Comparative Study of Graduate Students' Self-Perceived Needs for Written Feedback and Supervisors' Perceptions[1]

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to examine the supervisors' and graduate students' needs for written feedback on thesis/dissertation and juxtaposed them to see how each group views feedback. A mixed-methods design was employed to collect the data. Questionnaires and interviews were deployed to collect the data from 132 graduate TEFL students and 37 supervisors from 10 Iranian Universities. Results indicated that there were similarities (argument, logical order, transition, clarity, and references decisions) and differences (inclusion of information, formatting, grammar, conclusion, introduction, and consistency) between the priorities given by the M.A. and Ph.D. students. Moreover, the findings indicated that the M.A. students' expressed priorities were not similar to those of the supervisors except in 3 areas (argument, formatting, and grammar). On the contrary, the supervisors' priorities were close to those expressed by the Ph.D. students in almost all cases. Different factors underlying the perceptions of the students and supervisors were also extracted and presented. Some implications and suggestions for further research are proposed.

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

As Ferris (2003) and Bitchener and Ferris (2012) have pointed out, one of the major research lines pertinent to feedback has to do with the investigation of different interactants' perceptions. These perceptions are of significance as they can affect the process of exchanging comments, lead to positive or negative feelings, and affect L2 learners' acquisition level (Leki & Carson, 1994; Mahfoodh & Pandian, 2011). Cohen (1991) stated that there is a danger of misfit between what students like to get and what teachers provide. The study of L2 learners and their supervisors'

perceptions of feedback can give us a better understanding of this misfit, which can jeopardize the whole process of feedback exchange.

Whereas many studies have investigated L2 students' feedback in private institutes and undergraduate level (e.g., Ferris, 1995; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Rahimi, 2010, 2013; Zacharias, 2007), there is a paucity of investigation into supervisory feedback. With regard to probing into graduate students' perceived needs, two studies have been conducted: Can and Walker (2014) surveyed Ph.D. students of different majors in America and found out that they prioritized the areas as follows: arguments, conclusion, clarity and understandability of the statements, inclusion or exclusion of information, introduction, consistency in the overall paper, logical order of ideas, transition, paragraphs or sections, grammar, formatting, and references. They noted that the Ph.D. students' ratings were lower for more mechanical aspects such as grammar, formatting, and referencing.

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

Previous studies (Carless, 2006; Chanock, 2000; James, 2000) have shown that graduate students are not satisfied with the written feedback provided on their theses/dissertations. In spite of this dissatisfaction, the number of studies investigating graduate students' perceived needs of feedback on their theses/dissertations is highly limited. Furthermore, previous studies were conducted in English-speaking countries (the US & Australia); however, as Alonso, Alonso and Marinas (2012) stated, because nonnative students require more writing ability assistance, the nature of supervising native and nonnative students can be different because the focus of supervision would change when students' needs and wants are different. To the researchers' knowledge, almost no study to date has investigated the needs and wants of L2 students in a context where English is a foreign language. The present study was an attempt to occupy this niche in the literature. In addition, previous studies have focused on Ph.D. students and have excluded M.A. students' perceptions. Furthermore, Cohen (1991) has cautioned researchers against the consequences of misfit between the perceptions of feedback providers and receivers. This misfit can lead to L2 students' failure to apply comments, breakdown in their learning process, and decrease in their motivation level. Goldstein (2004) stated clearly that feedback exchange, as a social interaction, is effective only when the feedback provider is cognizant of perceptions and needs of L2 learners. Boud (1991) stressed that the success of a feedback exchange process depends heavily upon the

extent to which the comments are compatible with L2 students' and not supervisors' perceptions and needs. Although the significance of this compatibility has been reiterated in the literature (e.g., Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Boud, 1991; Cohen, 1991; Ferris, 2003; Ferris & Goldstein, 2004, Rahimi, 2011), to the best of our knowledge, studies that have investigated the possible differences between graduate students' perceived needs and their supervisors' perceptions quantitatively and qualitatively are still sparse. Another feature of the present study is the comparison of M.A. and Ph.D. students' perceived needs, which have been overlooked in previous studies. This comparison can inform supervisors about M.A. and Ph.D. students' possible diverse perceived needs and, accordingly, help them tune their feedback practice based on the expressed needs. Furthermore, policymakers and curriculum developers can get insights into L2 students' perceived needs and provide M.A. and Ph.D. students with appropriate scaffoldings prior to their thesis/dissertation phase of their education.

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

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

2. Research Method

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

2.1. Participants

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

provinces to iron out possible contextual factors. All the Ph.D. and 17 M.A. students had published, at least, one scientific paper in peer-reviewed journals.

Thirty-seven faculty members, who were the supervisors of the abovementioned students, took part in this study. Fourteen of the faculty members had supervised both M.A. and Ph.D. students, whereas 23 had been just the supervisors of M.A. students. Both the male ($n = 22$) and female ($n = 15$) supervisors, with 2 to 27 years of supervisory experience, participated in the study. To have a representative sample, we selected the students and supervisors from different provinces in Iran and from 10 universities (state universities, Islamic Azad University, and Payame Noor University). The sample size was determined using Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh's (2006) and Sampsize's (2005) criteria, which resulted in the inclusion of, at least, 96 graduate students and 39 supervisors. Although the number of the students was more than what was required by the formulas, two more supervisors were required to meet the set standard of the sample size.

2.2. Questionnaire

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

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

2.3. Interview

To have a better understanding of the issues, we interviewed 20 supervisors and 70 students (50 M.A. & 20 Ph.D.). The interviewees' participation was voluntary and they had the right to decline to answer any question. The interviews were utilized to qualitatively examine the way the students and supervisors prioritized written feedback needs and possible underlying reasons. Semistructured interview was selected to give us the chance to delve into the issue flexibly by raising new queries as the interviews progressed. The interviews, each taking about 20 to 30 min, were conducted in Persian (i.e., the interviewees' L1). The recorded interviews were, then, transcribed for further analysis.

2.4. Procedure

Upon selecting the participants from different universities, we generated and implemented student and supervisor versions of the questionnaire to collect the quantitative data after obtaining the participants' consent. The supervisors and their students completed the questionnaire in less than 10 min. After analyzing the questionnaire results, we started collecting the qualitative data in the form of semistructured interviews. The supervisors and students were contacted and interview meeting times were set. We interviewed the participants of both genders. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. The whole procedure of data collection and analysis lasted for 9 months.

3. Questionnaire Results

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

Table 1. *TEFL Students' Needs for Written Feedback: Students' Perspectives*

	M.A. Mean (SD)	Priority	Ph.D. Mean (SD)	Priority	U	p
Inclusion or Exclusion of Information	3.33 (.53)	1	2.29 (.7)	8	515.5	000
Arguments and Justifications in My Thesis/Dissertation	3.31 (.55)	2	2.78 (.71)	1	1062.0	000
Formatting (Tables, Figures, Page Design, Fitting APA Style, Giving Citations, etc.)	3.29 (.86)	3	1.91 (.92)	11	558.5	000

Grammar and Sentence Structure	3.17 (.68)	4	2.10 (.65)	10	535.0	000
Logical Order and Organization of Information and Ideas	3.15 (.60)	5	2.67 (.81)	4	1190.5	001
Transition and Flow Between Sentences, Paragraphs, or Sections	3.13 (.66)	6	2.56 (.68)	7	1026.5	000
Clarity and Understandability of Statements	3.10 (.57)	7	2.62 (.82)	6	1147.5	001
Conclusion	3.04 (.75)	8	2.75 (.83)	2	1432.0	.077
References and Literature Decisions	2.97 (.72)	9	2.13 (.71)	9	770.0	.000
Introduction, Purpose, and Significance of Thesis/Dissertation	2.85 (.77)	10	2.72 (.73)	3	1610.0	.420
Consistency in Overall Thesis/Dissertation	2.8 (.89)	11	2.64 (.82)	5	1547.5	.251

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

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

The other three items, put under the same category, were formatting, consistency, and references and literature decisions. The M.A. students found feedback on consistency in the overall thesis the least needed type of feedback, whereas the Ph.D. students felt the need to receive this type of feedback and put it on the fifth priority. An item that was given the same priority (9) by both the M.A. and Ph.D. students was references and literature decisions; however, the mean score of the M.A. group was significantly higher than that of Ph.D. students ($U = 770.0$, $p <$

.05). The last item of this factor dealt with formatting; the M.A. students indicated a significantly higher level of feedback need on this area ($U = 558.0$, $p < .05$). They also expressed feedback on formatting as their third priority that shows their real enthusiasm to be assisted in this area.

Table 2. *TEFL Supervisors' Perceptions of Graduate Students' Needs*

	M.A. Mean (*SD*)	Priority	Ph.D. Mean (*SD*)	Priority
Arguments and Justifications in My Thesis/Dissertation	3.56 (.5)	1	3.64 (.49)	1
Conclusion	3.51 (.5)	2	3.5 (.51)	2
Introduction, Purpose, and Significance of Thesis/ Dissertation	3.48 (.6)	3	3.07 (.61)	3
Formatting (Tables, Figures, Page Design, Fitting APA Style, Giving Citations, etc.)	3.45 (.69)	4	1.71 (.61)	11
References and Literature Decisions	3.42 (.5)	5	2.64 (.63)	4
Grammar and Sentence Structure	3.40 (.49)	6	1.85 (.53)	10
Inclusion or Exclusion of Information	3.21 (.47)	7	2.21 (.69)	7
Consistency in Overall Thesis/Dissertation	3.05 (.74)	8	2.21 (.57)	8
Transition and Flow Between Sentences, Paragraphs, or Sections	2.94 (.62)	9	2.14 (.66)	9
Clarity and Understandability of Statements	2.94 (.7)	10	2.28 (.72)	6
Logical Order and Organization of Information and Ideas	2.91 (.75)	11	2.57 (.64)	5

As shown in Table 2, the supervisors gave the second and third priorities to conclusion and introduction items for both the M.A. and Ph.D. students. Comparing the priorities given by the supervisors and students, we could witness that whereas the M.A. students gave the 8th and 10th priorities to conclusion and introduction areas, their supervisors gave higher priorities to them (2 & 3). However, the supervisors' and Ph.D. students' perceptions were found to be similar to each other and both groups ranked these two items as their second and third priorities, which mirrored the fact that both groups considered these two items important.

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

supervisors gave much lower priority (7) to this area. However, the supervisors' and students' priorities given to this area were similar (7 & 8, respectively).

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

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

4. Interview Results

4.1. Argumentation

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

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

4.2. Logical Order, Transition, Clarity, Consistency

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

A factor which seemed to affect the supervisors' perception was their lower standards for the M.A. students' writing ability in comparison to that of their Ph.D. students. Some of them (35%) mentioned that they did not expect their M.A. students to reach very high standards because they were still in the process of learning and they might be demotivated by a large number of comments on writing areas. With regard to the Ph.D. students, the supervisors ranked these areas somewhere between abstract areas such as argumentation and main idea and the more mechanical aspects such as formatting or grammar.

4.3. Inclusion or Exclusion of Information

Three factors of genre knowledge, content knowledge, and appropriation were found to affect the graduate students' perceived need for this type of feedback. A large number of the M.A. students (74%) found themselves unable to complete the section that they were writing because they had no idea what to include in each chapter or subsection. A majority of the M.A. students (62%) felt they needed to be guided by their supervisors to decide what to include in each section, as it was their first academic writing experience. These findings suggest that the M.A. students were

not fully familiar with the thesis genre and the stages of different moves (see Swales & Feak, 1994) that should be followed so as to write an acceptable thesis.

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

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

The analysis of the interviews indicated that the supervisors found this feedback crucial because their M.A. students were not familiar with the genre of thesis and its components (60%), and the students suffered from a lack of content knowledge (55%). When asked about the causes of these deficiencies, they made a mention of the inefficiency of academic writing courses in B.A. and M.A. programs (60%), lack of academic writing experience (25%) and students' insufficient exposure to similar texts (20%). With regard to content knowledge, all the supervisors blamed their students for their insufficient reading of pertinent materials. It seemed that they found themselves innocent in this case.

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

One of the issues related to writing is ownership/authorship, referring to "the act of assuming that one is the owner of one's own text" (Fordham, 2017, p. 23). When a student's text is appropriated by the reviewer (supervisor in this case) with

comments which change the direction of the content or style, the students' ownership of the text is in danger. With regard to the students' ownership of the text, around half of the supervisors (55%) denied usurping their students' ownership at all.

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

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

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

4.4. Grammar

The findings revealed that the students' linguistic self-confidence affected their perceived need. For instance, an M.A. interviewee who had been teaching in language institutes for 5 years stated:

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

However, another M.A. student mentioned his need for structural comments as follows:

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

Two terms that can be used to examine L2 students' linguistic self-confidence are *error* and *mistake*. In linguistic studies, deviant items are divided into two categories of error and mistake. The former results from incomplete knowledge, and the latter stems from one's carelessness, fatigue, lack of attention, and so on (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). When asked about the percentage of their mistakes and errors, on average, the M.A. students indicated that 63% of their deviant items were errors and 37% of them were mistakes. The Ph.D. students, however, found 21% of their deviant items errors and 79% mistakes. These findings can explain the M.A. and Ph.D. students' expressed levels of grammar feedback need.

Grammar is another area for which similar priorities were expressed by the supervisors and students. The M.A. students gave the 4th and their supervisors gave

the 6th priority to this area. Both the Ph.D. students and their supervisors ranked grammar as the 10th priority. When asked about the nature of deviant items, the supervisors believed that 58% of the M.A. students' deviant items were errors and 42% were mistakes. However, for the deviant items of the Ph.D. students, the supervisors thought that less than one third of them were errors (24%) and the rest were mistakes (76%).

4.5. Introduction and Conclusion

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

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

Another said:

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

The analysis of the supervisors' interviews indicated that all the supervisors emphasized the indisputable roles of conclusion and introduction in relating the study to the pertinent literature. Furthermore, around half mentioned the role of journals' comments (45%). As the students in Iran are required to publish a report of their theses or dissertations in an indexed journal, the supervisors believed that these comments should be given to avoid any problem in the process of publishing. The third reason was their own experience as students themselves. Around 40% of the supervisors recounted their own difficulties in these two areas and their own need for comments about relating their study to the related literature.

4.6. Formatting

The results of interviews indicated that the Ph.D. students' low level of perceived need for this type of feedback stemmed from their prior experience gained in writing classes (40%), reading similar texts (55%), and comments received from journals (70%). The M.A. students indicated their need to receive comments pertinent to the formatting of their theses. Around half (44%) mentioned that due to the large number of criteria, it was difficult for them to follow all items, so the need for feedback on this area is inevitable. A majority of the M.A. students (66%) believed that meeting the formatting requirements needed extensive practice during the B.A.

and M.A. programs, which was missing, and 84% of them found the number of academic writing classes in their syllabus insufficient. One of the M.A. students said:

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

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

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

4.7. References and Literature Decisions

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

Around half of the supervisors (45%) talked about their difficulty in finding their reference through library shelves or even on the Internet when they were students themselves. It seemed that the supervisors' prior experience had an effect on their perception about their own students' needs. Furthermore, the analysis of the interviews indicated that the supervisors believed in a connection between this area and inclusion/exclusion of information. Forty percent of the supervisors stated that when their students are directed to the right references, their need for inclusion/exclusion of information feedback is eliminated. In other words, it seemed that they reckoned that when their students were exposed to the appropriate literature,

they did not need inclusion/exclusion comments because the students could obtain a good understanding of the topic and genre.

5. Discussion

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

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

The findings indicated that in the majority of cases (8 out of 11), the M.A. students expressed significantly higher levels of need for feedback than their Ph.D. counterparts. When their expressed priorities were compared, there were some cases (argument, logical order, transition, clarity, and references) that were given the same

or similar places in their ratings, and there were some areas (including or excluding information, consistency, formatting, grammar, introduction, and conclusion) given dissimilar priorities. Furthermore, it should be noted that although there were some similar priorities, the underlying reasons expressed by the M.A. and Ph.D. students were disparate.

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

Table 3. *Factors Affecting TEFL Students' and Supervisors' Perceptions of Need for Feedback on Theses/Dissertations*

Students	Supervisors
Linguistic Self-Confidence	Expectations
Prior Experience - Academic Writing Experience - Receiving Journal Feedback - Exposure to Similar Genre - M.A. Thesis Defense Session	Supervisors' Perception of Students' L2 Competence
Difficulty of Task	Supervisory Experience
Electronic Literacy	Their Experience as Graduate Students
Appropriation of Text	Appropriation of Text
Insufficiency of Academic Writing Classes - Content Knowledge - Genre Knowledge	Electronic literacy
	Insufficiency of Educational System and University Writing Classes
	Difficulty of Task

Different factors were found to underlie the students' and supervisors' perceptions of the need for feedback on thesis/dissertation. Linguistic self-confidence is a factor that can affect L2 students' need to receive feedback on grammar. Linguistic self-confidence is defined as the belief in one's "capacity to use the second language in an adaptive and efficient manner" (Clément, 1986, p. 273). The findings

indicated that those who were of high linguistic self-confidence asked for less grammar feedback. In the same line, supervisors form an appraisal of their students' L2 competence and, then, conceptualize need patterns. In the present study, the supervisors expressed that the M.A. students were customarily of lower linguistic ability and, thus, needed more grammar feedback.

The graduate students' prior experiences in the form of academic writing experience, journal feedback, exposure to similar genre, and M.A. thesis defense session were some factors that affected their perceived needs of different areas (argument, including, and excluding information, introduction, conclusion, formatting, and references). As Maclellan (2001) states, a factor, among many others, that can affect the process of feedback exchange is the student's prior experience. Some other scholars (e.g., Fritz & Morris, 2000; Weaver, 2006) have mentioned the effect of L2 students' past experience on their perceptions and the success of feedback activities. The supervisors also mentioned the impact of their own experience on their perceptions. They pointed out the two types of supervisory experience gave them an understanding of the students' capabilities and needs, and their experience as graduate students provided them with a sympathetic approach to examine their students' needs. As mentioned in Bitchener et al. (2011), supervisors' experience as graduate students could affect their perceptions of the significance of feedback on an area (Dong, 1998).

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

Another factor mentioned by both the students and supervisors was difficulty of tasks. For instance, argument was regarded as a difficult area requiring more supervisor feedback and guidance. This result makes sense as it is compatible with the oft-cited revised Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), which has suggested different levels of difficulty for educational tasks. According to this taxonomy, argumentation is pertinent to analyzing, evaluating, and creating that are at the zenith of this taxonomy and can lead to more cognitive pressure on L2 students. In addition to argument, the supervisors indicated the difficulty of some areas such as conclusion, introduction, and references that were given high priorities by them.

In the electronic age, the electronic literacy of L2 students can affect their research process (Williamson, Bernath, Wright, & Sullivan, 2007). Electronic literacy, which is defined as "ability to communicate, read, write, compose, and

conduct research with competence and confidence in computer-mediated and internet environment" (Brussino & Gunn, 2008, p. 18), seems to affect the way L2 students and supervisors think about feedback needs. Several students indicated that by the use of the Internet, they had no difficulty finding the pertinent literature; however, some supervisors, especially the older ones, indicated that it was difficult for them to find the right paper on the net. It seems that the familiarity of supervisors and students with the Internet can affect their need for references feedback.

The roles of the educational system and academic writing classes were also emphasized in the findings. The supervisors and students put the blame on the educational system for different inadequacies such as not preparing students for critical thinking and their lack of content and genre knowledge. The absence of critical thinking development, which has reported to be the ultimate goal of education (Galagan, 2010), can lead to L2 students' inability to think critically and argue the propositions plausibly. L2 students' lack of content and genre knowledge can also stem from the academic writing classes. If these classes prepare L2 students to find relevant literature and expose them to similar texts or employed a genre-based writing approach, this problem will decrease to a minimum level (Hyland, 2004).

The last factor affecting the supervisors and students' perceptions of the need for feedback on theses/dissertations was related to the appropriation of the text. Whereas the M.A. students did not complain about their supervisors' manipulating their theses, the Ph.D. students were against having their texts taken over by their supervisors. This phenomenon is called *appropriation* and is defined as "to take someone's words and inject one's own meaning into them, to take ownership of those words for one's own purpose" (Tardy, 2006, p. 61). Appropriation can occur when the writer feels that his or her paper does not belong to him or her anymore. The interview findings suggested that the students' low perceived need for feedback in some areas was pertinent to this sense of ownership. Also, Bitchener et al. (2011) caution supervisors against taking the ownership of the text as it can demotivate L2 students easily.

6. Conclusion

With regard to the implications of the present study, the findings indicate that there might be differences between the perceptions of supervisors and students; the chance of a discrepancy between M.A. students' and supervisors' perception is higher, though. Thus, a supervisor should get familiar with his or her students' perceived needs through interviews or a short questionnaire and, then, make either modifications in his or her own priority list and/or enlighten his or her students about the criteria of acceptable academic studies and reports. Second, as prior experience plays a significant role in students' needs and their success, supervisors can provide intensive tasks for their M.A. students to compensate for the inadequacies of

academic writing courses. Third, the educational system should prepare the students of the graduate degrees to be capable of arguing the ideas competently. Whereas the task of argumentation is not as an easy one, there should be courses before graduate degrees to enable students to think critically. Fourth, supervisors should catch up with the latest education-related technologies to understand their students' perceived needs; thus, it is recommended to ask supervisors to take in-service technology courses regularly. Fifth, supervisors should try to promote their students' sense of ownership by providing suggestive rather than prescriptive comments (Peterson, 2010).

Future studies can examine different areas of a thesis/dissertation (argument, grammar, writing conclusion, etc.) with regard to their difficulty levels for M.A. and Ph.D. students based on a taxonomy such as revised Bloom's taxonomy. The effect of individual factors such as age, gender, motivation, orientation, and background knowledge on students' perceived needs can also be studied. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies should be conducted to check if there are different conceptualizations of the ownership of thesis/dissertation in different societies.

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Appendix
Semistructured Interview Questions

- What are the most and least difficult areas of thesis/dissertation writing?
- How did you learn about the APA style?
- Do you need feedback on grammatical issues? Why?
- Is it easy for you to argue for propositions?
- Do you think you need assistance in the form of feedback to find pertinent literature?
- Do you think you need feedback on the consistency of your text?
- Do you think you need feedback on the logical order of your text?
- Do you think you need feedback on the clarity of your text?
- Would you like to receive comments that include or exclude parts from your text?
- What are the areas that you need feedback most and least?