Pre-service Teachers' Beliefs about the Roles of Thesis Supervisors: A Case Study[1]

Creencias de los Docentes de Inglés en Formación sobre los Roles de los Directores de Tesis: Un Estudio de Caso

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Abstract

Trainee beliefs about the roles of thesis supervisors can exert an important influence on timely and successful completion of theses. This research article explores pre-service teacher beliefs about the roles of thesis supervisors through the analysis of their learning diaries. The aim of this study is to identify ways to improve supervisory practices in order to facilitate timely theses completion. Findings reveal that participants believe that the supervisor should motivate trainees to write their thesis, help them to select a promising topic, and provide advice on the research design, data collection and data analysis. In sum, candidates expect guidance in the writing of the entire thesis. The data also suggest that shaping students' beliefs can improve the timely and successful completion of their theses and as a result improve graduation rate.

Key words: Pre-service teacher beliefs, thesis supervision, thesis supervisors' roles, research competences, teacher education, graduation rate

Resumen

Las creencias de los docentes en formación acerca del rol del director de tesis pueden influir de manera significativa en la culminación oportuna y exitosa de la tesis. Este artículo analiza las creencias de dichos docentes acerca de los roles de los directores o supervisores de tesis mediante el análisis de sus diarios de aprendizaje. El objetivo de este estudio es identificar mecanismos que permitan mejorar las prácticas de supervisión para que los estudiantes puedan concluir de

forma oportuna la tesis. Los hallazgos de este estudio muestran que los futuros docentes creen que el rol del director de tesis incluye motivar a los alumnos a escribir su tesis; ayudarles a elegir un tema adecuado; orientarlos para que definan el diseño de investigación, la metodología para recoger y analizar los datos; en conclusión, guiar a los alumnos en la redacción de toda la tesis. Los datos también sugieren que modelar las creencias de los estudiantes puede contribuir a la culminación oportuna y exitosa de sus tesis y en consecuencia aumentar la tasa de titulados.

Palabras clave: Creencias de los docentes de inglés, dirección de tesis, rol del director de tesis, competencias investigativas, formación docente, tasa de titulados

Resumo

As crenças dos docentes em formação sobre o papel do diretor de tese podem influir de maneira significativa na culminação oportuna e bem-sucedida da tese. Este artigo analisa as crenças de ditos docentes acerca dos papéis dos diretores ou supervisores de teses mediante a análise dos seus diários de aprendizagem. O objetivo deste estudo é identificar mecanismos que permitam melhorar as práticas de supervisão para que os estudantes possam concluir de forma oportuna a tese. As descobertas deste estudo mostram que os futuros docentes acham que o papel do diretor de tese inclui motivar os alunos a escrever sua tese; ajudá-los a escolher um tema adequado; orientá-los para que definam o desenho de pesquisa, a metodologia para coletar e analisar os dados; em conclusão, guiar os alunos na redação de toda a tese. Os dados também sugerem que modelar as crenças dos estudantes pode contribuir à culminação oportuna e bem-sucedida da sua tese e, em consequência, aumentar a taxa de titulados.

Palavras chave: Crenças dos docentes de inglês, direção de tese, papel do diretor de tese, competências investigativas, formação docente, taxa de titulados

Introduction

Language teacher education aims to train students as future language teachers and professionals. In order to reach this goal, BA programs in Latin American countries seek to develop communicative, pedagogical and research competencies and shape trainees' beliefs and identity (Cortés, Cárdenas & Nieto, 2013; Lengeling, 2010; Pérez, 2010; Tapia, 2009). Due to graduation rate problems identified in various Mexican BAs in ELT (Tapia, Hidalgo, Ortega & Paredes, 2009), various Mexican researchers linked through

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the net of Mexican Language Research Groups Network (RECALE) began to conduct collaborative research to better understand the issues associated with graduation programs, and have reported the initial stage of this project in Tapia, Hidalgo & Méndez (2013a). One of the causes that affects graduation rate in BAs in ELT in Mexico is pre-service teacher beliefs about self, teaching, learning and research (Aguirre & Vélez, 2013; Funderburk, Hidalgo, Paredes & Dzul, 2013; Romero, Márquez & Chrova, 2013; Tapia, Hidalgo & Méndez, 2013b; Tapia, Rivera, Piantzi, 2013). This study explores pre-service teacher beliefs about the roles of thesis supervisors.

Ismail, Abiddin and Hassan (2011) note that students often experience problems when writing their thesis which are related to the research and supervisory process. A change in student teachers' beliefs about thesis supervision and supervisors can enhance timely and successful completion of their theses. So, this research aims to contribute to better understand how thesis supervisory practices can be improved to facilitate graduation rate in BAs in ELT in Mexico. The research questions that guided this study were two:

1. What beliefs do pre-service teachers hold about the roles of thesis supervisors? and

2. How can supervisory practices be improved to facilitate thesis completion?

There is little research conducted about thesis writing and supervision in ELT, especially in Mexico (Tapia, Rivera & Piantzi, 2013). Regarding teacher education programs in Latin America, it can be seen that Colombian BAs in English Language Teaching (ELT) seek to develop communicative, pedagogic and research competencies as part of the objectives of their curriculum (Cortés et al, 2013). Mexican ELT BAs also share these goals. Although most of these programs in Mexico are mainly focused on developing communicative and pedagogic competences (Funderburk et al, 2013; Pérez, 2010; Tapia & Blanco, 2011; Tapia, Gutiérrez, Pérez, Castillo, 2010; Tapia, Pérez, Lima, Otero, Rivera, 2010), these programs also include research and thesis writing as part of their curriculum. It is in one of these programs that this research took place.

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As an experienced teacher educator and thesis supervisor, my experience as thesis supervisor and teacher of thesis writing courses lead me to search for adequate teaching methodology and supervisory practices to make thesis writers more autonomous and successful. This work is linked to a larger and broader study conducted as part of my

doctoral thesis. However, the analysis done and the way that data was analyzed differ from the methodology of the original work (Tapia, 2009).

This article contains four sections. The first presents the review of literature regarding two topics: pre-service teacher beliefs and thesis supervision. The second describes the study including two points: subjects and educational context, and methods for data collection and data analysis. The third presents the findings and discussion of the study, and the last displays the conclusions.

Literature Review

Pre-service Teacher Beliefs

Teacher education programs aim to educate professionals. This education requires learners to become reflective professionals. According to Wallace (1991), teacher education courses should then be broadly educative in terms of the trainee personal and intellectual, and fully professional to prepare trainees for the profession by making them competent to assume their responsibilities. They should also foster continuing development of graduates as autonomous professionals and reflective practitioners.

Pre-service teachers are those engaged in initial teacher education programs at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Pre-service teacher beliefs are the beliefs that these subjects hold. Borg (2006, p. 46) notes that the specific concerns that have been explored in this area are four: "trainees' prior learning experiences and cognitions, trainees' beliefs about language teaching, trainees' decision-making, beliefs and knowledge during the practicum, and change in trainees' cognitions during teacher education."

Beliefs are defined by Borg (2001, p. 186) as a "proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, that is evaluative because it is accepted as true by the individual, it has emotive commitment, it guides thought and behavior." Beliefs are also defined as tools used by the human mind to deal with the problems and questions the world possesses (Barcelos, 2003). Barcelos and Kajala (2003) describe the nature of beliefs. First, they state that beliefs can be seen as mental constructs, and that they are emergent and dynamic. Second, they claim that beliefs change as we experience the world. Third, they state that beliefs are socially constructed and contextually situated. Finally, Barcelos and Kajala note that beliefs are produced in discursive situations and are linked to identities.

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Basturkmen, Loewen and Lewis (2004) provide another definition of beliefs as statements teachers make about their ideas, thought and knowledge that are expressed as evaluations of what should be done and is preferable. For this study, the definition of Basturkmen et al. (2004) will be used.

Thesis Supervision

This section discusses the terms thesis supervision and thesis supervisor as well as the main steps and roles of supervision in the thesis writing process. A thesis supervisor is a professor that guides a student to write their theses (Tapia, 2009). A thesis is "a piece of research that is required by a university in order to award an academic degree" (Criollo, 2003, p. 15). Ibañez (1990) signals the need to have adequate support and thesis supervision to write a thesis. There are various views about thesis supervision.

Connel (as cited in Murphy, Bain & Conrad, 2007, p. 210) defines thesis supervision as "the most advanced level of teaching in our educational system." Opposite to this view, Zorrilla and Torres (1992) point out that the thesis supervisor should only be a guide, not a teacher. They argue that the supervisor should not teach students how to conduct research; supervisors just need to guide students to integrate the theoretical and practical knowledge received during the major to write their thesis. Zorrilla and Torres also state that thesis students need to be closely supervised and receive the approval of their supervisor for each of the following steps involved in thesis writing: topic selection, problem and hypothesis statement, timetable, thesis progress and final draft. However, they also mention that it is the supervisor's responsibility to suggest the appropriate research methodology and specialized literature to the learner.

Regarding the definition of thesis supervisor, Wisker (2005) defines a supervisor as a professional who acts as a tutor, friend or colleague that helps the learner to become an independent researcher through guidance, modeling and managing. Oliver (2004) also provides a definition of supervisor as "the person who will advise you on the development of your research plan or proposal, the conduct of the research and the writing of the thesis" (p. 49). In his view, the supervisor roles include helping students to develop a research proposal, providing advice on the research design, data collection and data analysis, and guiding students in the writing process. This scholar goes on to say that if students need research training, it is the supervisor's responsibility to suggest an appropriate research training program. Regarding the

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thesis defense or viva and the preparation for it, the supervisor should nominate potential examiners and give advice to students to prepare for the defense as well as advice on how to do administrative procedures to obtain the degree. Grant (2005) views the supervisor as a caring, expert professional who guides the novice student towards becoming an independent researcher.

There are various views about thesis supervision. In contrast with Oliver's (2004) as well as Zorrilla & Torres' (1992) view of thesis supervision, Burns, Lamm & Lewis (1999) found three ways in which supervisors and students typically think about supervision: thesis, professional and person orientations. The focus of each orientation differs in terms of the task itself when referring to the thesis, the thesis as part of an induction to academic or professional life, and finally focusing on students as whole persons with academic and non-academic needs in their lives. They also state that regarding roles and expectations, the thesis supervision relationship needs to be reassessed or renegotiated at various times during candidature.

Murphy et al. (2007) make a distinction between supervisory roles being controlling or guiding, and between making supervision a task or a person focused endeavor. Paltridge and Starfield (2007) suggest that supervisors and students discuss their understandings of the supervisory relationship regarding topic or area of study, contact or involvement, and the thesis or dissertation. They propose the Role Perception Scale (p. 38) as an instrument to achieve this goal. This scale makes supervisors and thesis writing students reflect about the issue of whose responsibility it is regarding decision making for each step of the thesis writing process. In sum, it can be said that thesis supervision is a complex process that can be conceived and understood from different perspectives by supervisors and supervisees depending on their background knowledge and experience.

Grant (2005), applying a critical view, claims that in the contemporary scene of supervision there is a proliferation of discourses or systems of meaning that define the roles of thesis supervisors and supervisees. The four discourses identified present four perspectives for thesis supervision, which are the *psychological*, the *traditional academic*, the *techno-scientific*, and the *neo-liberal*. The *psychological perspective* views the supervisor as an expert or professional researcher who is the most important source of motivation and support for the supervisee. The *traditional academic perspective* sees the supervisor as a proven scholar and master of the discipline. Supervision is marked by formality and distance, and he is seen as a teacher and the supervisee is the disciple who wants to learn what the teacher knows. The *techno-*

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scientific perspective suggests that the supervisor is a trained and expert scientist who teaches the inexperienced trainee (Bitchener, Basturkmen & East, 2010). Supervision then is a research skill training process. Finally, the *neo-liberal perspective* is associated with the economic reforms of the 1980s; education is seen as a commodity and educational institutions as commercial enterprises. Supervisees then are seen as customers and the supervisors are providers of educational services. The supervisor role is the production of scholars by transferring skills that will allow supervisees to obtain the credential (commodity).

Taylor and Beasley (2005) and Deuchar (2008) suggest four thesis supervision styles, and each supervision style defines the roles of the supervisor and supervisee regarding the organization and management of the research project, the support given to the candidate, and resourcing the research project. The first style is called *laisser- faire,* and assumes that the candidates are capable of managing both the research project and themselves. The second is called *pastoral style,* which assumes that supervisees are able to manage the project but may need personal support. The third style called *directorial* assumes that trainees need support in managing the project but not for themselves. Finally, the *contractual style* assumes that supervisors and students need to negotiate the extent of support in both project and personal terms. Deuchar (2008) notes that it is crucial to become aware of the supervisee needs in order to meet them, but this depends on the supervisor and supervisee beliefs about the thesis supervision process and their actual roles in it.

Methodology

Context and Participants

I conducted this research in a BA program in modern languages in a public university located in Central Mexico. Participants were taking two consecutive courses where they had to write a full draft of their BA thesis. Each course lasted 16 weeks. The teaching methodology used was constructivist and learner centered having as a goal educating learners; it was a methodology designed to shape their beliefs (Tapia, 2009). I had noticed in my previous thesis writing courses that pre-service teachers and future translators did not value thesis writing. Most of them believed that writing a thesis was just a very difficult, useless and tedious writing task that was required in two consecutive courses at the end of their degree program. So, I designed and tried different methodologies to change their beliefs. I aimed to make them believe that writing a thesis was a project that could lead to professional development (Tapia, 2013). As such, the methodology used in this

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course was the result of a series of action research longitudinal studies where I had tried different methodologies.

In this case, I was teaching a group of 23 students, 16 were pre-service teachers and seven future translators. As I was their teacher and the supervisor of most of them, I invited those 16 pre-service teachers at the end of the two thesis writing courses, after giving them their final scores, to volunteer and participate in this research that was part of my doctoral thesis. From this 16, eight students volunteered and filled a consent form to confirm their participation; through that consent form, they allowed me to analyze their electronic dialog diaries sent to me as their teacher. The participants were two male and six female. Thus, the subjects of this study were eight pre-service teachers majoring in modern languages in a public university in central Mexico. Their age ranged between 21 and 25 years old. In order to protect the identity of the participants, I gave them pseudonyms.

Data Collection and Analysis

This paper reports a case study where learner beliefs about thesis supervision were identified and analyzed. These beliefs were found in the participants' electronic learning diaries that were sent via e-mail to me as the teacher of the thesis writing courses on a weekly basis. This task was a small part (10%) of the score of the students. Diaries are data collection instruments that can be used to identify beliefs (Borg, 2006).

Students were asked to write diaries because they are beneficial for learners and teachers as researchers. Diaries provide effective means of identifying variables that are important to individual teachers and learners, and they are excellent tools for reflection; they provide immediate feedback (Jarvis, 1992; Meath-Lang, 1990). They serve as means of generating questions and hypotheses about teaching and learning (Brock et al., as cited in Wallace, 1998). They also enhance awareness about the way a teacher teaches and students learn (Gray, 1998). Electronic dialogue diaries are easy to conduct (Shin, 2003). Thus, they are a very useful tool to help the teachers to respond more effectively to learners (Gray, 1998; Tapia, 2012). Diaries allow students to reflect *in action, on action*, as suggested by Schön (1983), and *for action* as noted by Murphy (2014). They are the most natural form of classroom research. They enable the researcher to relate classroom events and examine trends emerging from the diaries (Bailey, 1990). Diaries were the only instrument used to collect data for this study due to the fact that they provide rich data. As they were kept by the participants for nine months, they allowed me as their teacher and

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researcher to identify their beliefs and follow in a detailed way their thesis writing process. It was during these months that I was able to see that I created a friendly environment and even though the relation was asymmetrical, participants felt confident enough to narrate positive and negative experiences as well as provide positive and negative feedback for me as their theses supervisor.

The narratives from the participants were read various times and then were analyzed. Common categories were identified and classified as follows: *effects of adequate supervision*, and *supervision functions.* The beliefs identified do not include all the beliefs found, only the ones related to the role of the thesis supervisor and supervision practices. The discussion includes some quotes from the students' diaries that were written in two consecutive courses. They were reported with two numbers: the first number indicates whether the diary entry was written on the first or second course, and the second number(s) refers to the number of week(s) of the course when the entry was written and sent to the teacher via e-mail.

Results

The beliefs identified about the roles of the thesis supervisor were grouped and analyzed. Common beliefs were grouped and classified under the following categories: *effects of adequate supervision* and *supervision functions*. These beliefs are presented and discussed in the figures below. These beliefs overlap due to the fact that they are referring to the same category: adequate thesis supervision and supervisor roles. It is worth noting that the words illustrating the beliefs are exact quotes taken from students' diaries; some of them contained grammatical or spelling errors and they were not corrected.

Beliefs about the Effects of Adequate Supervision

Figure 1 shows participants beliefs about the effects of adequate supervisory practices on thesis writers. These practices are related to the beliefs displayed in Figure 2.

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Adequate supervision helped me to:
1. Make decisions and answer questions.
2. Find specific information.
3. Write and improve specific parts of the thesis.
4. Become autonomous learners.

Figure 1. Beliefs about the effects of adequate supervision on thesis writers

Participants believe that adequate supervision helped them to:

1. Make decisions and answer questions.

Thesis writing required students to make decisions throughout the process. As they were novice researchers they had many questions and wanted the supervisor to guide them, to answer their questions that allowed them to make adequate decisions. The following entry from Paula illustrates this belief.

> Now related to the introduction I have a question. Can I start my introduction by describing an experience??? And then relate that with the formal aspects? (Paula 1, 2).

This type of question presented in the diaries was sent to the teacher via e-mail. It is important to allow thesis writers to express all their doubts to the supervisor, so they can answer their questions and make adequate decisions. Donato (1994) notes that the expert needs to guide the novice.

2. Find specific information.

An important element of successful research and thesis writing is having adequate references to support the writing process. BA thesis students as novice researchers have difficulties finding relevant sources to write their thesis. The supervisor can provide some of them but can also train learners to find them and promote collaborative work to help students share and learn from each other. As Zorrilla and Torres (1992) point out, 95% of the responsibility of writing a thesis relies on the student.

> Well, the last class that we had last week, it was pretty cool. I found a classmate who I talked to had checked some books that talk about some aspects of my thesis. I also shared with her some books that could help her. I hope we can do it again so I help others and others help me (Paula 1, 9).

3. Write and improve specific parts of the thesis.

Novice researchers find it difficult to write their first thesis. They need guidance and support to write each of the chapters. Wisker (2005) argues that they need adequate scaffolding. Specific directions and clear explanations are needed to produce and edit the first drafts of the thesis. However, as I followed a constructivist methodology, I promoted peer interaction and feedback to improve their thesis. In the words of Paula, Julian and Nancy:

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Later you explained what the thesis was about…I loved the 'food' and thesis comparison. It made me have in clear what you expect from me and what I want to get from my thesis (Paula, 1, 1).

... the examples the teacher uses are motivating (Julian 1, 2).

Our work was reviewed by my classmates in class. It is always good to receive comments from other people. Especially if we consider those comments as good criticism in order to improve what we did (Nancy 1, 7).

4. Become autonomous.

Thesis writing is a learning experience that may lead to autonomy (Tapia, 2010). This includes setting goals and learning to manage time to achieve them. The words of Julian show his experience related to this point.

I think that an important element in writing our theses and in learning how to become an independent learner is the fact of knowing how to manage our time (Julian 2, 5).

Beliefs about Supervisors' Roles

Figure 2 shows participants beliefs about the effects of the roles of thesis supervisors. These roles are related to the beliefs displayed on Table 1.

Adequate supervision gave me:
1. Guidance and advice
2. Feedback
3. Motivation and recognition

Figure 2. Beliefs about supervisors' roles

Adequate supervision gave me:

1. Guidance and advice

Novice thesis writers need guidance and advice throughout the process. Participants reflected on the process but they needed a guide to help them succeed. In the words of Marisol:

... we should take advantage of our abilities and skills and consider them as a gift. But that gift isuseless unless we use it. Sometimes we need someone who guide us (Marisol 1, 5).

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Regarding the role of the supervisor to help the learner in the thesis writing process, Donato (1994, p. 37) argues that "the experienced individual is often observed to guide, support and shape actions of the novice who in turn, internalizes the expert's strategic process."

2. Feedback

Participants expected feedback from their supervisor. As they were novice researchers, their supervisor's feedback was crucial when making decisions in the research process. Carmen's comments illustrate this.

> However, when you checked our instruments I could see that what we had was good (Carmen 2, 5).

Feedback can also be obtained from peers, but the supervisor's feedback is highly valued by thesis writers. Marisol's entry is an example of this practice.

> We did peer evaluation, focusing on strengths, weaknesses, questions and comments (Marisol 1, 12).

González and Roux (2007) suggest writing teachers to train learners to give balanced feedback starting with positive comments.

3. Motivation and recognition

The starting point to begin writing is being motivated to write (Hedge, 1988). However, thesis writers also need to be motivated throughout the process and recognized for the effort they write a part of their thesis. The diary entries of Nancy, Julian and Carmen show the importance of these actions as part of the roles of thesis supervisors.

> Something funny is that you always say the phrase just in the right moment to bring me up (Nancy 1, 3).

> Carrying out that activity was meaningful for me because just a day before I had learned what I wanted and that activity made me feel capable of doing that (Julian 1,5) .

> Well, I just want to thank you, your motivation toward us, I mean, you have always told us that what we are doing is a very good piece of research...It is hyper good that an expert like you recognizes our job and effort (Carmen 2, 6).

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Thesis writing is a stressful process for novice researchers. According to Christison (2002) the brain downshifts under threat. So, thesis writing, as other learning processes, needs to take place in an environment that facilitates the achievement of the full potential of the students (Moskowitz, 1978).

In order to summarize the findings of the study they are going to be presented linked to the research questions that guided this study.

1. *What beliefs do pre-service teachers hold about the roles of thesis supervisors?*

Participants believe that adequate supervision occurred when the supervisor guided, gave feedback and advice to learners. They also believe that adequate supervision means motivating and recognizing learners. These findings relate to the work of Ismail et al. (2011). These scholars mention that supervisors should give support to students, keep their morale high, be sensitive to students' time and competence limitations, give advice and feedback.

2. *How can supervisory practices be improved to facilitate thesis completion?*

Participants believe that adequate supervision helped them to make decisions, find specific information, write and improve specific parts of the thesis and become autonomous learners. These findings are linked to the supervisory roles described by Haksever and Manisali (2000). These scholars state that the supervisor should provide personal help as well as indirect and direct research related help.

Ismail et al. (2011) state that there are various factors that influence the thesis writing process. However, adequate supervision can lead to successful thesis writing. I think that thesis supervisors need to reflect and conduct research about their thesis supervision practices in order to analyze their own style and roles. Besides, in order to address supervisee's needs and expectations, I believe that the thesis supervision relationship needs to be developed, reassessed or renegotiated at various times during the thesis writing process, as pointed out by Burns et al. (1999). Besides, experienced supervisors can train novice teachers to develop teaching competences linked to thesis supervision. Team teaching and peer observation could be two ways to achieve this goal. These are innovative practices that may face resistance by gate keepers; however, they may lead to improvements in supervisory practices in language teacher education as reported in the cases by Witten, Brenes, Castineira, Preciado, Sánchez & Tapia (2007).

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Conclusion

In this study I identified and analyzed participants' beliefs about thesis supervision. Although learners were novice researchers, the constructivist methodology I used in the thesis writing courses led them to autonomy confirming the first study of my doctoral thesis (Tapia, 2010). As suggested by Murphy et al. (2007), my supervisory roles aimed at having more features of guiding than of controlling, facilitating learners' development and growth. Participants' beliefs about thesis supervision also note that students perceived in my supervisory practices the three orientations for thesis writing suggested by Burns et al (1999): thesis, personal and professional orientations. Although BA's in ELT in Mexico have included other options for awarding of the degree since 2001, as noted by Sayer (2007), the thesis remains one option. This is one of the reasons why it is worth analyzing supervisory practices, as suggested by Tapia et al. (2009; 2013), to improve graduation rate in ELT education in Mexico.

The findings of this study are limited to the participants and the context where the research took place. However, I hope that this study contributes to better understand supervisory practices and inspires other thesis supervisors to explore thesis supervision and supervision roles in other contexts and levels. Further research exploring beliefs about thesis supervision is needed in order to generate a wider and stronger group of studies that can allow thesis supervisors to reflect about their roles and practices and find ways to make them more professional and learner centered.

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