

# Written Supervisory Feedback Strategies on Bachelor's Theses: Chinese EFL Supervisors' Beliefs and Practices

ZHIBIN LEI & ISSRA PRAMOOLSOOK\*

*Institute of Social Technology, Suranaree University of Technology, Thailand*

\*Corresponding author email: [issra@sut.ac.th](mailto:issra@sut.ac.th)

Article Information	Abstract
<b>Article History:</b> Received: 28 May 2020 Accepted: 19 September 2020 Available online: 1 October 2020	<i>This study investigated the beliefs and practices of Chinese EFL supervisors regarding their written supervisory feedback strategies for undergraduate English majors' bachelor's thesis drafts at a Chinese public university. Qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with six EFL supervisors and the text analysis results of the written feedback strategies used in six sets of first, second and third bachelors' thesis drafts showed matches between the supervisors' stated and actual written feedback strategies both in general and in different draft stages. In general, the supervisors believed in using an indirect strategy, and they provided written feedback indirectly in practice. For different draft stages, the supervisors believed in prioritizing indirect strategy in initial drafts and direct strategy in later drafts. In practice, they provided written feedback more indirectly for the first and second drafts, but they did so more directly for the third draft. These findings contrast with the literature and point towards some pedagogical recommendations.</i>
<b>Keywords:</b> English majors Bachelor's thesis Written feedback strategies Beliefs and practices	

## INTRODUCTION

In China, each English major undergraduate is required to complete a bachelor's thesis in English to meet the requirements for a bachelor's degree (Ministry of Education, 2001), and they complete their theses under the supervision of supervisors. The supervisors, through their feedback, which is mostly in a written form on students' thesis drafts, continuously provide the students the time, knowledge, expertise, and support to foster the students' research skills and attitudes in order to ensure the production of a thesis of an acceptable standard (Heath, 2002). Therefore, the supervisors' commitment to their written supervisory feedback on students' thesis drafts cannot be understated (Nurie, 2018). In the Chinese context, because of the small proportion of supervisors to students and the large amount of time required for supervisors to provide personalized oral feedback, written supervisory feedback is particularly important to students' bachelor's thesis improvement (Wu, 2015).

To date, there has been much research on teachers' written feedback in EFL classroom writing. Bitchener and Ferris (2012) concluded that the previous research on written feedback in EFL writing covered the following topics: the foci of teachers' written feedback (e.g. Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Stracke & Kumar, 2016; Bitchener, 2018; Lee, 2019), the effects of teachers'

written feedback (e.g. Chandler, 2003; Yu & Cheng, 2017; Gorman & Ellis, 2019), the approaches to providing written feedback (e.g. Bitchener, 2018), and the teachers' and students' perceptions of written feedback (e.g. Ferris, 2012; Marie, 2016; Arifin, 2020). In addition, some scholars (e.g. Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Chandler, 2003; Chen, 2018) found that teachers' written feedback strategy is one main factor that influences the effectiveness of teachers' written feedback practices because it can exert influence on students' psychometric understanding and determine how their students will react to written feedback, which, in turn, influences the quality of the research (Tahir, Ghani, Atek & Manaf, 2012).

Despite an agreement on the beneficial effects of written feedback in general, there is controversy around which type of feedback strategy is more effective (Nassaji, 2016). For instance, some studies (e.g. Sheen, 2007; Bitchener, 2008; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Karim & Nassaji, 2018) found that a direct feedback strategy is more effective than an indirect one as it explicitly points out how the error should be corrected. However, other studies (Ferris, 2003, 2006) have argued that an indirect feedback strategy is superior to a direct one in the long run.

In language pedagogy research, it has been shown that teachers' practices are influenced by personal theories and beliefs (Borg, 2003). Lee (2009) argued that "uncovering the beliefs that underlie teachers' practices can help identify the factors that contribute to effective feedback" (p.14). In addition, teachers who are willing to reflect on their beliefs and on how the beliefs influence their practices can both serve their students' EFL writing and support their professional growth (Xu, 2012). However, even though much research has been conducted on written feedback, the type of supervisory feedback strategies provided on English majors' bachelor's draft theses by EFL supervisors and the reasons why the EFL supervisors provide it in these ways remain in question, especially in the EFL context in China.

Currently, there is a noticeable lack of studies offering insights into how the supervisors should provide written supervisory feedback to English majors' draft theses. Research on English majors' bachelor's theses has shown that many students have problems in thesis writing, including the selection and report of topics, the writing of each part of the thesis, and the argumentation in the thesis as a whole (Wu, 2012; Han, 2014). Therefore, students expect help from the supervisors in the form of written feedback. However, how the supervisors provide the written feedback has rarely been investigated. Therefore, this study aims to understand the beliefs and practices on the less researched written supervisory feedback strategies.

This study provides insights into understanding written supervisory feedback strategies in bachelor's thesis supervision and will seek to offer practical pedagogical recommendations. It may also be helpful for thesis supervisors to revisit their feedback strategy practices in order to achieve effective supervisions. According to the research purpose, this study sets out to answer the following three questions:

1. What are the supervisors' beliefs about written supervisory feedback strategies?
2. What are the supervisors' practices for written supervisory feedback strategies?

3. To what extent do the supervisors' beliefs and practices of written supervisory feedback strategy match, and what are the factors that influence the EFL supervisors' practices in selecting and changing their written feedback strategy?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the field of EFL writing, extensive research has been conducted on teachers' written feedback; nevertheless, little consensus has been found on the findings. Keeping in line with the goals of the present study, namely exploring supervisors' beliefs and practices regarding written supervisory feedback strategies, the following sections emphasize studies on written feedback, written supervisory feedback, and teachers' beliefs and practices in written feedback.

### Research on written feedback

Since the 1980s, there has been a vast array of relevant research on teachers' written feedback on EFL writing. Regarding the importance of written feedback, Truscott (1996) argued for the ineffectiveness of written feedback on form. However, since then, many research studies have revealed that written feedback results in achieving learning outcomes and enhancing students' metalinguistic awareness (Ferris, 2002), students' self-editing (Myles, 2002), and fostering the degree of accuracy in new writings (Bitchener, 2008).

Among the extensive research on written feedback, the question of which types of problems that teachers' written feedback should focus on has received a great deal of attention. Teachers' written feedback focus is traditionally divided into form feedback (local feedback) and content feedback (global feedback). Form feedback refers to feedback on grammatical mistakes and incorrect spelling or mechanics, while content feedback refers to the feedback provided aimed at the content or the organization of students' writing.

Influenced by product writing pedagogy, form feedback was traditionally emphasized over content feedback in EFL writing classrooms (Kepner, 1991; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994). Krashen (1984) and Zamel (1985) advocated delaying of form feedback until the final stage of the writing process, and form feedback and content feedback should be separated to avoid students' confusion. However, other scholars (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ashwell, 2000) showed that giving form and content feedback simultaneously was as effective as either form or content feedback, hence the unnecessary and impossibility of the separation. Thus far, research evidence supports delivering both form and content feedback to improve students' L2 writing qualities and abilities (Hyland, 2003).

Another practical problem that supervisors encounter when providing written feedback on students' writing is how to provide it, that is, the written feedback strategy. Literature provides a few classifications of written feedback strategy. Ellis (2009) identified six strategies for teachers to provide written feedback on students' linguistic errors, including (1) direct feedback, (2) indirect feedback, (3) metalinguistic feedback, (4) focused and unfocused feedback, (5) electronic feedback, and (6) reformulation. Direct feedback requires the teacher to provide the students

with the correct form. Indirect feedback requires the teacher to indicate that an error exists but does not provide the correction. Metalinguistic feedback involves providing students with some kind of metalinguistic clues such as error codes or metalinguistic explanations to the nature of the errors (Ellis, 2009), and reformulation requires "... a native speaker writing the student's text in such a way as to preserve as many of the of the writer's ideas as possible, while expressing them in their own words so as to make the piece sound native-like" (Cohen, 1989, p. 4).

However, the six strategies for providing feedback were not classified on a uniform standard, which has led to some overlap (Alkhatib, 2015). Consequently, in order to be operational in analysis and avoid confusion, Ene and Upton (2014) divided the written feedback into direct and indirect strategies based on the directness, each with a few subcategories (Appendix A). However, some of these subcategories are too complicated and unnecessary. Therefore, Ene and Upton's (2014) classifications of feedback strategy were adapted for the present study.

As for the effectiveness of direct and indirect feedback strategies, the results are quite mixed. Many researchers support the use of indirect written feedback because it is claimed to encourage students' analytic reflection to guide their own learning, their engagement in the problem-solving process, and their processing of the feedback they receive (Ferris & Robert, 2001; Shintani & Ellis, 2013). In contrast, other researchers (Chandler, 2003; Lee, 2004; Sheen, 2007; Bitchener & Knoch, 2010) stated direct feedback is the fastest and easiest way for producing accurate revisions.

Whether to provide feedback on a few specific problem categories (i.e. selective feedback) or to mark all problems (i.e. comprehensive feedback) is an important decision that teachers must make (Ferris, 2002). Researchers who advocated selective correction (e.g. Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010; Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Lee, 2013) believed that marking a few problems can improve the students' self-editing strategies and be less overwhelming for the students while those who recommend a comprehensive approach (Evans, Hartshorn, McCollum, & Wolfersberger, 2010) stated that marking all problems meet students' needs and expectations.

Students' views on their teachers' written feedback have been a concern for researchers because students' views could help teachers to be aware of their needs and reactions to the written feedback practices. Most studies revealed positive perceptions of teachers' written feedback. For example, some studies (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Diab, 2005) highly valued the role of teachers' written feedback to improving the quality of their writing products. Other research (e.g. Lee, 2004) revealed that students' preferences aligned strongly with their teachers' written feedback practices. Other studies (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Hamouda, 2011) compared teachers' beliefs and students' preferences towards written feedback and revealed students and teachers shared beliefs in the amount and usefulness of written feedback, and a few discrepancies concerning the focus of written feedback as well. However, some research also showed negative perceptions of written feedback. Truscott (1996) and Truscott and Hsu (2008) stated students had negative attitudes to numerous written feedback instances because they felt frustrated.

In a word, the research on teachers' written feedback was extensive, but current studies seem to yield few conclusive answers in terms of the effectiveness of written feedback in EFL writing improvement. The effectiveness of direct and indirect feedback strategies is still controversial. In addition, the studies on written feedback are mainly directed at language form errors, while the effectiveness of written feedback for the problems and weakness in content and organization is very limited.

### **Research on written supervisory feedback**

The thesis has become a central element as well as a formal requirement of graduate programs in universities (Nouri, Larsson & Saqr, 2019); therefore, a large number of studies have investigated thesis supervisors' written feedback to students. As Bitchener (2018) stated, "A number of reasons can be given to explain why feedback to thesis/dissertation writers is particularly important" (p.2) because thesis/dissertation is a new type or genre of writing for students, and feedback helps students understand "the norms and values of their particular disciplines, and thus facilitates (their) enculturation into disciplinary literacies and epistemologies" (Hyland, 2009, p. 132).

In relevant studies, different terms were used for the thesis supervisors' written feedback, such as "supervisor written feedback" (e.g. Bitchener, Basturkmen & East, 2010; de Kleijn, Mainhard, Meijer, Brekelmans & Pilot, 2013), "supervisory feedback" (e.g. Xu & Hu, 2019), "supervisor's on-script feedback" (e.g. Basturkmen, East, Bitchener, & Meyer, 2011; Basturkmen, East, & Bitchener, 2014). In the current study, "written supervisory feedback" is used with the intention to distinguish it from "written corrective feedback" which is used only for linguistic error corrections in L2 or EFL writing.

Until recently, very little attention had been given to written supervisory feedback (Bitchener, 2018). Most previous studies reported on supervisors' perceptions of the difficulties that graduate L2 students experience. Casanave and Hubbard (1992), and Cooley and Lewcowicz (1995) reported on the difficulties that L2 writers can experience with surface forms and structures, and Dong (1998) explained that the development of an argument, understanding what characterizes the thesis as a particular genre, and the discipline-specific requirements and expectations of supervisors and disciplines are the most irritating difficulties.

In recent years, a growing number of studies have begun to consider the speech functions and focus of written supervisory feedback. Kumar and Stracke (2007) investigated the different language functions of supervisor feedback to doctorate students on their first draft dissertations. They developed a model for analysis based on three fundamental functions of speech: referential, directive and expressive, and found that expressive feedback benefited the supervisee the most. Later, Stracke and Kumar (2016) studied the impact that the language and speech functions of supervisors' written feedback have on the doctoral students' learning experiences and found that expressive types of feedback can play an important role in developing academic writing.

The classification of form and content feedback has been difficult to apply in the analysis of

written supervisory feedback since the classification is based on the feedback on linguistic errors. Therefore, a few researchers (e.g. Hyatt, 2005) made attempts to categorize different types of written supervisory feedback. Bitchener, et al. (2011) provided a four-category classification of written supervisory feedback foci which includes contents, requirements, cohesion and coherence, and linguistic accuracy and appropriateness. Consequently, Basturkmen, East, and Bitchener (2012) analyzed supervisors' on-script feedback comments and revealed that most comments were about linguistic accuracy and appropriateness (62%), and then the number of comments on content, requirements, and cohesion/coherence followed.

In the study by Jafarigohar, Hoomanfar and Jalilifar (2018), thirty supervisors' written feedback on graduate students' theses/dissertations was analyzed and seven categories of comments were found: grammar and sentence structure, content, method, organization, references, formatting, and academic procedures.

Students' perceptions of supervisors' written feedback were a research interest to study thesis supervision (Odena & Burgess, 2017; Nurie, 2019). For example, de Kleijn, et al. (2013) explored students' perceptions of master's thesis supervision, and found feedback to be positive, providing information on how they are doing and what they need to do next, is perceived to be the most satisfying feedback, from which they are learning the most. In Bitchener's (2018) study, both L1 and L2 master's or doctorate students perceived guidance on the subject-specific use of literature, discourse structure, and language use through genre analysis as the most important aspects from their supervisors.

Apart from studies on the speech functions, focus, and graduate students' perceptions, research on the supervisory relationship between supervisors and graduates (Kleijn, Meijer, Pilot & Brekelmans, 2014), and master students' engagement with written supervisor feedback (Zheng, Yu, Wang & Zhang, 2020) has been addressed. These studies have widened our understanding of written supervisory feedback.

Despite increasing research on written supervisory feedback for doctoral and master's students to date, limited research has addressed this issue for undergraduate students. The research of supervision on doctoral students or master's students' theses or dissertations cannot be readily applied to the supervision of undergraduate students' theses as undergraduate students have no or limited previous independent research experience (Cook, 1980). More importantly, few studies have examined the written supervisory feedback strategy, which is considered as a critical factor influencing the quality of thesis writing.

### **Research on teachers' beliefs and practices in written feedback**

Research has demonstrated that teachers' practices are affected by their beliefs (e.g. Burns, 1992; Borg, 2001) as teachers are thinking beings who construct their own personal and workable theories of teaching (Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2004). Given the complexity of written feedback, much research has been conducted to uncover the teachers' beliefs that underlie teachers' feedback practices for the purpose of identifying the factors that contribute to effective feedback on students' writing (Lee, 2009).



Evans, Hartshorn, and Tuioti (2010) conducted a study on teachers' beliefs in written corrective feedback and found that 92% of teachers from 69 countries reported the use of written corrective feedback (WCF) in their teaching practices because they believed that it is useful for students. The factors that affected their practices of written corrective feedback were their personal teaching experiences, academic training, and research and conferences. Ferris, Brown, Liu and Stine (2011) found that although teachers value feedback and believe it is essential, they often feel frustrated and dissatisfied with their feedback practices due to the "apparent lack of impact on student progress" (p. 39).

A complex relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices can also be found in several studies. For example, Montgomery and Baker's (2007) study revealed that 13 EFL teachers believed they provided a lot of feedback on global concerns, but the analysis of their actual WCF revealed more instances of WCF on grammar and mechanics. Similarly, Lee (2009) found that EFL high school teachers believed that good writing involves more than grammatical accuracy, but their WCF focused primarily on language form.

As for factors influencing teachers' beliefs and practices, Lee (2008a) concluded that teachers' written feedback practices are influenced by a myriad of contextual factors, including the institutional and cultural context, such as the influence of the exams and school policy. In Lee's (2009) study, the participants attributed their feedback practices primarily to the exam culture in Hong Kong, to expectations from the English panel in their school and to the time constraint in providing more balanced written feedback. Similarly, Guénette and Lyster's (2013) study revealed that time constraints, adaptation of feedback practices to students' proficiency and the fear of overwhelming the students with too much feedback are important factors impacting how the teacher responded to their students' essays.

Although many studies have investigated teachers' beliefs regarding written feedback in EFL writing, these studies mostly focused on the beliefs of the roles of supervisors, the values of written feedback, and the types of written feedback which are effective to students' writing improvement. However, little research has been conducted on the beliefs of written feedback strategy, especially in bachelor's thesis supervision.

In summary, bachelor's thesis is a central key to the first graduation in higher education (Ashwin, Abbas, & McLean, 2017; Nouri et al., 2019). This review of literature suggests more research on bachelor's thesis supervision related to beliefs and practices of written feedback strategy is needed, especially in EFL contexts, where the bachelor's theses are written in English and supervised by non-native university teachers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Both semi-structured interviews for data collection and text analysis to uncover feedback strategies were involved in the present study. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the supervisors to investigate their beliefs on their written feedback strategies on the whole as well as in different draft stages. After that, the students' thesis drafts under the

interviewed supervisors were analyzed to demonstrate how the supervisors actually provided their written corrective feedback.

## **Context**

This study was conducted in the School of Foreign Languages at a public university in Central China. The writing of a bachelor's thesis for students in an English major program, as a partial requirement for a bachelor's degree, aims to improve both students' basic research skills and academic writing ability. The bachelor's thesis, worth six credits, needs to be fluent, clear and informative with independent ideas and needs to have a length of 3,000-5,000 words in English. Before the thesis writing, the students in the English major program have no experience writing academic articles, and most of them have only reached the level of writing skills in Test for English Majors Level 4 (TEM4), a nationwide EFL test in China to measure the overall English language proficiency of Chinese university undergraduates majoring in English Language and Literature at the end of their second year at university, which is "to be able to write a short essay with a length of 150-200 words in 30 minutes with relevant contents, well-organized structure, correct grammar, smooth language and appropriate expressions according to the given topic, outline, chart, statistics" (Ministry of Education, 2001). The supervisors for the bachelor's theses in the current context are all non-native teachers of English, mostly with a master's degree or above in the fields related to English studies.

According to the School's policy, the students in the English major program have to submit their thesis drafts to their supervisors no less than three times after they finish their proposals and before they attend the oral defense. The School provides a thesis template and guidelines for students which includes the format specifications, timetable for draft submission, and requires that each draft should be complete, including the cover, content, references, appendices and acknowledgments formatted like the template. The supervisor should be an associate professor or above in professional ranks or a master's degree holder or above. Each supervisor supervises 4-8 students according to their professional rank, and those with higher ranks will supervise more students than those with lower ranks.

## **Participants**

Six Chinese teacher participants (5 females, 1 male) who supervised the thesis students in the English major program in the academic year 2018-2019 took part in the study based on convenience sampling (Duff, 2008). The mean length of their teaching experience was 16 years. All the participants have supervised thesis students for more than five years, but none of them reported having received written feedback training. Table 1 presents the participants' background information.



**Table 1**  
**Summary of Participants' Background Information**

Participants	Gender	Teaching experience	Professional rank	Research field	Degree
T1	M	24	Prof.	Linguistics	MA
T2	F	25	Prof.	Literature	MA
T3	F	12	Assoc. Prof.	Translation	MA
T4	F	20	Assoc. Prof.	Pedagogy	MA
T5	F	3	Lecturer	Literature	PhD
T6	F	12	Lecturer	Interpretation	MA

Note. M=male; F=female; Assoc. Prof=associate professor

## Data Collection

**Interview.** A semi-structured interview was conducted in this study to elicit both the supervisors' beliefs in written feedback strategies and the factors that influenced their practice of written feedback strategies. The questions in the interview were developed in relevance to the literature on teachers' beliefs and written feedback and to the research questions of this study and were piloted with one supervisor who did not participate in this study (see Appendix B).

The interview was carried out in Chinese prior to the collection of student thesis samples from the School of Foreign Languages. The semi-structured interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. Each was audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis, and a summary was sent to each interviewee for validation in order to present their views accurately.

**Students' Thesis Samples.** The students' thesis samples included six sets of drafts (each set contained a student's first, second and third drafts) from six different students who were under the six participants' supervision, respectively. Having received permission from the supervisors and the students, one of the researchers went to the School of Foreign Language archives and copied the six sets of drafts with the supervisors' written feedback. A total number of 18 thesis drafts with written feedback were collected. More detailed information about the draft theses is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Information about the Draft Theses**

Student Supervisor		Thesis title	Research area	Length (words)
S1	T1	Comparative Analysis of National Characteristics of English and Chinese Proverbs	Culture	5775
S2	T2	Metaphorical Cognition of English Phonaestheme "fl-"	Linguistics	6458
S3	T3	On Celie's Growth in Alice Walker's <i>the Color Purple</i>	Literature	10431
S4	T4	The Strategies of Developing Students' Thinking Abilities in English Reading Lessons	Teaching	7332

S5	T5	On the Influence of Five Women Characters on the Heroine in <i>Jane Eyre</i>	Literature	7446
S6	T6	On the Application of Phonics to English Pronunciation Teaching in Primary Schools	Teaching	5989
Average				7239

Note. the length refers to the word number of the third drafts.

The six theses addressed the topics in four different areas: English literature, English teaching, English linguistics, and English and Chinese culture, and the average length of the final drafts of these six theses was a little over 7,000 words.

### Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed with a thematic approach by one of the researchers. First, the interview transcripts were read through several times so that the researcher could get a sense of the data. Next, the comments relevant to this study were labeled with an informative label. All labels and their corresponding extracts were stored into a Word file, as the foundation for forming themes. Consequently, all the labels were carefully read and the relationships between them were identified, then they were arranged to form different themes based on the research questions and the main aim of the study (Cohen & Upton, 2007). Specifically, the themes were named in relation to the factors influencing supervisors' beliefs in their supervisory feedback strategies. For example, the comments "It's our responsibility to point out the students' errors (T1)" and "thesis writing is also a process of exploring and learning, during which the students will make many errors and cannot notice their own errors (T2)" were labeled as "responsibility of instruction" and "incapability of noticing errors", respectively. Then, the researcher classified them into the theme "instructional scaffolding" because both of the labels revealed the necessity of instruction from the supervisors' and the students' perspectives. Finally, the labels and themes were examined by the other researcher, and some of them were refined.

For the students' thesis samples, the written feedback strategy was coded based on a self-invented scheme designed by the researchers (see Table 3). The scheme, which was based on Ene and Upton's (2014) distinction, classified the feedback strategy into direct and indirect strategies. The direct strategy was further divided into two subcategories, which are correction/reformulation and correction/reformulation with explanations, and the indirect strategy was divided into four subcategories; namely, graphical locating, graphical locating with explanations, error numbers, and error codes (see Appendix C for descriptions).

**Table 3**  
**Coding Schemes for Supervisors' Written feedback Strategy**

Strategy	Subcategory	Codes
Direct feedback strategy	Corrections/ reformulation	Dc
	Correction/ reformulation with explanations	Ds
Indirect feedback strategy	Graphically locating	Lo

Graphically locating with explanations	Le
Error numbers	En
Error codes	Ec

An independent coder, who was a Chinese supervisor with a master's degree in Applied Linguistics and who did not participate in this study, helped to code two sets of drafts (6 thesis drafts) together with one of the researchers, and the inter-coder agreement percentage was 94%. Then, one of the researchers coded the other four sets (12 thesis drafts).

## RESULTS

### 1. Supervisors' beliefs

The semi-structured interviews elicited much information about the supervisors' beliefs in their preferences, the factors affecting their preferences and their strategy variations in different thesis drafts.

#### 1.1 Preferences for written feedback strategy

The results of the supervisors' preference for written supervisor feedback strategy from the interview is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**  
**Supervisors' Preferences for Written Feedback Strategies**

Participants	Written feedback Strategy					
	Direct			Indirect		
	Dc	De	Lo	Le	En	Ec
T1				√		
T2				√		
T3			√			
T4				√		
T5	√			√		
T6		√				
Total	1	1	1	4		

Note. Dc=direct correction/reformulation; De= direct correction/reformulation + explanations; Lo= graphical locating; Le= graphical locating + explanations; En= error numbers; Ec= error codes.

As shown in Table 4, most of the supervisors (N=5) preferred one feedback strategy, while only one preferred two feedback strategies. For three strategies, namely, direct correction/reformulation ("Dc"), direct correction/reformulation with explanations ("De"), and locating errors without explanation ("Lo"), each was favored only by one supervisor (T5, T6, and T3, respectively), and the locating errors with explanation ("Le") was preferred by four supervisors (including one supervisor who favored both "Le" and "D"). However, the other two indirect

strategies, namely, indicating errors with numbers (“En”) and indicating errors with codes (“Ec”), were preferred by none of the supervisors.

From Table 4, it can be concluded that most of the supervisors (N=5, including T5, who favored both “Dc” and “Le”) preferred an indirect written feedback strategy, more specifically, locating errors with explanations (“Le”). This finding does not align with other studies (e.g., Lee, 2003; Alkhatib, 2015) in which teachers preferred direct feedback strategy.

## 1.2 Factors affecting supervisors’ preferences

As for the reasons for the supervisors’ preference for using an indirect written feedback strategy, four themes were identified from the interview conversations: “instructional scaffolding”, “student engagement”, “time efficiency” and “researcher independence”. For example, T2, who favored “locating errors with explanations” (“Lo”), explained:

It’s our responsibility to point out the students’ errors. For example, since our students have never been exposed to the format (of academic papers), they certainly can’t identify the problems in format. So, we must tell them (with explanations) (T2). (“instructional scaffolding”)

For T2, written supervisory feedback is a kind of supervisor’s instruction to students in thesis writing. Pointing out the errors/problems in the thesis with explanations in an indirect way may help the students notice the errors/problems, understand what the errors/problems are and revise the errors or solve the problems by themselves. Therefore, indirect written feedback provides a scaffold for students to reach a higher position in thesis writing.

The supervisors also believed that the indirect strategy is a good way to increase students’ engagement, which, in return, can improve the quality of their theses. Supervisor 4, who also favored the strategy of locating errors/problems with explanations, argued:

As a supervisor, I would like to tell [the students] the reasons after pointing out of the problems, but not to give the correct answers. In this way [locating the problem with explanations indicating the problem nature], the students will think [what the problems are] and try to revise themselves (T4). (“student engagement”)

For T4, only the students who engage themselves in thesis writing can make effective revision and write high-quality theses. Otherwise, the students would become dependent, always waiting for the supervisors to correct, to revise, even to rewrite the thesis. Therefore, indirect written feedback provides an opportunity for students to improve their writing skills independently.

Similarly to locating the errors/problems with explanations (“Le”), locating errors/problems without explanations (“Lo”) was also believed to increase students’ engagement. T3, who favored “Lo”, claimed:

For most problems, I will only leave a question mark or an underlining, because I want to let them think [the reasons, types and revisions of the problem]. With this thinking, they will have a deep

impression about the problem [and will not repeat the same error] (T3). (“student engagement”)

For T3, the indirect written feedback strategy was employed to make the students notice the errors/problems and then engage in thinking about how to correct the errors and improve the weakness. In this way, students may think more in the self-revision.

In addition, the supervisors believed that indirect supervisory feedback strategy is also time-efficient. Since each supervisor supervised several thesis students, and every supervisor needed to give written feedback in a short time, an indirect strategy would be the right choice for supervisors. T2 stated:

It’s impossible for me to provide direct feedback on all errors or problems to all the [eight] students within a short period of time (T2). (“time efficiency”)

Her idea was also supported by other supervisors. For example, T4 agreed the time constraint was a reason for her to use “locating errors/problems with explanations”, claiming that:

For those organizational problems, after pointing where they are, I cannot state them clearly with explanations in two or three words. So, I just wrote a few words and then I will explain in detail when I have a face-to-face conference with the students (T4). (“time efficiency”)

For T4, she did not want to write detailed explanations for students’ problems because the problems and suggestions could not be stated clearly in one or two sentences, and if she wrote them down, that would take too much of her time. Therefore, she would like to have a face-to-face conference instead because that would be effective and time-saving in her opinion.

Besides the above reasons, some supervisors would like to help students to carry out research and write research papers independently. T1 claimed:

As a supervisor, we need to point out the problems, but not to correct them for the students. Instead, the students should be allowed to revise the errors by themselves, so that they can get the opportunity to correct the errors and to grow up independently (T1). (“researcher independence”)

For T1, one of the major purposes of thesis writing is to train students’ academic writing skills. The supervisor’s written feedback is to provide help in the writing, but not to control the writing.

### **1.3 Beliefs in feedback strategy variations in different draft stages**

Concerning whether their feedback will change or not from the initial draft stage to the third draft stage, most supervisors (N=5) reported a confirmative answer, which is presented in Table 5. As shown in this table, the supervisors stated that they mainly adopt indirect feedback strategy (“Lo” or “Le”) in the first and second drafts, while they mainly use direct feedback

strategy (“Dc” or “De”) in the third draft. Only one supervisor (T4) claimed she would not change her feedback strategy throughout the three draft stages.

**Table 5**  
**Supervisors’ Preferences for Written Feedback Strategy in Three Stages**

Participants	The 1 <sup>st</sup> draft stage	The 2 <sup>nd</sup> draft stage	The 3 <sup>rd</sup> draft stage
T1	Le	Le	Dc
T2	Lo	Lo	Dc
T3	Lo	Lo + Dc	Dc
T4	Le	Le	Le
T5	Le	Le	Dc
T6	Le	Dc	Dc

Regarding the reasons for the supervisors’ change in written feedback strategies, three themes were identified from the interview conversations, including the “variation of feedback focus” in different stages (T1, T2, T3, T5, T6), “students’ academic proficiency” (T1, T3) and “cognitive difficulty of thesis topics” (T3). For example, T1 stated:

Because my feedback focus for each draft is different, and the quality of each student’s draft is different, the way of providing feedback will certainly change accordingly. For example, in the first draft, I mainly correct the structural problems, so I mainly use the method of pointing out the problems and explaining [the nature of the problems]. In the second draft, [...] students’ main problems are format and content ones. For the format errors, I ask the students to refer to the correct format or the university’ format requirement, and tell them where they can refer to the correct format, so that students can learn [the correct format] and solve the problems. [...] In the third draft, language is the [feedback] focus (T1). (“feedback focus”)

Like T1, other supervisors agreed that the written feedback focus would affect their choices of strategies for providing written feedback. For example, for those minor errors such as spelling, punctuation or lexical choices, the supervisors reported they usually correct them directly. However, for those structural and content problems, they often preferred locating them with explanations.

Furthermore, students’ academic proficiency also affects the supervisors’ choice of written feedback strategies. Some students are less proficient than others in academic writing, so the supervisors could not take the same strategy in giving written feedback for these students. T3 explained:

Some students are really incapable to correct [the errors] by themselves, such as those errors in the abstracts, non-authentic expressions or lack of transitional paragraphs, so I will correct them directly. Because of the limited proficiency, if you don’t correct [the errors] for them, they can never revise them correctly (T3). (“academic proficiency”)



The cognitive difficulty of thesis topics is another concern of the supervisors' feedback strategy changes. Since the students choose different thesis topics including theoretical linguistics, English literature, English culture and English teaching, the writing in some topics will undoubtedly need more cognitive effort than others. Therefore, the supervisors believed they need to give more direct feedback on the thesis drafts with difficult topics.

## 2. Supervisors' practice of feedback strategy

The direct and indirect feedback strategies that each supervisor has provided on their students' thesis drafts are presented in Table 6. Findings are provided in terms of the frequency of occurrences and the percentage of each strategy by each supervisor.

**Table 6**  
**Proportion of Each Supervisors' Practices of Written Feedback Strategy**

P.	Written feedback strategy								Total
	Dc	De	Direct Subtotal (%)	Lo	Le	Indirect En Ec		Subtotal (%)	
T1	65	24	89(71%)	11	26	0	0	37(29%)	126
T2	30	31	61(63%)	8	28	0	0	36(37%)	97
T3	43	70	113 (31%)	16	240	0	0	256 (69%)	369
T4	13	6	19(17%)	12	83	0	0	95(83%)	114
T5	25	26	51(52%)	6	42	0	0	48(48%)	99
T6	15	4	19(68%)	5	4	0	0	9(32%)	28
Total	191	161	352	58	423	0	0	481	833
(%)	(23%)	(19%)	(42%)	(7%)	(51%)			(58%)	

Note. P.=participants

As can be seen from Table 6, all supervisors tended to use both direct and indirect feedback strategies. Moreover, Table 6 shows that the total number of direct feedback instances (42%) is much less than that of indirect feedback instances (58%). However, individual supervisor's practices showed different patterns regarding the feedback strategies: two supervisors (T1, T2) used less indirect feedback strategies than direct ones, three supervisors (T3, T4, T6) used more indirect feedback strategies than direct ones, and one supervisor (T5) kept a balance between direct and indirect feedback strategies.

As for the written feedback strategies in different draft stages, the results are demonstrated in Table 7.

**Table 7**  
**Proportion of Written Feedback Strategy in Different Drafts**

Stage	Written feedback strategy								Total
	Dc	De	Direct Subtotal (%)	Lo	Le	En	Ec	Subtotal (%)	
D1	50(18%)	73(26%)	123(44%)	18(6%)	140(50%)	0	0	158(56%)	281
D2	56(16%)	58(17%)	114(33%)	28(8%)	206(59%)	0	0	234(67%)	348
D3	85(42%)	30(15%)	115(56%)	12(6%)	77(38%)	0	0	89(44%)	204
Total	191(23%)	161(19%)	352(42%)	58(7%)	423(51%)	0	0	481(58%)	833

Note. D1= draft 1; D2=draft 2; D3=draft 3.

As shown in Table 7, the supervisors used more indirect feedback strategies (56%) than the direct feedback strategies (44%) in the first draft stage, and in both direct and indirect feedback strategies, supervisors tended to provide feedback with explanations. That is, “De” was used more often than “Dc” (26% vs. 18%) and “Le” was used more than “Lo” (50% vs. 6%).

In the second draft stage, the supervisors tended to use indirect feedback strategies to a large degree (67%). While the supervisors kept a balance between “Dc” (16%) and “De” (17%) as a direct feedback strategy, they used much more “Le” (59%) than “Lo” (9%) as an indirect feedback strategy.

In the third draft stage, the supervisors liked to use direct feedback strategies (56%) more than indirect strategies (44%). When using a direct feedback strategy, they tended to favor in “Dc” (42%) than “De” (15%), but they favored in “Le” (38%) more than “Lo” (6%) when using indirect feedback strategy.

In conclusion, the supervisors adopted both direct and indirect strategies in giving written feedback throughout the three draft stages. However, they tended to use more indirect feedback strategies than direct ones in the first and the second draft stages, while they use much less indirect feedback strategies than direct feedback strategies in the third draft stage.

## DISCUSSION

From the results, it can be interpreted that most of the supervisors believed in indirect written feedback strategy, which conforms to the literature (e.g., Lalande, 1982; Ferris, 2002; Lee, 2009; Storch, 2010; Van Beuningen, 2010; Hamouda, 2011), saying that the indirect approach correction is more appropriate as it encourages students to be more reflective and analytical about their errors. Although the previous literature has claimed that the indirect strategy might be misleading (Alkhatib, 2015), the supervisors in this study reported that their beliefs in the indirect strategy stemmed from its functions of “instructional scaffolding”, “time efficiency”, “increasing student engagement” and “improving student independence”. This indicated that the supervisors believed in the students’ responsibility in thesis writing and the students’ capacity to identify and correct the errors by themselves.

The supervisors' beliefs matched their practices in general, as they provided feedback more indirectly (58%) than directly (42%) in practice. This indicated that the supervisors' beliefs influenced their practices.

However, the supervisors exhibited confidence in their own indirect written feedback strategies, but there was a lack of consensus in the best written feedback strategy. Although most supervisors believed in an indirect written feedback strategy, they used more direct strategies than indirect ones in their practices. It is noted that none of the supervisors reported having received supervision training, so their beliefs on written feedback strategies might mostly be shaped by their own academic learning experiences. This suggested the need for professional training concerning written supervisory feedback, so that the supervisors will be more aware of their written feedback strategies in practice and give written feedback in an effective and confident way.

It is also noted that the supervisors neither preferred nor used the strategies of "Ec" and "En", which were classified as indirect strategy and referred to "error codes" and "error numbers", respectively in this study. According to Ellis (2009), "error codes" and "error numbers" are basic feedback options for teachers. The fact that these Chinese EFL supervisors did not prefer or use "En" and "Ec" might indicate a difference in feedback strategy preferences between native-speaker supervisors and non-native-speaker supervisors, which is worth further study. The results also revealed that, in different draft stages, the supervisors' use of written feedback strategies matched their beliefs: most (N=5) reported that they would change the feedback strategies from the first to the third draft stages, and they actually provided more indirect written feedback than direct written feedback in the first and second draft stages (56% vs. 44%, and 67% vs. 33%, respectively) and more direct written feedback than indirect written feedback (56% vs. 44%) in the third draft stage. The factors influencing the supervisors' changes in written feedback strategies from early drafts to the later drafts include the "variation of feedback focus" in different stages, "students' academic proficiency" and "cognitive difficulty of thesis topics". Previous literature contains scant information on whether supervisors will change their written feedback strategies in multiple-draft writing and, if they do, the reasons for those changes. These findings extend previous research by pointing out supervisors' feedback strategy changes and the reasons for the changes in different draft stages, which can be considered as one of the main contributions of this paper. Furthermore, the findings of this study might provide some insights into what strategies the supervisors should use when they provide written feedback in different draft stages.

While most supervisors (N=5) stated that they only preferred one strategy, they tended to use both direct and indirect feedback strategies in practice. This showed that the supervisors exercised their favorite strategies but also considered other factors while giving supervisory feedback on their students' theses. The mixed use of direct and indirect feedback strategies in this study is in line with Bitchener and Ferris (2012) and Jamoom (2016), who argued that providing a mixture of direct and indirect feedback is the most effective way to scaffold students' learning and understanding of feedback. However, it is worthy of finding out what factors exert influence and how these factors affect supervisors' practices of supervisory feedback strategies.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored six supervisors' beliefs and practices regarding written supervisory feedback strategies. The findings showed that most preferred the indirect feedback strategy in general, because the indirect strategy can contribute to "instructional scaffolding", "student engagement", "time efficiency" and "researcher independence" in thesis writing. In addition, most supervisors would change their strategies in different draft stages according to the "feedback foci", "students' academic proficiency", and the "cognitive difficulty of the thesis topics". In practice, the supervisors used both strategies, but they used an indirect feedback strategy more than a direct one in the initial and earlier drafts, while using more direct feedback strategies in the final drafts. The results indicated a degree of alignment between supervisors' beliefs and practices in indirect feedback strategy and in strategy changes over draft stages, but misalignment between their beliefs and practices of supervisory feedback strategy in the second draft stage was also found.

The findings in this study that few supervisors believed in direct feedback strategy and in not changing the strategies throughout three draft stages suggested that there should be opportunities for the supervisors to receive professional training regarding written feedback provision, during which they meet with their colleagues and coordinators to share, reflect on, and examine their beliefs and practices regarding written feedback strategies. This would improve their awareness of written feedback strategy, enable them to reflect on their own feedback strategy beliefs and practices, and allow them to find out the factors that might be preventing the translation of their beliefs into practices.

Nevertheless, this study has some limitations which should be noted. Firstly, since this is a small-scale study, the number of the participants were limited, so the results cannot be overgeneralized to other EFL contexts outside of this restricted setting. Secondly, the study did not investigate the effects of different written feedback strategies; therefore, it cannot be concluded which strategies will result in effective supervision. However, these limitations lead to several directions for future investigation regarding written supervisory feedback.

## THE AUTHORS

**Zhibin Lei**, a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages of Hunan First Normal University, China, is a Ph.D. student at Sunararee University of Technology, Thailand. His research interests include ELT pedagogy and EAP writing.  
[leiluke001@gmail.com](mailto:leiluke001@gmail.com)

**Issra Pramoolsook** (Ph.D.) is an assistant professor in applied linguistics and English language teaching at Suranaree University of Technology (SUT), Thailand. He is also a senior fellow of the UK's Higher Education Academy. His research interests mainly include academic and professional discourses, genre analysis, and EAP writing.  
[issra@sut.ac.th](mailto:issra@sut.ac.th)

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# Appendix A

## Teachers' Written feedback strategies (Ene & Upton, 2014)

Written feedback strategy	Descriptions and examples
Direct feedback	<p>Dc = Correction (correct form provided; replacement, reformulation, insertion)</p> <p>Ds = Explicit statement that something is wrong or problematic. Ex: "This explanation does not work." "The word should not be capitalized."</p> <p>Dr = Rule or explanation is provided. Ex: "In English, each sentence must have a subject." (Rule); "This is a fragment because the sentence doesn't have a verb." (Explanation)</p> <p>Dd = Directive. Ex: "Use the SVO word order here." "You have to use quotation marks around this phrase."</p> <p>De = Example is provided. Ex: "This is not the only consequence of the conflict. For example, they are not allowed to pray there, either."</p> <p>Du = Incorrect form is crossed out.</p> <p>Da = Acknowledgment of correct language usage; agreement with content. "Yes! Well said!"</p>
Indirect feedback	<p>Ig = Error is graphically marked or enhanced: underlining, highlighting, circling</p> <p>It = Error count is provided</p> <p>Ict = Error codes are used (wc for word choice, wo for word order, etc.)</p>

**Appendix B**  
**Guided Questions for the Semi-Structured Interview**

1. How many students have you supervised this year?
2. What do you think of the supervisors' written feedback to the students' thesis writing?
3. What training experience do you have regarding written feedback provision?

Prompt card for Question 4:

- A. to directly correct without explanations
- B. to direct correct with explanations
- C. to locate the errors/problems without any explanations
- D. to locate the errors/problems with explanations (about the type or reason)
- E. to indicate the errors/problems by symbol (such as "VT", indicating that there is a verb tense error)
- F. to indicate the errors/problems with numbers (such as writing "3" next to a sentence or a paragraph, indicating that there are 3 errors in the sentence or the paragraph has three errors)
- G. others (please specify)

4. What are your favorite ways to point out the errors/problems in the student's bachelor's thesis? why?
5. Do you change the ways of pointing out the errors/problems in the students' bachelor's theses from the first draft to the third draft?
6. If yes, what factors affect your change in the ways of pointing out the errors/problems in students' thesis?
7. What else will you say about the supervisors' strategies of providing written feedback?

**Appendix C**  
**Categories of Written Feedback Strategy**

Strategy	Category	Coding	Description
Direct feedback strategy	Corrections/ reformulation	Dc	crossing out unnecessary words;  inserting missing words;  providing correct form or content
	Correction/ reformulation with explanations	Ds	providing the correct or expected answers to the error, and giving comments;  describing the error types or the reasons for the correction or reformulation
Indirect feedback strategy	Graphically locating	Lo	using underling, circling, a question mark, a ticking or a cross to indicate errors
	Graphically locating with explanations	Le	providing commenting on students' texts hinting errors, with or without pointing where the errors exist
	Error numbers	En	error numbers in a line or a paragraph is provided.
	Error codes	Ec	codes for different types of errors are used.

## Appendix D

### Coding Examples of Written Feedback Strategy

#### 1. Direct correction / reformulation

Example 1:

The author hopes

[...]I hope to find some ways to improve the teacher talk used by elementary school English teachers.

Example 2:

○  
1.2 observational survey

#### 2. Direct correction /reformulation with explanations

Example 3:

For example, teaching call, shop, and ask for directions can use the role-playing method.

when teaching making a call, going shopping or asking for directions, we can...  
*Pay attention to your grammatical mistakes.*

Example 4:

A paper entitled "On Perfection of Teacher Talk in Classroom" (Cheng, 1997:2) revealed that [...]

*On Perfection of Teacher Talk in Classroom*

#### 3. Graphically locating

Example 5:

The pupils' intentional attention time will not be very long, so teachers need to pay attention to their interest and the easy degree of phonics.

Example 6:

In these about 500 words, nearly 80% of the words are concentrated in the four groups of interrelated semantic chains.

#### 4. Graphically locating with explanations

Example 7:

*Any sources? Or your own imagination?*

However, some teachers do whatever they like when they ask students some questions in the classroom. There is a lack of necessary relevance between the questions, which leads to a loss of logic and consistency in teacher talk.





*Example 8:*

3.1 The Description of Buck's Image → Portrayal

*Be consistent with the Table of Contents!*