Views of Summer TEFL Postgraduate Students and their Supervisors on the Practice of Thesis Supervision in the Ethiopian Context

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the views of postgraduate students and their thesis supervisors on the practice of thesis supervision in the Department of English Language and Literature found at an Ethiopian university. The participants of the study were twenty-seven master's students studying the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) and eight of their thesis supervisors. A questionnaire consisting of seven open-ended items and one closed-ended item was used to collect data from the students while a semi-structured interview was used with the supervisors. Frequency count and percentage were used to analyze the data from the closed-ended items of the questionnaire whereas the data from the open-ended item in the questionnaire and the interview were analyzed qualitatively. The findings showed that the supervisors focused on helping their supervisees with methodology and correcting typos. Consequently, most thesis supervisors neglected to support their supervisees in developing a theoretical framework. The findings also indicated that more than half of the supervisees did not frequently receive feedback from their supervisors. Some supervisees also said

that they did not have good relationships with their supervisors. However, the results from the analysis of the interviews with the supervisors indicated that the supervisors believed that they had amicable relationships with their supervisees and that they provided adequate feedback. Some supervisors also admitted that the theoretical framework was overlooked by many supervisors in their supervision of TEFL master's students. Finally, conclusions are drawn and recommendations made for further research in the area.

Keywords: Supervision, thesis, postgraduate, student experiences

Introduction

Supervision is a common and vital part of the relationship between postgraduate students and their supervisors in higher education. As a result, supervising students on the research projects they conduct as a requirement for their graduation is one of the responsibilities of professors all over the world. One of the learning experiences students may not forget after graduation might be the supervision process they have undergone when they were carrying out their research projects (Gedamu, 2018; McLeod, 2008). Completing a research project and defending it creates a good sense of achievement and students learn from it the need for dedication and hard work to be successful in life or in their future careers (Roberts & Seaman, 2018).

Supervision is commonly acknowledged as being complex and multifaceted. Ballard and Clanchy (1993) explain that supervising students requires blending academic knowledge and the skillful management of personal and professional relations. To complete a thesis successfully postgraduate students should show commitment and interest in their area of research; however, equally importantly they should receive effective thesis supervision (Abiddin, Hassan, & Ahmad, 2009; Frischer & Larsson, 2000; Orellana, Darder, Pérez, & Salinas, 2016). How well postgraduate

students are supervised is probably associated with the way they and their supervisors choose to play their respective roles (Mhunpiew, 2013). Knowing their roles and responsibilities can be helpful to students and supervisors so that they may examine what they should do and how they should go about playing their roles optimally (Roberts & Seaman, 2018).

Postgraduate students need effective advising starting from the selection of a good research topic to the last stage of writing up the report of the results of their research project (Lahenius, 2013). The level of success of postgraduate students in doing research can be influenced by the kind of help and support they get from their thesis advisors (Ismail, Abiddin, & Hassan, 2011; Mhunpiew, 2013). How the help and the support research students receive from their supervisors could influence their research work can be explained by the Zone of Proximal Development. The concept of Zone of Proximal Development, which is an important social interactionist theory, is developed by Vygotsky's (1978) and refers to the level of skill or knowledge that supervisees do not currently have, but which the supervisees can develop through contingent and calibrated support they receive by interacting with their supervisors. Working together with a supervisor, who is more experienced and more knowledgeable, is the best way for the supervisee to move into the next level of development which is required to complete the thesis.

The body of research on the supervision of undergraduate and postgraduate students has increased globally since the 1990s. Most of the studies are concerned with issues such as effective supervisory processes as a means of successful thesis completion (Hodza, 2007), supervision pedagogies (Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007) and the roles and responsibilities of students and supervisors (McGinty, Koo, & Saeidi, 2010). However, there has been less research interest in master's theses than in doctoral dissertations (Anderson, Day, & McLaughlin, 2008). This is also true in the Ethiopian context where the few studies conducted on the thesis supervision of TEFL postgraduate students focused on doctoral students. Zewdu (2012), for example, wrote his PhD

dissertation on the research culture of Addis Ababa University with particular reference to TEFL PhD students. He found that the recommendations made by doctoral students in their dissertations were not used to solve problems in the Ethiopian education system. Yenus (2018) also conducted a study on doctoral students' perceived needs and preferences for written feedback from their supervisors. He discovered that PhD students from many disciplines including TEFL students preferred to receive written feedback on content to feedback on linguistic accuracy. However, one local study on supervision looked at master's TEFL students' views of their supervisors' supervisory styles and satisfaction with thesis supervision (Gedamu, 2018). Gedamu (2018) reported that master's TEFL students perceived that their thesis supervisors discharged their responsibilities properly by giving them emotional support and helpful timely feedback. Moreover, Gedamu (2018) revealed that master's TEFL students were satisfied with the supervision they received. However, Gedamu's study did not explicitly show the reasons for the TEFL master's students' satisfaction.

Research has also indicated that many postgraduate students fail to complete their studies in many countries because of problems related to supervision (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Jiranek, 2010; Kim & Otts, 2010). Some of the problems mentioned in the literature that can affect the completion of thesis in time and its high quality are poor student-supervisor relationship and inexperienced or incompetent thesis supervisors (Rugg & Petre, 2007). The most common complaints from research students are infrequent contact with supervisors, who may be too busy with administrative or teaching responsibilities, who have too many students or who be away from the university too often (Ismail et al., 2011). Some of the students' potential challenges in the course of their supervision in general can include over-commitment, perfectionism, procrastination, lack of effort, and disorganization (Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008). Kearns and Gardiner (2012), for instance, claim that research students from a non-western educational culture may

find supervision difficult and daunting because they may not take an assertive role to let their supervisors know what they do not understand or whether they need something to be done differently; and thus supervisors would not know what the students' hidden problems and needs are. In the supervision process supervisors may also face difficulties and challenges. Harman (2002), for instance, claims that there were weaknesses in PhD supervision in Australian research-intensive universities due to the limited time available to supervisors and their inability to cater for larger and more diverse PhD student populations who felt dissatisfied.

Many professors teaching at the Faculty of Humanities in the university which was the focus of this study have a long experience of supervising undergraduate and postgraduate students. There is no doubt that most of these professors supervise their students to the best of their abilities. At the same time there are some professors who may not be properly carrying out their duties like thesis supervisors seen in other universities (Zewdu, 2012 ; Olibie, Agu, & Uzoechina, 2015). Therefore, it is deemed necessary to conduct a survey which can be used to assess the views of TEFL students about the practice of thesis supervision in the Department of English Language and Literature at Bahir Dar University. It is hoped that the results of this survey can be used to improve the way thesis supervision is conducted in the faculty with the ultimate goal of helping students to have the best experiences in doing their research as a requirement for graduation.

Literature review

The quality of theses written by postgraduate students can be affected by the kind of supervision that they receive during the time they conduct their research. Postgraduate students usually complain about the kind of support they receive from their supervisors, and they could be disillusioned because their supervisors may not meet their expectations (Malfroy, 2005). Lessing and Schulze (2002) argue that the supervisory role involves balancing various factors such as skills in the area of

research, support for the student, constructive criticism, and creativity. Ives and Rowley (2005) also stress the importance of matching postgraduate students to supervisors in terms of area of research and compatibility. These authors also indicated that postgraduate students may have different needs at different stages of the development of their theses. Some researchers like Black (2017) recommend that the supervisor and a postgraduate student should form a roadmap to complete all the stages in the dissertation with a focus on completing the doctoral candidate's dissertation.

Thesis supervision is understood as a complex and vulnerable social relationship because it involves emotional and cognitive processes (Deem & Brehony, 2000; Hodza, 2007). Effective communication (Spear, 2000) and fine-tuning supervision to students' needs (Anderson, Day, &, McLaughlin, 2006) have been identified as main characteristics of effective supervision. Students' may differ in their expectations of the supervisory relationship when compared to their supervisors. Although supervisors tend to give importance to the academic aspects of the supervision process, students may regard interpersonal relationships as more important than content-related aspects (Johnston, 1999 cited in McGinty et al., 2010). That is why some academic institutions allow their postgraduate students to choose their own supervisors believing that the outcome of the supervision would be more effective (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006). The relationship and interaction postgraduate students develop with their thesis supervisors can also determine their retention and persistence (Baxter Magolda, & King, 2008; Campbell & Nutt, 2008).

The responsibilities of supervisors include managing the frequency of communication between supervisor and student (Russell, 1996), taking students' schedule into consideration (Hodza, 2007) and advising and providing effective feedback (Dysthe, Samara, & Westrheim, 2006). The supervisor is assumed to adopt many roles during supervision such as those of

challenger (Hodza 2007), guide (Mhunpiew, 2010) and the emotional supporter who empowers student effectiveness

(Anderson et al., 2006). Postgraduate students, particularly doctoral students, need access to knowledge on methodological and theoretical issues (Dysthe et al., 2006) as well as on practical matters such as how to write an article and how to create a research network (Pearson & Brew, 2002). In addition, students expect supervisors to express genuine interest, be friendly and demonstrate empathy when they face academic difficulties (Anderson et al., 2008).

The responsibilities of faculty members who supervise postgraduate students have been extensively discussed in the literature (Aspland, Edwards, O'Leary, & Ryan, 1999; Crosta & Packman, 2005; Jones, 2013). Creating learning environments that both support and challenge their supervisees is one of the responsibilities of thesis supervisors (Daloz, 1999). Yu and Wright (2016) argue the supervisee-supervisor relationship is one of the major barriers leading to students' academic failure and dissatisfaction. Sidhu, Kaur, Fook, and Yunus (2014) surveyed postgraduate students from Malaysia and the United Kingdom about their expectations of the supervisory practices, roles and responsibilities of their supervisors. Respondents from both countries had similar views regarding supervisory practices and agreed that supervisors must provide guidance during the research process and must be experts in their field of study. Comparatively, the Malaysian students focused more on the personal attributes of their supervisor, while the British students were found less dependent and had fewer expectations of their supervisors. The students, who have an intimate relationship with their supervisors, emphasize positive contributions of the supervisors (Çelik, 2013). These findings support that the students value more the personal aspect of the supervisory relationship, and, even though there seems to be a general agreement on responsibilities, there is an obvious mix of attitudes regarding students' dependency on their supervisors. Manathunga (2007, 2011) found that students demonstrated an independent

attitude towards supervision regardless of cultural background, which contradicted the conventional image that Asian students are more dependent than other students. The author rejected the assumption that non-European students prefer a hierarchical approach to supervision, highlighting that personal experiences, personality and preferences are equally important to the cultural background of both supervisors and supervisees. Studies also indicated that in addition to developing skills and attitudes in their supervisees, supervisors should also support their supervisees with career planning (Vilkinas, 2005).

Other studies also indicated that students have multiple expectations of their supervisors; they expect supervisors to assist them with their time management, provide them with constructive feedback (Lessing & Schulze, 2002), be constructively critical and guide them in terms of reading material (Woolhouse, 2002). Research students are also expected to be open and committed to learning in order to progress as planned (Duan & Roehlke, 2001). They are also expected to decide on the work needed for the completion of the thesis and the method of producing outcomes. However, their responsibilities are not always clearly articulated. For instance, de Kleijn, Meijer, Brekelmans, and Pilot (2012) found that research students are not always aware of the manner in which their supervisors might expect them to work, for example, independently, and as a result of this misconception, they do not acknowledge their goals. This thus suggests that expectations like goals should be clarified and agreed upon in advance. The manner in which thesis supervision is conducted has the potential to make an important contribution to the quality of postgraduate research (Ismail et al., 2011).

Research question
1. What are the views of summer TEFL postgraduate students and their thesis supervisors on the practice of thesis supervision?

Research design and Methodology
Design
The study employed a survey design in which both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered using a questionnaire and an interview. The survey design was selected for the present study because it was important to assess the views of summer TEFL postgraduate students and their supervisors on the practice of thesis supervision in their department.

Participants
Twenty-seven summer master's students in TEFL who defended their theses in the 2016-2017 academic year and eight of their thesis supervisors participated in this survey. The total number of master's students in TEFL who defended their theses in the 2016-2017 academic year was 82. Twenty (74%) of the participants were male, and the remaining seven (26%) were female. Moreover, twenty-five (93%) of the participants were sponsored by the government; only two of them were self-sponsored. In the 2016-2017 academic year there were 40 academic staff in the department.

Sampling
Fifty questionnaires were distributed to final-year summer postgraduate students who came to the university to defend their theses from September 3-5, 2017. Only 27 of them completed and returned the questionnaires with a 54% return rate. The sample size of eight for the interview with the supervisors was determined by data saturation.

Data gathering instrument
Questionnaire and interview were employed to collect data for the study. The questionnaire had seven closed-ended items and one open-ended item. The closed-ended items required the supervisees participating in this study to express their views about the kind of help and support they received during thesis supervision and what their thesis supervisors did to help them

complete their thesis on time in terms of setting a deadline for every stage of the research project. Another item also required the participants to divulge whether their thesis supervisors provided them with written or oral feedback. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher after reviewing the related literature. Cronbach alpha was computed for the closed-ended items of the questionnaire to check the internal consistency of the items and it was found to be 7.04, which was large enough to continue collecting data. To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was given to two senior faculty members in the Department of English Language and Literature, and their comments were used to drop some items and revise others. The interview protocol was written by the researcher and it was pilot tested with two academic staff and it was found that two questions were very similar and one of them was dropped. Finally, eleven questions were used for the interviews with the supervisors.

Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed by the researcher and two summer master's TEFL students who were the researcher's supervisees. Most of the questionnaires were returned to the researcher in person and some of them were collected by the two summer master's students and were given to the researcher. Two questionnaires were also returned to the head of the Department of English Language and Literature, which were finally given to the researcher. Then, the researcher interviewed the thesis supervisors. Finally, the data from the questionnaire and interview were organized and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Data analysis

The data from the closed-ended items of the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency count and percentage while the data from the open-ended item of the questionnaire and the interview were coded for various themes whose meanings were interpreted in search of useful insights.

Results

Assistance and communication

Table 1 below clearly shows that more than half of the supervisees self-reported that they received help and support from their thesis supervisors in refining their topics, developing a research approach, how to avoid plagiarism, designing methodology and proofreading their papers.

Table 1: Types of assistance the supervisees received from their thesis supervisors

Types of assistance	Respondents	
	Frequency	**Percentage**
Refining your topic	15	55.55%
Developing a research approach	17	62.96%
How to avoid plagiarism	15	55.55%
Developing theoretical framework	12	44.44%
Designing methodology	18	66.66%
Proofreading your paper	17	62.96%

However, only 44.44% of the supervisees disclosed that they received help in developing the theoretical framework for their studies. It seems that thesis supervisors gave more attention to methodology (66.66%) in their supervision of their master's students than to theories (44.44%) that their research students could use to analyze their data or to explain the relationships that may exist in the variables they investigated. Some of the supervisors interviewed also agreed that the theoretical framework was neglected by both the supervisors and the supervisees. These supervisors believed that understanding what the theoretical framework was difficult for most of the supervisees; as a result, these supervisors might not have encouraged their supervisees to use a theoretical framework for their theses.

Table 2: Deadlines and time schedule for conducting the research

Items	Respondents					
	Yes	%	No	%	Total	
Did your thesis supervisor set deadlines for the various components of the thesis, for example, literature review, data collection and analysis?	16	59.25%	11	40.75%	27	100%
Did your thesis supervisor make schedules so that you could meet him regularly?	11	42.30	15	57.70%	26	100%

According to Table 2, the majority of the supervisees (59.25%) revealed that their thesis supervisors set deadlines for them to complete the various components of the thesis. Setting deadlines by thesis supervisors could help their supervisees to complete their research projects in time and probably did their research projects with a better quality. However, 40.75% of the supervisees, which is not a small number, replied that their thesis supervisors did not set deadlines for them which may mean that these supervisees might not get the kind of help they needed before they went from one component of the research process to the next. These supervisees might also try to do a lot of things in a short period of time which might compromise the quality of their research.

On the contrary, the majority of the supervisees (57.70%) responded that their thesis supervisors did not make schedules so that they could meet regularly. If thesis supervisors and their supervisees have not met regularly, it might mean that supervisors might not have control over what their supervisees were doing and it could be too late to help their supervisees if their supervisees had made mistakes in their methodology and analysis of data. Not meeting regularly may also open doors to cheating on the part of supervisees because they might feel that they have a free ride in what they do and their supervisors may not have enough time to look at their complete work critically.

The supervisors interviewed for this study disclosed that they did not sit together with their supervisees and plan together because after summer most of their supervisees would leave the campus. Most of the supervisors said that they maintained communication with their supervisees through the phone. According to the supervisors, some of their supervisees lived far from the university and did not even have access to the Internet which made planning difficult. One supervisor said that before his supervisors left the campus he would convene a meeting and would give his supervisees general orientation on what they needed to do throughout the research process, but he acknowledged that he would not work out a detailed plan with each of his supervisees.

Table 3: Time elapsed before supervisors respond to requests by supervisees for meetings and for feedback on drafts

	1-3 days		About a week		1-2 weeks		About a month		More than a month		Total	
Items	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
How long would it take for your thesis supervisor to respond to your requests for meetings?	6	23.07%	3	11.53%	8	30.76%	9	34.61%	__	__	26	100%
How long would it take for your thesis supervisor to respond to your drafts?	5	18.51%	5	18.515	9	33.33%	4	14.81%	4	14.81%	27	100%

Based on the data in Table 3, it can be seen that more than 65% of the supervisees got a response from their supervisors for their request for a meeting within a few days or a couple of weeks, which is a relatively quick response if one considers the fact that

many professors in the department have many supervisees and are burdened with several other duties and responsibilities. In contrast, about 35% of the supervisees replied that it took for their thesis supervisors about a month to respond to their requests for a meeting. To wait for a month to meet their supervisors can be very costly for summer master's students, who are doing their thesis, because they do their research by teaching full time in their respective schools. This response seems to contradict with what most of the supervisors interviewed claimed. The supervisors said that it did not take them more than a couple of weeks to meet with their supervisees once their supervisees asked for a meeting. The supervisors even said that their supervisees could meet them in a couple of days if they were on campus or were not busy. Table 3 further shows that about 30% of the participants disclosed that they had to wait a month or more than a month to receive feedback and comments to their drafts from their thesis supervisors. Waiting a month or more to get feedback from their supervisors can affect the quality of their research because most research students may find it difficult to proceed to the next stage of their research project without getting the opinions or decisions of their supervisors. However, except one supervisor who said that it might take him about a month to give comments and feedback, all the other supervisors interviewed seem to disagree with what their supervisees stated. The supervisors replied that they would give comments and feedback to their supervisees in a few days or weeks not in months as claimed by the supervisees.

Table 4: Efforts by thesis supervisors to let their supervisees know their whereabouts

Items	Respondents					
	Yes	**%**	**No**	**%**	**Total**	
Did your thesis supervisor let you know that he would be travelling or be away from campus and could not respond to your emails or phone calls?	13	48.14%	14	51.85%	27	100%

Almost 52% of the supervisees, according to Table 4, replied that their thesis supervisors did not let them know that they would be travelling or be away from campus and could not respond to their emails or phone calls. Although it may not be difficult for research students to know where their thesis supervisors are at any given moment in this age of mobile phones and the Internet, it would always be helpful if thesis supervisors let their supervisees know if they leave their city for days or weeks. Since almost all summer postgraduate students live out of Bahir Dar, letting their supervisees know when thesis supervisors are out of town may spare their supervisees from wasting valuable time by travelling to Bahir Dar to meet their supervisors. However, the supervisors confirmed that their supervisees could call them any time they wanted and talk to them.

Feedback

Table 5 shows how often TEFL summer students received written or oral feedback from their supervisors.

Table 5: Provision of written or oral commentary on drafts

Item	Responses						Total	
	Always		**Sometimes**		**Rarely**			
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Did your thesis supervisor provide written or oral commentary on your drafts?	12	44.44%	6	22.22%	9	33.33%	27	100%

Table 5 shows that 33.33% of the supervisees believed that their supervisors rarely provided them with written or oral commentary on their drafts, and 22.22% of them thought that they only sometimes received written or oral comments on their drafts from their supervisors. In other words more than half of the supervisees did not frequently receive written or oral comments

from their supervisors. Table 5 also indicates that only 44.44% of the supervisees believed that they always received written or oral comments on their drafts from their supervisors. Contrary to what some of the supervisees said about feedback and comments, the supervisors asserted that they gave both oral and written feedback to their supervisees. Since the supervisees did not live on campus, the oral feedback the supervisors gave was mostly over the phone, and the written feedback and comments were given on soft copies and were sent by email. However, one supervisor admitted that he mostly gave oral feedback and comments over the phone because he was too busy to give written feedback.

Thematic analysis of data from open-ended item of the questionnaire

The open-ended item of the questionnaire asked the supervisees to describe any good or bad experiences they had with their thesis supervisors and to comment on what should be done to improve thesis supervision in the future. They were told to write their comments either in Amharic, a local language, or English, though they were also told that writing in English would be preferable. Three of the respondents wrote no comments at all. Two other respondents wrote their comments in Amharic, and one other respondent wrote his comments both in English and Amharic. The vast majority of the respondents wrote their comments in a few sentences though they were given enough space to write their comments. However, some of them provided relatively long comments. The comments or suggestions given by the respondents are organized into themes and are presented below.

Words of appreciation

Some respondents expressed their appreciation of the help and support they received from their supervisors by directly referring to their supervisors anonymously. Their comments are presented below (no attempt made to edit their language except for spelling and capitalization). Respondent 4 below gave relatively

detailed information about the support he received from his supervisor:

> *From my experience with my thesis advisor, I could notice that he is so energetic and unreserved in giving valuable commentaries in framing problem statements, important data gathering tools and suggesting appropriate data analysis techniques.*

Similarly, Respondent 2 said that her supervisor contributed to her success but did not explain how she was supported or assisted in doing her thesis.

> *… My advisor is one of the person that encourages me for my success.*

Respondent 20 thanked his supervisor although he criticized him for his unclear comments which he couldn't understand.

> *My advisor supported me based on my pace as much as possible. So I want to thank him.*

Relationships between supervisors and supervisees

If thesis supervisors have amicable relationships with their supervisees, it will have a positive impact on the performance of their supervisees. Understanding the importance of the relationship that should exist between supervisors and supervisees, some of the supervisees suggested the following. For instance, Respondent 8 suggested what relationship should exist between supervisors and supervisees:

> *It will be good if advisors are encouraging and gap fillers and have good approaching to their advisees.*

Respondent 18 had a similar suggestion:

The two should have positive relationship and discuss freely.

Some of the supervisees were very critical of the relationship they or their fellow supervisees had with their supervisors. In connection with this, Respondent 5 wrote the following:

Some …advisors consider themselves as a king and give less respect for their advisees. As a result, they would not respond to their advisees requests.

Another respondent made a general critical comment in Amharic about the relationship supervisors had with their supervisees. Respondent 23 said that supervisors did not even talk to their supervisees with good manners. Most of the supervisors interviewed for this study, however, thought that they had good rapport with their supervisees except two of them. One of the supervisors said that sometimes he could be angry with his supervisees and might shout at them but that he was usually friendly with them. The other supervisor admitted that if the supervisee was careless he might not have a smooth relationship with his supervisee.

Busy supervisors

Many of the supervisees believed that their supervisors were busy and could not help them as much as they should have. With this regard, Respondent 11 wrote:

Since most of the advisors are too busy with different responsibilities, they lack some commitments and devotions to help their students well.

Even Respondent 12 went as far as blaming his supervisor for the unsatisfactory result he got for his thesis because his supervisor was busy. He said:

> …*he was very busy and my result became less due to no further detail comments, supports even the research title was weak.*

Similarly, Respondent 13 blamed his low grade on his busy supervisor and also expressed what he felt at the end of it all. He wrote:

> … *my advisor was too busy in his work so that I got poor result because of this I was disappointed.*

Respondent 2 believing that supervisors were busy he suggested the following:

> …*advisors should have sufficient time and should be free from extra activities in order to give appropriate comments.*

Likewise Respondent 5 suggested, "…in assigning advisors, it is better to consider advisors' workload." Another respondent echoed a similar view in Amharic saying that one of the weaknesses of advisors was their being busy.

One of the few issues that the supervisors and the supervisees seem to agree was the problem of supervisors who were busy. One of the supervisors said that there were times when he was not able to satisfy the needs of his supervisees because of being busy. Similarly, another supervisor said that he might not have given them valuable and adequate feedback because of some other demanding work. Still another supervisor regretfully said that he sometimes felt guilty because he did not help his supervisees as much as he would have liked. However, one supervisor claimed that being busy was not a problem for him and blamed some of his supervisees for not being able to submit part

of their theses or the whole theses in time so that he could give them feedback and comments before the date of submission approached.

Negligence on the part of thesis supervisors

Some of the informants criticized their supervisors for being careless because their supervisors lost the drafts they gave them. Respondent 6 said the following:

> …*my advisor lost the concept paper that I gave him and even shouted at me when I asked him the paper to be back.*

Similarly, Respondent 5 wrote that supervisees were forced to do some of the work again because of the negligence of some supervisors.

> …*Some other advisors also seem to be careless (I'm sorry to say this). They take their advisees works and throw it somewhere and let them do it again as if they did not receive it.*

The supervisors interviewed were surprised when they were asked if they had ever lost a draft paper of any of their supervisees. All of them except one supervisor said that they had never lost the draft papers of their supervisees because they almost always received soft copies from their supervisees. However, one of the supervisors recalled that many years ago he lost the draft paper of one of his supervisees. Even if his supervisee confirmed to him again and again that she gave him a draft paper he could not find it and told her that she did not give him the draft at all. Finally, the supervisee was forced to give him another copy of the draft. The supervisor admitted during the interview that after his supervisee defended her thesis he found somewhere in his office the first copy he lost.

Little or no support from thesis supervisors

According to some supervisees, some thesis supervisors did not help them as much as they should have. For example, Respondent 6 said:

> *Some advisors are not willing to help their advisees; rather they tend to escape from discussing with the advisee by formulating trivial reasons. This is really shameful.*

In a similar vein, Respondent 14 commented the following:

> *… I understood how to do a research but my advisor did not support me.*

Distrustful of knowledge of supervisors

Being distrustful of the knowledge and skills of their thesis supervisors may not be very common among the respondents. However, Respondent 7 said that the grade he obtained for his thesis was the result of the mistake his supervisor made in supervising him. He wrote:

> *… he didn't give me appropriate feedback. He made me to change the topic, instruments and other things without my interest. But my internal and external advisors also said that my instruments were correct. Because of my advisor mistake, I did not get good result.*

Respondent 6 was very blunt in his criticism of some thesis supervisors and commented that some should not even be allowed to supervise students:

> *… there are some instructors that do not have the quality to be advisors and these should not be advisors. A blind cannot lead another blind.*

When asked if they had ever felt that they did not have the knowledge or skills required to supervise a summer master's student, some of the supervisors said that they had never had this problem. For example, one of them said that the topics on which summer master's students did their theses were very common and he was very familiar with them; as a result, he did not have problems in supervising summer master's students with their theses. However, some of them said that there were times when their supervisees did their theses on topics that were unfamiliar with the supervisors, so in that case they read more on the topic or referred their supervisees to other supervisors who were more familiar with the topics.

Type of feedback preferred

Different supervisees may have different preferences for the type of feedback they receive from their supervisors or how the feedback should be given. With this regard, Respondent 18 wrote the following:

> *… The advisor should write what should be corrected rather than simply underlining.*

Likewise, Respondent 19 said:

> *It would be better if the comments of the advisor is in a written comment on the hard copy.*

Assignment of thesis supervisors

Some of the respondents suggested how thesis supervisors should be assigned. Respondent 9 for example said the following:

> *The advisors should be selected based on their talent.*

Similarly, Respondent 22 wrote the following:

> *Advisors should be arranged based on the topic of the research.*

Except for one supervisor who said he could supervise master's TEFL students with their theses as long as their topics are related to issues in TEFL, all the other supervisors interviewed expressed their concern in the way supervisors were assigned in the Department of English Language and Literature. Those supervisors said that even though it might have some practical problems in changing the way supervisors were assigned, they agreed that the way supervisors were assigned should be reviewed. So far the way supervisors are assigned is not as such based on the research interest areas of the supervisors; it has been made in a way that looks random. The supervisors interviewed suggested that the assignment of supervisors should be made on the effectiveness of their past thesis supervision and their thesis supervision should be evaluated every year. The supervisors also suggested that the research interest areas of the supervisors should be identified and the assignment of thesis supervisors should be based on that.

Discussion

It seems that thesis supervisors in the Department of English Language and Literature (DELL) in one of the universities in the Amhara National Regional State, Ethiopia, gave more attention to methodology in their supervision of their master's students than to supporting their students to develop theoretical frameworks. This finding revealed that the supervision provided by thesis supervisors in the DELL may not satisfy the needs of some TEFL postgraduate students. This finding is contrary to Dysthe et al.'s (2006) conclusion which states that research students have various needs one of which is the need to be supported by their supervisors to develop a theoretical framework that can help them explain the relationships that may exist in the variables they investigate.

When it comes to time management it is encouraging because the majority of the supervisees participating in this study responded that their thesis supervisors set deadlines for them to complete the various components of the thesis. This result is

consistent with what Lessing and Schulze (2002) found in their study. Lessing and Schulze (2002) pointed out that thesis supervisors are expected to help their supervisees with their time management, and it seems that the supervisors of the research students participating in this study were doing just that. This finding is also in line with Black's (2017) recommendation in which he advised that the supervisor and a research student should set up a timetable to complete all the phases in the thesis with a focus on completing the thesis in time. Nevertheless, a preponderance of the supervisees replied that their thesis supervisors did not make schedules so that they could meet regularly, which seems contrary to the supervisees' earlier assertion that their thesis supervisors set deadlines for them to complete the various components of the thesis. The supervisors participating in the study, however, disputed the supervisees' complaints by saying that their supervisees could meet them within a few days or a couple of weeks. Thesis supervisors should know that some of their supervisees may not only need a detailed work plan that they should follow they may also go as far as needing help and support from their supervisors with career planning, as Vilkinas (2005) noted about the needs of research students.

Although it is encouraging to know that the majority of the supervisees were able to meet their supervisors within a few days or a couple of weeks after they had requested to see their supervisors, more than one third of the supervisees replied that it took for their thesis supervisors about a month to respond to their requests for a meeting. It seems that some supervisors might not be discharging their responsibilities to manage how often they should communicate with their supervisees by taking their supervisees' schedule into account, as Russell (1996) and Hodza (2007) suggested.

Dysthe et al. (2006) and Lessing and Schulze (2002) argue that providing effective or constructive feedback to supervisees is one of the responsibilities of thesis supervisors. However, according to the results of the present study more than half of the

supervisees did not frequently receive written or oral comments from their supervisors. This might mean that some supervisors might not have been satisfying one of their supervisees' needs to get feedback, particularly, on the content of their thesis, as Yenus (2018) indicated in his study. Some of the supervisors of the participants of this study might not have also followed what Woolhouse (2002) advises in terms of the importance of providing supervisees with adequate and frequent feedback that is constructively critical.

Many research students may regard interpersonal relationships as more important than content-related aspects as Johnston (1999) cited in McGinty et al. (2010) argued, but, unfortunately, some of the supervisees in the present study seemed to have not very good communication or interaction with their supervisors. Thesis supervisors in the DELL should understand that their supervisees may value the relationship they have with their supervisors more than anything else in the supervision process. With this regard, Yu and Wright (2016) argued the supervisee-supervisor relationship is one of the major barriers leading to students' academic failure and dissatisfaction. Some of the supervisors could have affected the persistence of their supervisees in completing their theses in time and with high quality because, as Campbell and Nutt (2008) contended, ineffective communication could affect the perseverance of research students in doing their research work effectively. Anderson et al. (2008) indicated that students expect supervisors to express genuine interest, be friendly and demonstrate empathy when they face academic difficulties.

Most of the supervisees believed that their supervisors were busy and could not help them as much as they should have and that their supervisors did not let them know that they would be traveling or be away from campus and could not respond to their emails or phone calls. This is consistent with what Ismail et al. (2011) stated most research students faced in doing research projects. According to Ismail et al. (2011), the most common complaints from research students were infrequent contacts with

supervisors, who may be too busy with administrative or teaching responsibilities, have too many students or be away from the university too often. That could be the reason some supervisees in the present study complained that their thesis supervisors did not help them as much as they should have.

Some of the supervisees suggested that thesis supervisors should be assigned based on their knowledge of the topic of research. The supervisees seemed to be dissatisfied with the supervision they received which is not in line with what Gedamu (2018) found in his study in which TEFL master's students reported that they were satisfied with the supervision they received.

In the Department of English Language and Literature at an Ethiopian university which was the focus of this study, thesis supervisors may be assigned to supervise a research student even if the supervisor may not have a very thorough understanding of the research topic. This is in contradiction to the advice given by researchers such as Ives and Rowley (2005) who stress the importance of matching postgraduate students to supervisors in terms of area of research and compatibility. The supervisors participating in the current study also indicated that the way thesis supervisors were assigned did not usually consider the research interest areas of the supervisors, and they suggested different ways which could help improve the situation.

Conclusions

The focus of the support of most supervisors seems to be on helping their supervisees with methodology and correcting typos. It seems, as a result, that thesis supervisors neglected to support their supervisees in developing a theoretical framework that can be used for their study. A master's thesis without a theoretical framework cannot be said to have construct validity.

Some supervisors seem not to have a schedule which could help them to follow up the work of their supervisees. Consequently, they might not meet with their supervisees regularly which could have an effect on the quality of the thesis. Since summer

postgraduate students are not full-time students, long delays in meeting their supervisors can be stressful and may slow down the progress of their work which can have a direct impact again on the quality of their theses. Similarly, the fact that about one-third of supervisees waited a month or more to get feedback on their papers might force them to put their theses on hold which reduces the time they need to spend on their theses. Spending less time on their theses can definitely affect the standard of the theses they write. The fact that more than half of the supervisees participating in this study complained that they did not frequently receive oral or written comments can be alarming. This may mean supervisors do not discuss the work of their supervisees with them or it may mean that advisors do not write extended comments on the papers of their supervisees. As a result, the kind of feedback summer postgraduate students get might be in the form of underlining or scribbling short phrases written in the margins which might not be very helpful. Even though giving feedback on a soft copy of the theses of supervisees looks modern and effective, some supervisees may prefer to get feedback on a hard copy.

There are some supervisors who do not treat their supervisees with respect even if this was disputed by the supervisors who participated in this study. If there is no an amicable relationship between supervisors and supervisees, it can affect the quality of the thesis the supervisees write and their satisfaction in doing their research projects. Some summer postgraduate students believed that their supervisors did not help them much because their supervisors were busy. There could often be something to be done, but some supervisors may use being busy as a pretext for being lazy. Supervising students is one of the major responsibilities of professors, so being busy cannot be used as a reason for not supervising students well.

A few supervisees complained that their thesis supervisors lost the papers they had given them creating unnecessary stress for them and wasting their valuable time. However, during the interview only one supervisor admitted to losing a thesis his supervisee had given him. If supervisors lose the papers their

supervisees give them, it can affect the quality of the thesis postgraduate students write and the grade they obtain on their thesis. Some supervisees believed that their supervisors were assigned not because of their familiarity with the topics on which the supervisees were doing their thesis, but because of other less logical reasons. This could be the reason why some supervisees distrusted the knowledge their supervisors had or the advice given to them by their supervisors. This can be a cause of conflict or dissatisfaction on the part of supervisees.

Limitations of the survey

All TEFL summer postgraduate students who defended their M.A. thesis in 2017 could have participated in the survey because of their relatively small size. However, only those who were available during the oral examinations of the theses as candidates or audience were asked to fill out the questionnaire of the survey. The main reason for the low response rate could be the fact that the students were at the university for a few days to defend their theses, and that they were totally focused on their upcoming defenses. As a result, only twenty-seven (32.9%) students participated in the study which may not be large enough to make generalizations.

Recommendations

The advice and support thesis supervisors offer to their supervisees should be comprehensive. In other words, the advice and support they give should not be limited to a few areas or issues such as methodology and correcting typos. Supervisors should be aware that their supervisees have various needs and they should try to fulfill them. Thesis supervisors should also make a detailed schedule working together with their supervisees about how often and when they should meet. The department or faculty has to issue general guidelines on the duration, among other things, within which a paper should be returned to a supervisee. Comments and feedback given on supervisees' papers should be clear and as much as possible extended. Written

comments alone may not be enough, so supervisees should sometimes be given oral comments. Thesis supervisors should let their supervisees know their whereabouts using mobile phones or emails when they leave the city for days or weeks. For this purpose, thesis supervisors and their supervisees should exchange their phone numbers and email addresses the first time they meet.

Some supervisees may prefer to get their feedback on a hard copy rather than on a soft copy, so supervisors should ask their supervisees which one they prefer and give their feedback accordingly. Thesis supervisors should as much as possible establish an amicable relationship with their supervisees. Supervisees should feel respected and free whenever they meet their supervisors. Some thesis supervisors should develop their documentation skills so that they can systematically keep a good file of the papers they are given by their supervisees. Although many supervisees lack the research and language skills to do their theses, thesis supervisors should do their utmost to help their supervisees achieve better.

As much as possible thesis supervisors should be assigned based on their interest of research areas. Alternatively, thesis supervisors should not supervise postgraduate students whose topics of research projects are not related to the topic of their PhD dissertation or to other publications the supervisors have. Some supervisees may doubt the knowledge and expertise their supervisors have, so to be effective thesis supervisors, thesis supervisors should continually do research and publish so that they can improve their own knowledge and skills of doing research.

Under current circumstances there are many challenges for supervisors. Therefore, thesis supervisors who do their jobs well should be incentivized. To achieve this, thesis supervisors should be formally evaluated by their supervisees using a standard evaluation form specifically developed for this purpose.

Finally, it is recommended that a large-scale study which investigates the problems supervisors face in the supervision of

master's students in many universities in the Amhara National Regional State be conducted. This kind of study may shed light on the knowledge and skills master's students who are enrolled in postgraduate programs have and may play a role in revising the admissions policy of the universities in the region.

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