



## Examining Written Feedback to Students' Theses: A Teacher's Reflection

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### Abstract

*This paper presents a reflection of an English teacher's written feedback. This reflective study aims at evaluating the teacher's written feedback practices. It adopts a qualitative approach, in which the author did a self-reflection of her own written feedback (Hamilton, Smith & Worthington, 2008) to her students' thesis proposals and drafts (Walsh & Mann, 2015). The small study intends to seek answers of these questions: (1) what can be reflected from the teacher's written feedback to her students' theses drafts, and (2) what changes have been made as a result of the reflection? The objects of the reflection are two sets of written feedback that the teacher provided to two students' thesis drafts and another two series of written feedback given to two students' thesis proposal drafts between 2020 to 2022. Through the reflection of her own written feedback, the author found several issues: 1) limited understanding of the concept of EMI and essence of literature review, (2) lack of synthesizing skills and skills in making the synthesis coherent with research questions and research methods design, (3) low organization skills, (4) and limited knowledge about research instrument protocols. Based on the reflection the author has made several changes, including giving a series of critical questions to stimulate and check student's understanding of the theme/concept and of coherence between the synthesis, research questions and research methods, and providing emphases on students' understanding of the research instrument protocols prior to pilot study. This small reflective study implies the need for making reflection practice an important element of a teacher's professional development.*

### Teaching English academic writing

#### Keywords:

reflection, written feedback, thesis writing, teacher's professional development

#### 1 Introduction

Doing a reflection has been considered to be one important aspect in teacher's professional development (Körkkö, Kyrö-Ämmälä, & Turunen, 2016). Studies have shown how reflection can help teachers or teacher trainees gain a deeper understanding of the pedagogical concept (Körkkö et al., 2016), do a self-learning of their professional experiences and increase their awareness of the effect of their teaching practices (Loan, 2019), gain insights of a reflective practice itself (Körkkö et al., 2016), critically examine their pedagogical flaws (Percy, Sharkey, Baecher, Motha & Varghese, 2019), and manage their own professional development (Zhao, 2012). Thus, research on reflection have been extended to English language teachers' teaching practices including those of EFL writing teachers. One crucial

aspect that needs more attention is a reflection about the teachers' teaching experiences in designing the syllabus, making lesson plan, teaching, giving feedback, evaluating students' work, and many other pedagogical activities, specifically because 'reflection' has been assumed to be an inherent important part of teaching (Atkinson, 2012). Therefore, it is widely known that teachers make some alterations in their teaching approach or techniques because of their simultaneous personal reflections upon the subject-content and/or pedagogical knowledge and beliefs (Alsahrani & Storch, 2014; Körkkö et al., 2016) and the need to evaluate their own teaching practices (Peercy et al., 2019) in order to become better teachers (Zhao, 2012).

In a more specific context, i.e., English academic writing skills, previous research has reported the effect of doing a reflection in EFL writing classes, from alterations in perspectives towards motivation behind the written feedback (Min, 2013), to learning their strengths and weaknesses in teaching writing so they can change their mindset (Loan, 2019), the innovation created from the reflection (Lee, 2014), and the variety of the beliefs and practices in teaching writing (Yang & Gao, 2013). The above studies have shown the positive effects of conducting a reflection for EFL writing teachers. Hence, to join the above academic discussion, this study intends to examine a writing teacher's written feedback by addressing these two research questions: (1) What can be reflected from the teacher's written feedback to her students' thesis drafts?; (2) What changes have been made as a result of the reflection?

## 2 Literature Review

In this section, the author will explain the notion of reflection, models and tools for doing reflection in the context of teacher's professional development. As a concept, reflection was defined as:

" . . . conscious, experientially informed thought, at times involving aspects of evaluation, criticality, and problem-solving, and leading to insight, increased awareness, and/or new understanding. As such, reflection can be contrasted with 'impulsive' or 'routine' decision-making that reinforces and embeds current perceptions or practices . . ." (Dewey 1933, p.17 as cited in Anderson 2020, p.480)

The definition above may imply a complexity of reflection, as it should involve one's conscious thought, which goes beyond an understanding and interpretation of a subject-matter. As a matter of fact, one can confidently claim doing a reflection if they intentionally include a process of checking and making judgment of a matter with an awareness of attaining clear goals at the end of a reflection, such as a new understanding, a change of paradigm, actions or solutions to problems, or a consciousness towards something.

Anderson points out that two most popular reflection schools, i.e., Deweyan and Schonian may be put in a continuum (2020). On one end, Dewey's notion of reflection is believed to be highly dependent upon scientific approach, in which one is required to be involved in active, persistent, and careful consideration of their beliefs and knowledge. In other words, Dewey's notion of reflection for education follows a rational and scientific approach, reflecting the positivism approach (through which knowledge should be obtained through real, factual experiences that can be proved as in natural science). In the classroom context, implementing Deweyan reflection implies observing a problem in the classroom, developing a hypothesis or the possible causes of the problems and trying out a potential solution for the problem. On the other end, Schon's reflection demonstrates a more intuitive, but conscious reflection, and

requires one to use their experiential knowledge to be the major source of learning. Schon's reflection is based on a practitioner-based intuition, in which reflection is believed to occur during actions, during classroom activities where there can be unusual happenings or phenomena, from which both teachers and students can do self-evaluation, that will result in a new awareness, insights, or a change of ideas, concept, process.

To do a reflection, one can choose one of these tools or combine them. A list of questions can be developed into a complex reflective survey (Loan, 2019). For example, when English teachers intend to reflect upon their teaching pedagogy, they can survey their own students by developing a list of questions that ask the benefits students have received from the subject, the aspects they need to improve, and students' expectations from the teachers. Another method can be a post-activity discussion or focus-group discussion with colleagues or partners (Abednia, Hovassapian, Teimournezhad, & Ghanbari, 2013; Walsh & Mann, 2015). In addition, peer-observation can be used as an alternative method for reflection (Moradkhani, 2019). Furthermore, reflective journals or blogs of teacher's narrative inquiry (Peercy, et al., 2019) are some common methods used by teachers. In this case, an English teacher can do a regular journaling after teaching one class. Finally, portfolio can serve as a tool for doing a reflection (Körkkö et al., 2016).

### 3 Methodology

This section is divided into three subsections. In the first subsection, the author describes the research approach, instrument and setting. Next, the author explains the data sources. In the last subsection, the author presents the data collection and analysis procedures.

#### 3.1. Approach, instrument & context

This reflection adopted a qualitative approach, in which the author did a self-reflection of her own written feedback (Hamilton, Smith & Worthington, 2008) to her students' thesis proposals and drafts (as described in sections 3.1. and 3.2.). To enable her to do a reflection, the author used a content analysis of the written feedback given to her students' work (Patton, 2015).

In her thesis proposal classes, the author assigned students to write drafts of literature review, introduction, and research methods as well as the partial and complete thesis proposal draft. Each of the draft was given written feedback in terms of content, organization, language and mechanics. In total, each student received five sets of written feedback and two sets of oral feedback (teacher's and peers') in the thesis proposal class (see Appendix A). After the students passed the thesis proposal class, they joined a review session that is organized by the department, in which each of them had to defend their thesis proposals and is given both oral and written feedback by two internal reviewers. Meanwhile, during the thesis research and writing process, students received both written and oral feedback for every draft they send (see Appendix B). In sum, there can be at least seven sets of feedback that the author provided via the shared files in Google Drive, emails, WhatsApp chats and/or video calls.

#### 3.2 Data sources

Data for this small study was two sets of written feedback that the author provided to two students' thesis drafts and another two series of written feedback given to two students' thesis proposal drafts between 2020 to 2022. The stages are as follows. Of ten thesis drafts that the author has supervised since 2018, two theses were selected and of eighteen thesis proposals written in 2022, two were chosen with the following criteria: (1) the theses (and thesis proposals) were written and/or defended between 2020 and 2022; (2) the themes are those of

the writer's current interest, i.e., EMI and ESP; (3) the students' theses were developed from the author's thesis proposal classes. Hence, there were 2 sets of data sources: the written feedback for Nur's and May's thesis drafts, and that for Ren's and Dan's thesis proposals (See Table 1). All names are pseudonyms.

Table 1. List of students' theses and thesis proposals for this reflective study

Theme	Work	Period	Students' names & gender
EMI	Thesis drafts	Thesis writing & exam	Nur, F
ESP	Thesis drafts	Thesis writing & exam	May, F
EMI	Thesis proposal	Thesis proposal writing	Dan, M
ESP	Thesis proposal	Thesis proposal writing	Ren, F

### 3.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

To collect data for this small reflective study, there were several steps that the author went through. Firstly, she selected the most current themes of her interest during the thesis proposal and supervision in the past four years, i.e., ESP and EMI. Secondly, having the said topics, she chose two theses and two thesis proposals (see Table 1). Thirdly, she collected all the written feedback given to the above work which enabled her to do a stimulated recall (Walsh & Mann, 2015). To analyze data, the following stages were taken. First, the author read the collected written feedback carefully for several times. Second, she categorized the written feedback into (a) organization, (b) content, (c) language, and (d) mechanics. Third, she highlighted the most salient issues that Nur and May faced in the process of thesis writing from the feedback she gave to them. Fourth, she highlighted the changes she has made in Dan's and Ren's thesis proposals as a result of her reflection upon Nur's and May's thesis drafts. Fifth, in accordance to the issues analyzed or interpreted her reflection, guided by the objective of this study. Finally, she made reflective notes of the Nur's and May's major problems in writing and the alterations she has provided to Dan's and Ren's thesis proposals.

## 4 Results and Discussion

In this section, the author presents the answers of the two research questions and a brief analysis of the above answers. The section is further divided into two subsections which are parallel to the research questions. In the first and second subsections, the author explains the findings and analysis of the first and second research questions, respectively. The organization of the findings will be based on the author's reflection upon the written feedback given to Nur's and May's thesis drafts, which will be followed by the actions made for Ren's and Dan's thesis proposals as a result of the reflection.

### 4.1 Findings

#### 4.1.1. What can be reflected from the author's written feedback to her students' thesis drafts?

The author would like to start presenting and discussing her reflection upon the process and written feedback to Nur's thesis proposal. From her reflective notes, she found several issues, i.e., limited understanding of the EMI and the essence of a literature review (e.g., presenting a report of relevant earlier studies instead of a review – see Excerpt1), lack of skills in synthesizing readings (e.g., synthesizing the concept of EMI and the research methods adopted in the earlier studies), and in connecting the synthesis with research questions and research methods design. To deal with these issues, the author helped Nur update her readings

by sending a number of research articles via emails – at least eighteen research articles or book chapters were shared within the period of 2020 to 2021), giving written feedback to the literature review and research methods chapters between 2020 and 2021, including guiding her formulate the research questions, do the literature review, sending frequent reminders via emails and WhatsApp personal chats, suggesting research instruments and giving access to find research participants, providing feedback through online video conferences, as well as giving a simulation of data collection and analysis process. The author expected that Nur could understand all the feedback given and complete her thesis research and writing in no more than a year.

and memory strategies more frequently than other strategies.

### 2.5 Previous Studies

There are some studies that are related to this research. First is Ibrahim

(2001) which attempts to find out whether EMI can be an effective means of

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I wonder why there are only two studies reviewed here. Aren't the other studies I emailed you months ago irrelevant? Were all the studies in this section conducted in Indonesia? It's not clear.

In the end, you have to review the studies and write the gap of the studies you reviewed. Otherwise, this section is merely a summary of the previous studies, NOT a review.

Excerpt 1. An example the author's comment for a section in Nur's literature review in the initial stage of her thesis writing

The next reflective notes are based on the author's written feedback for May's thesis proposal and draft. May was determined to create an ESP syllabus for her institution. However, she had one major problem in the thesis writing, i.e., making her ideas coherent and maintaining a cohesion in her writing. She found it very challenging to organize ideas that she got from the readings into her thesis drafts written (see Excerpt 2 for example). The problem seems to constantly appear in her thesis proposal and drafts and often times frustrated her. Another problem was doing a comprehensive literature review of readings in ESP. Although the author and other teachers have introduced several techniques in conducting and writing a literature review in the thesis proposal class and in other classes, respectively, the knowledge was not always automatically transferred and the writing skills may need long time to develop.

In the Target Situation Analysis, I have to consider the students' needs and what they have

to do in terms of their English proficiency in the target situation i.e., their workplace.

Paltridge and Starfield (2013) point out "that needs analysis first entered the literature on ESP as

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Can you please reorganize this so that it is easier to follow and read?

asus

I have no idea how to reorganized this part mam,

I need your advice

asus

Excerpt 2. An example of the author's comment for May's literature review in the beginning stage of her thesis writing and her response

With regard to May's major challenges in writing, the author suggested that May set regular (research paper) reading schedules so that she could expose herself to both the way authors organize ideas and the research paper writing convention. In addition, the author arranged several video and voice calls every time she needed clarifications or explanations from May, especially concerning the coherence and cohesion in her thesis drafts. The author could see that May needed to have dialogs (through the calls) in addition to the written feedback given. Afterwards, May made considerable progress by welcoming and taking up critiques and suggestions that the author provided. She was discipline to revise her drafts within the given time. As a result, she could finish her thesis in sixteen months. Thus, the author realized that to help students like May solve the above problems, she needs to ask students to show and tell her how they review the literature, particularly the relevant theories, research methods, and how the methods were utilized to get findings (Wang & Li, 2008). Oral dialogs were crucial for May, besides the written feedback.

In both Nur’s and May’s thesis writing journeys, the Covid-19 Pandemic has impacted their thesis writing progress and completion to a certain degree. Nur could only make very slow progress because she had more workload because of the online teaching mode and all the adjustments she had to make in her institution. As a result, she had less time to do online thesis consultations, which the author has asked for several times. As a matter of fact, she could not give quick responses to the author personal messages sent through emails or WhatsApp chats. In the end, she could not finish her research as set in her own timeline. She completed her thesis (thesis proposal writing was included) in twenty-two months. Meanwhile, May unexpectedly had another stressor because one of her family members who was infected by the Covid-19 virus, which caused her to delay reporting her thesis progress for several weeks.

#### 4.1.2. What changes have been made as a result of her reflection?

Learning from her own written feedback to Nur’s thesis proposal and drafts, the author paid a very detailed attention on the concept mastery of Dan, who also focused on EMI for his thesis proposal. Yet, different from Nur, Dan chose reflective practice as implemented in the data collection and analysis procedures. From the beginning of the thesis proposal writing, the author is quite meticulous in checking Dan’s understanding of EMI concept (see Excerpt 3) and how it is similar or distinctive from related concepts such as CBI, CLIL, and immersion program.

<p>subjects (other than English) in a country where the population does not speak English as a first language. In addition, EMI is defined as late immersion because this method is widely used in higher education (HE), and students require a high level of English proficiency in order to grasp and be relevant in a multilingual context (Dimova &amp; Kling, 2018; Macaro &amp; Han, 2019).</p>	<p><b>Anna da Silva</b> November 11, 2022</p> <p>You will see that Taylor and Francis journals have published a lot of research articles regarding EMI.</p> <p>It would be better to include the philosophical, political, historical backgrounds of EMI, too. In other words, you need to understand and explain clearly what EMI is, why EMI is introduced – why EMI is seen as important – the goal of EMI approach.</p>
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#### Excerpt 3. An example of the author’s comment for Dan’s review of EMI

She also asked him to question and evaluate his proposed data collection instrument on the basis of feasibility of the study. For example, at first, Dan planned to have his future participants (subject-content teachers) write reflective diaries. However, the author raised the issue of teachers’ tight schedule and absence of power relationship between him and his research participants, which may lead to a risk of failure with data collection. As a result, after some consideration and additional readings, Dan altered the instrument, from journal to interview.

Meanwhile, reflecting upon written feedback to May’s thesis drafts, the author learned several lessons that she could apply for Ren’s thesis research on EAP in terms of instrument protocols and data analysis process. First, the author needs to ensure that Ren has more than a comprehension of the concept of needs analysis in an ESP study (see Excerpt 4). In other words, the author expects that Ren can have a critical and evaluative thought of the needs analysis as a basic tool to design an ESP program. Second, the author also views that Ren needs to be critical of the research instruments she will use (or adapt) in her study. Therefore, the author provides much more comments for the pilot study that Ren prepared. For example, Ren plans to conduct quantitative survey, interview as well as job shadowing as needs analysis instruments. In that regard, the author is conscientious with Ren’s design of each instrument. Excerpt 5 presents an example of the author’s comments for Ren’s pilot survey questionnaire items.

It could hamper the results being fully addressed (Rautenbach, et al., 2019).

There are several approaches to needs analysis developed and proposed throughout the years. Munby (1978) suggested a *sociolinguistic approach* which targets communicative competence. This model requires a profile of communicative needs to be presented, consisting of communicative events, purposive domain, medium, mode, channel and setting of communication, main communicators and their interlocutors, dialect, attitudinal tone, subject content, and level of English proficiency. The profile then developed into a syllabus.

Anna Marietta da Silva October 04, 2022  
It's good that you've included this, and at the same time, you need to start thinking of the approach you will adopt for your own syllabus in response to the NEEDS of your students.

Remember, the NEEDS, NOT the wants. The former implies the English language that will be practically used in the professional setting (in line with the professional requirements at the workplace), while the latter is the language items that students think they're not really good at and therefore want to learn more, but they are probably not needed for their work!

Excerpt 4. An example of the author's comment for Ren's review of needs analysis in ESP

- Does TSA only consist of 2 questions? What are other questions have you found in the previous survey?
- Re. PSA & LSA, don't you think you need to differ between receptive and productive skills?
- I hope that you have formulated the questions in B02, C01-07, C08-C20, D03-D09, D10-D22 based on the job-shadowing or the previous studies, as well. What do you say?
- What's the base for writing the items in D23?

Excerpt 5. An example of the author's comment for Ren's pilot survey questionnaire

## 4.2. Discussion

### 4.2.1. What can be reflected from the author's written feedback to her students' thesis drafts?

The author learned that even though Nur was an experienced English teacher, it should not be taken for granted that she could easily comprehend the fundamental concept of her study, i.e., EMI (Walkinshaw, Fenton-Smith, & Humphreys, 2017), even after she was given several readings. Such understanding should have been reflected in her ability to determine a detailed set of criteria for sampling participants, design and describe research instruments, obtain data sources, and interpret research data (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). Nevertheless, it seems that it was not easy for Nur to arrive at a profound understanding of the concept. Therefore, the author realized that it was the point that she needed more stimulations from the author where she could check Nur's comprehension and challenged that through oral discussions until she reached a point where she could evaluate or criticize the concept (Wang & Li, 2008).

Equally important is a deep and growing understanding of both the protocol and content of the research instruments. Nur has learned research methods and instruments in the Thesis Proposal and Research Methods classes and through the research articles cited in her work. However, the author learned that the ample knowledge may not always guarantee its well implementation, especially when Nur did not give special and sharp focus for the above essential points in the literature review chapter. She was also aware that she needed to check the extent to which Nur looked at and comprehended the details of the research methods in the earlier studies until she was sure of how she could take the EMI concept into her research instruments and data analysis plan (Ylijoki, 2001).

May's issues in writing her thesis was also shared by other students with their English academic papers (Shahsavari & Kourepaz, 2020). In their studies, students found it difficult to make synthesis of their readings, let alone to explain and evaluate them. As a result, instead of making reviews, students wrote summaries of the texts they have read. However, May realized that it was one of her biggest challenges in writing and was neither afraid nor ashamed

to admit and communicate them with the author. She was also aware that she needed to talk with the author in addition to reading the written feedback given in order to understand the main point of the written feedback and find out how she could deal with the above issues. Hence, she has always welcomed every online (video) call arranged for her and made use of the opportunities to improve her writing. Here, the author views the important role of a dialogic approach in guiding students writing their thesis report (Brodersen, Solheim, Steiner, & Oftedal, 2016). In thesis writing, a dialogic approach emphasizes on a balanced communication between students and their thesis advisors (or writing tutors), in which the former are viewed as the owners and creators of their theses and the latter as the ones providing guidance that will assist the former “to think, learn and write on their own” (Brodersen, et al., 2016, p. 19)

Concerning the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic to both Nur ‘s and May’s thesis research and writing, research has proved that many students and teachers felt that the transitions to remote online learning was extraordinary, challenging, and demanding at the same time. Factually, they have to make very quick adjustments, but not many were ready to move to the new mode of teaching and learning in a very short time (Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020; Griffiths, Tinoco, Giordano, Hassel, Suh, & Sullivan, 2022). The case may even be more challenging for teacher-students like Nur and May. On the one hand, they have to learn using an online teaching and learning platforms available for them, adjust their teaching approach and methods, search for new teaching techniques that can attract their students’ attention, and deal with the financial consequences that arise because of all the transitions above. On the other hand, with the increasing workload and working hours, they have to continue their thesis research and writing.

In May’s case, she had to take care of her family member who was infected by the Covid-19 virus in the middle of writing her thesis, but she did not use that as an excuse. She even could finish her thesis earlier than Nur. One important key that she has shown is her resilience. In the context of education, resilience can be defined as “the ability to thrive academically despite adverse circumstances” (Windle, 2011, p. 155). Personality characteristics such as motivation and self-efficacy have been a crucial factor of one’s resilience (Windle, 2011; Novotny, 2011). The author witnessed how May was not easily provoked by her struggles in academic writing, family health issues, and her multiple roles as a teacher, student, mother and wife. May proved herself to be highly motivated despite all the above issues and believe in her ability to make improvements in academic writing no matter how small they are. All in all, she viewed all those challenges and the way she dealt with them as part of achieving a greater goal in her life as a teacher.

#### 4.2.2. What changes have been made as a result of her reflection?

The findings have shown that the author is quite critical in examining Dan’s comprehension of a reflective practice and how to elicit the research subjects’ reflection of EMI. In the author’s view, it is important for Dan to understand the concept of EMI, how it has been adopted or used by teachers in their classrooms. Another concept Dan needs to comprehend is reflection, reflective practice with all the challenges and benefits (Lee, 2014; Loan, 2019; Anderson, 2020) and its role in teacher’s professional development (Yang & Gao, 2013; Körkkö et al., 2016). Without a thorough understanding of the concept, Dan may find it difficult to design or adapt the research instruments and plan the data collection and analysis stages. Therefore, the author thinks that she needs to hold frequent or regular face-to-face or online discussions with Dan to address the above two concepts and to observe how his



comprehension will be reflected in the design of the research methods. Written feedback per se may not be enough to monitor student's understanding of a concept, especially if the concept is new to them.

In terms of the feedback given to Ren, whose study tends to be practical, the author also considers that she should emphasize the importance of understanding each research instrument protocols prior to conducting a pilot study (Loan, 2019). Furthermore, the author sees that Ren needs to be accustomed to data collection: its procedure, processing, and analysis as early as possible. Therefore, she begins the thesis consultation sessions with Ren from a discussion about data collection procedure prior to the pilot study. To help Ren develop a critical thought, the author has given at least three sets of critical feedback related to content, organization and mechanics related to the research instruments before she conducts the pilot study to help her deal with the challenges right from the initial stage of thesis research (Wang & Li, 2008). Dialogs, in addition to the written feedback, are seen as necessary in order to enable the author and Ren discuss issues related to the research instruments and the pilot study procedure.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the author's reflection has helped her examine and evaluate her teaching writing practices, specifically in term of giving written feedbacks. She realized that there are some strengths in the practices, such as commitment to scaffold students to become better writers, persistence in giving continues written feedback until students show some progress, empathy to student's struggles in English academic writing, and objectivity in giving advices to students work. However, she is also aware that she needs to deal with her weaknesses, for example her assumption that students could independently understand research instrument from the written feedback given, focusing more on giving written feedback than having more dialogues with students, and paying more attention to organization of ideas and linguistic errors. Therefore, she embraces the dialogic approach to guide students carry out their thesis research and write the report (Brodersen et al., 2016).

Due to the scope of this small reflective study, there some limitations, particularly in the sampling of research objects, period of data collection, and depth of reflection. Therefore, further studies may include more pieces of students written work, and adopt a mixed design approach, in which the written feedback can be quantified as well as analyzed qualitatively. Furthermore, to make an in-depth data analysis possible, a variety of data instrument collection, such as after-class discussion with students, peer observation, and narrative inquiry, can be employed in the future. This refection implies the need for English teachers to include reflective practices as a crucial point for improving their teaching methods and evaluating their beliefs and practices, which can be beneficial for them in their professional development.

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## 7. Appendices

### Appendix A

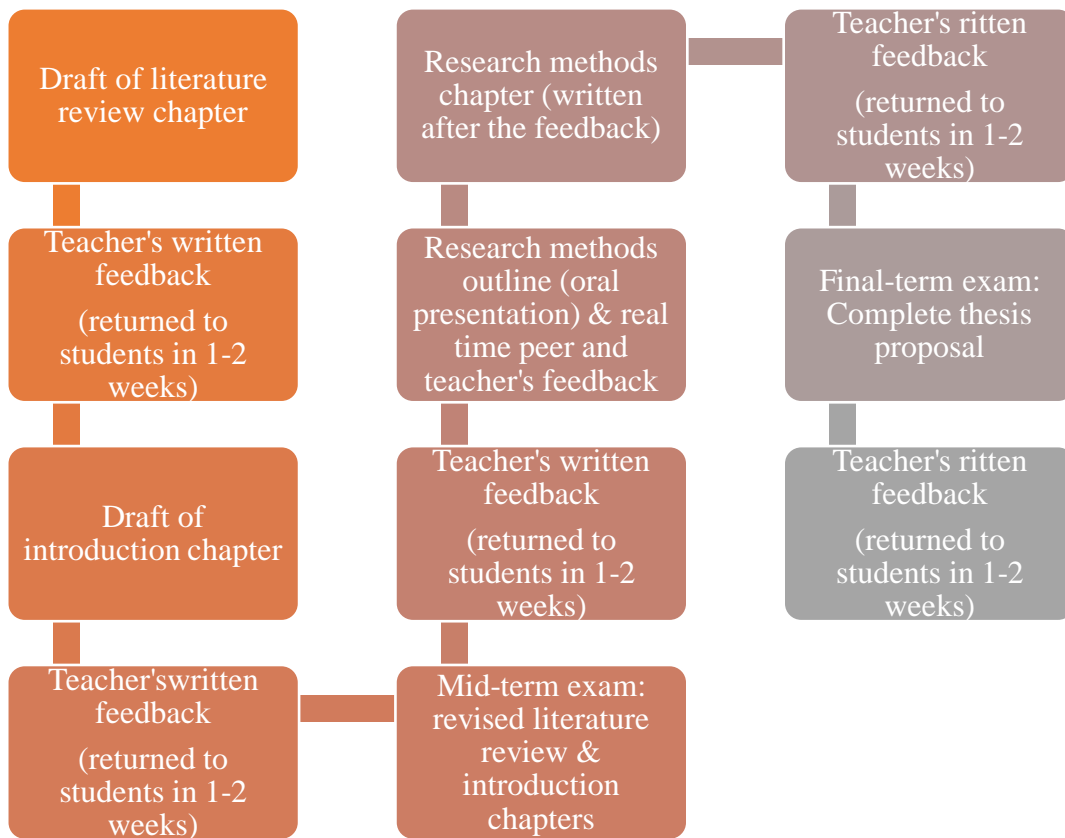


Figure 1. Sequence of thesis proposal drafts and written feedback in the author's thesis proposal class

**Appendix B**

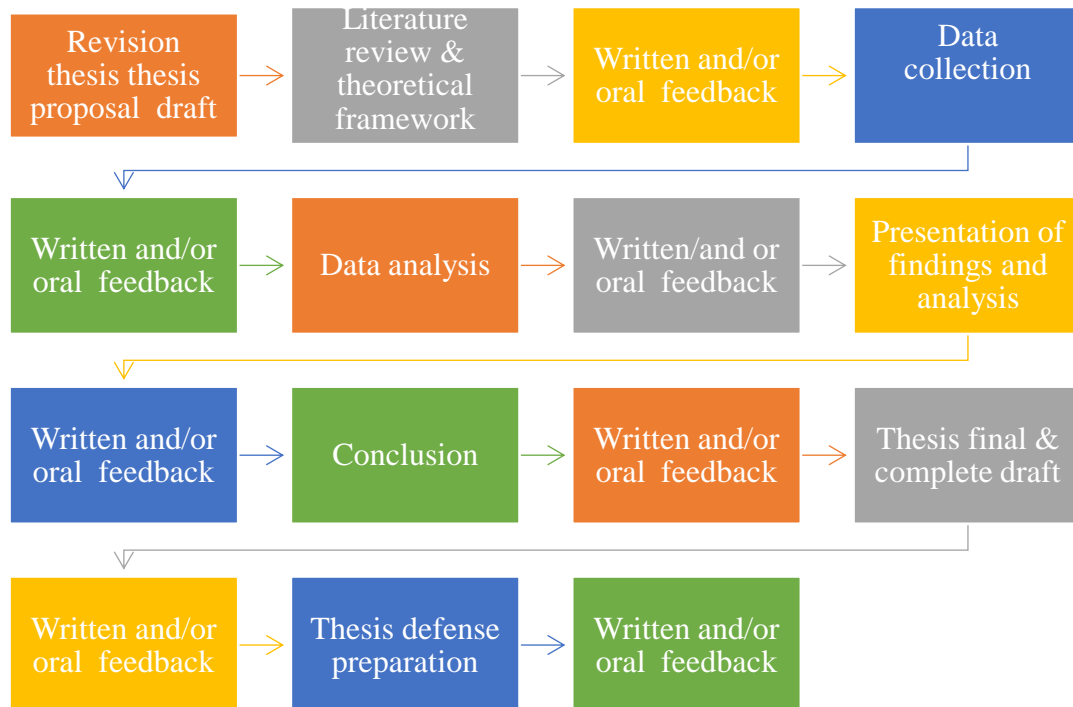


Figure 2. Sequence of thesis research and writing as well as teacher's written feedback (under the author's supervision)

