

# WRITTEN FEEDBACK FOCUS ON BACHELOR'S THESIS WRITING: A CASE STUDY OF SUPERVISORS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AT A CHINESE UNIVERSITY

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## **Abstract**

Written feedback is recognized as integral in supporting L2 writers. In China, the bachelor's degree thesis is an important genre aiming to cultivate undergraduates' critical thinking and basic research ability. However, writing this genre presents a context where written feedback has not yet been extensively studied. The objective of this paper is to explore six EFL supervisors' beliefs, practices, and the relationship between their beliefs and practices in written supervisory feedback (WSF) on drafts of theses for a bachelor's degree at a Chinese university. Two semi-structured interviews were used to investigate their beliefs in the WSF values, the WSF focuses, and the factors affecting their WSF practices. WSF analysis on students' theses was conducted to study the supervisors' practices for their WSF focuses. The results revealed that they had a positive view on the value of WSF; they believed that, on the whole, organization and content are the important aspects to be addressed, while organization should be the focus for the first draft, all aspects should be addressed for the second draft and grammar and the academic and university's requirements should be the focus for the third draft. However, their practices showed that they focused mostly grammar, academic and the university's requirements, and content. For the first draft, the supervisors mainly focused on the academic and university's requirements, grammar and content, while for the second and third drafts, they mainly focused on grammar. These mismatches between their beliefs and practices were explained by the supervisors as being

for the students' proficiency, occupational reactions, supervisors' expectations, institutional policy and time constraints. The findings suggested that supervisors should be offered more training opportunities in WSF provision. Moreover, future research on WSF should be careful about the classification of feedback focus and go beyond the consideration of only one aspect.

**Keywords:** Written supervisory feedback; feedback focus; bachelor's thesis; beliefs; practices

## **Introduction**

In China, the undergraduate students in the English major program (or English major undergraduates) are required to complete a thesis with 3,000-5,000 words in English as a partial requirement for their bachelor's degree (Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2000). The students usually have had no previous experience of writing research papers. Consequently, providing written supervisory feedback (WSF) on the students' draft theses is both a responsibility for the supervisors and a necessity for developing the students' writing skills. Writing a bachelor's degree thesis is a multi-draft writing process, during which the students submit their drafts and the supervisors provide written feedback to the students requiring revision again and again.

However, the literature on written feedback seems to lack previous studies which focus on a draft thesis. There has been much research on written corrective feedback (or error correction) in L2 writing classroom. For example, researchers have examined how writing instructors respond to L2 students' writing and the effect of these interventions (Ferris, 1995, 1997, 2006; Polio et al., 1998; Chandler, 2003), the impact of different feedback techniques on students' revision (Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Sheppard, 1992; Ashwell, 2000), students' views of teachers' responses (Leki, 1990; Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Montgomery and Baker, 2007), and teachers' beliefs and practices' on written feedback for L2 writing (Lee, 2008; Li and Barnard, 2011; Basturkmen, 2012; Alkhatib, 2015; Junqueira and Payant, 2015). Nevertheless, the majority of the previous error correction studies have been conducted in the United States (Lee, 2004), and few studies on WSF have been carried out in the Chinese context. The lack of research on WSF may impede Chinese supervisors from maximizing their students' academic writing proficiency and research skills. In addition, writing a bachelor's degree thesis is the first academic research and writing for most English major undergraduates. The students have received little training in academic writing, so the supervisors' WSF also serves as academic instruction for them. This study, therefore, aims to explore the supervisors' beliefs and practices concerning the focuses of WSF in a public university in China and to what extent those beliefs and practices match the WSF through investigating the students' draft theses. It sets out to answer the following three questions:

1. What are the supervisors' beliefs for WSF with regard to the values and focuses?
2. What are the supervisors' practices concerning the focuses of WSF?
3. To what extent do the supervisors' beliefs and practices match in terms of their focuses for WSF and what are the factors influencing their practices?

## **Literature Review**

### **Teachers' beliefs**

Teachers' beliefs are defined as "attitudes and values" about teaching, students, and the educational process (Pajares, 1992). Other researchers have used various terms to refer to beliefs such as views, perceptions or personal theories, and have given different definitions according to the purposes of their studies (e.g., Borg, 2001; Basturkmen et al., 2004).

The interest in teachers' beliefs is based on the commonly held view that beliefs play a major role in determining teachers' pedagogical practices (Pajares, 1992; Johnson, 1994; Borg, 2003, 2006; Farrell and Kun, 2008). However, a good number of studies have also shown that there are large discrepancies between teachers' reported beliefs and their observed classroom practices (Rashidi and Moghadam, 2015). With the developments in cognitive psychology, researchers (e.g., Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Lin et al., 1999; Borg, 2006) started to recognize the importance of studying beliefs not only with regard to their influence on behaviors but also for improving teachers' professional development and practices. Consequently, it is crucial to uncover the supervisors' beliefs regarding the use of WSF, not only to improve students' thesis writing but also to help supervisors reflect on some principles when determining their own policy for WSF (Ellis, 2009).

### **Written supervisory feedback**

Feedback is defined as "any procedure used to inform a learner whether an instructional response is right or wrong" (Kepner, 1991). In L2 writing classes, teachers' written feedback is most often called "written corrective feedback" (Sheen, 2007; Bitchener, 2008; Ellis, 2008; Ferris, 2010). Now,

providing written feedback on student writing is one of the pedagogical practices of L2 writing teachers who hope that this practice will assist the students in improving their writing skills and grammatical accuracy (Hyland and Hyland, 2006), and there has been much research on the written feedback in relation to its effectiveness (Robb et al., 1986; Fathman and Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Truscott, 1996; Ashwell, 2000), its focuses (Lee, 2004, 2008; Ferris, 2006; Ellis et al., 2008), its types (Chandler, 2003; Bitchener et al., 2005), and students' and teachers' preferences and teachers' beliefs (Lee, 2004; Diab, 2005; Amrhein and Nassaji, 2010; Hamouda, 2011). These studies, though getting some different or even conflicting results, helped teachers and researchers realize the complicity of written feedback and encouraged more empirical investigations on written feedback.

With the increase of research on academic writing, the studies on supervisors' written feedback have received much attention, and have revealed a few terms, such as "supervisor written feedback" (e.g., Bitchener et al., 2010; Kleijn et al., 2013), "supervisory feedback" (e.g., Paré, 2011; Azman et al., 2014) or "supervisor's on-script feedback" (e.g., Basturkmen et al., 2014). In this study, for the sake of consistency, the researchers used "written supervisory feedback" (abbreviated as WSF) to refer to all terms that implicate the written feedback provided by supervisors. Researchers have studied a variety of areas of WSF. For example, Bitchener et al. (2011) studied the supervisors' practices of WSF and the views of both the supervisors and the students on best WSF in three disciplines from six New Zealand universities. Kumar and Stracke (2007) studied the distribution of WSF in different functions in a doctoral dissertation. Hyatt (2005) also identified six functional categories in his analysis of WSF on master's degree writing and found that the feedback on content, style and development were most frequent. Basturkmen et al. (2014) investigated which aspects the WSF on thesis focused on and how the feedback was formulated linguistically. Can and Walker (2011) studied the students' perceptions of supervisors' written feedback. Although much of the research focused on the graduate level, these studies are relevant in that they highlight the importance of WSF on students' academic writing, and investigating supervisors' beliefs may help understand their practices regarding WSF.

### **Focus of written supervisory feedback**

Researchers have been interested in what type(s) of errors the teachers focus on when providing written feedback. One common distinction is the one between form errors and content errors (Kepner, 1991; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994). Form errors are those related to grammar or mechanics. Ferris and Roberts (2001) divided students' form errors into five categories comprising verb errors, noun ending errors, article errors, wrong word or sentence structure. Content errors refer to those related to content and organization. There are also other distinctions of errors (errors that cause communication breakdowns, e.g., conveying vague or unclear ideas) and minor errors (errors that do not obscure the comprehensibility of the text, e.g., morphological errors) (Bates et al., 1993), and frequent errors (i.e., errors that individual learners make frequently) and infrequent errors (Ferris, 2011). The purpose of these distinctions of errors was to explore which types of errors most deserve correction (Mings, 1993), since what to be addressed is the initial and most important issue for writing teachers.

However, in the field of thesis writing, the error distinctions mentioned above are difficult to apply to the analysis of WSF in practice because there are many overlapping areas between the parameters in these distinctions (Alkhatib, 2015). Bitchener et al. (2011) attempted to provide an accurate and detailed classification for supervisors' written feedback on academic writing and distinguished the errors into four categories, which are content, requirements, coherence and cohesion, and linguistic accuracy and appropriateness. However, in their study, the supervisors were all native English speakers and the students were speakers of English as a first language or as an additional language. The errors made by the L1 or L2 students might not cover all those made by EFL students. So, according to the features of Chinese tertiary students' writing, Liu (2013) classified errors into five categories of grammar, content, sentence structure, organization, and vocabulary. However, this classification was based on Chinese students' classroom writing, not on written academic genres. Therefore, this study adapted the classifications on errors of both Bitchener et al. (2011) and Liu (2013) and integrated them into seven categories of content (C), requirements (R), organization (O), grammar (G), linguistic appropriateness (L), writing attitudes (W), and others (See Appendix A for descriptions).

### **Bachelor's thesis for English major undergraduates**

The English major undergraduates are required to complete a qualified bachelor's thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts. The purpose of a bachelor's thesis is to enhance both the student's basic research ability and language proficiency, and the requirements for a qualified bachelor's thesis state that it should be "in fluent language, clear and informative arguments with independent ideas" (Ministry of Education of PRC, 2000).

The bachelor's thesis for English major undergraduates should be specialized in the areas regarding English language, English culture, English literature or the comparison between English and Chinese language, culture and literature. Universities usually have their own format for a bachelor's degree thesis, but the thesis is generally composed of the preliminaries, the body, and reference materials. Although depending on the different topics and areas of study, the body of the thesis for English major undergraduates is generally organized in a rough structure of four to six chapters, including an introduction and literature review as the first two chapters, and the conclusion as the last chapter, with the middle chapters varying from area to area.

The students cannot attend the oral defenses until their final bachelor's theses are assessed as qualified by their supervisors and other examiners with different weights. The Ministry of Education (2000) provides a principle for the assessment: "in addition to language proficiency, [thesis'] scoring should also consider students' independent ideas and innovative awareness". In practice, different universities adopt different assessment systems for their bachelor's degree thesis assessment in line with their educational missions, especially their teaching goals. A survey revealed that some universities laid emphasis on a student's research ability in assessing a bachelor's degree thesis, while others attached importance to the writing ability and format requirements, or even the writing attitude (Liu and Hu, 2008). However, the thesis topic, language proficiency, literature accessibility, logic structure, reasoning ability and format have been key areas for scoring, although universities have different focuses (Li, 2014).

## Methodology

### Study context

This study was conducted in the School of Foreign Languages at a public university in central China. In this university, there are about 250 undergraduate students in the English major program who need to write a bachelor's degree thesis each academic year, so around 50 teachers with at least MA degrees in the School of Foreign Languages will be assigned as supervisors. Each supervisor will supervise 4-8 students according to their professional ranks, and those with higher ranks will supervise more students. The thesis writing and supervision process lasts one academic year (two semesters). To avoid the students submitting low-quality theses, the School of Foreign Languages requires a student to submit and revise the theses drafts to the supervisors no less than three times.

Although the supervisors in the current research were assigned to be responsible for their students, they were not provided with any guidelines on the provision of WSF. Therefore, what the supervisors should give as WSF to the students and how they should give it were not mandated. They generally gave WSF on the areas they personally considered important, and in ways they considered effective for each draft according to their academic knowledge, habits, and intuitions. The supervisors' performance of their supervision was objectively examined by the WSF on their students' three drafts. When the students received their theses drafts with WSF from their supervisors, they needed to correct the errors or improve the content or organization by rewriting the whole thesis based on their supervisors' WSF, and to submit the revised draft. Commonly, they were required to submit a revised draft with the previous one simultaneously so that the supervisors could know whether the students had made corrections fully and effectively based on their WSF. The students' theses were evaluated holistically by both their own supervisors and another internal examiner (also a supervisor in the School) before the oral defense.

### Participants

Six supervisors (the "participants") working at the School of Foreign Languages took part in the study. The participants were all non-native-speaker teachers. Table 1 describes the participants' information.



**Table 1:** Information on the Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Teaching experience in current context	Professional rank	Research field	Degree
Qi	M	51	24	Prof.	Linguistics	MA
Xiang	F	49	25	Prof.	Literature	MA
Yu	F	39	12	Assoc. Prof.	Translation	MA
Ai	F	48	20	Assoc. Prof.	Pedagogy	MA
Yuan	F	35	3	Lecturer	Literature	PhD
Fei	F	34	12	Lecturer	Interpretation	MA

Note: M=male; F=female; Prof.=Professor; Assoc. Prof.=Associate Professor

As described in Table 1, the participants include both male and female supervisors ranging from 34 to 51 in age, with different professional ranks and different research fields. They were all course leaders for the advanced stage (third to fourth years), who were tasked with offering guidance on the course teaching. Although this research is qualitative in nature, the researchers hoped the participants may be more representative of the supervisors of the School.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The supervisors' beliefs relating to WSF were obtained through semi-structured interviews ("Interview 1"). The guided interview questions (See Appendix B) were adapted from Pearson's (2018) study with those questions irrelevant (questions on students, training) left out and the IELTS writing setting changed into a thesis writing setting. One of the researchers made appointments with the participants, and then the participants were interviewed individually in a small office at the School; each of them was interviewed for 10-25 minutes. Based on "Interview 1" and the analysis of the students' theses drafts, the study conducted the second semi-structured interview with the same supervisors ("Interview 2"). The guided questions for Interview 2 (See Appendix C) were self-designed and were used to explore the factors that influenced their practices in WSF. The supervisors were allowed to read the analysis results of their WSF and then were invited to Interview 2. Both of the interviews were in Chinese. All interview conversations were recorded to allow for transcription and further

analysis. The transcripts were given to the corresponding supervisors for validation in order to present their views accurately.

The supervisors' practices relating to WSF are mainly reflected in the multiple drafts of their students. After the "Interview 1" with the participants, the researchers obtained permission from the six supervisors and the School to collect their students' drafts on which the six supervisors had provided WSF in the academic year 2017-2018. The researchers randomly selected one student from each supervisor and then borrowed and copied the six students' theses drafts. Since the analysis only involved the supervisors' written feedback but not the students' writing, the researchers did not seek permission from the six students. As the School of Foreign Languages requires the students to submit no less than three drafts with their supervisors' feedback before their oral defense, the six selected students all submitted three drafts before the oral defense; that is, all of them had four drafts in their thesis archives. However, since the students' fourth drafts were used for the oral defense, there was no WSF on them. Therefore, the fourth drafts were not collected for analysis for this study. A total of 18 theses drafts were collected. Such a quantity of data analysis might not completely represent the supervisors' practices, but hopefully gives some insights into the supervisors' focus on WSF and provide suggestions for further research.

As pointed out in the literature review, the focus of WSF in this study was coded in terms of seven categories comprising content, requirements, grammar, organization, linguistic appropriateness, writing attitudes and others. An independent coder, who is a Chinese teacher with a master's degree in Applied Linguistics, helped to code 2 students' drafts (6 drafts in total) together with the researchers, and the inter-coder agreement percentage was 86%; then the other 12 drafts were coded.

## **Results**

### **1) Supervisors' Beliefs**

Focusing on the themes of value and focus, the following sections presented the supervisors' beliefs of WSF (data from "Interview 1").

### A. Beliefs in the value

Concerning the value of WSF, all participants shared the belief that WSF is “certainly” helpful for the students in thesis writing. All of them tended to perceive feedback as a crucial tool that positively improves a student’s thesis writing and develops research skills. They seemed to believe that the WSF could “improve writing”, “encourage communication”, “set up an accurate academic attitude and develop academic interests”, “enhance reasoning” and “gain another’s academic experiences”. For example, two supervisors explained that:

*[WSF] is absolutely essential for students in bachelor’s thesis writing. It could improve the students’ knowledge of academic writing, writing proficiency and cognitive ability. More importantly, it could encourage the students to ask questions regularly about their problems in thesis writing. (Qi)*

*The [written supervisory] feedback contained my experiences of academic writing, for example, ethical paraphrasing and summary skills. So, it could help the students indirectly gain my academic writing experiences. (Yuan)*

These interview conversations indicate that the supervisors considered WSF essential for promoting the students’ thesis writing skills and developing their research skills.

However, they differed in the extent of the value of WSF on improvement of the students’ writing. Two supervisors (Fei and Yuan) believed that the students could revise their drafts well enough with only the WSF, while the other four supervisors believed that WSF must be accompanied by oral feedback. Supervisor Xiang said:

*... I need to give explanations to some important written feedback instances to the students in person; otherwise, they could not understand, and this is not good for learning. (Xiang)*

Basically, all the supervisors supported the positive contributions of WSF in the improvement of the students’ thesis writing, although to different extents.

## B. Beliefs in the focus

When discussing the focus of WSF, all the supervisors believed that some areas should be given more attention than others. According to the six supervisors, the organization or the logic structure of the thesis is the most important and the first thing to concentrate on because a clear structure can help the students to envisage the work as a whole with every component having its right place and, if the students follow a clear structure, they may not lose their main ideas in writing. One of the supervisors explained:

*I will read my student's outline first and ask my student to keep the student's mind on the structure. If the outline is not good, I will not read the content nor give much feedback on other aspects.... The structure reflects your thinking; a good thesis is at first in a good structure. (Xiang)*

Although all agreed on the importance of organization, the supervisors differed in the treatments in other areas. Two of them believed language should be the second important concern for supervisors because one of the purposes of thesis writing is to practice the students' writing in English, while four of them believed that content should be the next concern for supervisors because "the content is the soul of a thesis" (Qi) and language should not be the supervisors' focus because the students are supposed to write proficiently as senior English major students.

Regarding the requirements, five supervisors stated that the supervisors should give the students feedback because it is "the responsibility of a supervisor" to give them feedback on every aspect including the requirements. In addition, since it is the first time for the students to be exposed to academic requirements, the supervisors should give help to them on the requirements. However, one supervisor claimed it is unnecessary to give feedback on the requirements.

*I never give written supervisory feedback on requirements to the students. All of them have the guidelines on thesis requirements, and they should carefully read them and learn the right requirements on their own. (Ai)*

As for the focus at the different draft stages, all the supervisors claimed they focus their WSF on the organization at the first draft stage. They believed that a good thesis is not only what a student writes, but also the structure and organization of his or her writing. They also believed that having sketched an outline, a student could work concentratedly within a specific framework so the thesis writing could go smoothly and could be completed within a required period. For example,

*Only if the content table is logically good at the first draft, can I tell what materials are relevant and what materials are lacking and give suggestions for later revision. (Qi)*

However, at the second draft stage, the supervisors differed in their focus. Two stated that they would focus on grammar (Xiang, Ai), one stated that she would focus on research methods and the reasoning (Fei), one said that he would focus on all aspects (Qi), and two stated their focus was on content (Yu and Yuan).

At the third draft stage, three supervisors believed that the format requirements should be the focus (Qi, Yu, Yuan) because the correct format is a key feature of thesis writing which distinguishes it from classroom writing and which the students can achieve with care; so at this stage, the supervisors should help the students to ensure that the format of the thesis is correct. However, two supervisors believed that language and format should be the focuses (Fei, Xiang) because few grammatical or format errors are evidence of the students' serious and careful academic attitude to the oral defense committee members. The last supervisor believed that the content should be the focus at this stage. She claimed:

*A thesis should contain some ideas and at this stage we [supervisors] should help the students to examine whether the thesis reveals the ideas accurately and completely. (Ai)*

From the interviews, it is notably seen that all the supervisors seemed to be inclined towards the process writing method as they are more concerned with helping students with thesis writing skills through outlining and writing multiple-drafts, although there are some differences in their focus on written feedback.

2) Supervisors’ Practices

A. Focus on the whole

The analysis of the students’ theses drafts, as revealed in Table 2, showed that the supervisors focused on grammar, the requirements and content in the order of frequency with differences in the extent to which each teacher gave attention to these categories. Overall, 833 individual feedback instances were identified in the analysis of the 18 theses drafts, an average of 46 instances of feedback per draft. Out of all the instances, 445 (53%) were grammar-focused, 146 (18%) were requirement-focused, and 129 (16%) were content-focused.

These results suggest that the supervisors gave much attention to the content, grammar and requirements of thesis writing, among which grammar received much more attention than the other aspects (e.g., content or organization).

Table 2: Number and Proportion of WSF Focus

Participant	Focus of WSF							Total
	C	R	G	O	L	W	Other	
Qi	18(14%)	26(21%)	48(38%)	13(10%)	18(14%)		3(2%)	126
Xiang	18(19%)	48(49%)	22(23%)	6(6%)	3(3%)			97
Yu	40(11%)	35(9%)	264(72%)	23(6%)	4(1%)	2(1%)	1	369
Ai	2(7%)	4(14%)	19(68%)		2(7%)	1(4%)		28
Yuan	21(21%)	19(19%)	40(40%)	5(5%)	12(12%)	0	2(2%)	99
Fei	30(26%)	14(12%)	52(46%)	3(3%)		10(9%)	5(4%)	114
Total per category	129 (16%)	146 (18%)	445 (53%)	50 (6%)	39 (5%)	13 (2%)	11 (1%)	833

Note: “C” stands for content, “R” for requirements, “G” for grammar, “O” for organization, “L” for linguistic appropriateness and “W” for writing attitudes.

B. Focus at different draft stages

The analysis of the supervisors’ feedback focus at different stages, as demonstrated in Table 3, showed that the supervisors focused on the second

draft stage (43%), the first (33%) and the third (24%) in the order of frequency. It also showed that the supervisors' WSF increased from the first to the second draft stages but then decreased to the lowest level at the third draft stage.

At the first draft stage, the majority of the supervisors' WSF was dedicated to the requirements (29%), content (28%) and grammar (27%), and these three aspects received almost the same attention.

At the second draft stage, the supervisors provided the most feedback instances on grammar (66%), and then on content (13%) and requirements (9%). It revealed that at this stage grammar received more attention than the other aspects.

At the third draft stage, the supervisors still provided the most feedback instances on grammar (67%), and they attached some attention to the feedback instances on requirements (17%) and on organization (11%). It could be seen that the supervisors offered only a little feedback on content (4%) at this stage.

In all the three draft stages, organization received little feedback. The supervisors' WSF instances on organization accounted for only 6% at the first stage, 3% at the second draft stage, and 11% at the third draft stage. From the results, it could be seen that the supervisors gave more attention on organization at the third stage than at the first or the second stage.

**Table 3:** Number and Proportion of WSF Focus in Different Stages

Draft	Focus of WSF							Sub total
	C	R	G	O	L	W	Other	
D1	77(28%)	80(29%)	76(27%)	16 (6%)	18(7%)	5(2%)	5(2%)	277(33%)
D2	45(13%)	32(9%)	234(66%)	12(3%)	18(5%)	8(2%)	6(2%)	355(43%)
D3	7(4%)	34(17%)	135(67%)	22(11%)	3(2%)	0	0	201(24%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>129</b> (16%)	<b>146</b> (18%)	<b>445</b> (53%)	<b>50</b> (6%)	<b>39</b> (5%)	<b>13</b> (2%)	<b>11</b> (1%)	<b>833</b>

### 3) Factors Influencing Practices

A comparison of the supervisors' beliefs and practices yielded a great discrepancy. First, all the supervisors believed that their WSF focus should be on the organization or the logical structure on the whole. However, in practice,

they provided only 6% feedback instances on organization. On the contrary, half of the supervisors believed language should not be their focus of WSF, but they provided the most feedback on grammar (53%). That is to say, the supervisors believed organization and content are more important in a bachelor’s degree thesis than other aspects, but they paid more attention to grammar.

Second, all the supervisors believed that they give priority to the feedback on organization at the first draft stage, and to the feedback on format or requirements in the third draft stage, although they differed in their beliefs in the second draft stage. Nevertheless, in practice, they offered the most feedback on requirements (29%), content (28%), and grammar (27%) at the first draft stage and gave the most feedback instances on grammar (67%) and on requirements (17%) at the third stage.

In order to understand the causes of the discrepancy between the supervisors’ beliefs and practices, another interview was conducted (Interview 2). Table 4 presents the possible factors for the discrepancy between the supervisors’ beliefs and practices on the whole.

**Table 4:** Factors for Discrepancy Between Beliefs and Practices

Factors for mismatching	Examples
Student performance	<i>Ai:</i> ...I gave much attention on grammar because I wanted to show the student that her mistakes are mostly out of carelessness. Next time, she will write more carefully. <i>Xiang:</i> I think the student is excellent. She can manage the organization and content well, so I gave much attention to the requirements.
Occupational reactions	<i>Yu:</i> I just can’t help pointing it out or correcting it whenever I see a grammatical error in my students’ writing. I can’t endure any mistakes. <i>Yuan:</i> I would like to underline grammatical mistakes, it’s almost automatic because I think accuracy is an important criterion for thesis.
Time constraints	<i>Yuan:</i> I needed to read eight theses drafts every time. I didn’t have enough time to read them carefully and it was easy to identify some grammatical mistakes.



**Table 4:** (Continued)

Factors for mismatching	Examples
Institutional policy	<p><b>Qi:</b> <i>I think the authorities would think that we are irresponsible if we leave many grammatical errors unmarked or uncorrected when they scrutinize our [supervision] performance."</i></p> <p><b>Fei:</b> <i>I would like to give more feedback on content [than other aspects], but that was an arduous but fruitless job, because failing to point out the problems in the language and format of the thesis would easily invite criticism [from the School] ...</i></p>

From Table 4, it can be seen that “student performance”, “occupational reactions”, “time constraints” and “institutional policy” are the main factors that influence the way that the supervisors practice their beliefs.

Concerning the discrepancy between their beliefs and practices at different draft stages, one supervisor (Ai) admitted that she gave WSF without much thought. She read her students’ thesis from the beginning to the end, and gave WSF wherever she thought necessary. Two other supervisors (Yu and Xiang) stated that their feedback focuses are dependent on the supervisors’ expectations.

*For those high-level or self-motivated students, we will be strict with them on every aspect [...] But for those average-level or low-level students, if their thesis structures are almost okay, we mainly give feedback on the obvious errors influencing understanding. (Yu)*

Another supervisor (Fei) claimed that oral feedback was more efficient than written feedback in pointing out the organizational problems, so she did not write much on organization. However, the other two supervisors (Qi and Yuan) did not agree on the discrepancy between their beliefs and practices, and they regarded something being problematic with the counting method of the present research. For example, Supervisor Qi was doubtful about the results:

*I think “organization” and “content” are something at the macro level, while “grammar” is something at a micro level. How could the feedback instances at different levels be compared? (Qi)*

The supervisors' answers may suggest that there were many factors constraining their practices, including student factors, supervisor factors, and institutional factors. It was also revealed that a good distinction on error categories is very important when research on written feedback is carried out.

## Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the Chinese supervisors believe that WSF plays an important role in the writing of a bachelor's degree thesis. Although providing feedback on students' theses drafts is time-consuming, most of the supervisors admitted that it is one of their main responsibilities as supervisors. They also regarded feedback as a communicative tool to assist students in interpersonal communication as well as in thesis writing. This view is in accordance with other studies which suggested written feedback was useful in L2 writing (e.g., Alkhatib, 2015). However, the previous studies emphasized the value of teachers' written feedback on developing students' writing skills (e.g., Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990; Hyland, 2003), enabling students to assess their weaknesses and strengths (e.g., Bailey and Garner, 2010), and helping students to avoid the same errors (e.g., Lee, 2008); this study revealed that the supervisors believed the written feedback can also exert a positive influence on the students' interpersonal communication, thinking and reasoning ability, and their interest in academic attitudes.

This study also found that the supervisors' beliefs in WSF emphasized organization and content. This reflects that Chinese supervisors are influenced by the process writing approach, which emphasizes the writing as a whole and pays much attention to the organization and content, but they also take care of students' writing in other aspects.

The major finding of this study was that there was a discrepancy between the supervisors' beliefs and their practices regarding the focus of WSF on thesis writing both on the whole and at different draft stages. Such differences between teachers' beliefs and practices regarding written corrective feedback for writing classes have also been reported in other studies (e.g., Gahin, 2001; Lee, 2008; Al-Bakri, 2016). For example, Ferris (1997) found that only 15% of the teachers' comments address student ideas and rhetorical development and the rest of the comments were directed to the language form. Lee (2009) reported

that teachers gave precedence to language accuracy despite believing that they should concentrate more on the content. These studies attributed the differences to the teachers' academic qualifications, students' levels, personal learning and teaching experiences, and workload (Al-Bakri, 2016), and the textbooks teachers were required to use (Hyland, 2003; Lee, 2008; Cohen and Cavalcanti, 1990). This study mainly attributed the differences to the students' performances, professional reactions, supervisors' expectations, institute's policy and time constraints.

First of all, the authors of the thesis drafts in this study were the undergraduate students in an English major program in China. Their English writing proficiency was not totally good because English was their foreign language. In addition, this was the first time for the students to complete a long research paper. These two reasons led to many language errors in their thesis drafts. Consequently, the supervisors' emphasis on grammar feedback was a necessity. In this study, one student (under Yu's supervision) even was incapable of completing her first draft with complete sentences and used many fragmented sentences. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the students' general writing during their university study.

Secondly, the supervisors, especially those teaching translation or writing courses, are very sensitive to language errors due to their professional reactions because language accuracy is one of the main goals of good translation and L2 writing. They are very strict with students' language errors. However, writing a thesis for a bachelor's degree is not only to train students on language accuracy, but also to instruct students on organization, the content and requirements of academic writing, and other aspects such as information retrieval and analysis. Therefore, supervisors should give WSF on their students' theses from multiple dimensions. This suggested that supervisors need to be trained before they start to supervise writing for a bachelor's degree thesis, for example, on understanding the assessment standard of a bachelor's degree thesis, being aware of the ranges of their WSF, and reflecting and sharing their feedback practices.

Thirdly, the supervisors' expectations are an important factor influencing their feedback practices. It is very common that the supervisors might encounter some low-quality first drafts which were carelessly written and

unacceptable. For these students, the supervisors would easily set low expectations due to the students' low writing proficiency, inaccurate academic attitude or lack of effort, and then would be less likely to provide feedback on deeper-levels such as organization or content. However, studies have revealed that teachers' expectations and students' achievements affect one another in more complicated and reciprocal ways (Goldenberg, 1992). Therefore, it is suggested that supervisors should provide specific feedback and monitor the progress regardless of the students' achievement in drafts.

Fourthly, the institutional assessment policy for supervisors' performances will also affect their practices in giving WSF. To see whether the supervisors were responsible or not, the School will examine the supervisors' written feedback on students' thesis drafts. However, this would possibly lead to the fact that the supervisors give much feedback on grammar because this could greatly increase the feedback instances. Therefore, the supervisors' performance on supervision could change into other ways such as anonymous evaluations of the students.

Fifthly, the time duration between each draft stage could be extended to a longer period. The duration of thesis writing for each stage in the present study was half a month, so the supervisors had to give feedback to all the theses drafts within a week so that the students have enough time to revise and submit the next drafts. Therefore, the extension of the time duration between draft stages can help the supervisors to have more time to provide feedback.

Lastly, the method of comparing the feedback focus on the thesis drafts (also on L2 classroom writing) is worthy of attention. The errors in language or grammar mostly take place at the lexical, phrasal or sentence levels, whereas the errors in organization or content are usually found at the levels of paragraphs, sections, chapters or the whole thesis. Therefore, judging the supervisors' practices of written feedback focus by calculating the number or frequency of their feedback points or instances, which was used in many studies (e.g., Al-Bakri, 2016; Bitchener et al., 2011; Lee, 2008, 2009; Li, 2016) was likely to be problematic. Since there is no more reasonable method for measuring and comparing the supervisors' different aspects of WSF focus to date, this current study decided to use the common method following previous studies of a similar nature. It is hoped that a more pragmatic solution will be worked out in the near future.

As a form of communication and instruction, the supervisors' WSF, besides directing the students to complete the theses, helps them to gain understanding and discovery in writing, research and thinking (Kumar and Stracke, 2007). Given the importance of WSF, uncovering the supervisors' beliefs and practices can help identify the factors that contribute to effective feedback (Lee, 2009).

Currently, there is a notable lack of studies offering insights into what supervisors should do to approach WSF in an EFL bachelor's degree thesis writing context. Therefore, the findings of the supervisors' beliefs and practices of their WSF focus might enable researchers to understand the students' achievements, and serve a way to look into the supervisors' professional development in the challenging WSF provision, which could be turned into a more effective and positive practice.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that the supervisors have positive beliefs in the value of WSF on students' theses writing. However, the study revealed gaps between the supervisors' beliefs and practices in their WSF focus, both for the whole and in different draft stages. There were likely to be some factors that influenced the supervisors' practices, including the students' performance, occupational reactions, supervisor's expectations, institutional policy and time constraints.

As the investigation in this study was restricted to only one aspect of WSF, that is, the feedback focus, future research could examine the supervisors' beliefs and practices with regard to other aspects such as strategy, tone, syntactic forms as well as their correlations to students' revisions. In addition, the response to thesis writing is a complex behavior, so it is also necessary to explore what other factors, such as social or student factors, may exert influence on supervisors' feedback practices.

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Appendix A: Categories of WSF Focus Used in This Study

Category of Focus	Descriptions
Content	Effectiveness, accuracy, completeness or appropriateness of ideas or argumentation
Requirements	Academic conventions (including referencing, mechanics, passive voice and objective tone) University requirements
Organization	Order of information/ ideas; Links between information/ ideas; Paragraph/chapter/thesis development; Arrangement of sentence structures
Grammar	Spelling; Tense; Voice; Word class; Word addition and deletion; Article; Punctuation; Chinese English
Linguistic Appropriateness	Appropriateness: using suitable, right and proper words; Accuracy: precision or exactness of word choice, especially resulting from careful effort; Formality: using formal words and avoiding colloquial expressions
Writing Attitudes	Carefulness, seriousness in writing; Academic behavior (plagiarism); Academic ethics
Others	Feedback instances not included in the above categories; Unidentifiable feedback instances

## **Appendix B: Guided Questions for Interview 1**

(Adapted from Pearson, 2018)

1. How important is the WSF to students' bachelor's degree thesis writing improvement?
2. Do you focus on any areas in your WSF? Why or why not?
3. The students will submit at least three thesis drafts to you according to the School's requirements. Do you focus on any aspect of writing when giving written feedback on the first draft/ on the second draft/ on the third draft? Why or why not?

## **Appendix C: Guided Questions for Interview 2**

[After reading the analysis results of their own WSF on the students' thesis drafts, the supervisors are asked the following questions.]

1. What do you think of the analysis results of your WSF focus?
2. Why did you give much/little feedback on this/these aspect/aspects?
3. What do you think of the mismatches between what you believed you should give in WSF and what you actually gave in WSF for different drafts?
4. You said you should focus on ... at the first/second/third draft, but you gave much feedback on .... What are the main reasons for the mismatches?
5. What other reasons can lead to the mismatches between supervisors' beliefs and practices of WSF focus?

Appendix D: Coding Examples of WSF Focus

1. Feedback focus on content

Example 1

*“Add a summary for this chapter.”*

Example 2

Table 3 The Difficulty in Vocabulary learning

	A (%)	B (%)	C (%)
The first question	32%	43%	15%

*What do A, B and C mean in the table?*

2. Feedback focus on grammar

Example 3

Second, teachers need to step up their own education.  
*strengthen their own learning*

Example 4

The town students are not good at school English.

3. Feedback focus on organization

Example 5

2.1 Definition of Phonaestheme *(Put it in Chapter One)*

Example 6

Many teachers lack the habit of self-directed reading. Except the English textbooks, they rarely read any professional-skill books, original English books and magazines.

4. Feedback focus on requirements

Example 7

A paper entitled “On Perfection of Teachers’ Talk in Classroom” (Cheng, 1997:2) revealed that [...]

*Please use italics.*

Example 8

Chapter Two The importance of English vocabulary teaching

## 5. Feedback focus on linguistic appropriateness

Example 9

~~The main reason why many~~ teachers do not pay enough attention <sup>to teacher talk</sup> ~~is that they do~~  
~~not understand~~ related theories.  
*because of their lack of*

Example 10

They can deepen their understanding of teacher talk and can truly  
~~recognize its important position~~ from the heart.  
*importance*

## 6. Feedback focus on writing attitudes

Example 11

*"Your second draft is the same as the first draft!"*

Example 12

*"Do not copy others."*