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Supervisors' Written Feedback on Saudi Postgraduate Students' Problems with Academic English Writing in Selected UK Universities

Noof Al-Harbi and Salah Troudi

Introduction

Academic writing is both challenging and complex for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. This is particularly true for students conducting research or studying in EFL contexts where English is the language of instruction (Al-Badwawi, 2011; Muslim, 2014). There is already a significant amount of literature regarding the challenges Arab students, including Saudi students, face when dealing with academic writing in a second language (Al-Khawaldeh, 2011; Al-Mansour, 2015; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Tsai, 2006; Zamel, 1992). The main problem is because academic writing involves systematically presenting thoughts and experiences based on logic and reason. Thus, academic writing differs from other forms of writing (Al-Mansour, 2015).

N. Al-Harbi
Deanery of Academic Service, Taibah University, Medina, Saudi Arabia

S. Troudi (✉)
Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK
e-mail: s.troudi@exeter.ac.uk

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As Al Fadda (2012) highlighted, students working at higher levels of academic writing in English and wanting to develop their academic voice need to analyse and evaluate the views of other researchers and synthesise their ideas. Writing in a foreign language involves several elements. The first is the cognitive element, which refers to the linguistic competence of composing. Second is the meta-cognitive element, which involves being aware of the aim, audience, and style of the writing. The third is the social element, which comprises communicating and interacting with peers and with the target reader, and fourth is the affective element, which involves expressing feelings and ideas (Xiao-xia, 2007). However, it is difficult to acquire such writing skills, particularly when compared to other language skills, and thus the writing process for such students is complex.

Hyland (2007) commented that at university level, writing skills are crucial, as this is mostly how students are assessed. Therefore, EFL students may find that poor academic writing hinders their success; they might be unable to meet their institution's expectations regarding the level of their writing, and so they should develop and improve their writing skills so they are able to cope with university coursework in a range of disciplines (Bacha, 2002).

Feedback is a crucial factor in student achievement in L2 writing; it aids learners in finding appropriate methods to convey their ideas, express meaning, and explore a wide range of linguistic apparatus (Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Liu & Hansen, 2002).

Many researchers have noted the significant impact that supervisory feedback has on improvements in students' writing (Bitchener, Basturkmen, & East, 2010; Catterall, Ross, Aitchison, & Burgin, 2011; Idris, 2011; Kumar & Stracke, 2007). However, these studies have used international students as the sample, and there is little or no research exploring the effects of supervisor written feedback on the writing skills of Saudi postgraduate students in particular. Thus, since Saudi students form an increasingly large group in tertiary and especially postgraduate education in the UK, it is important to explore the written feedback supervisors give to their postgraduate students regarding the drafts of their theses. This chapter sheds light on the nature of the written feedback Saudi postgraduate students receive from their supervisors. In particular, the focus is on the types of difficulties supervisors identify in the written

products of their Saudi students and the feedback they provide to address these difficulties. Thus this research proposes to answer the following question:

How do supervisors view Saudi postgraduate students' difficulties with their academic English writing and what feedback do they provide?

Review of the Literature

Several studies have examined the effects supervisory feedback can have on the development of students' writing (Bitchener et al., 2010; Catterall et al., 2011; Idris, 2011). The findings of these studies show that supervisor feedback influences various aspects of the quality of student writing, such as cohesion and coherence in constructing an argument, knowledge of genre, knowledge of content, rhetorical organisation, accuracy of linguistic elements, and structure.

When supervisors add written feedback to students' work, they act as mentors with the aim of increasing students' independence in their writing by giving them advice and techniques regarding their writing skills; in this way, students are able to become more proficient in their academic writing and will subsequently be better able to write independently (Bitchener et al., 2010). Catterall et al.'s (2011) research demonstrated how positive supervisory practices such as providing students with feedback on their writing can contribute to students making a significant improvement in their ability to write and acts as a pedagogical tool not only for teaching but also for learning to write for research purposes (Catterall et al., 2011). Similarly, effective supervision has been recognised as making a crucial contribution to the success of doctoral research (Frischer & Larsson, 2000).

For postgraduate students, feedback serves to enable them to understand the academic standards expected of them. This is a major challenge for many students especially at the initial stages of their postgraduate experience. Feedback will also help them improve their academic skills in a number of areas, such as methodological issues and the writing and presentation of data and findings. Feedback also serves to orient students

towards a deeper understanding of their topic and the multiple perspectives in the literature that relate to their research areas. This should add breadth and depth to the quality of their work. Feedback can also give students a sense of achievement (Brown & Atkins, 1988) by identifying elements of good quality work. In fact, receiving positive recognition from their supervisors, for whom they have significant respect, regarding what they have managed to achieve can play a crucial role in motivating candidates. This is particularly the case early on in an academic project (Taylor & Beasley, 2005). In addition, Taylor and Beasley (2005) argued that for supervisors' feedback to be effective, it has to be not only purposive and timely but delivered in the most appropriate form. In addition, it should be carried out correctly with the necessary care taken with regard the candidate's feelings.

However, the quality of supervision for international students can be affected by a wide range of challenges, particularly with regard to international students' academic cultural adjustment in western countries (Handa & Fallon, 2006; Robinson-Pant, 2009) and their linguistic competence (Andrade, 2006; Park & Son, 2011; Walsh, 2010). In view of the complex nature of the writing difficulties experienced by students writing in a foreign language, supervisor's feedback is likely to play a major role in shaping a student's academic journey and progress.

A considerable amount of literature exists that identifies the difficulties L2 postgraduate students face with regard to their academic writing while producing assignments or theses. These include thinking critically, constructing a logical argument, and providing links between ideas, as well as the need for a broad and suitable vocabulary. Regarding the latter, a few studies have demonstrated how an insufficient academic vocabulary is problematic for English as a Second Language (ESL) and EFL students' writing (Hinkel, 2004; Paynter, Bodrove, & Doty, 2006; Song, 2002), and several studies have been conducted to explore the difficulties with vocabulary faced by Arab students in their L2 writing. Research by Hisham (2008) and Al-Khasawneh (2011) clearly showed that Arab learners encounter a range of problems while completing their writing tasks, including referencing and grammar, but vocabulary is identified as a major issue. Other researchers have found that, for Arab

students, constructing an argument represents a significant challenge (Al-Abed Al-Haq & Ahmed, 1994; Kamel, 2000); indeed, researchers in a wide range of EFL studies (Groom, 2000; Hirose, 2003; Wingate, 2012; Zhu, 2001) have supported this finding. Thus, the claim that students struggle when asked to produce written academic arguments is supported by a significant body of literature. Studies have revealed that Saudi university students' writing is generally weak regarding sentence fragments and link sentences (Alkubaidi, 2014; Al Fadda, 2012), and research carried out in Arab nations has demonstrated that Arab students also encounter problems at the sentence and paragraph levels, for example, the concept of paragraph unity, establishing a logical link between ideas, and moving from one idea to another (Ahmed, 2010; Ezza, 2010; Khuwaileh & Shoumali, 2000). A number of studies have also highlighted the challenges Arab students face when required to demonstrate critical thinking in their academic writing (Abdulkareem, 2013; Ahmed, 2011; Al-Wehaibi, 2012; Al-Zubaidi, 2012; Barnawi, 2009; Saba, 2013).

This overview of the existing literature demonstrate how students' writing development is affected by supervisory feedback and identifies the importance of investigating the challenges faced by L2 postgraduate students regarding their academic writing to help them achieve greater academic success.

Methodology

The decision to apply an exploratory methodology in the current study was based on the type of research questions. Creswell (2009) claimed that an exploratory methodology can help a researcher explore a specific phenomenon. Similarly, according to Ritchie and Lewis (2003), an exploratory methodology allows the researcher to investigate participants' values, cultures, and perceptions while revealing the true meaning of participants' behaviours and words, so an exploratory methodology would provide a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Research Methods

Semi-structured Interview

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), an interview is more than the informal exchange of quotidian conversations, as it has more structure and a specific purpose. Thus, it involves careful questioning and careful listening in order to acquire thoroughly tested knowledge. In addition, Kvale (1996) stated that the aim of the interview in qualitative research is to gain an understanding of the world as seen from the subjects' perspective, to unpack the hidden meaning of the experiences people go through, and to reveal their world. Thus, researchers use interviews to help them understand interviewees' meaning (Kvale, 2009).

From the different types of interviews available to a researcher, the semi-structured interview offers advantages since most researchers will have already prepared a list of relevant questions they wish to ask. It also allows them sufficient flexibility to explore issues that might arise during the interview but that might not be part of the interview protocol (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006). The researcher thereby gains a more in-depth understanding of an individual or subject, while keeping elements of control over the topic areas under exploration. In this research, such an interview type was employed because it could potentially lead to rich data being obtained, thus helping to provide a more in-depth interpretation not only of the topic but also of the interviewees' views concerning the nature of feedback they provide. See Appendix 1 for the list of questions asked to participants in the present study.

Document Analysis

Wellington (2000) defined document analysis as the procedures and strategy used to analyse and interpret any kind of documents that might be considered important when researching a specific area. A wide range of documents can be analysed, whether public documents, for example, newspapers, television scripts, or the minutes of meetings, or private documents, for example, personal journals, diaries, memoirs, school records,

and letters (Creswell, 2009). In addition, as Merriam (1988) stated, a wide range of documents can assist the researcher in revealing meaning, developing an understanding, and discovering new insights that are pertinent to the research problem.

In the current study, document analysis was applied to the feedback students received from their supervisors (see Appendix 2 for a sample of this feedback). This analysis supplemented and supported the data derived from the semi-structured interviews; the combination of methods facilitated comprehension of the nature of feedback provided to address the difficulties Saudi postgraduate students in the UK experience when writing their assignments and theses. Both methods also helped to formulate a deeper understanding of the various areas of academic writing, including those areas that students are considered to find the most challenging.

Sampling

The current research used a non-probability strategy or convenience sampling to potentially select 15 postgraduate Saudi students and nine of their available supervisors to be interviewed. This sampling strategy has the benefit of being relatively uncomplicated, and it avoids problems concerning gaining access to the participants (Wellington, 2000). The selection criteria for the nine supervisor interviewees were as follows: they had experience of supervising students from Saudi Arabia, Gulf countries, or Arab countries at a postgraduate level, and they were willing to be interviewed. The sample of supervisors included both males and females, and they were from six universities across the UK. Three supervisors were paired with three of the participant postgraduate students whose subjects were Islamic studies, education, biology, computer science, and business.

Regarding the sample of students, 15 Saudi postgraduate students in the UK were asked to provide samples of feedback on their English academic writing from their supervisors. There were both male and female students in the sample; they were from a range of universities across the UK, as well as many universities in Saudi Arabia, and were studying to

gain an MA, PhD, or EdD degree in a variety of specialisations; thus, it was felt that this would provide a representative sample of Saudi post-graduate students. The students shared a number of characteristics: Saudi national, Arabic speaker, postgraduate student in the UK, similar socio-cultural background, and religious belief in Islam.

Of the 15 students, ten were willing to provide samples of feedback on their writing; the other five students said they preferred not to partici-pate. It is important for researchers to obtain participants' consent during data collection (Creswell, 2009). Each of the ten students provided a single sample of feedback they had received from their supervisors; while each piece of writing was in the same genre, the length of feedback varied. In addition, the samples demonstrated the supervisors' perception of the students' writing difficulties.

Data Analysis

Data from the samples of written feedback and from the semi-structured interviews were analysed qualitatively in accordance with Creswell's (2007) procedures for qualitative data analysis, which state that such analysis comprises the preparation and organisation of the data, for example, text data from transcripts or image data from photographs, to make it possible to perform an analysis. The next step was to categorise the data into different themes; this involved first applying codes and then condensing them. The final step was to present the data in a graphic for-mat, such as figures or tables, or in the form of a discussion. Qualitative data analysis is a non-linear process; the researcher has to become involved in all stages of the research, alternating between the original data and the coding process to test existing codes and devise new ones against the original data.

We carried out an inductive analysis of the qualitative data by building categories and themes from the bottom up (Creswell, 2013). The coding involved choosing from the data certain words, sentences, paragraphs, or sections that seemed to capture the participants' key concepts or thoughts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Next, the coding and labelling processes were used to break the data down into smaller pieces and assign units of

meaning to each piece of data (Radnor, 2002). Various themes emerged when the coding was undertaken inductively. Subsequently, a thematic chart was created to display the data; the chart was modified by combining categories that were similar and creating other categories where necessary. In this way, the data were better organised and more easily accessed.

Ethical Considerations

To protect the participants' identities and maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to refer to all the interviewed participants. Indeed, the confidentiality of the research is closely related to the research participants' anonymity. Moreover, we were careful to assure the participants that only the researchers would have access to their data and that it would be stored securely.

Findings

Difficulties with Developing an Argument

Five supervisors highlighted that one area which their students found difficult was developing an argument. This is a skill which is particularly important at postgraduate level as students need to present arguments which are clearly stated, well substantiated, and with full respect for the conventions of academic writing relevant to particular subjects or disciplines. Dr John gave the following example of this issue:

> Students have problems with constructing arguments, or they use language that just does not quite fit. There is often awkwardness about the written style, which is an indication of the problems the students have when trying to convey a message. Therefore, the combination of the technical language and the difficulty with constructing sentences clearly and concisely just makes it harder for the supervisors to help and to unpack the arguments that they are trying to present. This means we spend a lot of time helping the students to say what they want to say. Often they can articulate in a conversation a whole lot better than they can do in a written form.

Dr Helen gave another example, emphasising the difficulty not only of writing in English but also of establishing an argument:

> I find a lot of students struggle while writing. They think they are struggling with the language, but they are actually struggling with the logical sequence of arguments they are trying to create. I do not think this is necessarily just an academic problem, but it is particularly important for academics, and I think it entails a lot of very difficult thinking to make the argument clear and points that are logical.

Additionally, Dr Andrew commented that due to students' basic method of writing, they find it difficult to incorporate well-argued essays in their research:

> Some students struggle with the complexity of the arguments within English texts, because it is difficult to understand, to penetrate, and to engage with such writing, because if students are writing in a very simple way, and not an academic way, that can cause an argument to get lost in what they are saying. I think this is challenging, especially for the students from Gulf countries.

As these extracts show, the supervisors were aware that students struggled significantly with formulating their own arguments and subsequently arranging them into logical and coherent sequences in English. The supervisors also highlighted that students needed to read a greater number and variety of English texts as their lack of reading combined with the lack of proper training in conducting research is a significant hindrance to their attempts to construct an argument.

Difficulties with Coherence

Four supervisors emphasised that students show significant difficulties in writing coherently. Many students are unable to write a paragraph that has a main idea supported by the other sentences in the paragraph, as described by Dr John:

I think paragraph construction and coherence is one of the most problematic areas. I think writing a paragraph is very difficult, but if you read good academic writing, you can see how important paragraphs are in that they indicate the topic at the beginning, develop it throughout the paragraph, and have a clear progression of ideas and coherence between ideas within the paragraph. I think Saudi students have problems with paragraph writing… these are not linked coherently—they are not synthesised; they do not follow each other.

Similarly, Dr Sarah indicated the importance of being able to write coherent paragraphs:

Paragraph construction is different, I believe, in Arabic. I think in Arabic; you lead into the main points. The main point comes towards the end rather than at the beginning. Therefore, you have those different structural issues, which really have to be learnt because, if you have chosen to do a doctoral degree here, you have to agree to the requirements of the doctoral writing in this country.

The analysis of samples of written feedback students received from their supervisors showed that four supervisors commented on a difficulty with writing coherently, as in this example:

You need to add a new subsection, or at least paragraph, and link it to the others to improve the coherence. Also, you need to indicate its relevance, because it just seems that you are jumping to a new topic.

Similarly:

I feel this point is out of place with the rest of the paragraph. It seems some of your paragraphs take the form of text dumps rather than reasoned arguments because this sentence is out of place with what follows.

A close examination of such feedback shows that the supervisors highlight the issue of cohesion and coherence, as students have usually written sentences that are unrelated to the main topic of the paragraph, or they have not been clear about where they should put the introductory and supporting sentences.

Difficulties with the Depth of Explanation

The written feedback samples demonstrated that students found the amount of information and detail they need to produce and the depth of the explanations to be difficult. Four supervisors identified this area, as in this example: "You need to have had some explanation or discussion of this beforehand. This will help to enrich why you adopt the position you seek to take". On occasions, the feedback showed that some students tended simply to refer to the results of the data without giving any indication or evaluation of their importance, as seen in this supervisor's comments: "You need to expand this discussion chapter to bring out the significance of all your findings", and again, "You need much more depth in your analysis and interpretation here. This is very important. You did not actually provide an analysis in this section". Indeed, feedback from other supervisors related to this problem of linking the implications of the research to the findings in greater depth:

> You need to get to a point where you examine the implications of adopting this view to the objectives of what you are seeking to achieve. To an extent, this follows later, but you need to ground it in the work in more depth to have a clear appreciation of its implication for methods, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and theory.

Another supervisor mentioned the need for greater depth: "You need to investigate what the underpinning premise is to this—why is it important? Generally, though, I feel your points throughout need more depth".

For students to succeed in higher education, they need to be able to write effectively in an academic discipline at the doctoral level. One of the major requirements of English academic writing is providing sufficient and in-depth explanations. The above extracts demonstrate that the supervisors acknowledged that students find it difficult to provide a greater degree of depth when writing. This is because there are significant differences in the style of writing between Arabic and English regarding explicitness; Arab students have a tendency to be less explicit in their writing, as they make the assumption that their readers should take the responsibility for understanding what they wish to convey (Abu Rass,

2015). Another factor is the amount of reading done by these students; they demonstrated a general lack of interest in academic reading at both L1 and L2. This is almost certain to have an impact on their ability to write in-depth explanations, since acquiring knowledge and background information is closely related to reading. This close relationship between reading and writing is well documented in the literature, as a large number of studies have confirmed that these skills have a mutual impact (Al-khawaldeh, 2011; Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2011; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Tsai, 2006; Zamel, 1992).

Difficulties with Academic Vocabulary

Three supervisors commented that their students encountered difficulties with academic vocabulary. Dr John revealed that students have problems selecting a precise word to suit the research language: "They really have an issue with using specific English vocabulary. One of their difficulties, I think, is finding the proper and exact words that express their intended views when writing". Similarly, Dr Sarah recognised students' limited ability when it comes to using academic vocabulary:

> Other students have a problem with using word collocations and idiomatic expressions. I think this is related to their insufficient knowledge of academic words, which prevents them from writing according to academic standards.

The idea of students having difficulty with using academic vocabulary is also supported by the analysis of supervisors' feedback on written assignments: "I do not like the word 'opinion'. 'Informed', perhaps, but still dangerous; you should consider 'subjective interpretation' and 'reasoned judgement' instead". Another example is in the following piece of feedback: "Be careful of such a term. Can anything really be 'fully' treated?" Finally, another stated: "It would be beneficial to be somewhat more assertive here—e.g., 'is most suitable".

While students' difficulties with academic vocabulary stem from a range of issues, in general, such difficulties are due to insufficient strategies for learning vocabulary in the education system of their native country. Additionally, insufficient experience in reading texts in English leads to

students having a restricted vocabulary. Thus, while writing, students find it difficult both to select the necessary vocabulary that is appropriate for the context and to find the exact word that expresses their meaning with accuracy and concision. This lack of lexical knowledge can be remedied, but "it is necessary for students to have a thorough knowledge of words that occur frequently in different academic texts in order to read and understand the advanced, authentic, and academic texts in English or to use the academic words when writing in their own fields" (Song, 2002, p. 3). Therefore, it is essential that students read intensively to satisfy the demands of academic writing.

Difficulties with Clarity

The majority of the supervisors commented on the students' difficulty in achieving sufficient clarity in their writing, as demonstrated in the following extracts from the supervisors' feedback: "The ambiguity here is problematic—you need to be confident that you show evidence of it; incomplete paragraph or details; This paragraph is unclear. This is really vague, explain the figure; You need to explicitly provide these definitions here" and finally, "Where does this inclination come from?"

The students' difficulty in attempting to write with clarity may be caused by a range of factors. Firstly, their lack of familiarity with writing in academic English means that they make errors in their own writing style when writing in English as their L2. Secondly, insufficient reading of academic resources in L2 means that students have rarely practised their writing skills before arriving in the UK. Thirdly, students' poor proficiency in the English language hinders them from formulating complex thoughts and expressing them in a clear structure and using the most appropriate language.

Difficulties of Criticality

Most of the supervisors commented on the students' difficulty in understanding what it means to be critical in the academic sense. For instance, Dr Sandy stated:

> I think the students who come from a different education system are unable, or unaware of the fact that you can critically engage in academic discourse, and I believe that critical engagement is absolutely crucial to academic writing. I mean, I think many postgraduate students, not particularly Saudi students, do not understand what it means to be critical in an academic sense. It means to disagree with other people, their theories or other ways of thinking, but in fact, all it means is to get an understanding of a much wider range of ideas than we had before. In this way, we can form a different opinion about it and decide how to proceed when people who are equally authoritative disagree.

In addition, Dr Ann commented that a significant number of students restrict their analysis to describing the views and ideas of other authors but lack any ability to analyse their writings or explain why they agree, or disagree, as can be seen by this excerpt from her interview:

> With all PhD students, there is a tendency to look at the box and look at the research material and start just writing, and then you find it to be very descriptive, but it has to be analytic because the PhD in this country and in America is awarded for an original and substantial contribution in knowledge; it's got to be original in some form.

Dr Mike gave another example when he referred to different educational systems being the reason for students having so many difficulties with writing in terms of criticality:

> Even if the language skills are high enough, I think the levels of criticality in thinking and writing still remain a challenge for students, because there are differences in educational systems in the world… I treat my students very strictly in terms of developing their research skills and asking critical questions.

In the Middle East, the tendency is for some supervisors to respect the author's view without offering any critique; indeed, this is a feature of their culture. However, it is crucial that students are willing and able to criticise the views and ideas of other authors respectfully and with the necessary evidence to support their own views. For example, Dr Ann

emphasised that PhD students should have the ability to provide a critique of what they read, rather than simply accept ideas just because they appear in a book or a journal. She stated:

> I can see that students have difficulties with the ability to make a critical view of what they read and what they write. Sometimes it seems to me that the international students, including some Saudi students, will read something, and just because it is written in a book or a journal, they think it must be correct whereas the best thing to do would be to think whether it is correct! You need to be critical about this; you need to look at the context in which the research and the ideas are being expressed and whether they are transferable, say, to different concepts. Therefore, there has to be a degree of criticality that some students perhaps do not have. However, when they start working on their PhD, developing that criticality is an essential part of the PhD process.

Similarly, Dr John highlighted the importance of students supporting their critique with the relevant evidence and facts:

> Students must feel free to criticise any scholar at all if they provide evidence. Give evidence for what you think, and if your thesis leads you to overturn the theories of an established scholar that is not a problem; so they must not be shy, and their criticality should be evidence.

Moreover, three of the supervisors revealed that students found it particularly difficult to write the discussion chapter in their thesis, and that this is due to their lack of critical reasoning skills. Dr Mike explained this as follows:

> The big challenge that the discussion chapter involves is to link the findings of your study back to the literature and to demonstrate their significance. So it is very much about argumentation and, again, you do need critical thinking and confidence. So, many Saudi students, in my experience, find the discussion chapter is challenging for them. Students have to think critically in order to write critically. On the other hand, the methodology chapter is more clearly described, as much clearer guidelines are often provided.

Dr Sarah mentioned that Saudi students studying at a master's level do not show any level of thinking critically, and thus their work is inadequate for this level. She commented:

> I do not think their master's degree is adequate, because, as I say, I suspect this does not reflect their critical thinking ability. They do not have the ability to critically analyse the literature and form their own complex argument, as that probably was not a part of their degree. If they achieve a master's degree, it should mean that they have critics-related skills, but this is often untrue. Obviously, they have the knowledge, but I suppose master's degrees in Saudi are more about the knowledge rather than the ability to think critically.

Dr Andrew had a similar viewpoint, and commented that the students' lack of critical thinking skills is due to the system of education in their own country:

> I think the education system in many countries focuses perhaps too much on memorisation, involves too many inputs from teachers and materials that students think they have to learn and reproduce. I do not say this is not enough, but it is insufficient for the western culture, because here they study in a different culture, and it requires critical thinking. It may not always be required—it certainly was not in the past—but it is now, and I think that this is something that many different cultures have no experience with, and therefore, developing habits of this kind is hard.

The analysis of the written feedback students received from their supervisors reveals that a significant number of them included comments about how the students find it difficult to write critically, as can be seen in the following feedback excerpt:

> You need to add your voice to your analysis of the findings and in the discussion as well. The data in this table needs to be explained in more depth than what you have done above. You cannot just repeat the results. The analysis requires a more in-depth explanation and interpretation.

Saudi students' difficulties with writing critically seem to stem from the uncritical culture of Saudi Arabia, which "doesn't encourage discussion, even in the home between parents and their children" (Allamnakhrah, 2013, p. 205). Indeed, Saudi society views it as an unacceptable mark of disrespect for students or young people to query or argue with older people and with their teachers (Barnawi, 2009). Additional reasons for the students' problems with thinking critically could be linked to how writing is taught in Saudi, as it is based on the product approach, that is, the focus is mostly on grammar and spelling. This is further confirmed by AlKhoudary (2015) who stated that: "The problem with the traditional writing class is that it leads to a view of writing as a set of isolated skills unconnected to an authentic desire to converse with interested readers about their ideas" (p. 214). Therefore, curriculum designers of courses for teaching writing should include critical thinking. Doing so would require a student-centred approach to be adopted, as students would need to engage in the learning process and would have opportunities to discuss, analyse, and evaluate issues and ideas and express their opinions.

Content Knowledge Difficulties

Supervisors indicated that students had difficulty with this area of their writing, as can be seen in the following two feedback extracts which focus on knowledge of philosophies and the need to demonstrate extensive understanding. Lack of extensive reading in academic areas related to their fields of specialism has also affected the quality of students' work:

> Please develop this more (here and below). To justify the position, you go on to take, you need to be able to grasp why it is that you are selecting it over something else. It is important to address this now because you might well get asked to justify your position in your Viva and part of that justification comes from appreciating how it differs over other philosophies and why other positions might be inferior to the subject/problem that serves as the objective of your study.

Additionally,

> Be absolutely specific. You cannot 'pick and choose' a part of a philosophy to discuss here because every aspect of it has an implication for your work. In turn, you must be as thorough and exhaustive as you need to be to map out its implications for your work.

There are several underlying reasons for Saudi postgraduate students' difficulties when it comes to obtaining background knowledge of the subject. Firstly, many students start their postgraduate studies in UK universities with a clear lack of sufficient reading in their subjects; secondly, their work is frequently rendered ineffective due to the lack of an effective planning strategy. Furthermore, the nature of many research topics demonstrates clearly the differences between Arabic and English, and these differences might restrict students' vocabularies and lead them to further challenges in their attempts to gain sufficient information about their subjects.

Structural Difficulties

Analysis of the feedback students received from their supervisors also demonstrated that the students encountered problems with grammar and structure in their English writing. Many comments were of general nature as in: "This does not make grammatical sense; the translation is not right here; this needs to be rewritten in a clearer structure; edit this sentence for structure and grammar." Others provided more focused and potentially more useful critique: "Please be careful with subject verb agreements"; "watch out for the wrong use of the definite article".

  These extracts show clearly that some of students' difficulties with the language are related to the important differences between Arabic and English, differences that are related not only to a different alphabet but also to differences in writing structures and styles. As stated earlier, in Saudi Arabia the teaching of English writing is based on the product approach; that is, the emphasis is on elements such as linguistic accuracy, use of proper grammar, and correct spelling, with the focus being on the final product of the text. Despite this focus on grammatical accuracy, a good number of postgraduate students still demonstrate major challenges

with grammaticality, style, and general writing abilities. This issue can also be explained by the lack of writing opportunities students experienced in their first and second languages during their school and university education. In fact, the method of teaching writing in L1 is the same as that for L2 and, and students lacked the "ability to write in their own language, Arabic" (Al-Seghayer, 2014, p. 94). Prior to starting postgraduate studies in the UK most Saudi students had engaged in very little academic waiting in either Arabic or English.

Discussion and Conclusion

Analysis of the examples of the written feedback that supervisors provided shows that the feedback covers a wide range of areas, including content knowledge, structure, criticality, clarity, coherence, vocabulary appropriateness, and grammatical and spelling accuracy. Consequently, understanding the difficulties students face in their English academic writing will facilitate the formulation of suggestions to improve students' academic writing.

Some supervisors feel it is inappropriate for them to interfere heavily with doctoral theses, as they are intended to be the student's original work, and, furthermore, they consider that students are able to improve by practising independently. These supervisors fulfil their role by adding question marks and notes in the margins rather than making corrections in the text, and by asking the student to revise their work to provide further clarification of the meaning (Gurel, 2010). Other supervisors might prefer to provide more detailed feedback on language and structure and would make suggestions on how to develop one's academic writing.

The findings of this study also indicated that, in the UK, a supervisor of a Saudi or overseas postgraduate student expects to help the student clarify their argument, their criticism, and their discussion. However, due to their educational culture, many Saudi postgraduate students expect the supervisor to have a role similar to that of a schoolteacher, in that they will tell the student exactly what they should do and that the student will not be expected to give their own opinion or views or question those of their supervisors (Al-Harbi, 2017). This is because in the academic

culture in Arab countries learners seem not to have received sufficient training in the three most important elements in becoming independent researchers and writers, namely, applying critical thinking, finding their own voice, and developing their own point of view (Azman, Nor, & Aghwela, 2014). Accordingly, this can exacerbate the students' inability to communicate effectively with their supervisors in English (Aldoukalee, 2013). During the research process, students encounter a high level of difficulty due to their lack of familiarity with the research topic and lack of knowledge relevant to research methodologies (Affero Ismail et al., 2015). Therefore, as emphasised by Moses (1992), it is important for students to process a variety of forms of guidance when structuring and writing their thesis. From the supervisees' perspective, Saudi students frequently feel unsatisfied with the feedback their supervisors give them when writing their dissertation, as they require more in-depth advice (Al-Harbi, 2017).

Thus, a systematic pedagogical approach to supervision is required so that these international students can be socialised into academic genres through supervisory feedback (Azman et al., 2014). Similarly, Wang and Li (2008) were of the opinion that supervisors should use a systematic approach to emphasise the problems in research writing, particularly with international students, who face a range of difficulties when writing their thesis in English. Kumar and Stracke (2007) suggested a taxonomy for good practices of feedback in postgraduate supervision practice in higher education based on three functions of feedback. Feedback should include comments that focus on a range of issues including content, organisational, and editorial matters. Feedback is further divided into three types, namely, suggestions, questions, and instructions, to offer praise or criticism or simply to express an opinion (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). They added that the expressive function of feedback is most beneficial for students as it resulted in more modification and further improvement of their thesis. This is particularly important given the diversity of doctoral students who differ in terms of academic ability and other features such as personality attributes, motivation, and attitude (Ismail, Abiddin, & Ahmad, 2010, p. 14). In Al-Harbi's study (2017), all of the participating Saudi postgraduate students had a background different to that of their supervisor in the UK, and thus it is possible that the

interaction between the students and their supervisors may be problematic and subsequently less productive.

The general conclusion from such studies would seem to indicate that learners require more assistance with regular writing experiences and benefit from structured feedback, in conjunction with effective and continual communication with their supervisors (Azman et al., 2014). Thus, establishing a good relationship between students and their supervisor will contribute to the successful completion of the students' research project and an improvement in their writing skills.

Appendix 1: Supervisors Semi-structured Interview

1. Are you currently supervising any Saudi students at master or doctoral levels?
2. What do you think are the main difficulties that Saudi students face in writing their theses or assignments?
3. Can you tell me if you are aware of any specific areas of difficulty among Saudi students compared to other non-native students in their postgraduate studies? Can you provide any examples?
4. Is there anything you want to add?

Appendix 2: A Sample of Written Feedback from Supervisors

Research Philosophy

Sayer (2000, p. 2) argues that critical realism is not what many people think in which they suppose it is the 'truth' and thus involves a kind of 'foundationalism' where this is inconsistent with realism. He points out that critical realism is

the belief that there is a world existing independently of our knowledge of it.

Thus, this independence of objects from knowledge weakens any content assumptions about the relation between them and renders it problematic (Sayer, 2000). What makes critical realism 'critical' is that the identification of generative mechanisms (which Bhaskar refers to) offers the prospect of introducing changes that can transform the status quo (i.e. stable things) (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 18).

There are fundamental characteristics of critical realism shared by widely regarded critical realists such as Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson and Alan Norrie who together edited *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (1998). Some critical characteristics will be discussed as follow:

Reed (2005a, p. 1637) reflects on the relevance, nature and consequences of adopting a critical realism approach as an investigative orientation in organisation and management studies. He points out that critical realism can offer a 'coherent ontological' grounds and 'causal-explanatory' method for determining fundamental structures and mechanisms which create 'observable events' and outcomes that may or may not be 'actualised' in particular historical contexts and social settings. Contu and Willmott (2005, p. 1646) indicate that 'critical realism can assist in opening-up deep-seated issues in the philosophical standing of social and organizational analysis'. Pratt (2011) observes that the critical realism approach seeks a depth investigation of natural and social phenomena in which it attempts to identify the mechanisms operating in a context. He also indicates that critical realism attempts to go beyond the boundary of experience by suggesting the reality behind it. Moreover, a social phenomenon can often be 'understood' but not often 'meaningfully measured', hence its preference for qualitative methods (Fleetwood & Ackroyd, 2004). Looking at the world from this angle is best for exploratory and descriptive studies that seek to understand, investigate, and explain a phenomenon in depth as perceived by social actors.

For the aforementioned reasons, this research study will look at the research problem from a critical realism perspective, which prioritises ontology over epistemology and focuses on the mechanisms that produce events rather than the events themselves, more specifically as 'structured' and 'differentiated' (Bhaskar, 2008, p. xi), along with a qualitative method. The stratified reality offers insights in a series of 'staggered layers',

each of which provides a foundation for the level above (Pratt, 2011, p. 15). This stratification with underlying generative mechanisms and causal structures provide a means to answer the research questions. Thus, critical realism can be seen as 'a philosophy of science that provides a theory and model of social scientific explanation, based on a systematic form of … methodology, which combines historical, structural and processual analysis in a coherent and integrated framework' (Reed, 2005b, p. 1664).

Both critical realism and institutional theory highlight the importance of social context and take a multi-level view of reality. Wry adopts Bhaskar's domains of reality and argues that 'structures' which operate in the 'domain of real' is parallel to 'institutional logics', the 'domain of actual' is equivalent to 'institutions', and the'domain of empirical' is similar to 'practice'. In the 'domain of real', structures/logics have the potential, as frameworks, to generate phenomena and make them meaningful (Bhaskar, 1978; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). These structures/logics play an important role in shaping patterns of behaviour in a context.

Research Methodology

Research methods represent the way data is collected. There are two main types of research methods in social science: quantitative methods and qualitative methods.

Thus, it allows for flexibility and variety of interpretive techniques that are essential for understanding a phenomenon in social science studies. Creswell (1996, p. 24) points out that:

> [a] research problem needs to be explored [when] little information exists on the topic. The variables are largely unknown and the researcher wants to focus on the context that may shape the understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Thus, a qualitative approach is best for investigating a little-known or poorly-understood phenomenon. It is also best for areas that mistreated, non-treated, or received very little attention in the literature. Whereas these areas, which have unknown variables, needs to be fully treated and covered sufficiently to open doors for future research which, in turn, are necessary to broaden the views and provide insights that contribute to the literature.

Qualitative research concerns the process rather than the outcomes or products (Merriam, 1988). It also concerns the meaning—the way people make sense of their lives, experiences, and structures of the world (Merriam, 1988). Within a qualitative approach, the researcher is inclined to be subjective. More to the point, when the research inquiry is on the basis of the participant's perception and opinion, then the collected data is subjective data as the researcher's knowledge can influence the research to some extent (Herndl & Nahrwold, 2000). Qualitative research is used to gain insights and better understanding about an individual's experience and to have a sense of reality (Herndl & Nahrwold, 2000). It is also used in research that explores where and why knowledge and practices are at odds (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Qualitative research often generates credible data for analysis by means of describing, exploring, or expanding existing knowledge and theories (Herndl & Nahrwold, 2000). Qualitative approach is often used for gathering an in-depth understanding of the research topic through various instruments (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). These instruments include interviews, observation, case studies, and focus groups (Creswell, 1996).

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