

# Towards Effective Written Feedback: Insights from Lecturers and Students in Thesis Supervision

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## Abstract

This research investigates how both lecturers and students perceive written feedback during thesis writing, as well as the stress such feedback may cause students. Employing a qualitative content analysis approach, the study examined thesis drafts enriched with written feedback, along with questionnaires and interviews conducted with four lecturers and eight students. Findings reveal that lecturers and students share similar perceptions regarding feedback delivery, focus on content, grammar correction, clarity, and timing. However, differences emerged concerning the use of marks, the imbalance of positive and negative feedback, errors in feedback, and insufficient psychological consideration, three of which were identified as sources of stress for students. The study recommends further exploration of effective written communication strategies to reduce stress in the thesis-writing process.

## Keywords:

written feedback, thesis writing, perception, stress-effect

## INTRODUCTION

Second language (L2) students often require greater support in thesis writing, particularly in areas of English grammar and usage, compared to native speakers (Wei & Cao, 2020). The linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds that they bring into the writing process, along with the challenges they encounter, deserve close consideration (Gezahegn & Gedamu, 2023). Unlike first language (L1) students, who tend to work more independently and seek help only when necessary, Indonesian students usually meet with their supervisors regularly and intensively to receive guidance from the beginning to the end of the thesis-writing process. At the institution where this study was conducted, for example, each student was assigned two supervisors, with a set schedule of eight meetings to complete the proposal and ten meetings to finalize the research report (Gezahegn & Gedamu, 2023).

For L2 students, the need for close supervision goes beyond linguistic barriers. Cultural differences add additional layers of complexity, creating distinct challenges that make continuous feedback from supervisors crucial (Cheng & Zhang, 2021; Gezahegn & Gedamu, 2023). In this context, feedback serves multiple purposes—praise, criticism, and suggestions—that support students in developing their theses (Cheng & Zhang, 2021).

Written feedback, in particular, is recognized as a key indicator of supervision quality, given its essential role in guiding thesis completion (Gezahegn & Gedamu, 2023). More than just correction, written feedback functions as a channel of communication between supervisor and student, especially in the context of academic writing. It not only directs and safeguards students' progress in research and writing but also helps them cultivate the skills to become independent academic researchers who can eventually publish their work in national and international journals and participate in scholarly communities.

Nicol (2010) emphasized that the type of feedback and the manner in which it is delivered play a crucial role in shaping the quality of students' responses. Students' engagement with the feedback, particularly regarding content quality, directly contributes to their progress in thesis writing, as reflected in the revisions made to their drafts. More detailed feedback on aspects such as content and organization tends to result in more substantial and more effective revisions.

Moreover, supervisors vary in their ability to apply feedback strategies, which in turn influences the development of students' theses.

Bitchener (2008) suggested that future research should examine supervisors' perceptions in giving feedback. This is an important area of inquiry, as supervisors' awareness of how they provide written feedback and how it is interpreted may encourage them to deliver feedback that is not only more meaningful but also motivating. To ensure a balanced perspective, this study also considers students' perceptions, providing a more comprehensive understanding of written feedback in thesis supervision.

Feedback is often described as the core of the thesis-writing learning experience (Ajjawi et al., 2022a), and its significance is well recognized by those who provide it. Nonetheless, the way written feedback is delivered can at times confuse or discourage students (Mahfoodh, 2022). This highlights the need for continued research into written feedback, as many students view it as part of their lifelong learning and even preserve their corrected drafts for future professional reference (Miao et al., 2023).

Equally important is what students actually do with the feedback they receive. As Pearson (2022a) points out, the effectiveness of feedback depends not only on its quality and delivery but also on students' responsibility to act upon it. Prior studies have shown that written feedback plays an essential role for both first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) thesis students, although L2 learners sometimes require feedback in areas that L1 students typically do not (Shao, 2015). In practice, this often means that supervisors apply different standards, tending to be less critical toward L2 students.

Building on this, Suci et al. (2021) recommend that further research focus on the specific types of written feedback provided by supervisors, as this area has not been extensively studied. In line with that suggestion, the present study explores the attitudes and practices of thesis supervisors in delivering written feedback.

## METHOD

This study applied a qualitative approach, specifically using content analysis. Content analysis was chosen because it focuses on interpreting the meanings reflected in the characteristics of written materials.

The primary materials examined were students' thesis drafts containing written feedback from supervisors, along with interviews conducted with the participants: four lecturers (acting as thesis supervisors) and eight students. Four sets of thesis drafts, complete with lecturers' comments, served as the core data for identifying the types of feedback that required further exploration. After key feedback points were identified, interviews were conducted to capture both lecturers' and students' perceptions of the written comments. Four instruments supported the data collection process:

1. The researchers themselves as the primary instrument,
2. Field notes,
3. A questionnaire, and
4. Structured interview guidelines.

The research process began with a review of theories concerning written feedback practices in thesis writing (see Nicol, 2010; Bitchener, 2008; Wei & Cao, 2020). These theoretical insights were used to develop interview questions and construct thesis assessment rubrics. The data collected were then organized into tables based on

emerging themes and codes. Coding was applied to extract meaningful text segments and guide interpretation of the findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined three dimensions simultaneously: lecturers' actual written feedback, students' perceptions of that feedback, and lecturers' perceptions and attitudes toward their own practices. It also investigated how unclear or ambiguous feedback could lead to student stress. Findings show that while lecturers shared similar perceptions conceptually, their practices often differed. Students generally accepted the feedback they received and attempted to revise their work accordingly. However, when asked in detail about their views, students expressed disagreement with certain aspects, particularly regarding the frequent use of marks or symbols and the limited psychological consideration from supervisors. Moreover, the repeated appearance of marks and symbols in thesis drafts was found to be a significant source of stress for students, as these often lacked clear explanation and left them uncertain about how to proceed with revisions.

### 1. Lecturers' and Students' Similar Perception

It is found that in five aspects as presented in the following table, lecturers had similar perception with the students.

**Table 1.** Lecturers' and Students' Similar Perception

Aspects	Lecturers' Perception	Students' Perception
<b>The Manner</b>	Lecturers preferred providing written feedback manually (interview).	Students preferred receiving written feedback manually (questionnaire).
<b>Feedback on Content</b>	62.30% of written feedback found in the documents focused on content.	Students preferred content to be given written feedback.
<b>Grammar Correction</b>	Lecturers paid attention to grammar after the content was finalized (interview).	Students needed grammar correction (questionnaire).
<b>Written Feedback Clearness</b>	Lecturers could explain through written feedback the aspects students had to revise (questionnaire).	Students considered written feedback understandable (interview and documents).
<b>Timing</b>	Lecturers provided written feedback at all stages and preferred giving it immediately (interview).	Students received written feedback in all drafts, mostly immediately (interview).

Lecturers and students were found to share similar views across five aspects: the manner of providing written feedback, the focus on content, grammar correction, clarity, and timing. Interviews revealed that lecturers preferred giving feedback manually, with careful attention to grammar correction once the content was established. Likewise, questionnaires showed that students preferred receiving handwritten feedback and considered grammar correction necessary for producing an error-free thesis. Both groups also agreed that the written feedback was clear and understandable. In terms of timing,

lecturers reported giving feedback at all stages and often immediately, which aligned with students' experiences of receiving timely feedback across drafts.

Such alignment in perception contributes to a more positive and supportive atmosphere in thesis supervision. It also highlights the importance of viewing students as learners who still benefit from structured guidance, rather than treating them as fully independent researchers. The role of a thesis supervisor, therefore, differs fundamentally from that of a journal article reviewer; supervision involves a balance of instruction, guidance, and mentorship rather than strict evaluation alone.

## 2. Lecturers' and Students' Different Perceptions

In addition to areas of agreement, the analysis of documents, interviews, and questionnaires revealed that lecturers' practices in providing written feedback did not always align with students' perceptions. Several points of divergence were identified: the frequent reliance on marks and symbols, an imbalance between positive and negative comments, occasional errors in the feedback provided, and limited attention to students' psychological well-being. These aspects, which are presented in the following table, highlight the gap between how lecturers deliver feedback and how students interpret and respond to it.

**Table 2.** Lecturers' and Students' Different Perception

Aspects	Lecturers' Attitudes & Perception	Students' Perception
<b>The Use of Mark</b>	As found in the documents, lecturers used marks most in providing written feedback.	Students did not appreciate marks without text in feedback, such as underlined sentences, circles, or question marks (interview).
<b>Imbalance Written Feedback</b>	Lecturers provided negative written feedback more often than positive (documents).	Students preferred balanced positive and critical/negative written feedback (questionnaire).
<b>Lecturer's Mistake in Providing Written Feedback</b>	A lecturer wrote "It doesn't stated in your problem/objective" instead of "It is not stated." Some inappropriate parts were ignored.	Students reported: "If I catch a big mistake among the written feedback, I tend to disregard the other comments" (questionnaire).
<b>Psychological Consideration</b>	Only one lecturer showed concern for students' psychological factors during supervision; three did not (interview).	Students indicated that their psychology was affected during supervision (questionnaire).

Another issue that students found problematic was the tone of negative or critical feedback. While lecturers frequently provided corrections and criticisms, students felt that the feedback was unbalanced, with too little emphasis on positive comments. Interviews and questionnaires confirmed this perception: compared with the documents, positive remarks in the form of full written sentences were rare. Instead, praise was usually limited to checklist marks, which students interpreted as a form of positive feedback, though not very meaningful.

A further point of concern was the presence of errors in lecturers' written feedback. In one case, for instance, a lecturer wrote an ungrammatical sentence ("It doesn't

stated...”) rather than the correct form (“It is not stated”). Other inaccuracies or overlooked issues were also evident. Interestingly, while such mistakes drew students’ attention, they often chose to disregard these errors in order to focus on revising their drafts.

Finally, students reported that thesis supervision affected their emotional well-being. Many found it difficult to cope with the written feedback they received, admitting that the process made them anxious and stressed. Unfortunately, most lecturers paid little attention to the psychological dimension of supervision, leaving students to struggle with the emotional impact of feedback largely on their own.

### **3. Triggering Stress Written Feedback**

As discussed earlier, four areas of divergence were identified between lecturers and students: the use of marks, imbalance between positive and negative feedback, errors in feedback, and lack of psychological consideration. These differences represent a novel contribution of this study, as they highlight how written feedback can contribute to students’ stress in the thesis-writing process. Interviews confirmed that three of these factors—excessive use of marks, unbalanced feedback, and limited psychological awareness—were the primary sources of stress for students.

The first stressor relates to the frequent use of marks and symbols. Documents revealed that lecturers often relied heavily on marks, such as underlining, circling, or question marks. Students, however, found these unhelpful when not accompanied by explanatory text. Although lecturers consistently provided written feedback across all stages of thesis writing, students felt they required clearer and more comprehensive comments than they received.

The second factor was the imbalance between negative and positive feedback. Lecturers tended to focus more on corrections and criticisms, whereas students expressed a preference for balanced feedback that included encouragement alongside critique.

The third source of stress was the lack of psychological consideration during supervision. Interviews indicated that only one lecturer showed awareness of students’ emotional states, while most students reported that their mental well-being was affected by the way feedback was delivered.

Finally, the tone of critical feedback itself often exacerbated the problem. Since negative comments dominated over positive ones, students felt emotionally burdened and less motivated to continue revisions.

### **Discussion**

The findings reveal that lecturers generally hold a positive view of written feedback and aim to provide it effectively in theory. Their practices were evident in the documented feedback they gave, though interestingly, in some cases lecturers later disagreed with their own written comments after reflecting on students’ reactions. This corresponds with Pearson’s (2022b) study, which showed how student engagement with teacher feedback can expose discrepancies between intention and perception.

A major source of stress identified was the frequent use of marks. Students explained that marks often required further explanation (S1 and S7), that seeing numerous symbols on their drafts was discouraging (S2 and S6), and that such marks

were often unclear and difficult to revise (S4). For some, the heavy use of marks even led to feelings of incompetence in writing.

The issue of imbalanced feedback also emerged. Only two students explicitly commented on this, yet their insights were telling. One (S1) noted that she did not need exaggerated praise but wished the lecturer would minimize the use of crosses, red ink, or large question marks, replacing them with clearer comments. Another student suggested that even a simple verbal acknowledgment—such as “I appreciate that you’ve reached this chapter”—would make critical comments easier to accept. Both agreed that starting supervision sessions with encouraging words could make negative feedback less overwhelming and more constructive.

The final issue concerns the lack of attention to students’ psychological well-being. One student (S1) explained that her emotions were affected at every stage of thesis consultation. Before meeting her supervisor, she felt nervous and afraid; during the session, she experienced embarrassment when faced with numerous corrections; and afterward, she was stressed about how to revise her work. Another student acknowledged that supervisors were busy with other responsibilities but emphasized that, especially in thesis supervision, greater patience and understanding were needed. She hoped supervisors would recognize students as learners who depended on their guidance. She even suggested that lecturers prepare themselves for the possibility of mistakes in students’ drafts, so that their own mood remained stable and did not negatively influence either party’s emotions during supervision (Ngim et al., 2021).

When the four areas of differing perception between lecturers and students were reviewed, students confirmed that three of them were primary stressors: the frequent use of marks, the imbalance of positive and negative comments, and the lack of psychological consideration. These findings reinforce Pearson’s (2022a) observation that the delivery of feedback can significantly impact students’ emotional responses.

The heavy reliance on marks is consistent with Mahfoodh’s (2022) claim that indirect written feedback often leads to misunderstanding and miscommunication. Similarly, Wondim et al. (2024) found that students prefer personalized feedback with clear guidance to help them improve their work.

To address these challenges, Bitchener (2008) emphasized the importance of developing a range of feedback strategies that both support students’ confidence and accommodate their differing needs at various stages of research. For this reason, it is crucial that lecturers and students engage in open communication about expectations and feedback practices from the very first supervision session. Establishing such understanding can create a more positive atmosphere, which in turn fosters better writing development. Future studies are therefore encouraged to explore strategies that strengthen written communication between supervisors and students, aiming for outcomes that benefit both sides.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study revealed that lecturers and students shared similar perceptions of written feedback in several areas, including its mode of delivery, focus on content, grammar correction, clarity, and timing. However, differences emerged in other aspects,

namely the reliance on marks, the imbalance between positive and negative feedback, errors within the feedback itself, and insufficient psychological consideration. Of these, three factors—excessive marks, unbalanced comments, and lack of attention to students' emotions—were identified as significant sources of stress during the thesis-writing process.

Given that thesis writing is inherently demanding, students require not only academic guidance but also motivation and emotional support. Yet, in some cases, feedback that was unclear or insensitive increased stress rather than reducing it. Therefore, it is crucial for supervisors to receive specialized training on effective feedback practices. In addition, establishing clear agreements with students at the outset of supervision regarding how written feedback will be provided may help foster a more supportive and less stressful environment.

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