



Some Perceptions of Master's Degree Students on the Comments (remarks) of their Thesis Directors

Algunas percepciones de los estudiantes de maestría sobre los comentarios (observaciones) de sus directores de tesis

Algunas percepções dos alunos de mestrado sobre os comentários (observações) de seus diretores de tese

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Abstract

In the writing of the thesis, the comments and reviews given and received to test the hypothesis of the student throughout its elaboration take on a special meaning. Indeed, this article analyzes the students' perceptions of the comments and the support in the review given by the thesis directors, in order to identify what kind of comments are constructive and which are not. To achieve this objective, an exploratory method was used, using as procedure an interview of 10 master's degree students who were in the final stage of the preparation of their theses, as well as a survey of 10 graduates, all of them belonging to Human Sciences majors. The analysis of the data was made based on the methodology "content analysis." The results show that direct comments, focused on the object, not on the person, with suggestions for solution, are considered positive. On the other hand, ambiguous comments, offensive, dilated in time, and focused only on the form are perceived as unconstructive.

Keywords: writing comments; revision; feedback; perceptions

Resumen

Durante la escritura de la tesis de grado, los comentarios y revisiones que se hacen para probar la hipótesis del estudiante cobran un sentido especial. En este artículo se analizan las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre los comentarios y el apoyo en la revisión por parte de los directores de tesis, a fin de identificar cuáles son constructivos y cuáles no. Para el logro de este objetivo, se utilizó un método exploratorio basado en una entrevista a diez estudiantes de maestría en etapa final de la elaboración de su tesis, y una encuesta a diez egresados, todos ellos pertenecientes a carreras de Ciencias Humanas. El análisis de los datos se hizo a partir de la metodología de análisis de contenido. Los resultados muestran que comentarios directos, centrados en el objeto y no en la persona, con sugerencias de solución son considerados positivos. En cambio, comentarios ambiguos, desobligantes, dilatados en el tiempo y centrados solo en la forma son percibidos como poco constructivos.

Palabras clave: comentarios de escritura; revisión; retroalimentación; percepciones

Resumo

Na redação da tese tomam sentido especial os comentários e revisões dadas e recebidas para confrontar a hipótese do aluno ao longo da sua elaboração. Precisamente, neste artigo analisam-se as percepções dos alunos sobre os comentários e apoio na revisão por parte dos diretores de tese, a fim de identificar quais os comentários construtivos e quais não. Para atingir este objetivo utilizou-se o método exploratório usando como procedimento uma entrevista a dez alunos de mestrado que estavam na etapa final da elaboração de suas teses e um inquérito a dez formados, todos eles pertencentes às carreiras de Ciências Humanas. A análise dos dados foi feita a partir da metodologia "análise de conteúdo". Os resultados mostram que comentários diretos, focados no objeto, não na pessoa, com sugestões de solução são considerados positivos. Por outro lado, comentários ambíguos, desdenhosos, dilatados no tempo e focados apenas na forma são percebidos como pouco construtivos.

Palavras-chave: comentários de escrita; revisão; retroalimentação; percepções

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Introduction

Writing a Master's Thesis is a complex process involving a series of sub-processes. As stated in Ochoa and Cueva (2012), defining a problem, doing the literature review, building up a theoretical framework, designing a strategy, and verifying a hypothesis are highly complex processes.

On the other hand, preparing a Master's Thesis involves the participation of different actors with different "functional weight"; the role of the Thesis has been widely documented (cf. Valarino, 1994, 1997; Carlino, 2003; Rosas, Flores, & Valarino, 2006; Reisen & Carlino, 2009; Dubs, 2005; Rose, 2005; Golde, 2005; Ochoa & Cueva, 2012). In the case of the support provided by the thesis director, their guidance during the whole research process facilitate learning. According to Valarino (1997, p. 132), "the student's energy should be channeled towards the substantial questions and problems, helping him/her discriminate between his/her internality and the external control locus, stimulating his/her sense of belonging and responsibility".

The conditions under which the work is carried out are quite varied and they depend on the educational institution and on the thesis director themselves. Regarding dedication, for example, some directors meet with their advisee

every week, whereas others do it only when the student has sent a document.

A particularly important aspect in the function of the thesis director is the reading and commentaries provided on the different drafts presented by the thesis student (Arnoux, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kumar & Stracke, 2010). Since it is through them that, a novice researcher manages to enter an academic community and they learn how to argue and construct knowledge in it and, in more practical terms, to complete their thesis.

The importance of feedback in the writing of a thesis has been sufficiently documented in the existing bibliography and it is recognized both by the thesis directors and by the students.

East, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2012) emphasize on feedback as a tool the thesis writer has in order to become an independent researcher; likewise, Carless (2006) highlights its educational role. Can and Walker (2011), on the other hand, underscore its role in argumentation, clarity, and consistency of the writing and as a source of input the thesis writer can make decisions on what information to leave, expand on, or remove.

For Carlino (2003, 2004); Bartolini, Vivas, Braida, and Petric (2008), feedback provided by

peers promotes reflection and the analysis of formal and content aspects in the thesis writing, and they could reduce the difficulties that surround this process, such as feelings of disorientation, isolation, the wearing down, discouragement, and anguish.

On the other hand, feedback allows students to create writing habits, to have a positive attitude towards criticism, since as indicated by Caffarella and Barnett (2000) the fact of receiving and providing feedback in a continuous form reduces anxiety and promotes confidence. The content and the form of the comments are fundamental for them to be useful. Paltridge (2015) analyzed 97 reports by members of the evaluation panel for research articles in a journal published in English in order to identify how they asked authors to make changes; he found that there was an important number of indirect speech acts, a fact that is negatively valued by the authors, who consider that indirect requests are difficult to process, especially when writing and reading in a language that is not the author's mother tongue. Cotteral (2011) examined the writing practices of two doctoral students whose mother tongue is not English and concluded that it is necessary to teach students the rhetoric and conventions of

each discipline and work more with the students on the heuristic power of writing. Furthermore, Bitchener, Basturkmen, and East (2010) asked 35 advisors on the type of comments they made. They indicated that their observations focus mainly on content and they are particularly related with the theoretical framework, a section where students report having serious problems. Omissions or poor argumentation caused by conceptual problems or issues related with logic were also identified as problems, as well as the incorporation of other voices without awarding the corresponding credit for their authorship.

On the other hand, in order to obtain the "benefits" of feedback it is necessary that this feedback is effective, received, and accepted by the participants. The subject of perceptions is hence relevant.

In this context, a research was designed and carried out that aimed to answer the following questions: What are the perceptions of graduate students and Master's alumni on the revisions made by the thesis director in the process of writing their thesis? What types of comments are valued as positive (constructive) and which are valued as negative?

By constructive comments we refer to those comments promoting the academic independence of the thesis writer, the construction of knowledge, and the completion of the thesis. These include little constructive comments which do not help to train students in research.

Our general objective is to identify what type of comments, according to thesis writers, promote the proper development of the writing process and which hinder it. This objective considered the complexity of the thesis genre, which supposes a certain order, the command of discursive resources for positioning the author, and the participation of different voices in the speech. The following specific objectives were identified: 1. the type of comments made by the director; 2. the aspect on which they focused; 3. the form of the comment; and 4. the valuation made by those interviewed on these comments.

We start off from assuming that the comments of the thesis director may foster writing and research or, on the contrary, they may cause uncertainty in the thesis writer; and from the assumption that knowing the perceptions of the thesis writers contributes to gaining an awareness on what favors or hinders the culmination of a thesis with a view to fortifying the former and solving the latter.

In relation to the students' perceptions on the revisions there is an important bibliography. The literature includes research related with the perceptions of students towards feedback practices related with their writings and end products like the thesis, whose sources of information are mainly the professors (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000) or the thesis directors (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). Also, it is important to consider that this process of support and feedback of writing takes place within the framework of academic communities and institutions, and on specific disciplines; hence their evidently social nature (Aitchison & Lee, 2006, Cotterall, 2011).

The literature reviewed on research reveals that some studies are qualitative (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Carless, 2006; Kumar & Stracke 2007; East Bitchener

& Basturkmen, 2012; Cotterall, 2011, Odena & Burges, 2015), and some of them have a mixed approach (Can & Walker, 2010; East, Bitchener, & Basturkmen, 2012; Ghazal, Gul, Hanzala, Jessop, & Tharani, 2014) in which interviews, focal groups, or content analysis on the comments were used as mechanisms for the collection of information. Also, these studies pursue different objectives: the perceptions on the different characteristics and types of feedback (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Carless, 2006; East, Bitchener, & Basturkmen, 2012; Ghazal et al., 2014), the proposal for a model to understand the perceptions of the students, their decisions for revision, and factors associated with feedback practices (Can & Walker, 2010); writing as social practice and as an activity with pedagogical value, and the role of feedback in groups of academic writing (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Cotterall, 2011). Some studies will be presented next in general terms.

In a study involving 45 doctorate students, Caffarella and Barnett (2000) analyzed the commentaries of their thesis directors and the critique of their writing peers within the framework of the writing process (the Scholarly Writing Project). The findings show that the critique process is perceived as "one of the most influential elements of the scholarly writing process in terms of both learning about the process and improving their final product" (p. 50).

Kumar and Stracke (2007) analyzed the comments of the thesis director in the first draft. They developed a model of analysis based on three functions of speech: the referential, the directive, and the expressive function. They found that the expressive feedback is the one that most benefits the thesis writer. They also point out that through his/her comments" the supervisor communicates and provides advanced academic training, particularly in writing, to the supervisee" (p. 462).

Can and Walker (2011) carried out research on the perceptions and attitudes of Social Sciences doctorate students on the commentaries written on their texts and formulate an explanatory model to

describe the relationships between the perceptions of the students, their reviewing decisions, and the factors associated to their writing practices. Some of the conclusions presented were: “The participants preferred feedback examples that are both positive and critical, but mostly feedback with suggestive tones more than directive tones” (p. 519); also, they prefer to have some balance between positive and negative feedback, and more specific comments than fortify argumentation and clarity of the writing.

Odena and Burges (2015) interviewed 22 subjects in human sciences and 15 in technology; they indicated that those interviewed emphasized individualized feedback as decisive in keeping motivation and completing the thesis.

Ghazal et al. (2014) interviewed 10 Master’s students and 5 doctorate students and they analyzed 20 comments made by their professors. The results show that several students valued the feedback provided as a way to improve their writing abilities as well as their reasoning, textual organization, and coherence. They question contradictory or confusing comments; they prefer comments more focused on the conceptual rather than formal aspects, although foreign students value highly the observations related with the language. “Students in the current study appreciated constructive criticism when it was balanced with praise and suggestions” (p. 24).

Carless (2006) carried out research on how the students perceive the feedback process, what differentiates teachers’ and students’ perceptions, and what are the implications on the improvement of perceptions. To do so, a Likert-type survey was used, including 36 questions; it was applied to professors and students at eight public universities in Hong Kong, followed by some in-depth interviews to 5 students and two focal groups including university personnel.

Professors and students have different perceptions regarding feedback because thesis directors think that their comments are more detailed and useful than what students think. Thesis directors point out that students are only

interested in the grades, a perception that is not true, according to students. On the other hand, professors consider that their evaluations are fair, whereas students think that these are not impartial. Some points on which both coincide refer to the fact that the evaluation involves emotional aspects, since the students do not have a clear idea of the criteria used to evaluate them. According to Carless, these perceptions are key to improve assessment and feedback, which must take place through a dialogue between students and directors.

East, Bitchener, and Basturkmen (2012) analyzed the comments provided by L1 and L2 graduate students from three disciplinary areas (humanities, trade, and sciences) in six universities in New Zealand. The aim was to identify similarities and differences in the points of view of the thesis director and the student, focusing on the written comments. To this end, questionnaires and interviews were carried out. They focused especially on the students’ perspective and on how feedback works in the context of “learning conversations” (both written and oral) that take place in the supervisor-student teaching-learning relationship. It was found that for L1 students it was important that the information was direct and specific so that it would help them organize their writing. However, indirect comments implied a challenge for reasoning, so that the student would look for answers on his/her own. In addition, they valued the quality of the relationship with the thesis director and the opportunities to discuss feedback as a fundamental part of this relationship. In the case of students for whom English is the L2, understanding the comments was a source of concern. Regardless of language and cultural background, direct and indirect comments are valued in a positive way, as well as the discussion with the thesis director.

As we can see, most studies highlight the importance of revisions both as a means for training and to complete the thesis. It is hence necessary to examine what types of comments, according to the students taking part in the

interviews, promote self-awareness and autonomy in the thesis writers and encourage them to self-manage their knowledge or whether critical comments and remarks on the poor quality of the document, or contradictory feedback may lead to negative emotions (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000) and are perceived in a negative way.

Reference Framework

This work is framed in studies carried on about the writing of the graduate thesis, which supposes an analysis of the aspects related with a) the writing of the thesis; b) the importance of the review and the commentaries as devices for self-regulation of writing and c) the value of social representations regarding the process of review guided by the thesis director.

The writing of the thesis

The writing of the thesis displays some specific features that depend on the disciplinary framework in which it is set, the purposes that it aims for, the theoretical and methodological frameworks they develop, the ways to interpret the data, and even, on the professor who directs it. On this regards, Arnoux, Borsinger, Carlino, Di Stefano, Pereira, and Silvestre (2004) explain:

In the elaboration of the thesis project and its writing, besides the general knowledge associated with previous practices of writing, the criteria related with research in each area come to play (Bazerman, 1988): what is original in its contribution; what place do the data have; which type of data is considered relevant; what types of demonstrations are required; what links must be established with the bibliography; what sequences dominate—descriptive, narrative, explanatory or argumentative—; what proof must be provided; what is the importance of pictures, diagrams, illustrations, etc. (p. 4)

It is about constructing knowledge, which implies laying out the arguments; taking up a voice as the author and incorporating other voices;

understanding the dynamics of the researcher; consolidating the process of education through the accomplishment of research work that will lead him/her to choose a problem and a methodological route to account for it in a structured and systematic way; it also involves an analysis and interpretation that is in agreement with “verified empirical results according to the scientific method, accompanied by theoretical interpretations” (Valarino, 1997, p. 125).

It also involves the configuration process of an academic voice, which implies that the student takes up his/her own voice and places it in an intertextual dialogue with other voices of members of the same community (Bazerman & Russell, 2003).

The importance of reviewing and comments as a self-regulation device in writing

The reviewing process has been highlighted by authors like Hayes and Flower (1980), and Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) for whom the production of a text is understood through the resolution of complex cognitive activities and sub-processes involved in the planning, textualization and reviewing. These are assumed as necessary steps in understanding textual production, steps that the writer must resourcefully regulate through monitoring.

Beyond considering reviewing as a merely cognitive activity, it is suggested that it allows for the creation of a communicative situation whereby interaction makes it possible to contrast and share ideas, raise possibilities for rewriting, engage in a dialog on the difficulties, etc. Also, rhetorical problems can be identified, including the audience, the communicative function, and the setting.

Independently from the methodological process followed or the field of knowledge, reviewing as a mediation device between the author of the thesis, the thesis director, and the writing tutors, teachers, and even other peers, turns into a setting devoted to helping the student diagnose his/her achievements as well as his/her difficulties. Reviewing is in agreement with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1978),

which explains that the cognitive development of individuals is achieved in social situations in which they share with an expert, in this case, the reflection on textual production: A sociocultural glance at written language. Likewise, Vigotsky (1978) underscores the self-regulating function of writing.

From a sociocultural perspective, written communication does not occur in isolation, but in a context, which is understood as a “mental phenomenon” (Mercer, 2001, p. 39) created through the interaction between writers and readers; likewise, it is related with the uses that are configured around these practices. In the case of reviewing, it is conceived as a located practice in which two people share their analysis about the written text. The relationship that can be established between the students, the directors, and the writing tutors (or professors) through reviewing and commenting is recursive; it is continuously reprocessed on the bases of discursive construction. In addition, the information that is elaborated through this type of evaluation processes makes it possible to modify the text and become aware of the strategies of written composition employed.

Following Carlino (2015), the reasons that justify the importance of providing opportunities for reviewing in the elaboration of a thesis are of a different kind: a) sociocultural, b) didactic, c) institutional, and d) cognitive. Regarding the sociocultural reason, as this is a social practice within the scientific setting, it makes it possible for the thesis writer to be read and receive critical comments (as in the case of a scientific journal). As far as the didactic aspect is concerned, it is suggested that difficulties arise when reviewing texts according to their content, structure, and rhetorical effect on the reader, hence it is necessary that this process is taught. Also, it is explained that peer revision allows for the following:

The student writers learn that the changes suggested by these readers do not have to be made out of observance to an authority that has made an

evaluation, but it is essential that the students undertake their authorship, examine the suggestions received, and decide on their own improvement plan for the text in order to coordinate the author’s intentions with the effects they have on the reader. (Carlino, 2015, p. 14)

It is also pointed out that it is justified at the didactic level, since the student is placed in a more active role as a learner and not only as the receiver of comments. In the study carried out by Aitchison and Lee (2006, 269), in the absence of a systematic pedagogy of writing that allows students to access a culture of research, writing groups are created to promote collaborative learning. These teams of doctoral candidates are given the name of “thesis writers circle.” The fact that these groups have in common a strong dependency on these pedagogical principles is analyzed: identification and peer review, community, and writing as “normal business” in the doing of research.

In turn, Cotterall (2011) emphasizes on the need for pedagogy at doctoral level, which favors the development of writing through work dynamics including novice and expert students, and taking back Wenger’s concept of “communities of practice.”

With respect to cognitive reasons, it is considered that reviewing becomes a source for the epistemic potential of writing; to this extent, it is not only a matter of “telling about the knowledge,” but also about elaborating and transforming it. Feedback on writing plays a crucial role in the enculturation of students into discipline (Hyland 2009).

Feedback provided on graduate students’ texts offer an opportunity to improve their academic writing abilities, as it provides information leading to greater opportunities for learning (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Hattie & Timperley). Kumar and Stracke (2007, p. 462) argue that “it is through written feedback that the supervisor communicates and provides advanced academic training, particularly in writing, to the supervisee.”

The value of thesis writers' social perceptions

The writing of the thesis is a fundamental experience within the framework of academic discursive communities; hence the pertinence of the study on their perceptions.

Perception is a mental activity performed by the individual on his/her surroundings and it largely determines decision-making and the way in which this individual acts in the world. It is also understood as the means whereby the individual processes information on an object of knowledge, the sense he/she grants to it and the significance he/she builds around it.

Perceptions are determined by the context in which individuals are immersed. Hence, they are associated to a time and place (Merleau-Ponty, 1985). They are not only a system to understand and interpret our surroundings but they also determine the interactions of individuals who share the same sociocultural setting. Perceptions then are intimately associated with social experience, since the individual belongs to a group, in this case, to an academic community with interaction rules; social life guides and determines these perceptions.

By making perceptions explicit, we aim to understand the opinions, images, and meanings that social actors have built with respect to the experiences they have lived. We attempt to elucidate how social actors apprehend their reality, organize it and, as a result of this process, regulate their behavior. From the standpoint of the concrete proposal of this research, we inquire about a set of knowledge and attitudes by a group who has the role of the thesis writer, facing the comments provided by his/her thesis director, what they elicit in them, and how they react to them.

A concept that is closely related with perceptions is the concept of social representations (Raiter, 2002; Pont, 2010). The notion of social representation comes from social psychology (Moscovici, 1989; Jodelet, 1989). According to Jodelet (1984):

All social representations are representations of something and someone. Thus, they do not dupli-

cate the real, neither do they duplicate the ideal, nor the subjective part of the object, nor the objective part of the subject. Rather, they make up the process whereby their relationship is established. (p. 475)

To this extent, the active and reflexive roles of the subjects involved are at the bases of understanding social representations. They take a stance regarding the way they perceive the practices where they are inserted. In addition, at the basis of perception we find the social forms construed within a certain context, symbolic constructions created by the subjects in a discourse community.

Methodology

Type of study

This is a qualitative-exploratory study. Once the data had been described, an attempt was made to interpret them

Participants

10 graduate students from Master's programs in human and social sciences at a Colombian public university were interviewed; they were young students with ages ranging between 20 and 30 years old. Students who had already taken all the subjects in the academic program and who had spent two semesters with a thesis director (final stage of the process) were selected. Four of these students had already completed the maximum term of permanence in the program; that is to say, they no longer had the option of graduating. A questionnaire was also applied to an equal number of Master's Programs alumni: 8 from Colombian programs, one from a Master's program in Argentina, and another one from a Master's Program in France. The ages of this population ranged between 25 and 35 years old. This population had graduated in the past 5 years. The whole population was Colombian and from a middle-class in economic terms.

The fact of being Colombian and belonging to the field of human sciences allowed for a unified sample. We started off from the supposition that

every discipline has a particular language, but also that through the thesis director comments, regardless of the area of knowledge, the thesis writer manages to access an academic community. Two Colombians who had studied abroad were also included in this study, since we wished to know if there were significant differences between them and those who studied in Colombia.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and they were asked to sign an informed consent form.

Data collection process

Regarding the students, an invitation to participate in the research was initially sent through the postmaster service. Eighteen people replied and a meeting was agreed to apply the survey. Five of them did not attend the meeting and three of them did not comply with the requirements related with the subjects' profile. The interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

As for the alumni, a questionnaire was sent to 20 people by email. Only twelve people replied and two of them did not fill it in completely.

The information was collected and processed within six months. Both the questionnaire and the interview were built around 4 open questions:

1. What type of observations or comments did (or does) your thesis director do?
2. What type of aspects did they refer to?
3. What did/do you think about these observations or comments?
4. Did they help you to finish your thesis?

At first, the questions were piloted with a Master's student and with an alumnus and then they were adjusted according with the answers provided.

Data analysis

The unit of analysis for the research was focused on the written comments provided by thesis directors to the drafts presented by Master's Thesis students.

These comments were analyzed by means of the "content analysis" methodology, *i.e.*, the "set of research methods and techniques aimed to facilitate the systematic description and interpretation of semantic and formal components in all types of messages, and the formulation of valid inferences regarding the data gathered" (Krippendorff, 1990, p. 28).

Based on the answers provided and on the "content analysis" methodology we aimed to identify similarities and differences (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The process started by reading the answers several times and then making a categorization. Each one of the researchers carried out a pre-analysis and classified the answers on her own and later on confronted them with the ones classified by the other researcher in order to guarantee their reliability. The results were tabulated starting from the most frequent answers; however, some sporadic answers were considered in the results due to their importance, with a view to the last objective of this research: optimizing the feedback provided by thesis directors.

According to this methodology, not only the subject or theme of the comments was studied, but also the direction (attitude, assessment) or point of view of the matter being discussed. In the first aspect, the following categories were considered:

1. The type of comment: its form and content.
2. The time when the comment was made: thesis project and thesis (aspect on which it was focused).
3. Form of the comment. In the second aspect, the valuation system of *positive*, *negative*, *favorable* or *unfavorable* was used.

These two aspects made it possible to go from an objective description (first phase of the analysis) to the data inference and interpretation (phase two).

Results

Data description

The results based on the previous categories are presented below; then, the answer to the main research question is provided.

a. Perceptions on the type of comment

As reported by the students' answers, most of the thesis directors commented both on form and content: the comments on form are understood as observations related with the coherence and cohesion of the text; comments on content were related directly with the object of study.

(1) The Director asks me to be clear in what I say; for example, *if you say this, you must show specific statistical data or when you mention a concept you must explain [it...]*. Sometimes one leaves some information out and it is not clear, and the professor makes you aware of that. I_06¹

Regarding the first aspect, the aim to be achieved is for the document to be as accurate as possible and to comply with its communicative intentions; reflections are made on the document's organization, coherence, and cohesion according to the readers' profile as well as lexical, grammatical, and orthographic aspects. Let us take an example in (2):

(2) It happens sometimes that I am approaching one subject and then I move on to another one and there is no connection between paragraphs, I get entangled when I am writing [...]. Then the director made me see this problem I was not aware of and when I became aware of it I was able to solve the problem. I_04

Regarding the second aspect, the aim is to be more precise when it comes to aspects related with the concepts, ideas, and argumentative processes, as illustrated in (3) and (4).

(3) The director did some corrections related with the writing but the comments were mainly

focused on the argumentative construction and the contents in general. I_02

(4) From the beginning, his/her main concern was at level of the content: What exactly was going to be researched? What historical period, works, and authors should be chosen to work on the subject? Which would be the main axes in the comparative research? What result was intended? His/her observations were always linked to those fundamental aspects and it was very important for her to keep me always focused on them. I_05

For this population, both types of comments are necessary.

Perceptions on the timing for the comment

Although this research did not focus on the research project itself, several students taking part in the survey did discriminate between the research project and the thesis.

Regarding the first aspect, comments are considered even before the research question had been devised:

(5) My director made several precise and very sharp suggestions. Among them, she suggested to do an immersion in the corpus before stating the research problem; [she told me] that I should do a selection of the corpus based on what I wanted to research; [also] that I should pay close attention to the theories that would allow me to carry out the analysis. In addition, she suggested cutting out on theories and materials for analysis. I_17

Reference is also made to setting the limits for what the research was going to focus on:

(6) First (he) asked me questions that allowed me to frame the work in a field of the knowledge; my generating question and objectives (rather than a hypothesis, we worked on the question and we looked for answers through field work). I_13

Students who referred to the construction of the project considered this feedback was essential in the success of their thesis:

(7) I consider that the initial guidance and comments make up 80% of the thesis. I_17

(8) Having your research question, justification, and methodological strategy clear is a navigation chart that makes the journey easier for you. I_18

Regarding the “during” period, that is, the elaboration of the thesis, according to those interviewed, the comments focused on the different sections of the thesis: the problem, justification, objectives, theoretical framework, methodology, results, and to a lesser extent, the organization of the text. Participants (11) and (2) emphasize on the contributions related with the methodology:

(9) My thesis director used to make methodological suggestions to follow the structure of the research (research question, objectives, justification, theoretical framework, methodological design). I_11

(10) S/he helped me a lot with the methodology. For example, recommendations were provided on how to select the sample. I_2

The subject of the theoretical framework and finding one’s voice were recurring topics for several participants:

(11) I had many problems with the theoretical framework because I had included definitions or quotes that my director criticized: *you shouldn’t mix Bordieu and Lacan*. I_06

(12) [...] With the quotes, I used to insert them and not explain them; then, my director said to me that they had to be interwoven with the previous and the forthcoming text, and that I had to comment on them. I_19

(13) S/he told me that I had selected some theoreticians to the disadvantage of my own independent voice. S/he kept asking me where I stood as an author. I_20

On the contrary, only two of the participants made reference to the planning and organization stages of the thesis:

(14) Once the initial idea was structured, (s/he) helped me to establish the limits of the field work so that it would be feasible in a determined time lapse. I_13

(15) I value highly that s/he made me think of the sense of each chapter. I_18

Perceptions on the way in which the comment was made

The interviewees valued the comments in terms of their tone and quality. They expect that the comments are clear and direct. They prefer comments that provide both suggestions and solutions:

(16) S/he was always very precise, direct, and clear in the corrections. I_14

(17) S/he gave me suggestions to reframe and correct the text. I_03

(18) He used to help me reframe the questions, define concepts, the scope, and propose alternatives to approach the problems. I_01

On the other hand, directors were positively valued when they redirected the writing in terms of the process and they provided assistance through examples or even by co-authoring some sections:

(19) S/he helped me a lot by dividing the tasks into small goals, allowing me to see the positive aspects in the process, the contributions of the research. I_18

(20) S/he let me know that the texts delivered for revision did not have to be perfect and s/he reviewed them with kindness. I_01

(21) He asked me to read theses in order to interiorize their structure. I_15

(22) S/he always provided examples and on one occasion s/he even wrote a section with me. I_01

In contrast, comments which were derogatory towards the work and those which focused more on the form rather than on the research processes were valued negatively.

In relation to the first aspect, reference is made to pejorative or discrediting comments towards the work or the person; generally, these were comments that were not understood:

(23) The director disqualified the work immediately: *this is worthless*, from which I inferred that I was not worth anything. His/her comments were not focused on the text and its construction. I_07

(24) S/he marked some sections in red and wrote question marks on them. I did not understand what s/he wanted me to do. I_10

(25) I always came out of the meetings thinking that I clearly knew what I had to do. When I came back, the professor told me that everything was bad. It seemed that I did not understand her. The professor was very annoyed. I felt completely stupid and without any will to do anything. I_08

The second aspect refers to the fact that the director focuses his/her attention only on formal aspects: spelling, writing, punctuation, without thinking about the structural categories of the text or about the target audience.

(26) The formal aspects, the ones on which s/he emphasized the most, can be learned through the advisory sessions; however, the rigor of the research

requires a tutor who guarantees that the stages of the research process are followed correctly. I_11

From the group of thesis writers who did not manage to graduate, and even one who did, graduate students felt that the participation of the director was not successful, whether because they failed to do something of because of the way in which they did it (quick, imprecise explanations at very long intervals in time).

(27) I asked for directions on the methodology that I would have to follow in my research, but s/he did not say anything clear to me. I was very entangled and confused. In the end, I requested a change of director. I_10

(28) The director did not teach me almost anything. I had to learn from mistakes; still today, after 5 years, I am learning things like, for example, what the discussion is. If somebody had taught me, I would not have wasted so much time and I would have started my research career much earlier. I_12

(29) His multiple occupations generated much anguish by the impossibility to count on their advice office. When we met it was always in a hurry and I did not manage to understand well what I had to do. I_09

(30) The time between one instalment and the next one was so long that I did not even remember what I had written. It had to start again almost from zero. I_07

Inference and interpretation of data

The representations of the students about the comments of the directors that were considered positive and allowed them to advance in the development of their thesis varied in their nature. The large majority points to the superstructural categories of a research project or a thesis. Others reflect the dichotomy between form and content and finally, there are representations around what is considered to be “good advisory.” The perceptions also

reveal the serious problem of the configuration of a “researcher’s voice.” The subject of the thesis writer’s voice articulated with the voices of the authors is significant as a representation, since it involves a work of intertextuality and configuration of the identity of the thesis writer, who takes up and assumes a critical positioning regarding particular discourses framed in an academic community. According to Hyland (2005), “the creation of the authorial persona is an act of personal choice, and the influence of one’s individual personality, confidence, experience, ideological preference are important” (p. 191).

Likewise, the representation referring to the fact that the director does not only point to a problem, but also raises possibilities for improvement, even by editing sections of the thesis or providing examples is also important. This type of representations provide evidence on the fact that the revision is more effective if an understanding atmosphere is combined with concrete support and specific ways to improve the text.

Representations show that the students value the intervention of the director as a shared activity of reflection and dialogue within the framework of an academic community. From this perspective, the problems or errors related with the writing become a way to understand aspects related with coherence and clarity at the theoretical and methodological levels, as well as with the ways in which data are analyzed in a discipline and arguments are developed

The thesis writer is involved in an educational reviewing process. A relationship of trust and respect is established between the student and the director through which disciplinary as well as methodological knowledge is built; reflection processes on the bibliographical sources are generated; and on how the definition of the research goals of the student is attained.

According to the data, comments which are not so constructive are those related with the tone of the remarks, their content, and the availability of time by directors. The first aspect refers to the way in which the comment is made: possibly strong,

negative, reiterative comments are perceived by the receiver as too aggressive, recriminatory, and harmful to their professional and personal image, and generators of anxiety.

On the other hand, comments which did not allow for the possibility of a reply or question, that is, categorical remarks the thesis writer did not agree with, but were unable to express their disagreement.

Secondly, vague, imprecise comments, or comments which focused solely on the form were perceived as incomplete and not useful.

Lastly, the perception that the director did not devote enough time to the thesis writer and the document was regarded by the thesis writers as uncomfortable and also as a fact that created distances between them and their advisor, and it hindered progress. In addition, the absence of prompt feedback was also questioned.

These representations reveal that the thesis writers are novice researchers, a reason for them to require strong support in methodological aspects and at the different moments in the elaboration of the thesis. Although it is possible “to learn by oneself,” there is a great emotional and cognitive expense as well as a high investment of time.

These representations also show the importance of providing comprehensible explanations and justifications during the review in order to allow students to move forward in their writing purposes.

Likewise, the tone of the comments and the time devoted to the review are presented as aspects that have a positive or negative impact. Negative comments are usually directed towards the person and not the text, a fact that reduces the students’ self-esteem and leads to demotivation and sometimes abandonment.

Discussion

The data show that the form of the comment itself is essential for its acceptance: clear, complete, and direct comments (Paltridge, 2015; Ghazal et al. 2014) that provide solutions and are given with respect. East et al. (2012) also found that feedback

should be direct but at the same time it should pose an intellectual challenge. For students, it is important to understand the nature of their mistake, what the recommendations are, and how they can make progress in their writing (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). All this should take place in a relationship between equals where the director shows interest in the subject of the research.

Contrary to what Caffarella and Barnett (2000) state, we agree with Can and Walker (2011) in the fact that receiving frequent criticism does not guarantee its acceptance. We think that it depends on the quality of the criticism. Every instance of destructive criticism lowers the researcher's self-esteem and it may discourage him/her from concluding their work. Ghazal et al (2014, p. 24) showed that feedback based on excessive criticism was little useful because students tended to ignore it. By highlighting only the negative aspects, that is, those comments perceived by students as focusing only on the poor quality of the text, on confusing and contradictory comments, feedback that has little educational value is stimulated. That is, by focusing on the negative aspects and not providing detailed suggestions on how to improve the text, comments may be taken as a personal, discouraging attack. On the contrary, studies like the one carried out by Eyres, Hatch, Turner, and West (2001) provide evidence on the fact that positive feedback provides a feeling of reward, trust, confidence, and acceptance of one's writing practices.

In this process, the personality of the thesis director is decisive. Can and Walker (2011) indicate that cold, intimidating, irresponsible advisers with little time discourage students from requesting feedback, and students who feel ashamed and are afraid of criticism lose confidence in themselves, lose motivation, and do not dare to request feedback.

The subject of the citation appears in most of the works consulted. In this research it also appeared as a representation in most of the population; however, the relationship between the students' own voice and other people's voices appears only in a minority.

In a way, it is about re-invoking the voices of others, through intertextuality, as a way to ensure the social identity of the writer (Prior, 1998). In the same line we find Bazerman (2004) and his statement about the identity that is constructed through the discourse. To this extent, the voice in texts is analyzed through the texts the author refers to, as well as his/her interpretations and the use s/he makes of them, making special emphasis on the intentionality that takes him to take up a certain stance. This topic is associated with the production of knowledge and it is a problematic area for the population taking part in the survey. Many of the thesis writers sacrifice their own voices for the sake of greater rigor, which obliterates their creations. Others do not support their conclusions suitably, a fact that leads them to produce texts which lack consistency. Decisive support from the thesis director is necessary in the construction of the state of the matter and the theoretical framework, as it is in these sections that the thesis writer encounters more problems and sometimes ends up committing plagiarism.

According to the interviewees, there was little feedback regarding "meta-writing," that is to say, few professors make recommendations that lead students to plan and review some sections of their texts. The disciplinary rhetoric also appears to be absent because the comments are mainly focused on the contents. Bitchener, Basturkmen, and East (2010, p. 87) "referred to the need to give feedback on the structure and organization of part-genres and some."

We consider that the planning has a great power to clarify ideas and organize them, and to that extent it saves both effort and time. The same can be said about the revision. If both directors and students plan together the different sections of a thesis and if they dedicate some sessions to joint revision, some errors may certainly be avoided. Self-assessment grids and rubrics are also useful.

An important finding was related with feedback provided at the beginning of the research. This type of feedback performs a function of planning for the research as a whole and regarding

the thesis as a document. Setting the boundaries of the problem and the visualization of its solution guides the student and allows him/her to be more focused. This perception was also verified by Ghazal et al. (2014), who highlighted the importance of feedback during the project.

Many of the comments that, in the opinion of interviewees, are little constructive prevent the thesis writer from mastering the discursive genre of his/her discipline, from becoming an author for this discipline, and from entering an academic community.

Conclusions

The ability to take in criticism and see it as a necessary aspect of textual production is a process that is achieved gradually. In this process, the following features are crucial:

a. Getting positive comments which counterbalance the affective and emotional effect of negative comments, and stimulate the thesis writer to carry on. Students value as positive those comments in which confidence on what has been achieved is expressed, that is, properly written sections are praised and what should be done to correct them is clearly explained.

b. Giving the students the possibility to discuss the comments, express their disagreement or agreement, and defend their point of view. In this way they achieve more autonomy and confidence in their possibilities.

c. Recommendations are offered as a source for learning, as they do not indicate what is wrong, but they help students to think about how to edit their document. The purpose of the comments is to strengthen communication and interaction between the student and the thesis director; communication that leads students to face their way of writing, develop their learning skills, self-regulate by reading their drafts out loud, think about their writing by having a prospective reader in mind, be open to rewriting their text, and understand the importance of drafts in the writing of a thesis.

d. Avoiding overloading several tasks in a single comment. It is more efficient to ask for a

few tasks with very detailed and punctual aspects, short-term goals that are manageable. Otherwise students might be pushed to face an unsurmountable block.

To sum up, it is important for directors to become aware of the crucial role they play in the training of future researchers. Their comments should be constructive, accurate, and they should not only point to problems but also to ways to overcome them; they should allow the work to advance and also reduce the blocks every researcher faces when tackling an endeavor as challenging as a thesis. The director should not only be a researcher role model but also a role model reviewer S/he has to avoid as much as possible “sanctioning” the student and making derogatory comments. The samples of their own writing and the experiences they have accumulated may contribute to this end.

Tutoring sessions should also be made in a respectful and assertive way; the time allotted to thesis writers and their works should be respected and they should be seen as learners, not experts. In addition, a high level of commitment is expected from students regarding their research process.

Directors should make comments on both form and content. Form problems tend to reflect conceptual gaps, the mixture of paradigms, and in general, little command of the theoretical and methodological frameworks chosen. Thesis problems are not only writing, punctuation, and spelling problems.

It is advisable to encourage students to take part in conferences and promote collaborative writing works (professor-student), since these types of situations make comments, even “strong” ones, to be perceived in a different way, as there is an inherent motivation. Collaborative writing also allows for the thesis writer to move on from being an apprentice to little by little managing some academic independence, thanks to their directors’ guidance.

A high level of commitment regarding the research process, discipline, academic rigor, and the development of reviewing and linguistic skills are expected from students.

Finally, we wish to indicate that one of the limitations in this research was the small number of participants. In future studies, the population should be larger, both in numbers and in their diversity, and also include students from other faculties. Likewise, future research might include longitudinal studies comprising both the elaboration of the project and the writing of the thesis.

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Notas

1. The examples show the number of every interviewee at the end of the quote: the first ten numbers refer to student and the last ten numbers refer to alumni.

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