

Functions and Focus of Supervisory Feedback on Undergraduate Students' Theses Writing

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Abstract

In higher English education, undergraduate students improve in their academic writing through the feedback of their supervisors. Supervisor feedback can enhance students' English writing. However, the functions and focus of feedback remain underexplored. This study examines the functions and focus of supervisory feedback on undergraduate students' thesis writing across three drafts. The study adopts a descriptive research design to analyze supervisor feedback (369 comments) on undergraduate writing drafts among students enrolled in a Global Communication program at a Malaysian university. Fifteen thesis drafts submitted by five students (three drafts per student) were analyzed to identify the functions and focus of supervisory feedback during the academic writing process. The findings reveal that in terms of speech functions, the feedback can be categorized into three main types: directive, referential, and expressive. Directive feedback, which constitutes the largest proportion (56.6%), is primarily used to give explicit instructions for revision. Referential feedback, the second most frequent type (29.8%), provides information or corrections to support improvement. Expressive feedback, although less common (13.6%), serves to offer emotional support and encouragement. Feedback focus covers three key aspects of English proposal writing: content-related issues, organization, and editing appropriateness. Supervisors primarily focus on content, followed by editing appropriateness and organization. The study shows that the scaffolding through comments on successive drafts of thesis enabled undergraduate students to learn academic writing conventions in writing a research proposal.

Keywords: L2 supervisory feedback, undergraduate students, thesis, function, feedback focus

1. Introduction

Supervisory feedback is a primary means of instruction in academic writing (Benesch, 2000; Hyland, 2005; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Kumar & Stracke, 2007). It is also an important source of input for academic writing, such as thesis writing (Bitchener et al., 2010). To facilitate improvement in students' academic writing, supervisors must ensure that their feedback is clear, effective, and constructive (e.g., Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Kumar & Stracke, 2011; Xu, 2017). However, writing an undergraduate thesis poses a substantial challenge for inexperienced students. Students' difficulties stem from unfamiliarity with academic conventions, limited supervisory support, and authoritative one-way feedback, which may heighten anxiety (Qunayeer, 2020). Effective feedback has a profound impact on English academic writing (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Studies have investigated various types of corrective feedback provided by language teachers, including direct and indirect feedback, hybrid forms integrating direct feedback with metalinguistic explanation, and feedback focused on grammatical accuracy and content development. But research findings on the types of corrective feedback are inconsistent. Some studies show that direct feedback is more effective, as it clearly identifies errors and provides explicit correction (e.g., Chandler, 2003; Ellis, 2010; Karim & Nassaji, 2018; Van Beuningen et al., 2008). In contrast, other researchers (e.g., Ferris, 2003, 2006; Ferris & Helt, 2000) report that indirect feedback is more beneficial in the long term, as it fosters learners' ability to self-edit. In addition, several studies (e.g., Bitchener et al., 2005; Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013; Sheen, 2007) indicate that integrating direct feedback with metalinguistic explanation tends to produce the most effective results in corrective feedback. In these studies, the classroom instruction received by students generally emphasized grammatical structures, which may have heightened their attention to linguistic form. For instance, Nematzadeh and Siahpoosh (2017) investigated the effects of direct correction and indirect feedback (in the form of underlining) on the grammatical accuracy of intermediate Iranian EFL learners, specifically analyzing their performance in revising English articles, prepositions, and verb tenses. Similarly, Eslami (2014) found that indirect corrective feedback was more effective than direct feedback. The impact of these two types of feedback on the grammatical accuracy of lower-intermediate Iranian EFL learners was examined, focusing on errors related to the simple past tense.

In the field of academic writing, feedback from supervisors on students' work such as thesis writing, constitutes another research area. Studies on writing of thesis in applied linguistics have identified three main speech functions of feedback: referential, directive, and expressive. Several studies (e.g., Cheng et al., 2025; Neupane Bastola, 2021; Nurie, 2018; Saeed et al., 2021; Syafi'I et al., 2024) have shown that the use of the three speech functions varies with the type of the feedback. However, despite the extensive investigation into

various forms of feedback, limited attention has been given to the speech functions and focus of supervisor feedback in the context of academic thesis writing.

Research findings in the Australian and New Zealand context on prevalence of speech functions on feedback on research writing vary from study to study. Expressive feedback is the most beneficial according to the supervisee, because the supervisor's positive evaluations boosted his confidence and affirmed his writing achievements, while the constructive critical feedback prompted the writer to reassess the manuscript from a new perspective and make substantive revisions (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). Stracke and Kumar (2010) also highlight the significant role of expressive feedback in cultivating self-regulated learning, a fundamental aim of doctoral education that supports their gradual assimilation into the academic community. Using Kumar and Stracke's (2007) framework, other studies (Basturkmen et al., 2014; Xu, 2017) found a predominance of referential feedback. Xu (2017) conducted an investigation into the interaction of written feedback within cross-cultural doctoral supervision, with a specific focus on the feedback exchange between a white New Zealand supervisor and a Chinese international doctoral student, who is also the researcher and author of the study. Employing a mixed-methods approach, Xu's (2017) findings indicated that referential feedback was the most common (62.4%, 131 instances), followed by expressive feedback (23.3%, 49 instances) and directive feedback (14.3%, 30 instances). Referential feedback was predominantly used for language-related concerns, whereas expressive feedback, particularly positive feedback, was more frequently applied to content and organizational aspects. Basturkmen et al. (2014) classify supervisor feedback into directive, referential, and expressive types, with referential feedback being most common. Their analysis shows that feedback mainly focuses on linguistic accuracy (62%), followed by content, requirements, and coherence, with directive feedback often addressing content and coherence, and referential feedback used mainly for correcting language.

Research conducted in non-Western educational settings has consistently revealed frequent use of directive feedback. For instance, Gedamu and Gezahegn (2021), analyzed five thesis drafts of 55 Ethiopian M.A. and Ph.D. students supervised by four supervisors. Their results show that supervisors predominantly employ directive linguistic functions in their feedback (397 directive comments, 74.6%), with clarification directives constituting 41.5% of total feedback and instructional directives accounting for 25.4%. Within expressive functions, criticism (16.5%) and suggestions (16%) are relatively common, whereas praise is notably scarce, comprising only 0.6% of the feedback. This indicates that supervisor feedback is largely centered on criticism and suggestions, with minimal use of praise. In terms of feedback focus, the emphasis is content knowledge (66.5%), followed by genre knowledge (20.5%) and linguistic accuracy (13%). Detailed analysis shows that supervisors primarily emphasize students' comprehension of content and the coherence of their arguments, while less attention is given to linguistic form and genre structure. Similarly, Nurie (2018) found that supervisors at Bahir Dar University in Ethiopia give mostly directive feedback (72.28% of 285 instances) from eight supervisors, revealed that directive feedback was the most frequently used type. Among the subcategories, directive clarification was the most common, comprising 44.56% (127 instances) of the total feedback, directive instruction, accounted for 27.72% (79 instances). In contrast, expressive feedback was used less frequently, constituting 27.72% of the total feedback. As for the focus of the feedback, the supervisors commented more on genre knowledge (58.95%) than on content knowledge (28.07%) or language accuracy and appropriateness (12.98%). Neupane Bastola (2021), using a mixed-methods approach, analyzed 6340 supervisor comments on 118 English-taught master's thesis drafts across four disciplines in Nepal. The study found expressive feedback was most common (39.26%), largely negative and often nonverbal, offering limited support for disciplinary socialization. Referential feedback (37.27%) focused on editorial issues, while directive feedback (23.47%) was mainly explicit and non-negotiable. Disciplinary differences emerged, with physics supervisors giving more expressive and informative feedback, and education supervisors relying more on directive feedback. In Malaysia, Saeed et al. (2021) examine the forms of supervisor feedback on graduate students' research proposal writing and how two postgraduates responded to that feedback. Through an analysis of 550 feedback comments, Saeed et al. (2021) find that directive feedback is predominant, accounting for 320 comments (57% of the total), followed by referential feedback with 179 comments (32%), and expressive feedback being the least frequent, with only 62 comments (11%). Regarding the focus of feedback content, Saeed et al. (2021) reveal that supervisor feedback predominantly targets linguistic accuracy (325 comments, 59%), followed by content (133 comments, 24%), appropriateness (58 comments, 11%), and organization (34 comments, 6%). Directive feedback is more frequently employed in content, organization, and appropriateness, whereas referential feedback is primarily used for correcting linguistic accuracy. Saeed et al. (2021) conclude that the form of supervisor feedback significantly influences students' text revisions, with directive feedback, particularly in the form of questions and suggestions, effectively promoting students' revision behaviors.

Thus far, the past studies on functions of supervisory feedback on thesis writing do not investigate the changes in comments from one draft to another but focused on one draft of the writing. This study examines the functions and focus of supervisory feedback on undergraduate students' thesis writing across drafts.

2. Theoretical Framework of Study

The theoretical framework of this study on functions and focus of supervisory feedback on undergraduate students' theses writing is Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which views learning as a socially mediated process that supports academic and cognitive development (Saeed et al., 2021). Gedamu and Gezahegn (2021) further highlight the relevance of Sociocultural Theory in analyzing linguistic functions and feedback focus. A key concept of the Sociocultural Theory is scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976), where instructional support is targeted at the learner's Zone of Proximal Development which is gradually reduced as learners gain independence (Morton et al., 2014). The Sociocultural Theory has been applied widely in second language writing research (Saeed et al., 2021). According to the

Sociocultural Theory, feedback should evolve from directive to facilitative, promoting students’ self-regulation and writing autonomy as their proficiency grows.

Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) defined the Zone of Proximal Development as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers”. He also noted that “what the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow” (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 202), highlighting the transformative potential of guided learning. This suggests that in the process of academic writing supervision, supervisor feedback functions as a form of “scaffolding”, enabling students to gradually comprehend the meaning of comments and ultimately develop into independent and responsible academic writers (Storch, 2018). The supervisor-student relationship is dynamic and evolves over time, shifting from an initial expert-novice model to a more collaborative and egalitarian partnership as the supervision progresses (Morton et al., 2014). Feedback provided by supervisors plays a crucial role when students encounter significant difficulties in progressing from their current level of competence toward their potential level of development (Cheng et al., 2025). Without appropriate instructional support, students are likely to adopt a passive or avoidant attitude toward learning. The students develop higher cognitive functions through socially mediated interactions that offer structured guidance.

3. Methodology

The descriptive study involved the analysis of undergraduate thesis drafts written by students enrolled in a global communication program in a Malaysian university. The thesis carries three credits for the proposal in the fifth semester and an additional three credits for the final report in the sixth semester. The undergraduate thesis constitutes a compulsory element of the bachelor’s degree program, designed to cultivate students’ fundamental research skills and academic writing abilities. The thesis, the student is expected to demonstrate the qualities of fluency, clarity, and informative content, as well as independent thinking.

Fifteen drafts of thesis were analyzed, consisting of three drafts each from five students (S1 to S5) under the supervision of five supervisors (T1 to T5). Table 1 provides information about the five students’ thesis drafts, with the title of the theses, and word length.

Table 1. Information about students’ Thesis Drafts

Student	Supervisor	Title of theses	Word count
S1	T1	Interpersonal communication strategies used in instagram by the modest fashion brands IN Malaysia	7823
S2	T2	The usage of interactive video games by ESL students to enhance their English-speaking skills.	9275
S3	T3	The use of Quillbot as an AI-based academic writing tool among Malaysian undergraduate students	2183
S4	T4	The influence of multiplayer games on enhancing speaking ability among Malaysian university students.	1220
S5	T5	A Study on Buddhist Chinese and Christian Chinese Obituary	4852

To collect data, the second researcher informed supervisors about the purpose of the study and sought their cooperation to participate in the study. With the supervisors’ cooperation, students were then informed about the research and consent was obtained for the analysis of their drafts and the feedback. Each of the five supervisors submitted three drafts from one student, resulting in a corpus of 25,353 words centered on topics related to language and communication. These included the original Draft 1, the subsequent revisions (Drafts 2 and 3). The feedback was for all three drafts. All identifying details were anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality, and the data was securely stored on password-protected computer files, accessible only to the research team.

Typically, written feedback is provided directly by supervisors as annotations within the text, encompassing all of their comments. In this study, every comment, phrase or word that conveyed information to the student was considered an independent unit of communication. The analysis was conducted in chunks of text. For example,

*I do not know what this means. 【*expressive- criticism on content】, Citation? What benefits? 【*Directive- Eliciting on content】, Find citations that focus on the benefits, perhaps one or two. 【*referential- provide info on content】*

The analysis framework for classifying the functions of supervisory feedback was adapted from Saeed et al. (2021) and is outlined in Table 2. Feedback was categorized into three language functions: directive, expressive, and referential. Directive feedback involves the instruction and suggestion of specific tasks to the supervisee and questions are further categorized into clarification, eliciting information, confirmation and clarification. Referential feedback involves providing explicit instructions on what to correct. Expressive feedback conveys emotions and includes praise, criticism, and opinions (Kumar & Stracke, 2007).

Table 2. Analysis framework for identifying types of supervisory feedback

Feedback Function	Subcategory of feedback Functions	Example
Directive	Eliciting information	Where are the citations for these numerous research?
	Seeking justifications	Why? Why only one? Who?
	Seeking clarification	There must be a specific place in IG where you take your data, not the whole world.
Referential	Seeking confirmation	Are these part of your objectives?
	Instruction to do / not to do	to be discussed - must align to the gaps discussed after the problem statement.
	Suggestion to do/not to do	strategies – you should be defining this, and not only interpersonal comm.
Expressive	Providing information	Find citations that focus on the benefits, perhaps one or two.
	Providing correction	YOU MUST PUT A COMMA HERE.
	Praise	This is the right research gap. The name of this section is OK
	Criticism	Too old. Not clear
	Opinion	I think no.

Additionally, the focus of feedback was categorized into three main areas based on Saeed et al. (2021). Table 3 shows the three foci, that is, content, which relates to the clarity, completeness, and relevance of ideas. Editing appropriateness, which includes grammar, vocabulary, and citation formatting. And organization, which addresses structural elements of the thesis such as section functions, argument flow, and reflective components.

Table 3. Focus of Supervisory feedback

focus	Example
Content	<i>Give examples of these interactive video games.(T2)</i> <i>For Chap 1, you take what is necessary to build the argument for the gap.(T1)</i> <i>this is vague(T2)</i>
Organization	<i>We'll look into this after you fine-tune your scope, problem statement and ROs.(T4)</i> <i>This paragraph is written in the style for Chap 2.(T1)</i> <i>I feel very disturbed, because the paragraphs no longer join(T1)</i>
Editing appropriateness	<i>STUDY CAREFULLY IN APA WEBSITE HOW YOU DO IN-TEXT CITATION(T5)</i> <i>TITLE OF STUDY IS NOT NEEDED BECAUSE READERS CAN FIND IN YOUR REFERENCE LIST(T5)</i> <i>I won't be correcting one by one(T4)</i>

To ensure coding reliability, the researchers analyzed feedback in the drafts and conducted multiple rounds of independent coding, followed by collaborative discussions to verify the classification criteria.

4. Results

4.1 Speech Functions of Supervisory Feedback

Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage of supervisory feedback on undergraduate students' theses. Out of 369 feedback instances provided by supervisors on students' theses, 56.6% were directive feedback. This suggests that supervisors frequently provided instruction and suggestion of specific tasks and questions are further categorized into clarification, eliciting information, confirmation and clarification for improvement. In contrast, referential feedback accounted for 29.8% of the comments, indicating that supervisors provided information and corrections for the supervisee.

Table 4. Frequency and percentage of language functions of supervisory feedback

Language functions	Number	Percentage
Directive	209	56.6%
Referential	110	29.8%
Expressive	50	13.6%
Total	369	100%

The least common type was expressive feedback (13.6%) showing the little emphasis on praise or criticism and greater emphasis on practical, task-oriented guidance in supervisory feedback, with less focus on emotional or motivational support.

4.2 Qualitative Descriptions of Types of Supervisory Feedback

4.2.1 Directive feedback

Some supervisors utilize directive feedback to instruct students by eliciting information, seeking clarifications, justifications, and confirmations, as well as suggesting what actions to take or avoid in their writing. These comments may give instructions (Excerpt 1) and

seek confirmations on content (Excerpt 2), suggest what to do on content (Excerpt 3), or give instructions on organization (Excerpt 4).

Excerpts 1-4:

1. Need to move on to collect data. (draft 2/T1) **【*Directive-instruction on content】**
2. Are the yellow still part of the penetration theory? (draft 2/T1) **【*Directive-seek confirmation on content】**
3. THIS SENTENCE ABOUT OUTCOME SHOULD APPEAR LATER IN THIS PARAGRAPHY, NOT AS EARLY, (draft2/T5) **【*Directive suggestion on content】**
4. DON'T BE REPETITIVE WITH THE SENTENCE BELOW; BE CONCISE. DON'T BEAT ABOUT THE BUSH (draft 2/T5) **【*Directive instruction organization】**

For example, in Excerpt 1, the supervisor directly instructs the student to progress from the current stage (likely literature review or theoretical framing) to data collection. It signals that the student has spent too much time on preliminary sections and must shift focus to empirical work. Similarly, in Excerpt 2, the supervisor seeks confirmation from the student, questioning whether a highlighted (likely yellow-marked) section aligns with the theoretical framework (penetration theory). Rather than outright correction, the supervisor prompts the student to critically evaluate their own writing, fostering engagement with theoretical consistency.

Moreover, Excerpt 3 illustrates a content-specific suggestion that critiques paragraph structure, arguing for a reordering of ideas to improve logical flow. The explicit suggestion ("should") mandates revision but also implicitly suggests the student about sequencing arguments effectively, a key skill in academic writing. In Excerpt 4, the supervisor explicitly instructs the student to avoid redundancy and wordiness.

4.2.2 Referential Feedback

Referential feedback aims to provide information and corrections concerning content, editing, and organization. Excerpts 5 - 7 illustrate instances where supervisors offer guidance and corrections in these areas.

5. Wrong way to cite (draft1/T1) **【*Referential-Provide information on appropriateness】**
6. This paragraph is written in the style for Chap 2 (draft1/T1) **【*Referential-providing info on organization】**
7. For Chap 1, you take what is necessary to build the argument for the gap (draft1/T1) **【*Referential-providing info on content】**.

Unlike directive feedback, which explicitly tells students what to do, referential feedback serves to inform students about necessary corrections or improvements in their writing, offering guidance rather than direct commands. In Excerpt 5, the supervisor did not elaborate on the correct method from academic conventions, implying that the student should independently identify and rectify the issue. The student develops critical thinking in the process. In Excerpt 6, offering organizational feedback by pointing out a structural mismatch; the supervisor indicates that the paragraph's tone or content aligns more closely with a later section (Chapter 2, likely the literature review) rather than its current placement (possibly Chapter 1, the introduction). Finally, Excerpt 7 provides content-related guidance by clarifying the rhetorical purpose of Chapter 1, which is to succinctly establish the research gap.

4.2.3 Expressive Feedback

Expressive feedback serves to convey emotions, opinions, and evaluations regarding students' writing. Unlike directive and referential feedback, which focus on providing instructions or information, expressive feedback often reflects the supervisor's subjective response to the student's work. There were a few instances of expressive functions in the data set. Expressive feedback may involve criticism of the content or editorial aspects (Excerpts 8), or may involve opinion about organization (Excerpt 9).

8. This purple is not clear (draft1/T1) **【*Expressive -criticism on content】**
9. -I feel very disturbed, because the paragraphs no longer join (draft1/T1) **【*Expressive-opinion on organization】**

Excerpt 8 shows a supervisor's criticism of the clarity of the content. Excerpt 9 illustrates the frustration of a supervisor with the poor coherence of the piece. The phrase "I feel very disturbed" the supervisor conveys an emotional reaction, signaling to the student that structural issues significantly affect readability without specific revision suggestions, the student may struggle to determine how to improve cohesion. Excerpt 8 for expressive feedback shows the supervisors directly critiquing the quality of expression without offering explicit guidance for revision. However, there is indirect opinion for improvement like making the writing clearer (Excerpt 9).

4.3 Tracking Language Functions of Supervisory Feedback over Three Drafts

Figure 1 shows the frequency and percentage of the types of supervisory feedback given by five supervisors (T1 to T5) on three drafts (D1 to D3) of their undergraduate students' work (S1 to S5). In essence, Figure 3 presents a breakdown of the 369 comments presented. Directive feedback is the most frequently used (51.2%), followed by referential (35.8%) and expressive feedback (13%). Overall, feedback is most intensive in Draft 1 (57%), declines in Draft 2 (30.9%), and is minimal in Draft 3 (12.2%), indicating that the supervisor provides more guidance initially and gradually reduce input as the student revise writing. Two trends are evident, that is, there is a decrease in the number of comments across the three drafts, and the feedback comments remain consistent in the first two drafts but drastically drops in Draft 3.

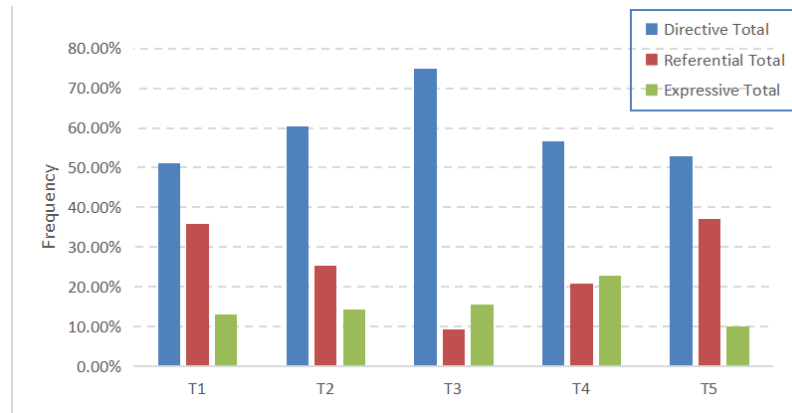


Figure 1. The Percentage of Supervisory Feedback Function given by Supervisors T1, T2, T3, T4, T5

Table 5. The Frequency and Proportion of Supervisory Feedback Function Subcategories of D1, D2, D3

Feedback	T1 - D1	T1 - D2	T1 - D3	T2 - D1	T2 - D2	T2 - D3	T3 - D1	T3 - D2	T3 - D3	T4 - D1	T4 - D2	T4 - D3	T5 - D1	T5 - D2	T5 - D3
Directive Total	27.60%	20.30%	3.30%	16.50%	30.80%	13.20%	37.50%	21.90%	15.60%	15.10%	20.80%	20.80%	17.10%	22.90%	12.90%
Elicit info	1.60%	2.40%	1.60%	1.10%	6.60%	2.20%	9.40%	6.30%	3.10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	7.10%	1.40%
Seek justifications	0%	0.80%	0%	2.20%	3.30%	1.10%	0%	0%	0%	1.90%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Seek clarification	0.80%	0%	0%	5.50%	6.60%	3.30%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Seek Confirmation	0%	1.60%	0%	1.10%	0%	2.20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1.90%	0%	0%	1.40%	8.60%
Instruct	22%	15.40%	1.60%	6.60%	13.20%	4.40%	25%	15.60%	12.50%	11.30%	11.30%	20.80%	17.10%	8.60%	2.90%
Suggest	3.30%	0%	0%	0%	1.10%	0%	3.10%	0%	0%	1.90%	7.50%	0%	0%	5.70%	0%
Referential Total	23.60%	7.30%	4.90%	1.10%	15.40%	8.80%	6.30%	0%	3.10%	3.80%	7.50%	9.40%	18.60%	15.70%	2.90%
Provide info	14.60%	7.30%	4.90%	1.10%	15.40%	8.80%	6.30%	0%	3.10%	3.80%	3.80%	9.40%	18.60%	12.90%	2.90%
Correct	8.90%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3.80%	0%	0%	2.90%	0%
Expressive Total	5.70%	3.30%	4.10%	2.20%	11%	1.10%	9.40%	3.10%	3.10%	3.80%	13.20%	5.70%	5.70%	2.90%	1.40%
Praise	0%	0%	0%	0%	1.10%	0%	3.10%	3.10%	0%	0%	1.90%	3.80%	4.30%	1.40%	0%
Criticise	4.10%	3.30%	1.60%	2.20%	5.50%	1.10%	6.30%	0%	3.10%	1.90%	5.70%	0%	0%	1.40%	1.40%
Give opinion	1.60%	0%	2.40%	0%	4.40%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1.90%	5.70%	1.90%	1.40%	0%	0%
Grand total	57%	30.90%	12.20%	19.80%	57.10%	23.10%	53.10%	25%	21.90%	22.60%	41.50%	35.80%	41.40%	41.40%	17.10%

The supervisor (T1) primarily employs directive feedback in the early stages and gradually reduces as the student revises, indicating a strong emphasis on guidance early in the revision process in Table 5. Directive feedback, particularly instructions on what to do or not to do, is the dominant form (39%), peaking in Draft 1 (22%) and then decreasing in Draft 2 (15.4%) and Draft 3 (1.6%). This decline suggests that the supervisor (T1) provides more direct instructions initially and expects the student to internalize and apply them in subsequent drafts.

Similarly, eliciting information peaked in Draft 2 but declined in Draft 3, while clarification and confirmation remained minimal, contrasting with previous studies (Gedamu & Gezahegn, 2021; Nurie, 2018), who observed frequent use of directive clarification. Referential feedback followed a similar downward trend, with information and correction both decreasing from Draft 1 to Draft 3. Providing information is common in Draft 1 (14.6%) and Draft 2 (7.3%) but decreases in Draft 3 (4.9%), suggesting that the student progressively integrates the information provided by their supervisors. Providing correction, which is primarily found in Draft 1 (8.9%), disappears entirely in later drafts, implying that major language and structural issues are addressed early in the revision process. The overall decrease in referential feedback, from (23.6%) in Draft 1 to (7.3%) in Draft 2 and (4.9%) in Draft 3, reflects this trend.

Expressive feedback remained low throughout, which accounts for 13% of the total comments given. Criticism increases slightly in Draft 2 but falls in Draft 3, suggesting reduced negative feedback as the writing improves. Opinion-based feedback appears only in the first two drafts, and no praise is recorded at any stage, indicating the supervisor prioritized issue identification over positive reinforcement.

From Table 5, the supervisor’s feedback of T2 shows a clear trend across the three drafts. Overall, feedback was most concentrated in Draft 2 (57.1%), whereas Draft 1 (19.8%) received the least feedback, and Draft 3 (23.1%) saw a slight decrease. This suggests that the supervisor provided the most guidance during the intermediate stage to facilitate revisions. Specifically, directive feedback remained the predominant type, accounting for 60.4% of the total comments. The number of comments peaked in Draft 2 (30.8%), was relatively lower in Draft 1 (16.5%), and significantly decreased in Draft 3 (13.2%).

As shown in Table 5, the supervisor placed greater emphasis on giving specific instructions in Draft 2, but this directive feedback was reduced by Draft 3, likely reflecting an expectation for the student to take more responsibility for independent revision. Referential feedback peaked in Draft 2 at 15.4%, compared to a minimal 1.1% in Draft 1 and a slight decline to 8.8% in Draft 3, suggesting that the supervisor offered more informational support mid-process to assist with structural and linguistic improvements. Although expressive feedback remained relatively low overall (14.3%), it increased in Draft 2 (11%), but stayed minimal in Drafts 1 and 3 (2.2% and 1.1%, respectively). This pattern implies that the supervisor was more inclined to offer affective or evaluative comments during the middle stage of writing, while earlier and later feedback focused more on practical revision strategies.

According to Table 5, supervisor T3 gave the most feedback on Draft 1 (53.1%), followed by a sharp decline in Draft 2 (25%) and a slight decrease in Draft 3 (21.9%). This pattern suggests a heavy supervisory presence in the initial stage, with reduced involvement as the student progressed. Directive feedback was most prominent in Draft 1 (37.5%), decreasing to 21.9% in Draft 2 and 15.6% in Draft 3, indicating a shift from direct guidance to promoting student autonomy. Referential feedback remained limited overall (9.4%), appearing in Draft 1 (6.3%) and Draft 3 (3.1%) but absent in Draft 2, implying a sporadic use of information-based support. Expressive feedback accounted for 15.6% of the total number of comments, mostly concentrated in Draft 1 (9.4%) with minor instances in Drafts 2 and 3 (both 3.1%), suggesting an initial focus on evaluative comments that tapered off in later revisions.

As for T4, directive feedback remains the most dominant category (56.6%), with its proportion increasing from D1 (15.1%) to D2 (20.8%) and maintaining the same level in D3 (20.8%). Within this category, instructions on what to do or not to do constitute the majority (43.4%), peaking in D3 (20.8%), indicating that supervisors provide more specific directives as the drafts progress. Referential feedback accounts for (20.8%) of the total feedback, showing a steady increase from D1 (3.8%) to D2 (7.5%) and D3 (9.4%). This suggests that as the student refine their work, the supervisor offers more informational support, particularly in providing corrections. Expressive feedback constitutes 12 or 22.6% of the total, peaking in D2 (13.2%) before decreasing in D3 (5.7%), which implies that T4 gives more evaluative comments in the middle stage but shift their focus toward directive and referential feedback in the later stage.

Supervisor T5 provided a similar amount of feedback on Drafts 1 and 2, but significantly less on Draft 3. Directive feedback remained the most common (52.9%), though “Instruction to do/not to do” declined while “Eliciting information” and “Seeking confirmation” increased, indicating a move from direct instruction to more interactive engagement. Referential feedback (37.1%) gradually decreased, suggesting reduced one-way input. Expressive feedback stayed consistent at around 10%, mostly comprising praise. Overall, the feedback evolved from directive to more dialogic and supportive in later drafts.

4.4 Tracking Focus of Supervisory Feedback over Three Drafts

The following is analysis of focus of supervisory feedback.

Supervisors’ written feedback on students’ theses was gathered from the comments on thesis drafts. The comments were categorized into three areas: content knowledge, organization (pertaining to the functions of various sections of the thesis), and editing appropriateness (seen Table 6).

Table 6. Distribution of the focus of supervisory feedback

Focus of feedback	Number	Percentage
Content	207	56.1%
Organization	62	16.8%
Editing Appropriateness	100	27.1%
Total	369	100%

Table 6 shows that content knowledge 207 (56.1%) was the most prevalent focus of written feedback which requires students’ conceptual understanding, thoroughness, and relevance. A few of these comments, as illustration include “This is supposed to be your topic but in your write-up until now, I cannot see it in Chap 3” and “This yellow can be kept but you need to write other sentences to build the flow of ideas”. This is followed by feedback addressing editing appropriateness, with 100 comments (27.1%). In contrast, organization receives the least amount of feedback, with only 62 comments (16.8%). Accordingly, the supervisors appear to predominantly focus on content when providing feedback.

Table 7. Number and percentage of supervisory feedback focus on undergraduate students’ theses

Focus of feedback	T1(D1,2,3)	T2(D1,2,3)	T3(D1,2,3)	T4(D1,2,3)	T5(D1,2,3)	Overall
Content	65(17.6%)	74(20.1%)	18(4.9%)	27(7.3%)	23(6.2%)	207(56.1%)
Organization	30(8.1%)	6(1.6%)	12(3.3%)	6(1.6%)	8(2.2%)	62(16.8%)
Editing appropriateness	28(7.6%)	11(3%)	2(0.5%)	20(5.4%)	39(10.6%)	100(27.1%)
Total	123(33.3%)	91(24.7%)	32(8.7%)	53(14.3%)	70(18.9%)	369(100%)

Table 7 presents the distribution of these responses among the five supervisors. The analysis of supervisory feedback on undergraduate students’ theses (a total of 369 comments) aimed to quantify the number and percentage of feedback responses given by each supervisor based on their focus areas.

The results indicate that the first supervisor provided the highest number of feedback comments, with 65 (17.6%) addressing content-related issues. This was followed by organization (30 comments, 8.1%) and editing appropriateness (28 comments, 7.6%). The second supervisor

wrote 74 comments (20.1%) mainly on content. Feedback on editing appropriateness was considerably lower, with 11 comments (3%), while organization received the least attention, with only 6 comments (1.6%). The third supervisor provided 32 feedback responses (8.7%), mainly targeting content (18 comments, 4.9%). Organization accounted for 12 comments (3.3%), while editing appropriateness received the least attention (2 comments, 0.5%). The last two supervisors provided 53 (14.3%) and 70 (18.9%) feedback responses, respectively, with distinct areas of emphasis. The fourth supervisor concentrated on content (27 comments, 7.3%), followed by editing appropriateness (20 comments, 5.4%) and organization (6 comments, 1.6%). In contrast, the fifth supervisor primarily addressed editing appropriateness (39 comments, 10.6%), followed by content (23 comments, 6.2%) and organization (8 comments, 2.2%). This indicates that feedback on content and editing appropriateness is prioritized over feedback on organization.

Table 8. The frequency and proportion of language function and focus of supervisory feedback

Language function	Focus	T1(D1,2,3)	T2(D1,2,3)	T3(D1,2,3)	T4(D1,2,3)	T5(D1,2,3)	Overall
Directive	Content	32(8.7%)	43(11.7%)	11(3%)	13(3.5%)	13(3.5%)	112(30.4%)
	Organization	17(4.6%)	4(1.1%)	11(3%)	5(1.4%)	7(1.9%)	44(11.9%)
	Editing appropriateness	14(3.8%)	8(2.2%)	2(0.5%)	12(3.3%)	17(4.6%)	53(14.4%)
Referential	Content	22(6%)	18(4.9%)	2(0.5%)	4(1.1%)	8(2.2%)	54(14.6%)
	Organization	8(2.2%)	2(0.5%)	1(0.3%)	1(0.3%)	1(0.3%)	13(3.5%)
	Editing appropriateness	11(3%)	3(0.8%)	0(0%)	6(1.6%)	20(5.4%)	40(10.8%)
Expressive	Content	11(3%)	13(3.5%)	5(1.4%)	10(2.7%)	2(0.5%)	41(11.1%)
	Organization	5(1.4%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	5(1.4%)
	Editing appropriateness	3(0.8%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	2(0.5%)	2(0.5%)	7(1.9%)
Total		123(33.3%)	91(24.7%)	32(8.7%)	53(14.3%)	70(18.9%)	369(100%)

Table 8 indicates that within directive feedback, content-focused feedback is the most frequently provided (30.4%), followed by organization (11.9%) and editing appropriateness (14.4%). Of the total referential feedback, with the highest proportion also directed toward content (14.6%), while organization and editing appropriateness receive 3.5% and 10.8% of the total number of comments, respectively. Content-related expressive feedback is the most frequent (11.1%), whereas there are minimal expressive comments on organization and editing appropriateness (1.4% and 1.9%, respectively).

Overall, these findings suggest that supervisors prioritize directive feedback, particularly on content. Additionally, organization receives the least feedback across all language functions, indicating that supervisors may focus more on content development and editing rather than structural aspects of students’ theses. The prioritization of content-related feedback over organization and editing appropriateness further highlights that content-related challenges are the most prevalent in undergraduate students’ theses, potentially reflecting their English academic writing proficiency and overall skill level.

5. Discussion

The study focuses on three main types of written supervisory feedback: directive, referential and expressive feedback. The validity of this classification framework has been empirically substantiated by scholars from various countries (Basturkmen et al., 2014; Cheng et al., 2025; Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Neupane Bastola, 2021; Saeed et al., 2021; Stracke & Kumar, 2010; Syafi’i et al., 2024; Xu, 2017). The findings of this study on the linguistic functions and focus of supervisors’ feedback on undergraduate theses led to two key points of discussion.

Firstly, the results revealed that supervisory feedback was predominantly delivered through directive feedback, while expressive feedback were comparatively rare. Among its subcategories, “instructions to do” appeared most often. This type of feedback provided students with explicit guidance on how to revise their drafts. Examples of such directive-instruction feedback included “Move it there. Extract what is needed to build argument for gap,” “add what is therefore less understood about the topic,” and “write about the businesses and how they benefit from your future results.” These findings suggest that supervisors primarily rely on directive feedback to instruct students on what actions to take or avoid in their writing. As noted by Winstone and Carless (2020), directive feedback tends to position supervisors as unquestionable authorities, thereby limiting students’ agency and intellectual autonomy and reinforcing the hierarchical power dynamic between supervisor and student. Dominant use of directive language functions was also found by Nurie (2018) from a study of supervisors at Bahir Dar University in Ethiopia In Nurie’s (2018) study, directive feedback often framed as questions or statements to help students clarify their ideas, particularly when revising theoretical frameworks and research design components. The widespread use of directive feedback underscores a control-oriented approach in supervisory practice. However, this finding contrasts with the findings of other studies (e.g., Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Xu, 2017). Xu (2017) has shown that in more collaborative and interactive supervision settings, supervisors tend to exercise greater caution in their use of directive language, particularly when issuing specific instructions. A lower frequency of directive comments in such contexts may thus reflect a more participatory and dialogic feedback approach. In Kumar and Stracke’s (2007) qualitative analysis of feedback on a doctoral thesis draft, they found that referential feedback was used most frequently and considered the easiest for PhD supervisors to implement. Supervisees also found referential feedback easier to process, enabling quicker and more effective revisions. Additionally, both supervisors and supervisees in their study emphasized that editorial and organizational issues should not appear in doctoral theses, which resulted in heightened attention to these elements. The supervisee, in particular, viewed editorial mistakes as a sign

of carelessness, and therefore exercised strict control over these aspects during revisions, ultimately achieving stylistic consistency and enhancing the final draft's readability.

In contrast, the use of expressive feedback is relatively infrequent. This type of feedback typically evaluates the quality of student work from the perspective of academic gatekeepers, using praise or criticism, with negative evaluations dominating (Cheng et al., 2025). Supervisors often believe that positive feedback has limited immediate effects on improving academic abilities (Wirawan et al., 2022) and lacks specific guidance value (Saeed et al., 2021). Simple praise or criticism does not substantially help improve writing quality (Leo, 2021). However, some supervisors still consciously employ positive feedback, which, though unable to directly improve writing quality, play a crucial role in maintaining students' writing motivation (Syafi'i et al., 2024). In fact, expressive feedback fosters students' sense of belonging and security (Adedokun & Oyetunde-Joshua, 2024) and promotes positive supervisor-student interaction (Zheng et al., 2020), providing essential psychological support for addressing writing challenges. It is noteworthy that the amount of three types of feedback decreased by the third draft. For example, Supervisor T1 tended to provide directive guidance in the early stages of revision, with the expectation that students would internalize and apply this feedback in subsequent drafts. Moreover, the frequent use of comments in the second draft declined in the third, indicating that as students' writing quality improved and the need for directive prompts correspondingly diminished. Supervisory feedback is important in academic writing as it helps to guide students to improve writing quality (Morton et al., 2014) and also highlights the essence of learning from a sociocultural theoretical perspective. This process embodies the principles of scaffolding instruction in which supervisors provide appropriate guidance based on students' actual ability levels and their Zone of Proximal Development (Alanazi et al., 2025). It follows the core idea of conditional assistance that avoids both over-intervention and insufficient support (Storch, 2018). As students' abilities increase, supervisors gradually reduce the level of support (Morton et al., 2014). This flexible adjustment represents a key feature of scaffolding instruction. Supervisory feedback functions as external support (Cheng et al., 2025) which students internalize and convert into their own academic abilities, ultimately moving from dependence on guidance to independent writing.

The results acquired from supervisory comments revealed that the comments supervisors provided to their students were principally focused on content, followed by editing appropriateness, and then on organization, respectively. This aligns with the supervisors' preference for type of feedback. Specifically, supervisors primarily use referential feedback to correct editing appropriateness of writing, while they primarily use directive feedback to address global issues (content and organization). It is understandable that supervisors use directive feedback to comment on content and organization. Feedback comments most frequently addressed weaknesses in content, followed by a focus on thesis structure and linguistic accuracy (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2010; Basturkmen et al., 2014; Kumar & Stracke, 2007). This content-centric guidance addresses the challenges undergraduate students face in organizing their thoughts, refining their arguments, and constructing their research. Supervisors prioritize content to enhance the overall clarity and logical coherence of students' writing. This teaching method helps students master systematic academic writing methods (Syafi'i et al., 2024). Conversely, some empirical studies have reported that teachers predominantly concentrated on appropriateness (Gul et al., 2016; Lee, 2009; Lucero et al., 2018), often overlooking other critical aspects. In terms of the focus of supervisor feedback, students' theses often require substantial revisions in structural organization, logical development, and rhetorical coherence (Alharbi, 2022). This includes reconfiguring the overall framework, rearranging paragraph order, and reorganizing sentence-level expression. As Hyland (1998, p. 261) noted, "The more revision focuses on meaning improvement, the greater the opportunity for writer development". It is also noteworthy that L2 writing instructors tend to encourage students to express their ideas creatively rather than placing excessive emphasis on linguistic accuracy (Van Heerden et al., 2017). From the perspective of Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development theory, scaffolded feedback provided by supervisors plays a crucial role when students encounter significant difficulties in progressing from their current level of competence toward their potential level of development. Without appropriate instructional support, students are likely to adopt a passive or avoidant attitude toward learning. This perspective reinforces Vygotsky's (1978) central claim that higher cognitive functions develop through socially mediated interactions that offer structured guidance.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study examined the language functions and focus of supervisory feedback provided by L2 supervisors during the undergraduate thesis writing process. The findings reveal that directive feedback was the most frequently employed, while referential and expressive feedback were used comparatively less. Moreover, the feedback primarily targeted content-related issues, followed by organization and appropriateness. An analysis of directive feedback showed a dynamic shift in the supervisor-student relationship by the third draft. While the first two drafts were dominated by directive comments, there was a decrease in both the quantity and directiveness of feedback in the third draft, suggesting a reduction in scaffolding. These findings highlight the importance of examining how students engage with feedback during the revision process in order to better assess its impact on their writing development.

Despite contributing to the emerging field of supervisory feedback in undergraduate writing, this study has several limitations. First, future research is encouraged to adopt mixed-methods approaches and include interviews with both supervisors and students to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Second, it is necessary to investigate how undergraduate students internalize and respond to feedback during the revision process. Lastly, future studies should explore individual learner factors that influence students' varied responses to feedback, in order to optimize personalized supervisory strategies.

Biodata

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Authors' contributions

Conceptualisation and design of study: SH Ting; Instrument formulation: SH Ting, L Zhao; Data collection: SH Ting; Data analysis and interpretation: SH Ting, L Zhao; Drafting the paper: SH Ting, L Zhao; Revising the paper: SH Ting, L Zhao. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript and authors contributed equally to the study.

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