthermore, it should be noted that although there were some similar priorities, the underlying reasons expressed by MA and PhD students were disparate.

The second goal of the present study was to examine the degree to which the graduate students' perceived needs for feedback matched their supervisors' perceptions. This objective was set as both the literature and the experiences of the authors alarmed the adverse effect of what is called misfit between what students wish to get and what instructors provide (Boud, 1991; Cohen, 1991; Goldstein, 2004). The findings indicated a substantial discrepancy between the priorities given by MA students and their supervisors; aside from argument, formatting, and grammar, other areas were given dissimilar priorities. In contrast, the PhD students' rating was similar to that of the supervisors except for references and literature decisions. It seems that PhD students and supervisors' mindsets, although were not clones of each other, were not markedly divergent. Several factors, extracted from the findings of the present study, that might underlie these similarities and differences are listed in Table 3.



Table 3. *Factors affecting TEFL students and supervisors' perceptions of the need for feedback on theses/dissertations*

Students	Supervisors
Linguistic self-confidence	Expectations
Prior experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- academic writing experience</li> <li>- receiving journal feedback</li> <li>- exposure to similar genre</li> <li>- MA thesis defense session</li> </ul>	Supervisors' perception of students' second language competence
Difficulty of the task	Supervisory experience
Electronic literacy	Their experience as graduate students
Appropriation of the text	Appropriation of the text
Insufficiency of academic writing classes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Content knowledge</li> <li>- Genre knowledge</li> </ul>	Electronic literacy
	Insufficiency of the educational system and university writing classes
	Difficulty of the task

Different factors were found to underlie the students' and supervisors' perceptions of the need for feedback on thesis/dissertation. Linguistic self-confidence is a factor that can affect students' need to receive feedback on grammar. Linguistic self-confidence is defined as the belief in one's "capacity to use the second language in an adaptive and efficient manner" (Clément, 1986, p. 273). The findings indicated that those who were of high linguistic self-confidence asked for less grammar feedback. In the same line, supervisors form an appraisal of their students' second language competence and then conceptualize need patterns. In the present study, supervisors expressed that, customarily, MA students were of lower linguistic ability, and thus needed more grammar feedback.

The graduate students' prior experiences in the form of academic writing experience, journal feedback, exposure to similar genre, and MA thesis defense session were some factors that affected the students' perceived needs of different areas (argument, including & excluding information, introduction, conclusion, formatting, & references). As Maclellan (2001) states, a factor, among many others, that can affect the process of feedback exchange is students' prior experience. Some other scholars (e.g., Fritz & Morris, 2000; Weaver, 2006) have mentioned the effect

of students' past experience on students' perceptions and the success of feedback activities. The supervisors have also mentioned the impact of their own experience on their perceptions. They pointed out the two types of experience in the form of supervisory experience, which gave them an understanding of the students' capabilities and needs, and their experience as graduate students which gave them a sort of sympathetic approach to examine their students' needs. As mentioned in Bitchener et al (2011), supervisors' experience as graduate students could affect their perceptions of the significance of feedback on an area (Dong, 1998).

The supervisors' standards of MA and PhD students were different in some cases. The findings of this study indicated that in some areas, supervisors set lower standards and deprioritize some areas (consistency, logical order, clarity, & transition) for MA students to focus more on "more significant" areas and avoid giving a large number of comments, which can be a source of novice researchers' (MA students') demotivation (Graham, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Another factor mentioned by both students and supervisors was the difficulty of tasks. For instance, argument was regarded as a difficult area requiring more supervisor feedback and guidance. This result makes sense as it is compatible with the oft-cited Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), which has suggested different levels of difficulty for educational tasks. According to this taxonomy, argumentation is pertinent to analyzing, evaluating, and creating which are at the zenith of this taxonomy and can lead to more cognitive pressure on students. In addition to argument, supervisors indicated the difficulty of some areas such as conclusion, introduction, and references which were given high priorities by them.

In the electronic age, the electronic literacy of students can affect their research process (Williamson, Bernath, Wright, & Sullivan, 2007). Electronic literacy, which is defined as "ability to communicate, read, write, compose and conduct research with competence and confidence in computer-mediated and internet environment" (Brussino & Gunn, 2008, p. 18), seems to affect the way students and supervisors think about feedback needs. Several students indicated that by the use of the Internet, they had no difficulty finding the pertinent literature; however, some supervisors, especially the older ones, indicated that it was difficult for them to find the right paper on the net. It seems that the familiarity of supervisors and students with the Internet can affect their need for references feedback.

The roles of the educational system and academic writing classes were also emphasized in the findings. Supervisors and students put the blame on the educational system for different inadequacies such as not preparing students for critical thinking and students' lack of content and genre knowledge. The absence of critical thinking

development, which has reported to be the ultimate goal of education (Galagan, 2010), can lead to students' inability to think critically and argue the propositions plausibly. The students' lack of content and genre knowledge can also stem from the academic writing classes. If these classes prepared students to find relevant literature and exposed them to similar texts or employed a genre-based writing approach, this problem would decrease to a minimum level (Hyland, 2004).

The last factor affecting supervisors and students' perceptions of the need for feedback on theses/dissertations was related to the appropriation of the text. While MA students did not complain about their supervisors' manipulating their theses, PhD students were against having their texts taken over by their supervisors. This phenomenon is called appropriation and is defined as "to take someone's words and inject one's own meaning into them, to take ownership of those words for one's own purpose" (Tardy, 2006, p. 61). Appropriation can occur when the writer feels that his/her paper does not belong to him/her anymore. The interview findings suggested that the students' low perceived need for feedback in some areas was pertinent to this sense of ownership. Bitchener et al. (2011), too, caution supervisors against taking the ownership of the text as it can demotivate students easily.

## **6. Conclusion**

With regard to the implications of the present study, the findings indicated that there might be differences between the perceptions of supervisors and students; the chance of discrepancy between the MA and supervisors' perception is higher, though. Thus, a supervisor should get familiar with his/her students' perceived needs through interviews or a short questionnaire and then make either modifications in his/her own priority list and/or enlighten his/her students about the criteria of acceptable academic studies and reports. Second, as prior experience plays a significant role in students' needs and their success, supervisors can provide intensive tasks for their MA students to compensate for the inadequacies of academic writing courses. Third, the educational system should prepare the students of the graduate degrees to be capable of arguing the ideas competently. While the task of argumentation is not as an easy one, there should be courses before graduate degrees to enable students to think critically. Fourth, supervisors should catch up with the latest education-related technologies to understand their students' perceived needs; thus, it is recommended to ask supervisors to take in-service technology courses regularly. Fifth, supervisors should try to promote students' sense of ownership by providing suggestive rather than prescriptive comments (Peterson, 2010).

Future studies can examine different areas of a thesis/dissertation (argument, grammar, writing conclusion, etc.) with regard to their difficulty levels for MA and PhD students based on a taxonomy such as Revised Bloom's Taxonomy. The effect

of individual factors such as age, gender, motivation, orientation, background knowledge on students' perceived needs can also be studied. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies should be conducted to check if there are different conceptualizations of the ownership of thesis/dissertation in different societies.

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## **Appendix**

### **Semi-structured interview questions**

What are the most and least difficult areas of thesis/dissertation writing?

How did you learn about APA style?

Do you need feedback on grammatical issues? Why?

Is it easy for you to argue for propositions?

Do you think you need assistance in the form of feedback to find pertinent literature?

Do you think you need feedback on the consistency of your text?

Do you think you need feedback on the logical order of your text?

Do you think you need feedback on the clarity of your text?

Would you like to receive comments that include or exclude parts from your text?

What are the areas that you need feedback most and least?