The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning™

2025 Volume 15/Issue 2 Article 3

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Recommended Citations:

APA
Vinte, J. V., & Bensen Bostanci, H. (2025). The Impact of Thesis Feedback on Doctoral Students' Academic Writing: A Social Practice-Oriented Phenomenological Study. *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, *15*(2), 44-65.

MLA
Vinte, Joaquim Vicente, and Hanife Bensen Bostanci. "The Impact of Thesis Feedback on Doctoral Students' Academic Writing: A Social Practice-Oriented Phenomenological Study." *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2025, 44-65.

Contents lists available at www.jltl.com.tr

The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning

Published by the Association of Applied Linguistics

www.jltl.com.tr

The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning, 2025*(2)*, pp. 44-65

The Impact of Thesis Feedback on Doctoral Students' Academic Writing: A Social Practice-Oriented Phenomenological Study

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:
Received 24 Dec 2024
Revisions completed 28 Jun 2025
Online First 30 Jun 2025
Published 30 Jun 2025

Key Words:
Academic writing
EFL students
Social practice
Thesis supervision
Supervisors' roles
Doctoral students' perceptions
Phenomenology

ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) doctoral students regarding the impact of supervisors' feedback on their academic writing, framing academic writing as a socially situated practice shaped by interaction and institutional dynamics. We employed an interpretative phenomenological research design within a qualitative approach, and using purposive sampling, we interviewed five doctoral students from the Department of English Language Teaching at a private university in Northern Cyprus, Türkiye. The data, analysed thematically, revealed a wide range of perceptions among participants. From the social practice theory lens, some participants expressed satisfaction with the developmental role of supervisory feedback, others reported dissatisfaction due to limited interaction, lack of dialogic engagement, and the perceived quality of feedback. These findings suggest that thesis feedback is not merely a pedagogical tool but a socially mediated practice that deeply influences students' academic writing trajectories, their confidence in navigating academic conventions, and integration into the academic community. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the supervision process and the broader social practices that shape EFL academic writing, with particular attention to its relational and contextual dimensions.

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Developing academic writing skills is the most challenging learning aspect for postgraduate students in general (Şahin & Yağız, 2024; Ooi et al., 2022) and for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in particular (Riadil et al., 2023; Su & Wang, 2020; Sukandi & Rianita, 2018). While students struggle to master these skills, university lecturers and professors use academic writing to measure students' progress in higher education. Doctoral EFL students are typically required to produce a range of academic texts as part of their coursework across different subject areas (Gillett et al., 2009). Crucially, their academic journey culminates in the thesis - arguably the most substantial and complex piece of writing they are expected to produce (Phyo et al., 2023). This academic requirement is particularly demanding because thesis writing constitutes a specialized genre that differs significantly from other types of academic writing doctoral EFL students may have previously developed (Casanave, 2019; Sükan & Mohammadzadeh, 2022; Sukandi & Rianita, 2018). Consequently, producing a doctoral thesis demands a higher level of critical analysis, which adds to the complexity and challenges faced by doctoral students (Ooi et al., 2022; Phyo et al., 2024).

To investigate the thesis supervision process, much research within academic writing has focused on different aspects of higher education students (Berlach, 2010; Gedamu, 2018; Kamler & Thomson, 2014; Nurie, 2018; Netshitangani & Machaisa, 2021; Rasool et al., 2022; Schmolitzky & Schümmer, 2009). Nurie (2018), for example, conducted a study to understand supervisors' attention to information and the language functions supervisors use to interact with their students. Other researchers have paid special attention to the key concerns in higher education that influence graduate students' supervisors (O'Hara et al., 2019). Adding to the supervisory literature, Parija and Kate (2018) focuses on postgraduate thesis writing; however, only one chapter superficially deals with the thesis supervision process. This study contributes to the existing literature by examining academic writing as a social practice, focusing specifically on how doctoral supervisees, who are in the process of writing their theses, communicate and engage in feedback exchanges with their supervisors.

2. Literature review

2.1. Academic Writing as Social Practice

Academic writing is widely understood as a social practice within higher education, shaped by the values, expectations, and interactions of specific academic communities (Gillett et al., 2009; Green, 2016; Mohamed, 2006). As Gillett et al. (2009) explain, students write with a particular readership and purpose in mind, where ideas of what is "right or wrong" are socially constructed by academic members (p. xix). Similarly, Mohamed (2006) describes academic writing practices and ideologies as "socially constituted" (p. iii), while Green (2016, p. 98) emphasizes that writing occurs within "activity systems" governed by disciplinary and institutional norms. Therefore, our study was guided by social practice theory focusing on academic writing development. This theory posits that learning occurs within a social context, where various factors interact to foster individual development and skill improvement (Penuel et al., 2016), as we illustrate in Figure 1.

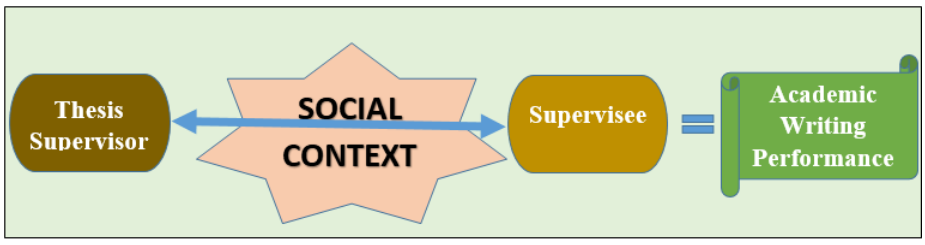

Figure 1.
Social practice theory in academic writing

In this sense, academic writing involves more than a cognitive skill - it reflects the social processes that shape how knowledge is constructed and communicated. In contrast to this social practice theory, Alejandro (2025) warns that "academic writing is largely desociologised" (p. 288). Therefore, in order to align academic writing with social practice, feedback should be a central mediating practice that helps doctoral EFL students navigate academic conventions and transition into their roles as researchers-in-training (Abdulkhaleq & Abdullah, 2013; Casanave, 2019; Connolly, 2023). Thus, Kamler and Thomson (2014, p. 9) describe supervision as a space where students are introduced to the "regulations, expectations, and disciplinary procedures" of academic life. From this perspective, effective feedback does more than guide text revision - it supports students' academic identities and social integration. When supervision is attuned to the relational and contextual realities of EFL students, it can foster not only their academic writing development but also their overall doctoral success. Conversely, ineffective feedback may hinder this integration and contribute to persistent challenges, such as low doctoral completion rates (Amani et al., 2022; Ghatak et al., 2021; Phyo et al., 2024).

2.2. The impact of feedback on thesis writing

Feedback on postgraduate students' theses is fundamental for their successful completion of their degree and improvement of their academic writing skills (Abdulkhaleq & Abdullah, 2013; Jackson et al., 2021; Ooi et al., 2022). Nurie (2018) adds that feedback can help postgraduate students achieve their final goal. Despite the relevance of feedback on postgraduate students' performance, it is the doctoral EFL students themselves who must contribute significantly to meet the doctorate requirements for graduation. While supervisors' feedback is crucial, Berlach (2010) asserts that students must realise from the beginning that the writing task is primarily theirs, not the supervisors. Moreover, the activities of these supervisors in some universities are still conducted based on their individual experiences (Casanave, 2019; Jackson et al., 2021), obtained through the practices of their former doctoral supervisors. Consequently, Carter et al. (2020) advise students not to conceal their flaws and to avoid complaining about minor shortcomings, remembering that, after all "supervisors are only humans" (p. 9).

When university efforts to assist supervisees are established, suggesting a one-size-fits-all style of thesis supervision feedback could not produce good results (Akella, 2022; Berlach, 2010). In fact, the way each student approaches academic writing is influenced by their culture, identity, and learning style. Therefore, these aspects should be considered when supervisors provide feedback to their supervisees since doctoral supervisees may analyse the writing world from a sociocultural point of view (Abdulkhaleq & Abdullah, 2013; Akela, 2022). In other words, a supervisee might view, comprehend, and perceive thesis feedback differently from their supervisor. Due to these differences, the supervisor should be aware of potential difficulties and consider ways to motivate students to continue writing their theses and overcome obstacles until they complete their studies (Casanave, 2019; Fitria, 2022; Syafi'i et al., 2024). On the other hand, no matter how the process of supervising a thesis is conducted, the feedback provided should be mutually beneficial for both supervisors and supervisees (Berlach, 2010; Ismail et al., 2013).

2.3. Types of feedback in doctoral supervision

The effectiveness of feedback for doctoral supervisees depends on its nature, with constructive feedback offering particular benefits. When feedback is constructive, the results are beneficial because the supervisees are encouraged to act on the suggestions and recommendations given by their supervisors (Lee, 2018; Ngulube, 2021; Phyo et al., 2024). Conversely, the results could be negative if the feedback does not foster supervisees' learning and understanding of academic writing principles. In fact, supervisees may experience discomfort from non-constructive thesis feedback, especially when their expectations diverge from those of their supervisors (Horn et al., 2023; Jackson, 2021; Maphalala & Mpufo, 2017). In

such cases, supervisees may receive the feedback but are unlikely to act on it promptly, if at all.

Previous research on feedback in students' academic writing emphasises the importance of viewing feedback as a **situated social practice**, highlighting the interplay between communication, expectations, and support (Alejandro, 2025; Penuel et al., 2016). A recurring theme across studies is the **need for feedback to be constructive, timely, and student-centered**. For instance, students generally expect feedback that not only critiques but also guides their academic development through constructive criticism, clear assessments of progress, and practical suggestions (Carter et al., 2020; Phyo et al., 2024). EFL supervisees, in particular, value **explicit instruction and personalised support**, underscoring the importance of clarity and individual responsiveness in supervisory interactions (Berlach, 2010; Phyo et al., 2024).

Another common thread in the literature is the **varied nature and focus of feedback**. Thus, thesis feedback can be oral and/ or written, and it is categorised as directive, referential, and expressive, often targeting linguistic accuracy, content development, organizational structure, and appropriateness in academic writing (Saeed et al., 2021; Syafi'i et al., 2024). Similarly, scholars distinguish between overt and covert feedback, drawing attention to its implicit dimensions (Jackson, 2021). These classifications illustrate the diverse modes through which feedback is delivered and received.

In terms of **supervisory expectations**, supervisees anticipate regular, written feedback provided within a reasonable timeframe and through transparent communication channels (Casanave, 2019; Everitt & Blackburn, 2023; Gedamu, 2018; Saeed et al., 2021). Gedamu (2018) further expands on supervisees' expectations by highlighting the value of support that extends beyond writing itself, such as guidance on research direction, time management, and oral presentation skills. Effective supervision, therefore, involves not only textual critique but also ongoing mentorship and accessibility, which collectively contribute to supervisees' sense of progress and academic belonging.

As can be concluded from the review of the literature, despite the existence of some sources that shed light on supervision in the academic writing process and the relevance of giving and receiving feedback at the postgraduate level, the existing body of literature remains limited in its discussion of doctoral supervision experiences. In fact, very few studies have used social practice theory to examine doctoral EFL students' perceptions regarding the role thesis feedback play in their writing skills performance. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap, thus answering the following research questions:

1) What are the experiences of EFL doctoral students with their theses supervisors' feedback?
2) What are EFL doctoral students' expectations regarding the nature and purpose of their supervisors' feedback?
3) How do EFL doctoral students interpret and respond to the feedback they actually receive?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

To answer our research questions, we adopted an interpretive phenomenological research design that falls within qualitative research method (van Manen, 2017; Vinte & Çavuşoğlu, 2024). In general, qualitative methods are used in educational studies where the researchers' aim is to gain a "deeper understanding of experiences, phenomena, and context" (Lichtman, 2023, p. 39). Depending on how the researchers want to obtain the meaning of the participants' experiences, an analysis of existing qualitative research designs is needed (Vinte et al., 2023). In fact, van Manen (2017) acknowledges that all research designs that fall under the category of qualitative approaches concentrate on studying "various kinds of human experience for the purpose of understanding different kinds of meaning" (p. 776). However, unlike other qualitative research designs, van Manen ascertains that

"phenomenology is the study of the primal, lived, prereflective, prepredicative meaning of an experience" (p. 776).

Therefore, based on the aim of this study, interpretive phenomenology design demonstrated to be appropriate because we wanted to focus on a specific phenomenon (Farrel, 2017; 2020; Giles et al., 2012), that is, understand what is the lived experience of the EFL doctoral students regarding the feedback they received from their supervisors in their thesis writing, as well as how they make sense of such experiences. This is in line with the purpose of a phenomenological study, which is to comprehend a phenomenon based on the real-life experiences of the study participants, allowing the exploration of how they build their own meanings based on their experiences (Bonyadi, 2023; Farrell, 2020; Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Vinte & Çavuşoğlu, 2024). *While not adopting phenomenology in its entirety, this study employed phenomenological techniques to derive broader, transferable findings.*

3.2. Participants

Before reaching the participants, we obtained ethical approval from the Education Science Ethics Committee, Near East University (NEU/ES/2022/878). This approval allowed us to contact the students' advisor, explain the purpose of our study, and obtain consent from her. As a result, we were provided with a list of student emails that included master and doctoral students. For this study, purposive sampling was employed to select only doctoral students. Initially, we contacted 30 prospective participants via email and provided them with comprehensive information regarding the study. Of these, 10 respondents confirmed their willingness to participate. However, following the completion of all preparatory arrangements, only five doctoral EFL students ultimately participated in the interviews.

The number of participants was deemed sufficient for the purposes of this study, in line with Bartholomew et al.'s (2021) assertion that smaller sample sizes are appropriate in phenomenological research. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) recommend a range of 6 to 10 participants for phenomenological studies, while Smith et al. (2009) suggest that 4 to 10 participants are ideal in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), given that the emphasis lies in representing *a perspective* within a phenomenon, rather than generalising to a broader population. Accordingly, based on Smith et al.'s (2009) position, interviewing five participants in the present study was considered methodologically appropriate.

Prior to data collection and following a clear explanation of the study's purpose, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Oral consent was secured from four participants whose interviews were conducted remotely, while written consent was obtained from one participant whose interview took place face-to-face. All participants granted permission for the interviews to be audio-recorded using a mobile phone, which was switched to flight mode to prevent interruptions (Lareau, 2021). The five interviews had a total duration of 73 minutes, with each lasting approximately 14 minutes on average.

The sample consisted of two females and three males. To ensure participant anonymity, each individual was assigned a code using the label "Sup." (denoting supervisee), followed by a numerical identifier based on the order of the interviews (e.g., Sup. 1 to Sup. 5). All of them were adult students majoring in English Language Education (ELE), in the Faculty of Education at a private university in North Cyprus. However, since the university itself has many international students majoring in different areas, including ELE, our participants also come from different backgrounds. Four were international students, three Africans one Asian, while the fifth student was a national from North Cyprus.

Regarding the stages of their academic writing process, participants were distributed across three distinct levels: (1) initial, (2) intermediate, and (3) advanced. The *initial* stage included two participants (Sup.1 and Sup.5) who were in the early phases of their research projects and actively working with their supervisors. The *intermediate* stage comprised one participant (Sup.2) who had progressed beyond the qualifying examination and was in the process of writing the thesis. The

advanced stage included two participants (Sup. 3 and Sup. 4) who had completed the earlier stages and were either finalising the last chapter or had already completed the full thesis. Interviewing participants at different stages of the supervision process enabled us to capture diverse perspectives and experiences of supervisees before, during, and after the supervisory engagement.

3.3. Tool for Data Collection

To collect data for this study, we employed semi-structured interviews. The interviews allowed us to explore in-depth data about the phenomenon and meet the phenomenological research design paradigm. Four interviews were conducted remotely, while one was face-to-face due to the participants' choices. This tool was appropriate since we wanted to explore the experiences of the supervisees about the role of their supervisors' feedback on their academic writing process. According to Seidman (2006), using interviews allows participants to talk about what they think regarding the topic under investigation. Of course, the use of interviews is motivated by a desire to understand EFL doctoral students lived experiences and the importance they assign to the thesis supervision process (Flick, 2018).

3.4. Data Analysis

Upon completion of both remote and face-to-face interviews, the audio recordings were transferred from the mobile device to a computer to facilitate subsequent analysis (Lareau, 2021; Seidman, 2006). Using MAXQDA 24, we imported the recordings into the software and transcribed them. Given that our primary objective was to capture participants' perceptions and experiences rather than conduct a detailed discourse analysis, intelligent transcription was employed. Intelligent transcription involves careful editing of the transcript to remove redundant language, correct grammatical errors, and enhance sentence coherence, thereby ensuring that the final transcript accurately reflects the intent and content of the original audio recordings (Brady, 2021; Cogito, 2017).

Following intelligent transcription, we immersed ourselves in the data by thoroughly reading the transcripts, highlighting sections pertinent to our research questions, and initiating the coding process. This iterative analysis involved multiple readings and re-readings of the transcripts. In several instances, we refined and re-coded the data as new meanings emerged (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Subsequently, the codes were organized into subthemes and overarching themes, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Lichtman, 2023). Adhering to their six-phase approach, we: (1) familiarised ourselves with the data; (2) generated initial codes; (3) searched for themes; (4) reviewed themes; (5) defined and named themes; and (6) produced the report, compiling findings according to the identified themes and subthemes, as exemplified in Table 1. Further explanation of this process is provided in the findings and discussion section.

Table 1
Sample of Coding Process

Themes	Subthemes	Codes	Occurrence
Perception of the role of supervisors' feedback	Previous feedback experience, Publication guidance, Characteristics of good supervisor	Guide, Topic for thesis, Affective, feedback on time, caring, flexible, Regular Meetings, changes of supervisors, supervisors roles…	74
Expected feedback	Constructive feedback, Feedback on: Topic selection Language aspects	Proofreading, types of feedback, changes of topics, feedback coverage, contribution to improvements.	58
Attitude to different feedback	Positive attitude Negative attitude	Both good and bad feeling, stressed, happy, high expectation, rapport, Positively Surprised, lack of time and meetings, criticism, lack of feedback records.	44

3.5. Trustworthiness

To guarantee trustworthiness in this study, a processual approach was used (Hayashi et al., 2019). The ongoing discussions between the authors, participants and other scholars were kept from the conceptual stage of the study and extended through data analysis and during the writing process. For instance during the development of the Findings section, the researchers collaboratively reviewed the interview transcripts and engaged in discussions around coding process. Where disagreements occurred, we reread the transcriptions and found the real meaning the participants intended to transmit and reached a consensus. When necessary, we contacted the participants for further details and checked if the understanding and the meaning we made from their data represented what they really wanted to transmit.

4. Findings

The findings are structured according to the three research questions and are further divided into corresponding subthemes. The results are presented first, followed by a separate discussion section, which incorporates the lens of social practice in academic writing.

4.1. What are the experiences of EFL doctoral students with their theses supervisors' feedback?

The supervisees understand that their supervisors play a significant role in their dissertation writing. For instance, Sup. 3 summarised the role of supervisors as crucial and "*very good*" for the supervisees. In fact, our participants acknowledged the relevance of their supervisors' assistance in their academic writing endeavour. Therefore, it is relevant that the supervisors play their role accordingly. The following participants' extracts illustrate what the participating doctoral students understand as the role of thesis supervisors.

> "*I think [supervisors] play a very important role in my thesis or in any student's thesis because they can make the student's thesis weak or strong*." (Sup. 1)
> "*I think their role is helpful and it facilitates the process.*" (Sup. 4)
> "*My supervisors' role is the one they are playing right now with me, which includes first of all giving me feedback on what I am doing*." (Sup. 2)

In addition, supervisors are commonly regarded as central to enabling and guiding the writing process, a view reflected in the statement made by Sup. 4. "*I think their role is helpful and they facilitate the process (…) It is beneficial to have someone to supervise you, especially someone who is specialised in your field.*"

This is the reason why Sup. 5 understands that "*supervisors are very important*" since many relevant changes suggested by her supervisor helped her enhance her work. Thus, without such support, she would not be able to spot the areas that needed further improvements.

During the interview, Sup. 1 who initially attributed the whole success to the supervisor mentioned that "*Of course, it [the success] depends on the students themselves. But the supervisors can guide them*." The same point found in Sup. 2 statement: "*their role is to assist, guide and give me feedback whenever necessary*." In fact, this is how supervisees should see their supervisors, not as the ones who will write the thesis for them, instead they should acknowledge that it is the supervisors' guidance that counts.

4.1.1. *Doctoral Students' perception of a good thesis supervision*

Our participants revealed that they perceive supervisors as academicians with qualities that help their supervisees succeed. In general, their descriptions had some characteristics in common, as illustrated in the following extracts.

> "*An ideal supervisor is someone who shows affection, who is concerned with time, because some supervisors do not care about the student's time and keep postponing the meetings. Therefore, the ideal supervisor is caring and flexible*." (Sup. 1).
> "*Supervisors can do much more than just give feedback; they should provide clear, honest, and detailed feedback at the right time*." (Sup. 2)

Furthermore, other participants pointed out the qualities of good supervision stating that "*supervision is a mentoring and guiding process*" (Sup. 3), therefore, supervisors must be "*available, cooperative, visionary and flexible*" (Sup. 4) and they should be "*kind and patient with students' errors or mistakes*" (Sup. 5). Based on these participants, a good supervisor demonstrates to his supervisee all or some of the characteristics herein described. Our participants state that supervisors should not be fixed on their agenda and forget that supervisees have their own research needs. Therefore, supervisors must be flexible to accommodate students with their particular doctoral research interest.

4.1.2. *Previous feedback experience impacting on Doctoral students' views*

The expectations of most of our doctoral participants were influenced by their previous experiences both in their MA supervision and in the way these supervisors act in their countries of origin, as well as the role that their supervisors played before they were assigned to them as their current supervisors of theses. This is illustrated in Sup. 3 response to the question about student expectations before starting the doctoral supervision:

> "*Based on my country's experience and how our university teachers in our country are, I was afraid because sometimes they are not so cordial. I thought that maybe lecturers, especially supervising PhD students, would be very difficult to deal with. Therefore, I was afraid that it would happen to me. But to my surprise, I have a positive experience*." (Sup. 3)

Influenced by cultural aspect, this doctoral supervisee had a negative perception of PhD supervisors. The behaviour of his former professors in his country affected his attitude towards the supervisors' role. However, his current good experience with his thesis supervisor has changed this perception, describing his current supervisor as a parent who provides everything for his family. On the other hand, Sup. 1 was influenced by her master's experience in Türkiye. According to this participant, her supervisor did not have time to check her work in detail since she was overloaded with the department assignments, as attested in the following extract:

> "*Because she normally doesn't have time, she didn't have any time for me. She always said 'that's okay, you can do that'. And whenever I wanted to meet her,*

I could email her or go to her office, but never or rarely met her." (Sup. 1)

In our follow-up questions, it became evident that Sup. 1 acknowledged she would not have been able to complete her Master's thesis without the support of her supervisor. However, the limited time allocated for supervision, which resulted in fewer meetings, has shaped her current perception of supervisors' overall performance. Similarly, Sup. 2 described being actively engaged in various academic activities organised by his supervisors. This involvement allowed him to understand that supervisors are responsible not only for reviewing theses but also for fulfilling a wide range of academic duties within the faculty and the broader university setting. A lack of awareness of these responsibilities can lead to stress and frustration among students, as highlighted by Sup. 4: "*Because as a student, you are stressed. You cannot manage your time; you cannot manage your content and topic. The supervisor will be able to help you much better*." This participant regarded his former supervisor as highly helpful in addressing his academic writing challenges effectively.

4.1.3. Publication guidance as part of the role of supervisors' feedback

The primary objective of doctoral students is to finish their studies and obtain their degree within the given time – three to four years. However, in addition to this objective, our participants pointed out that, in combination with the guidance on doctoral thesis writing, their supervisors should also assist them in publishing different articles during their studies. To illustrate this idea, Sup. 1 mentioned that:

"*The supervisors themselves have enough experience in publishing, while the students may not have such experience. I believe that it is one of the roles of the supervisor to show them the right way, to guide them in order to be able to publish their research papers.*" (Sup. 1)

Regarding this aspect, considering that publication is part of the requirements for students to defend their theses, with some universities demanding a minimum of one or two publications, it becomes officially part of the role of doctoral supervisors to assist their supervisees in publishing articles. In fact, Sup. 3 reported a positive experience that resulted in more than five publications during his supervisory process. According to this supervisee, these and other experiences have made him describe his supervisor as an excellent one:

"*In fact, I published almost seven papers. I am still waiting for one or two, because only one of these papers that I published is in a Scopus journal, and one is in Web of Science, but in ESCI. I was asked to publish in an SSCI journal from now on*." (Sup. 3)

Participants' experiences and understandings of their supervisors' contributions to research and publication varied. Sup. 4 and Sup. 5, for instance, did not mention publication support in their responses, as Sup. 5 explained, "*I am still at the initial stage*." Nonetheless, participants acknowledged the importance of receiving guidance on manuscript preparation and publication.

4.2. What are EFL doctoral students' expectations regarding the nature and purpose of their supervisors' feedback?

Thesis feedback has been identified in this study as a catalyst for enhancing academic writing. Although supervisors strive to provide high-quality feedback to their doctoral supervisees, fully meeting supervisees' expectations is not always feasible. This is because, at times, supervisees' expectations exceed what supervisors can reasonably offer or what is appropriate within the scope of their supervisory role.

4.2.1. Receiving constructive feedback

The perception of constructive feedback varies between participants. Our first participant described that she expects constructive feedback

from her supervisor. In her statement, she added: "*When they give me constructive feedback, I can learn from them. But whenever they just thank me or say it is okay, I feel they just want me to finish it*." (Sup. 1) Additionally, another participant considered constructive feedback as positive and stated: "*I do not expect negative feedback since I always receive positive feedback.*" (Sup. 5) Unlike this supervisee, some described constructive feedback as the one in which supervisors '*guide them and give them a lot of help*' (Sup. 3), or "*when you are wrong, they correct you'* (Sup. 4).

Feedback is intended to support students; therefore, supervisees need clear guidance on what needs to be done and how to improve their thesis writing. Lack of such aspects is described as non-constructive feedback by our participants (Sup. 2, Sup. 3). Furthermore, Sup. 2 commented "*I think positive feedback should include details, and the reasons behind the necessary changes to be made*". While Sup. 1 acknowledged the existence of supervisors who "*are very strict and very professional in improving students' theses*." As can be observed, providing positive and constructive feedback benefits not only students, who see their theses progress toward academic acceptability, but also supervisors, who can witness their supervisees' improvements.

4.2.2. Feedback on the language aspects

The language aspect is part of what supervisees expect to get feedback from their supervisors. In the perception of our participants, when supervisors give students' feedback, '*sometimes grammar is very important*." (Sup. 3) Another participant added

> "*I expect, for example, the supervisors to give me all kinds of feedback on different aspects of education. Because sometimes when the language is so poor or there are some mistakes, the supervisors are also responsible for them.*" (Sup. 1)

These supervisees' perceptions highlight the importance of supervisors providing comprehensive feedback, including corrections related to language, to enhance supervisees' academic writing. However, this is not always the case, as acknowledged by Sup. 1: "*But unfortunately, advisors and professors do not always look at the language*." Hence, she is dissatisfied with the attitudes of these supervisors. According to Sup. 5, supervisors "*know more than we do*", therefore they need to look at the language aspects.

In contrast to the other participants, who believe supervisors should address language issues in supervisees' writing, Sup. 4 is more cautious, stating that

> "*If possible, if the supervisors have time, they can also look at the language aspects. However, it is advisable to look for another reviewer to examine the language. (…) the reviewer should be someone both the supervisor and the supervisee know."* (Sup. 4)

For this participant, language should not be the main focus of supervisors, as professional proofreaders can be engaged before the writing is submitted to supervisors. This allows supervisors to concentrate on more important aspects, such as "*content and methodology,"* as highlighted by Sup. 2. Furthermore, Sup. 2 noted that

> "*I understand that there are some instances in which some aspects of language are unavoidable to look at because as I read the thesis, there must be cohesion and coherence within the text. Therefore, I should proofread the work before sending it to the supervisor.*" (Sup. 2)

While a majority advocate for the inclusion of language aspect in thesis feedback, some perceive language correction as an additional task, thus assigning the responsibility to the doctoral students themselves to seek external proofreading assistance for their theses.

4.2.3. Supervisees' feedback experience in topic selection

We found that participants' previous experiences shaped their current views on the role of their doctoral supervisors in selecting their thesis topics. For instance, Sup. 1 affirmed that

"*As I note from my experience and my other classmates, they do not guide us in finding the topic. They tell us to read and find the topic ourselves*."

Although Sup. 1 reacted negatively to the type of guidance she received, we argue that, at the doctoral level, the instructors were acting appropriately. By encouraging students to read widely and identify topics of personal interest for their theses, the instructors were fostering students' independence and enabling them to explore their potential and identify engaging research topics within the EFL context. This view prompted us to seek details on the reasons behind this reaction, and the same participant added:

"*On the other hand, in Istanbul, in Türkiye, I also noticed from my experience and from the experience of my classmates that all the professors helped us find the topics*."

Similar to Sup. 1, other participants shared the idea that supervisors must guide students in identifying the topics for their theses:

"Y*ou cannot manage your content and topic. (…). So, it is better to have supervisors.*" (Sup. 4)
"*Because I am still writing my proposal, the topic guidance is important."* (Sup. 5)

Therefore, the importance of supervisors' involvement in overseeing the topic selection during supervision is emphasised.

In contrast to the last three participants, Sup. 2 and Sup. 3 demonstrated a completely different understanding. For these participants, the choice of topic should follow the correct procedures as explained by Sup. 2:

"*I think this is the correct procedure, the student chooses the topic and the department assigns a supervisor to the student, a supervisor who has some expertise in the chosen topic and field*." (Sup. 2)

Despite this clear guidance on the initial processes of topic discussion, selection, and supervisor assignment, this supervisee's experience shows that even when students have clearly defined their research topics and fields, further discussions may still take place. Adjustments to the doctoral research proposal can be made to better align with the supervisors' expertise. This is illustrated in the following extract:

"*In my experience, there was something slightly different, because after choosing my topic, two supervisors were assigned to me. But they did not agree with the topic. So, they advised me to refit it and I changed the topic myself and focused on the supervisors' field of expertise*." (Sup. 2)

These experiences illustrate how different doctoral students in EFL consider their supervisors. Although for some, supervisors are do-it-all in their thesis, including the choice of research topic, others understand that they have a counterpart role.

4.2.4. Providing feedback on everything: possibility or mirage?

The participants of this study have different perceptions about the type of feedback and what should be covered in it. To illustrate these differences, Sup. 5 expects the supervisors to look at everything as expressed in her statement,

"*Everything related to my thesis for every chapter. Everything about the chapters, for example, about the introduction, the review of the literature, especially the way in which I conduct this research.*" (Sup. 5)

A similar view is defended by Sup. 4 who adds that supervisor "*should tell me if there is something to review paragraph by paragraph, or in each section, and tell me if the tools are okay*."

On the other hand, some participants recognise the challenges doctoral supervisors face and view correcting every aspect of a thesis as unrealistic. As Sup. 1 noted, "*But the problem is that they do not have time. Thus, they do not always give us this kind of feedback*." Similarly, Sup. 2 acknowledged that providing feedback on every detail, as some participants expected, is an "impossible" task,

stating, "*I think it's impossible to look at everything or all aspects of the thesis, although as lecturers they could try to look at all the aspects*."

4.3. How do EFL doctoral students interpret and respond to the feedback they actually receive?

The feedback from the supervisors contributes to the supervisees' satisfaction or dissatisfaction. These attitudes depend not only on the type of feedback but also on their general perception of the role of such feedback.

4.3.1. Positive Attitude

In this study, the expectations of some supervisees about the type of feedback they wanted from their supervisors were met, contributing to their positive attitude. For instance, supervisee 2 stated the following: "*I have been working with my two supervisors on a regular basis. I have meetings regularly and they give me feedback and assistance whenever I need."* (Sup. 2) For supervisee 5, whose expectations of her supervisor's feedback were high, having a supervisor who fulfilled those expectations was a positive experience: "*So far everything is going smoothly. (…) Whenever I add a new content, she checks and then asks me for further editions, which sometimes include adding more aspects for the proposal*." (Sup. 5)

Furthermore, supervisees 3 and 4 showed a holistic positive reaction regardless of the type of feedback they received:

> "*I consider everything positive unless my supervisor knows my level and asks me to do things which I cannot do. That would be negative for my side."* (Sup. 4)
>
> "*Whenever I receive negative feedback, I feel happy, because I notice that something needs to be improved in my writing process."* (Sup. 3)
>
> "*From that [negative feedback] I will learn and it can help me diagnose and then improve myself. So, I feel happy."* (Sup. 3)

Similar to Sup. 3 and Sup. 4 who understand that they can learn from and be encouraged by any feedback they receive, Sup. 2 also stated it in the following words:

> "*I do not view negative feedback as something negative as such, I view*
> *negative feedback as a way to show me where I did wrong or where I need to improve. Thus, whenever they show me where I did not perform well, I thank them and work hard in order to improve that weakness."* (Sup. 2)

This illustrates that when supervisees perceive feedback positively, thesis writing becomes more satisfying, and visible progress toward completion is observed, even when they receive feedback which for some would be considered as negative.

4.3.2. Negative Attitude

Regarding negative attitudes in thesis writing process, supervisee 1 explained that she sometimes felt depressed when receiving some kind of feedback: "*For negative feedback, I can say that I sometimes feel depressed, especially when I feel that I did it and I did my best*." (Sup. 1) However, she clarified: "*I like supervisors who criticise me, but of course they need not provide too much of it*." (Sup. 1)

Similarly, supervisee 5 explained that she does not hate criticisms, however, in some instances, receiving negative feedback would impact the progress of her thesis: "*I don't expect any negative feedback (…) because it's the one that makes me give up on my thesis*." (Sup. 5)

Thus, when feedback is perceived as overly critical, it can demotivate supervisees and negatively impact their writing engagement. As a result of not welcoming critical comments in their writing, the attitude of some supervisees towards feedback is negative mainly when this feedback includes criticism of their writing, which they consider as negative feedback.

5. Discussion

Based on the main findings that emerged from participants' accounts of the thesis supervision process, we developed a visual framework (see Fig.

2) illustrating the central components of thesis feedback and doctoral academic writing, interpreted through the lens of social practice theory. Most of the elements included in this framework will inform the discussion of this study's findings.

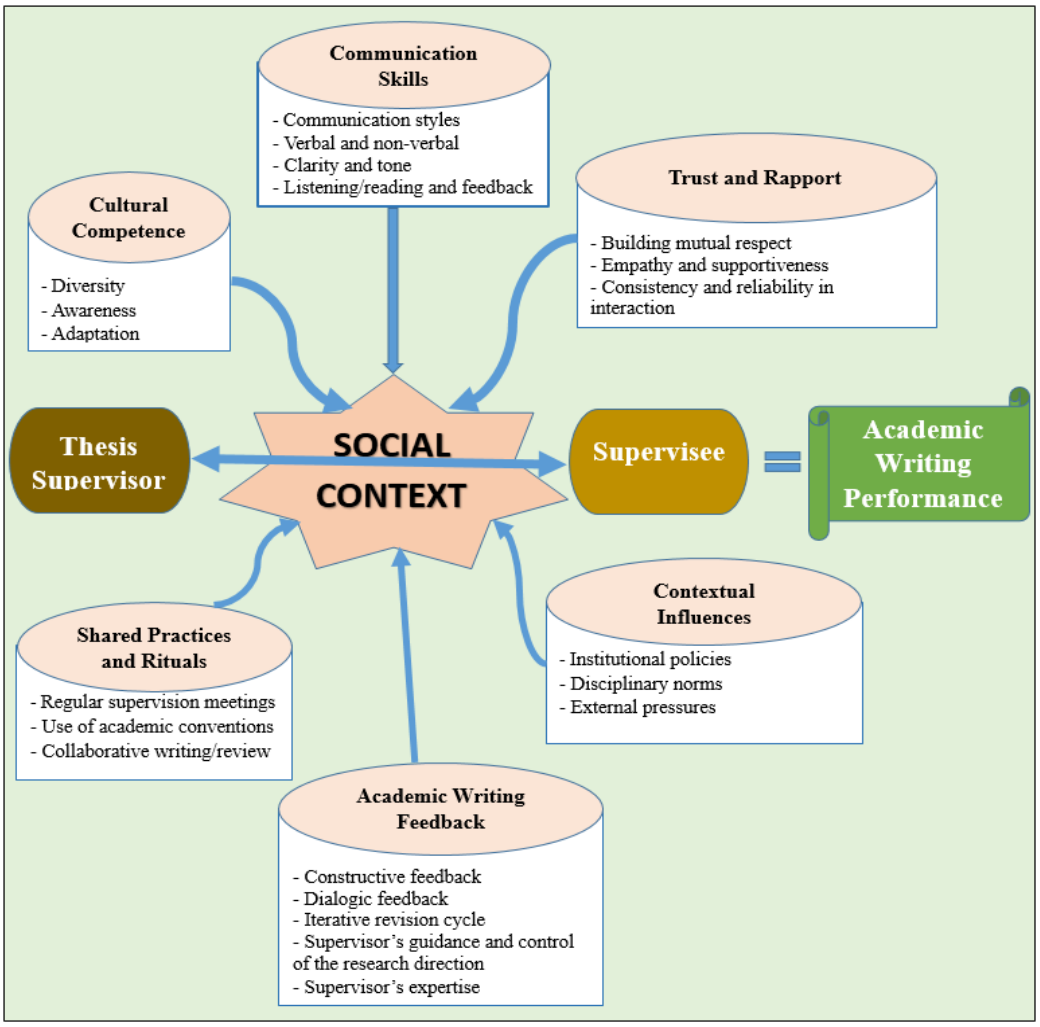

Figure 2
A social practice framework for academic writing

5.1. Doctoral Students' perceptions and experiences of thesis feedback

In line with the social practice framework of academic writing, the findings suggest that supervisees perceive supervisor feedback as a key contributor to their success in thesis writing. Similarly, instances of failures and unsuccessful academic practices are often attributed to the supervisors. However, as many scholars have made it clear, the responsibility of writing a successful thesis should not completely be assigned to the supervisors (Carter et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2021). Instead, the supervisees themselves have a significant role since they are the ones who act accordingly and work toward the improvement of

their writing skills based on the guidance received from their supervisors (Akela, 2022; Berlach, 2010).

With regard to effective supervision, the findings indicate that participants recognise the significance of social practice in the academic writing process. Specifically, they emphasised the importance of addressing students' needs and emotions, as well as fostering collaborative mechanisms, key elements reflected in the social practice framework. These insights are consistent with characteristics of good supervision identified in related studies (Carter, 2020; Gedamu, 2018; Nurie, 2018). Moreover, supervisors should reach an agreement regarding the supervision outline, including the supervisory methodology to be followed, as defended by Berlach (2010).

Another major findings from our study is that the doctoral supervisees cannot dissociate their perception of the role of their current supervisors from their previous academic and cultural experience. This highlights the relevance of social practice theory, which states that cultural context plays a vital role in mediating supervisory relationships and shaping academic writing experiences (Abdulkhaleq & Abdullah, 2013; Akela, 2022). As such, it is fundamental for supervisors to have some conversations right at the beginning to explore their supervisees' perception and their expectations regarding the supervision process. Since doing so will help them understand and guide their supervisees accordingly (Berlach, 2010; Kamler &Thomson, 2014).

Participants who were familiar with their supervisors' broader academic responsibilities demonstrated a greater understanding of the demanding nature of supervising PhD students alongside other institutional commitments. As Kamler and Thomson (2014) argue, it is important for doctoral supervisees to recognise the multiple roles their supervisors fulfil. Such awareness is crucial, given that supervisors are often engaged in a range of academic duties and require adequate time to offer meaningful and constructive supervision.

Our findings demonstrate that some doctoral students had many publications during their studies due to the clear publishing guidance they received from their supervisors. This fact suggest that when doctoral supervisees receive targeted feedback, on publishing in reputable journals, they are more likely to gain essential knowledge about the publication process. This includes developing an awareness of the risks associated with predatory journals, which can potentially damage their academic careers. Such guidance fosters an understanding of the value of publishing in indexed journals that follow rigorous peer review standards (Atiso et al., 2019; Yeoh et al., 2017). In addition to fostering general publication awareness, this practice contributes to the reduction of external pressures, an issue highlighted within social practice framework, as publishing often becomes a significant obstacle for many doctoral students. In some cases, students complete their theses but are unable to proceed to the defence stage due to lack of publications derived from their research findings.

5.2. Key Insights into the Nature and Purpose of Thesis Feedback

This study highlights the need for doctoral students to receive constructive feedback, which is fundamental to achieving the main objectives of their thesis in academic writing. Lee (2018) adds that positive feedback encourages students to act. This contrasts with what some participants described as non-constructive feedback, characterized by vague or unclear comments from their supervisors that lacked specific details. For these participants, such feedback suggests that the supervisors' primary objective may be simply to complete the theses rather than to help supervisees improve their work. Within social practice theory, this approach can negatively affect students' motivation and emotional well-being, potentially compromising their progress. Therefore, supervisors' feedback should be humane and holistic (Ayere, 2015; Ngulube, 2021).

Our findings reveal a division among participants regarding whether language correction should be part of doctoral supervisors' responsibilities. Some participants suggested that supervisors could address language issues when

time permits, while others argued that supervisors should actively revise the language in students' theses. In a similar study, Marinette (2022) emphasised the significance of language within research supervision feedback, acknowledging its relevance, and highlighting the challenges encountered by international students in EFL contexts. For us, the supervisors need to make it clear right at the beginning (Everitt & Blackburn, 2023) if supervisees will get some language feedback or not. However, regardless of the decision they make, we claim that it is part of supervisors' roles to teach supervisees that they will always need to include proofreaders in the writing process.

Among the roles attributed to supervisors, providing guidance on topic selection was highlighted. However, we believe that supervisees should ultimately decide on their research topic and seek supervisors' expertise and general guidance as needed. Doctoral students who are required to change their topics often experience negative effects. As defended by Marinette (2022), the change of the doctoral "research topics entirely can be frustrating" (p. 188). Furthermore, understanding that the choice of the topic is part of the supervisor's role contradicts Berlach's (2010) view, which calls for ensuring that the 'directed freedom' is given to the supervisees to select their topic.

Another major finding is that while some supervisees recognize that expecting their supervisors to provide feedback on every detail is unrealistic, others still expect their supervisors to correct every aspect of their thesis. While it is true that supervisors review all thesis chapters submitted by their supervisees, our experience indicates that expecting supervisors to address every detail in doctoral writing is unrealistic. Doctoral supervisors have multiple responsibilities that demand significant time, and they expect students to have mastered foundational writing skills during earlier academic stages. Consequently, supervisors may not focus on every detail of students' academic writing. This perception among supervisees contradicts the findings of Jackson et al. (2021), who argue that "line-by-line feedback was extremely labour intensive and of dubious value" (p. 4). In addition, many scholars contend that providing feedback to doctoral students becomes challenging due to the need of the supervisors to have time and space for their own research and other academic activities (Marinette, 2022; Kamler & Thomson, 2014). These authors emphasize that correcting every detail in supervisees' theses should not be considered part of supervisors' roles.

5.3. Doctoral Students' Reactions to Thesis Feedback

Supervisees who receive positive and constructive feedback feel more encouraged and motivated to progress in their thesis writing. In addition, having a positive attitude towards supervisor's feedback helps supervisees handle thesis writing support appropriately. As a matter of facts, following social practice theory, the supervisee's positive reaction could yield good communication and cooperation in the supervisor-supervisee relationship and could contribute to a general good doctoral student experience (Heron et al., 2023; Ismail et al., 2013). In contrast, supervisees are demotivated, discouraged, and sometimes think about abandoning the thesis when they receive negative feedback. Our findings support Jackson's et al. (2021) conclusion in which negative feedback "was a source of frustration and annoyance for the participants" (p. 5), illustrating the fact that emotional impact of feedback can negatively affect a supervisee's ability to progress.

Therefore, it is essential for supervisors to exercise careful consideration when providing feedback to their supervisees. They must ensure that such feedback effectively supports the overarching objectives of the doctoral writing process. Overall, supervisor feedback constitutes a critical element in shaping a constructive and meaningful doctoral thesis writing experience.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights doctoral supervision and its profound implications for academia and doctoral education as perceived from the doctoral EFL supervisees' perspective. The different roles of supervisors when providing feedback, as revealed

by our participants, highlight the significance of effective mentorship in fostering the academic growth and success of EFL doctoral supervisees. From guiding the selection of thesis topics to providing constructive feedback, supervisees view the central role that their supervisors play in shaping their academic writing skills. However, we argue that the responsibility for selecting a topic primarily rests with the doctoral students themselves. Although supervisors may exert a lot of effort to verify and provide feedback on many aspects of doctoral theses, expecting them to be proofreaders or look at every aspect of the doctoral theses would be too demanding and not feasible. After all, supervisors are not the writers of theses, but the guides, facilitators, and coaches of the supervisees. Therefore, based on social practice theory in academic writing, we highlight the imperative need to foster a supportive and constructive feedback culture within academic institutions.

While some doctoral supervisees in this study expressed positive attitudes toward feedback, others struggled with negative perceptions, highlighting the need for interventions to promote a mindset that views feedback as an integral part of the learning process. Developing an attitude that recognises all forms of feedback as essential is crucial for supervisees to engage effectively with their supervisors' comments. It is imperative that supervisees understand that every critique offered by supervisors is intended to enhance the quality of their doctoral theses.

From our findings, the supervisees understand that individual strategies in dealing with the supervision process are not always aligned with their expectations. Therefore, to improve current practices, practical institutional interventions at this university could include mentoring training programs for supervisees, as well as initiatives aimed at cultivating a collaborative and nurturing academic environment conducive to academic growth. These interventions should consider the fact that while supervisor feedback undoubtedly enriches the academic expertise of both supervisees and supervisors, the primary beneficiary remains students, who use invaluable guidance and knowledge in their chosen field of study. In summary, this study contributes to advancing our understanding of doctoral supervision feedback and highlights the importance of ongoing efforts to improve the support of doctoral supervisees throughout their academic journey.

6.1. Implications of the Study

This study addresses a significant gap in the EFL literature by investigating doctoral supervision experiences and practices in Northern Cyprus. For doctoral supervisees, this study offers valuable information to expand their understanding of the supervisors' role. It emphasises the recognition of potential limitations that supervisors may encounter, prompting students to seek additional resources to address such gaps. Furthermore, supervisors stand to benefit from this study by gaining a deeper understanding of their own practices through the lens of doctoral students' experiences. Supervisors can improve their effectiveness in supporting doctoral candidates by openly reflecting on and evaluating their approaches considering the reported findings. The development of guidelines and resources to support supervisors in their mentoring roles, as well as interventions aimed at promoting a positive feedback culture within academic institutions, are crucial activities for stakeholders within this institution.

6.2. Limitations and Further Studies

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design, conducting semi-structured interviews with five doctoral supervisees in Northern Cyprus. While the study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of these participants, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, all participants were drawn from the same department and university, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other institutional or disciplinary contexts. The homogeneity of the sample might have influenced the range of perspectives captured, especially concerning supervision practices that may vary

across academic cultures or institutions. Second, as with many qualitative studies, there is a potential for interviewer bias. Although efforts were made to ensure neutrality and reflexivity throughout the interview and analysis processes, the researcher's interpretations and interactions may have influenced participants' responses and final analysis.

In terms of future research, studies employing different methodologies, such as quantitative or mixed-method approaches, could broaden the scope and enhance the generalizability of findings. Including a larger and more diverse sample of participants across multiple institutions would strengthen the representativeness of the data. Moreover, adopting a more comprehensive perspective by involving both supervisors and supervisees could deepen the understanding of doctoral supervision practices and feedback dynamics.

Regarding the data collection, apart from the interviews used in this study, other studies might include exploring the nature and effectiveness of written feedback provided by supervisors based on the returned manuscripts. An analysis of oral feedback received by doctoral students can also be studied. Additionally, future studies could also explore the efficacy of different supervision models and interventions aimed at enhancing the feedback culture within academic departments.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all EFL doctoral students who participated in this study, as well as their advisor who provided the initial contacts. We extend our sincere gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers of *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning* for their invaluable feedback and insightful suggestions, which guided substantial revisions to enhance the quality of our manuscript. We acknowledge using ChatGPT during the revision of this article solely for proofreading certain sections to improve readability, as suggested by the reviewers. After using the tool, we carefully reviewed and edited the text ourselves and take full responsibility for the final content of the published article.

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Appendix

Transcript conventions used in the article
(…) – Words omitted from the speakers
[ ] – Words added by the authors to clarify the extracts