

Supervisors' Perceptions of Postgraduate Students' Thesis Literature Review Writing in a Ghanaian University

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ABSTRACT

A key rhetorical unit in the thesis, the literature review has in recent times received some interest by specialists and researchers of English for Academic Purposes, academic literacy, discourse analysis, and assessment. The present study reports the perceptions of graduate supervisors regarding students' engagement with thesis literature review writing, focusing on students' challenges and strategies faced and adopted respectively. Semi-structured interviews were administered to nine (three each) supervisors from three Humanities departments from one public Ghanaian university. The results showed, first, supervisors' awareness of thesis literature review writing as pivotal and, second, challenges such as reading and comprehension of texts, exercising criticality, synthesizing, referencing, and language use. Further, supervisors identified graduate students' key coping strategies such as summarizing, paraphrasing, patchwriting, concept mapping, and guidelines from supervisory interactions. These findings have implications for the scholarship on supervisors' perceptions concerning postgraduate students' literature review writing in a region least featured in the literature as well as postgraduate pedagogy and further research.

Keywords: challenges, supervisors' perceptions, students' engagement, thesis literature review

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Interest in postgraduate thesis writing worldwide has been increasing in the past two decades and half (e.g. Bitchener, 2010; Casanave, 2014; Dudley-Evans, 1999; Johns & Swales, 2002; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Peng, 2018), following Swales' (1990) influential work on research article (RA) introductions. There has been an unprecedented wave of studies on various rhetorical units of the thesis/dissertation such as its macro-structure (Bunton, 1998; Dong, 1998; Johns & Swales, 2002; Paltridge, 2002; Thompson, 2001), title (Afful & Akoto, 2010; Busch-Lauer, 2000; Dudley-Evans, 1984), acknowledgement (Afful, 2016; Al-Ali, 2010; Hyland, 2003), and abstract (Afful & Nartey, 2014; Ren & Li, 2011). Similarly, other rhetorical units including introduction (Bunton, 2002; Kawase, 2015; Samraj, 2008), methods (Cotos, Huffman, & Link, 2017; Nyika, 2014; Tulu, Tolosa, & Page, 2019), analysis and discussion (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Rasmeeenin, 2016), and conclusion (Bunton, 2005; Hewings, 1993) have gained some respectable attention. The thesis literature review (e.g. Afolabi, 1992; Bruce, 1994; Flowerdew & Forest, 2009; Hart, 1998) has not been left out of this profusion of studies.

The thesis literature review, distinguished from research synthesis (Li & Wang, 2018), requires a set of significant intellectual skills. Literature review skills embody the essence of what it means to be a scholar and researcher (e.g. Bruce, 1994; Hart, 1998), affording postgraduate research students opportunities to acquire advanced information literacies, disciplinary research practices, and academic writing. Literature reviews involve a level of mastery over often existing published research in a discipline or other publication outlets. They demand sophisticated intellectual literacies and high-level thinking skills (Bruce, 2001; Turner & Bitchener, 2008). There is admittedly considerable disciplinary variation in thesis literature review writing (Afful, 2016; Hyland, 1999); that is, there is as much inter-disciplinary variation as there is intra-disciplinary variation. In addition, writing a literature review is a complex process of constructing knowledge by using others' voices to establish collegiality and authority within a discourse community. Not only is this part-genre cognitively complex but also unstable (Turner & Bitchener, 2008). Depending on the context, discourse, and audience, students find that there are different interpretations and meanings about what is required (Badenhorst, 2017) in writing a thesis literature review. Practically speaking, a well-conducted thesis literature review is central to a scholar's ability to pose pertinent and timely questions within his/her field (Boote & Beile, 2005).

Due to its complexity, the thesis literature review has unsurprisingly attracted attention from researchers and scholars worldwide. In the last decade and half we have witnessed some considerable number of studies on thesis literature review writing, with Kwan's (2006) genre analysis of literature review produced by doctoral students providing a catalytic influence. These studies have often been descriptive and rarely prescriptive. Several of these studies in a much descriptive vein show how the literature review interfaces with various linguistic and rhetorical features such as stance (Hsiao, 2019), evaluative language (Xie, 2017), citation practices (Badenhorst, 2017, 2018) Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2016), schematic structure (Hsiao & Yu, 2012; Khoo, Na, & Jaidka, 2011; Kwan, 2006), tense usage (Chen, 2009), reporting verbs (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015) role of cited authors (Jomaa & Bidin, 2016), dialogic positioning (Afful, 2017), citation behaviour (Ali, 2016; Nguyen, 2016); disciplinary variation (Premaratne, 2013); information behaviour (Liao & Han, 2012), establishing the niche (Chen & Li, 2019), and writing quality (Hsaio, 2016).

Other studies too, including Ho (2013) and Jabulani (2014), highlight students' difficulties in writing the thesis literature review. Ho's (2013) study aimed to investigate the difficulties that first-year graduate students encountered while writing research papers at a Taiwanese university; it was shown that while research-related issues, such as locating relevant literature and lack of helpful library support, were more of a concern for international graduate students, linguistic-related issues hindered the research writing process of both local Taiwanese and international students. Located in Africa, Jabulani (2014) content-analysed 150 essays written by 50 PGCE students in respect of such key categories analysed as student preferences for the type and style of incorporating authors' ideas in their own academic essays, appropriateness of attributive words used, punctuation within the language of attribution, tense consistencies, appropriateness of attendant lexico-grammatical collocations, as well as attributive words' fit with the syntax and grammar of the writer's view. Although findings pointed to gross challenges across all categories of analysis, they were most glaring in the matching of attributive words with the intent of citations and in the use of proper punctuation. This observation tended to be true of the literature review as much as other parts of the writings assigned students. The experiences of a graduate researcher which interestingly include the writing of the literature review are chronicled in an auto-ethnographic account (Afful, 2008).

Significantly, one of the earliest studies on the perception of researchers and faculty regarding the writing of literature review is attributable to Zaporozhetz (1987), who, in her extensive interviews with supervisors, discovered that the thesis literature review is the area in which supervisors felt they had the least expertise to advise students. Lovitts (2006) conducted a notable study in which 276 supervisors were asked to "characterize dissertations and components...at four different levels of quality" (p. 12). Surprisingly, Lovitts discovered that some of the supervisors admitted to not even reading the thesis literature review, supporting Zaporozhetz's (1987) claim that some supervisors do not value the review of literature as much as other portions of the dissertation. In contrast, other participants in her study felt the review of literature was an important part of the dissertation and indicated that they carefully read this section of dissertations.

The second vital strand of faculty's perception of how students engage with the writing of the thesis literature review stems from thesis examination reports. One of the earliest works on the thesis literature review, Hansford and Maxwell (1993) note that examiners of master's theses identified the two most common criticisms of the literature reviews as the failure to use recent literature and an inability to critique existing literature. In the work of Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, and Dally (2004), inaccuracies and utilization and/or theoretical application were further mentioned in 23 and 24 per cent respectively of the comments. Mullins and Kiley's (2002) interview of thirty experienced examiners to determine what they look for in a thesis further pointed to a relationship between the literature review and the quality of thesis, arguing, "The initial impressions of the quality of the thesis are usually formed by the end of the second or third chapter—often by the end of the literature review" (Mullins & Kiley, 2002, p.377). Among other findings, they conclude that a poorly crafted thesis literature review signals difficulties elsewhere in a thesis. Alternately, a well conceptualized and executed literature review points toward better quality in the thesis.

Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbairn, and Lovat's (2007) paper remains the most explicit on the literature review as they draw on 1310 examiner reports for 501 doctoral candidates across five Australian universities to obtain insight into the examiners' comments on thesis literature review: "working understanding", "critical appraisal" of the body of literature, "connection of the literature to findings", and "disciplinary perspective" as key indicators of performance in the candidate's use of the literature. Holbrook *et al.* (2007) observe that examiners "descriptive comments pertinent to using and applying literature in Australian doctoral theses are predictive of good quality theses, and have potential to inform research training" (p.352). The dominant role of the student's supervisor is exhibited in the repeated use of the supervisor's name in the literature review section (Monfries & Morison, 2004) and the need for more critical appraisal of the relevant literature (Holbrook *et al.*, 2007). In a study conducted in Monash University in Australia, Bao and Leikin (2013) refer to comments that are passed on the literature review in MEd minor theses: "largely descriptive literature reviews", "lack of critical commentary", and "no contrasting views". It is instructive to note that Man, Xu, Chau, O'Toole, and Shunmugam (2020), in general, not only recognize that the thesis literature review has received scant attention from examiners but that few examiner reports address the accuracy of the literature review or comment on the accuracy of citations.

While most of the studies on thesis examiners' reports have come from Australia and Europe, there is evidence of some emerging research from Africa. Nimulola (2018) draws on Bourke and Holbrook (2013) to investigate 300 reports on MEd dissertations at Islamic University in Uganda. Among other indicators commented on, Nimulola found that, for thesis literature review, 'accuracy' and 'application' categories were among the most highly commented on, with most of them being inappropriately done, while relatively few comments were made on 'coverage'. Mulinge and Arasa (2013) investigated the examiners reports on 92 Master's and 8 PhD dissertations in a cross-disciplinary study in ten universities in sub-Saharan Africa and noted a decline in the quality of the dissertations. Specifically, on the thesis literature review, Mulinge and Arasa (2013) bemoaned: "...in many cases the depth of coverage, the style of presentation and the referencing style impaired the quality of such chapters. A major weakness... was...incomplete literature reviews" (p.184). The most pertinent study to the present one in terms of its provenance is Afful (2020) who focuses on the discourse of thesis assessment reports in a Ghanaian university. However, it misses an opportunity to highlight weaknesses that examiners identify in the thesis literature review. The work of Adika (2015), who is one of the few scholars on academic writing research in Ghana, is at best only anecdotal and partial in its treatment of the thesis literature review in thesis examiners' reports, though insightful comments are made on the quality of thesis literature reviews examined and a pedagogical framework is subsequently formulated. Adika's (2015) work reviewed a selection of Ghanaian graduate students' awareness of practices that surround academic discourses in scholarly writing.

Clearly, from the studies reviewed above, despite recent works in Ghana to identify practice or preference issues with thesis, little is known about the possible limitations of the literature review potentiality of Ghanaian postgraduate research students, restructuring our understanding of the practice and construction of thesis literature reviews and what could be done. Even less known are supervisors' views and experiences with their supervisees in the thesis literature review writing process. Against this background, the present study

investigates the perception that supervisors have about master students' writing of the thesis literature review in a Ghanaian university. Specifically, the question to be answered is:

What perceptions do supervisors in three selected departments have about master students' challenges and strategies in thesis literature review writing?

Understanding the views of supervisors from a least researched area may add to the cultural dimension of the topic and widen the horizon of the scope of such studies. Thesis literature review writing challenges faced by postgraduate research students are contextual, varying from one country to another as well as from culture to culture (Dysthe, 2002; Street, 2003); hence, the researchers' desire to investigate from the perspective of supervisors from Ghana. In what ensues, we discuss the research design that was adopted for the collection and analysis of data. This is followed by the findings, and thereafter the discussion of these findings. The last section closes the research with the key findings and implications.

METHODOLOGY

Educational Setting and Research Design

The present research is set in [XXX], a public institution in Ghana where postgraduate research has gained considerable attention in recent years in response to both national and global imperatives. With adequate research facilities, well-known faculty, an ethnically diverse graduate student body, and well-motivated supporting staff, [XXX] carries out well-integrated teaching and research activities in five colleges (Education Studies, Distance Education, Humanities and Legal Studies, Agriculture and Natural Sciences, and Health and Allied Sciences). In the last two decades, faculties/schools, and over 100 departments have benefited from regular visits of professors from other universities to offer assistance, especially, in various postgraduate programmes. [XXX], through the School of Graduate Studies, offers regular support to postgraduate students and has recently obtained approval from the Academic Board for the teaching of Academic Writing for all postgraduate research students as well as the establishment of a Writing Center. Thus, it is expected that students' difficulties with writing including critical issues like plagiarism will be dealt with through these platforms.

It is also important to highlight that Ghana is an outer circle country, a former colony of Britain, and for that matter, English Language which is the language of instruction in schools (from upper primary to tertiary levels) is also the official language used in the country. Majority of the students in Ghanaian tertiary institutions including [XXX] can be described as English as Second Language (ESL) users. Therefore, majority of the students in contention are likely to portray similar challenges which are characteristic of ESL students' academic writing practices (Al Badi, 2015).

Following similar studies such as Hyland (2000), Petric (2005), and Kwan (2006), a qualitative content multiple-case study methodology was adopted as an attempt to understand what goes on in thesis literature review writing from the perspectives of supervisors. The methodology adopted for this study involves a searching-out of underlying themes in the materials being analysed from multiple cases rather than a single case (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Bryman, 2004; Yin, 2009). This approach enables data to be collected and interpreted from their naturally occurring environment, without reducing the data into numerical state for analysis. Case studies facilitate the detailed study of social phenomena in their natural setting without sacrificing sensitivity to their complexity and contextual interdependence (Duff, 2008).

Research Participants and Data

To select information-rich participants for the study, only supervisors were selected as participants. In selecting supervisors to participate in the study, we established certain criteria. The first criterion was that the participants were to be Ghanaians. Next, to represent diverse disciplines and to ensure variety among supervisors, three from each of the following departments, namely English, History, and Religion and Human Values were selected to participate in the study. Selected supervisors had been involved in postgraduate supervision. It was expected that the experiences of lecturers will come handy in this study. The primary source of data was, thus, derived from semi-structured interviews administered to supervisors to ascertain their views on the postgraduate students' writing of thesis literature reviews. The demographic data for our supervisor-interviewees) are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Information on Supervisor-Interviewees

Categories	Faculty
Department	
English	3
History	3
Religion	3
Gender	
Male	9
Female	
Status	
Lecturer	2
Senior Lecturer	3
Associate Professor	2
Professor	2
Years of Supervision	
1-5 years	4
6-10 years	2
11-15 years	1
16-20 years	2

As can be found in Table 1, all nine supervisors were from four ranks (Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, and Professor) out of five ranks in [XXX]; the missing rank was Assistant Lecturers, as lecturers at this rank are ordinarily not expected to supervise postgraduate students. Two of the supervisors had spent twenty years supervising postgraduate work while four had spent five years in doing the same. All lecturers were males, although this does not reflect the demographics of faculty in [XXX] (*Basic Statistics*, 2017); the number here represented those who were available, in spite of the efforts made to ensure female participation.

Data Collection

The present research sought to obtain insights from supervisors of postgraduate research students in order to ascertain supervisors' perception of graduate students' thesis literature review writing.

To complete the study, permission was sought from the heads of participating departments and informed consent obtained from the individual participants (faculty) as part of the ethical considerations. Semi-structured interview (e.g. Kvale, 2007) was used to collect the data as it has the merit of providing reasonably structured data across participants, but with greater depth than can be obtained from other methods (Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008). Interview protocols were first self-designed and piloted with one supervisor from each of the departments to test the strength of questions, understand the breadth of possible answers, and ensure the validity of the questions. As [XXX] is an English-medium university by virtue of the colonial history of Ghana, interviews were conducted in English in the main study. All interviews were audiotaped with a high quality recording device that was pre-tested to preclude any failure during the interview. Besides the pre-planned questions, unforeseen questions also emerged from the main questions with either planned or unplanned probes. Each interview took, in general, not more than forty minutes, with no or minimal setbacks.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. In general, five pages of transcript data were generated from each of the interviews. Constant comparison was used to analyze the data. The study is interested in exploring from faculty's perspective, MPhil students' challenges and strategies adopted in engaging with the writing of thesis literature review. Thus, the transcripts of the interviews data were read and coded (where coding simply means naming or labelling the piece of text which contains an idea or a piece of information (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018), with the two issues or themes – challenges and strategies – in mind. Each theme was then refined and divided into sub-themes. Salient and recurring patterns were identified and synthesized through continual reviewing and comparing each sub-theme with other sub-themes across cases (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). We extracted the coded segments from the data files to describe and interpret trends and wrote the findings in light of the research questions.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The findings of the study are reported in this section in line with the purpose of this research, which was to obtain supervisor's views about postgraduate students' challenges and strategies while writing the thesis literature review.

Challenges

The challenges that supervisors highlighted when they were asked about the writing problems of their students in producing the thesis literature review ranged from accessing the appropriate texts, reading and understanding the texts, and ensuring that the thesis literature review was well written.

Reading and comprehension of texts

Analysis of the data collected reveals that supervisors recognized reading and comprehension as a key area of difficulty in students' handling of the thesis literature review, as seen in the extracts below:

Extract 1

In writing the LR, I am tempted to say that some of our students just lack the basic skill of comprehension and summary... How to identify the core issue, what the writer expects the reader to take home, the arguments, the evidence in support of claims, conclusions, getting

information out of literature is a huge challenge. The basic thing you would want to do is to read the text, understand it and summarize it. (HLR 2)

Extract 2

...one of the problems I have found is that sometimes students are not able to couch in their own words their understanding of the work. So you find a lot of bad summaries of the materials. Sometimes, you read the LR and go back to the material and you find that the student's review does not reflect what is in the literature. (ELR 1)

Extract 3

I suppose it's because we are not a reading people. Most books are also not readable to us. When you ask students to review a book, they don't do a review. They come back and you realize that they have not got it. Even PhD students. It is difficult for them, if you ask them to read volumes.... So reading volumes of books and being able to identify the key issues so as to review them is a problem. (RLR 3)

As can be seen from Extracts 1-3, faculty considered the comprehension of texts for the literature review as central. This is commonsensical as before any student can demonstrate the other skills – criticality, argumentation, and synthesis – one is required to deconstruct the texts. It is suggested then that students' difficulty with writing the thesis literature review stems from improper reading of the texts.

Referencing or citation practices

A frequent issue that was mentioned by the interviewed supervisors concerned referencing or citation practices. As indicated below, supervisors indicated that postgraduate students struggle with the intricacies concerning referencing:

Extract 4

The LR is mostly about citations and sometimes you see them citing wrongly, and I think that is something we should be able to look at and advise the student. (ELR 2)

Extract 5

Even when it comes to referencing, at times it is disappointing; a master student doesn't know how to do foot notes, end notes and in-text citation. So, they just don't know and it's not their fault. (HLR 2)

Extract 6

Yes, sometimes how to cue in a text, how to cite certain texts, some people have the habit of putting copiously without any summary. ...Coming back to literature, my advice is if you are quoting or defining, why those quoting? (ELR 3)

Extract 7

The student gives the impression that he is paraphrasing but it is not a paraphrase but the direct words of the author, supplemented with a few personal words. It ends up eventually we can say the students commit plagiarism... (ELR 1)

As indicated in the extracts (4-7) above, graduate students across the three departments not only experienced difficulty with citing but also such fundamental attributing skills as

summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting. It is these difficulties that eventually lead to plagiarism. There is evidence of the discipline-specific nature of this problem, as the History supervisors also mentioned students' problem with foot notes and end notes. There is also a suggestion of academic dishonesty, as presented by ELR 1, which indicates that there is a possibility of a gamut of acts of academic dishonesty that are committed by postgraduate students in the writing of thesis literature review.

Sourcing appropriate materials

Perhaps a very worrying issue from the perspective of supervisors lies in various aspects of the materials that are used by the students. This includes the nature, availability, classification, relevance, and scope:

Extract 8

Another one I want to mention is that...there is reliance on secondary or literature quoted in other literature rather than going to the source, and that may be due to unavailability or simply laziness. (ELR 1)

Extract 9

I expect research or review articles to dominate and on a high scale, I might say that errr textbook comes towards the bottom for a good reason. Textbook mostly contain information that is old and outdated by the time the textbook may hit the stance.... (ELR 3)

Extract 10

They end up repeating and writing what is there. They take everything.... But they don't know what they have read and which portions of the text is relevant and how to sum it up....There are some scholars or works in 1840 but it is scholarly and classic. If the thing is old, it should be classic. There should be a mixture of classic with modern literature... (RLR 1)

Extract 11

Yea sometimes they don't go beyond secondary sources like books but not articles in journals etc....Yes. We have problems with when people have not dealt with more current literature but relied on dated literature. (HLR 1)

Extract 12

I think one major problem is usually access to literature, materials, article, book and especially up-to-date research articles and books. And so most of the time you find the candidate engaging with very old literature. (ELR 2)

Further, as can be seen in Extracts 8-12, supervisors expressed concern about the nature of references, whether classical or current, with the preference for current materials, although HLR 1 argues for 'a mixture of classic with modern literature', depending on the area of investigation. Supervisors from the Department of English (ELR 2) preferred more current literature. Concerning the kinds of sources expected to be referenced in the writing of thesis literature review, there seems to be a general acceptance or preference of research articles as the chief mode of scholarly communication (Swales, 1990).

Information synthesis and criticality

Some supervisors recognized lack of information synthesis and criticality as problems that postgraduate students faced in writing their thesis literature review:

Extract 13

And sometimes, some of the candidates the little they get they find it difficult to do information synthesis. (ELR 2)

Extract 14

Many end by just talking about what they have read or what the literature says and may not relate it to the work they are doing. I don't think that is adequate.... Difficulty in doing linkages of one author to another. (RLR 1)

Extract 15

You don't find the sense of criticality in their works. You either state whether it confirms or does not confirm and that the work will either join these ideas and create a bigger narrative about what we are discussing,...But the students don't create the zeal; they have disjointed description of works. They only describe what one has done without creating any points of divergence and convergence and also without creating a kind of communication or conversations between these works. (HLR 2)

Extract 16

But sometimes because of the methodology used in constructing the LR, it becomes too long, 50 pages of literature. What for? Because every author is introduced like others and so they are all of equal importance, which is not true. (ELR 1)

Extract 17

I'd like to see more effort to generalize instead of this author-by-author, blow-for-blow kind of narrative to talk about issues rather and to introduce the authors as exponents of those issues. (ELR 3)

The issue of synthesis is referred to in Extract 14 as "doing linkages of one author to another" but students have difficulty in doing so. Peng's (2018) research on supervisors' views of the generic difficulties in thesis writing of Chinese EFL research students give ample testimony of this problem of lack of synthesising ability. To define criticality, the English supervisor, in the above quotes, also alluded to the ability to generalize and identify varying degrees of importance as important in the demonstration of criticality. A further aspect of criticality which is missing in students' writing of the thesis literature review is captured as the inability to create "points of divergence and convergence", "bigger picture", and "communication or conversations between these works" (HLR 2). Explaining further what criticality means, one English lecturer says:

Extract 18

I think a sign of immaturity is to find fault with everything you read because you are asked to critique it. You know, to critique something is different from criticizing it. Critique may include criticizing but it may include interpreting what you have read in ways that even others have not thought of. (ELR 3)

It is certain that from the above quote and earlier comments that different Humanities disciplines differ in their appreciation of the meaning and role of criticality in literature review. This is a key quality of thesis writing as stance and voice are enhanced as a result of students exercising criticality.

Language use

The last but not least of the issues identified by supervisors concerned their students' language use, as expressed below:

Extract 19

Language issues – coherence and sentence level....one major problem is language use. Most candidates don't edit their work well. I have a feeling they think that if there are mistakes, the supervisor will correct them but I don't think it is the duty of the supervisor to correct the language;... (ELR 2)

Extract 20

Yea often the logic is not very clear. There is a problem with Grammar, sentence construction and coherence. (RLR 1)

Extract 21

From the point of view of language, I'd recommend language that is readable, accessible, lively and interesting to read than language designed to impress or one that is calculated to frighten with a lot of technical terms. (ELR 3)

Supervisors seemed worried about the use of language from micro to macro level and not willing to take on the role of a proof-reader, thereby bringing to light the age-old argument in postgraduate education as to whose responsibility it is to ensure flawless language in a student's thesis and, in particular, the thesis literature review.

In all, analysis of the data reveals a number of challenges that supervisors identify with students' engagement with thesis literature review writing, and they include challenges with reading and comprehension of texts, sourcing appropriate materials, information synthesis and criticality, referencing or citation and language use. Interestingly, the problems talked about by supervisors are critical at every stage of thesis literature review writing, starting from accessing appropriate materials to presentation, and these demand some serious attention.

Strategies

The interview data showed supervisors' awareness of the strategies that students adopt in handling their challenges while writing the thesis literature review; some of the strategies are negative while others are positive. This section reports the findings on these strategies from supervisors when they were asked about how their students negotiate their way in writing the thesis literature review.

Cooperating with advanced peers, other lecturers, and or supervisors

Supervisors from the Department of Religion and Human Values and English elaborated on the strategies adopted by postgraduate students:

Extract 22

Some will go out and consult other students. They go to students who are a little bit advanced than them. Some of them too will go to other lecturers. Some students are able to help themselves by listening to the supervisor and taking note.... Sometimes, they tell me they chanced upon a research methods book and in reading it, it helped them to know what to do. (RLR 2)

Extract 23

...sometimes the assumption maybe they have is that if they have it there, the supervisor is going to guide them in putting them in the right thematic areas. (ELR 2)

From the above interview extracts, we see that students worked well or co-operated with their supervisors and employed this relationship as a social strategy for their writing. They sought advice and adhered to it. Their supervisors would read their drafts, correct them, and return their writing with suggestions. Students also depended on peer advice from their more senior mates. Supervisors, on the other hand, believed that the assistance they provided on the students' writing was adequate, containing extended or moderate comments. It is seen that the graduate students were in great need of feedback provided by their supervisors. The more detailed and clearer the feedback was, the easier for the students to figure out how they were supposed to correct their mistakes and to learn how to write better in the second language.

Reading and modelling/scaffolding

Supervisors indicated that students generally adopted a reading and modelling plan, as shown in the comments below:

Extract 24

....for some people, when they are reviewing the literature, they read one book and they start the review.... (HRL 3)

Extract 25

So sometimes what you see is that they attempt to identify some relevant works and some articles and try to put them together in a form of a LR...specially some of the students that I have supervised – they look at each article separately in details instead of ... sometimes maybe, if I should use the term 'compressing them. (ELR 2)

In other words, as revealed in Extracts 24-25, students felt that the best way to learn how to write a thesis literature review was to read reviews conducted by other researchers. After all, there is a role played by imitation in the process of learning, if only this does not lead to mere duplication.

While the reading of materials is obviously a strategy to adopt, the role of supervisors in helping students to make the best out of the texts they read is recognized, as indicated below:

Extract 26

We need to build the skills of our students regarding reading scientific texts, understanding and interpreting and extracting information. (RLR 2)

Summarizing, paragraphing and quoting

According to supervisors interviewed, another strategy used by postgraduate students involved summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting:

Extract 27

A lot of quoting but doing so wrongly especially with punctuation. There is not much of the student just quoting and write "I disagree." (RLR 1)

Extract 28

Most student would like to quote. But sometimes, when they quote they think they are paraphrasing. Most students do not want to own the material, make it their own or engage with it because sometimes there is also the fear: if I miss a word, would that not change the meaning of it so why don't I bring the whole thing. (RLR 3)

Extract 29

They simply summarize what they have read. A lot of summaries. It shows they have not read the work itself. They just read the abstract and then summarize. (ELR 1)

Extract 30

I feel upset when a lot of your entries are "cited in..", "cited in...". no. I want to know whether you've actually read Chomsky, 1957 or 1965. (ELR 3)

As can be seen in Extracts 27-30, there is no doubt that postgraduate students recognize summarising, paraphrasing, and quoting as skills that have the potential in offering them assistance in the attribution of propositions and claims. However, supervisors' comments reveal that they are not correctly handled by students. An example is ELR 3 who maintain that students utilize secondary sources as a strategy when they have not read the primary texts.

In all, comments of supervisors presented above reveal some of the strategies (including cooperating with their advanced peers, other lecturers and/ or supervisors; reading and modeling; and summarizing, paragraphing and quoting) that postgraduate students usually adopt to deal with their problems with writing their thesis literature review. It is important to note that supervisors still found the use of some of these strategies 'problematic'.

DISCUSSION

From the data, it is clear that supervisors were fully aware of the challenges that postgraduate students in the Humanities faced and the strategies they adopted in their thesis literature review writing. There were both similarities and dissimilarities from the supervisors' accounts. The study attests to the supervisors' awareness that thesis writing constitutes a challenge. This seems to confirm, in general, earlier studies that indicate that ESL students from diverse cultures and educational systems often have difficulty in meeting the demands of postgraduate thesis writing (Casanave, 2002; Paltridge, 1997; Peng, 2018), including the writing of thesis literature review (Komba, 2015), with Adel, Amirian, and Ghaderi (2015) characterizing thesis literature review as an "infamously difficulty task to manage" (p. 113). The lack of relevant previous studies for thesis literature review is given as a source of writing anxiety for students (Meng & Tseng, 2013). Hsiao and Yu (2012) attribute the difficulties in writing a thesis literature review as the consequence of not considering it as a genre. Lee and Laverty's (2014)

allude to the “telling mode” that some postgraduate student adopt instead of the “knowledge building mode” (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) in the thesis literature review writing as helping to understand the practice.

Despite the general characterisation of the writing of thesis literature review as a challenge in the present study, consistent with the literature (e.g. Vos, 2006; Akindele, 2008), it is clear that issues such as the availability of classical texts as well as end notes and footnotes from the perspectives of supervisors were not only important but also discipline-specific. Faculty were concerned about the challenge that was posed by information synthesis and criticality, as confirmed in the literature (Akindele, 2008; Bruce, 2014; Cronin, Ryan, & Coughlan, 2007; Salom & Monreal, 2014). Postgraduate students often found it difficult to comment on the limitations or significance of various findings (Boote & Beile 2005; Froese, Gantz, & Henry 1998). In fact, Cheng (2006) refers to this as a deeper problem in postgraduate writing. The lack of criticality or “voice” among postgraduate students in the study is sometimes attributed to social norms and acculturation (Akindele, 2008; Atkinson, 1997; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). Al Badi (2015) also considers it as characteristic of ESL students. The current situation may not be too different from what Al Badi (2015) describes, as majority of the students in [XXX], in addition to being considered ESL learners, come from cultures where the practice of juniors openly criticising their seniors or elderly is frowned upon; hence, their lack of confidence in being critical of the literature they review.

Interestingly, language use did not attract much attention for supervisors in the present study, given that the literature identifies language as key to the success of thesis literature review writing (Qian & Krugly-Smolka, 2008). Qian and Krugly-Smolka (2008) specifically mention the narrow range of vocabulary and sentence level difficulties as pertinent challenges for some Asian students, an observation that is confirmed in the present study. Limited vocabulary and reporting verbs, in conformity with Chen (2009), were seen as a challenge to students though supervisors in the current study failed to highlight it as a serious issue. Tense usage, reporting verbs, and active and passive voice are important linguistic resources that have serious consequences for the effective presentation of thesis literature review. The less attention given to language use may be attributed to two factors: first, supervisors may have less expectation towards their students’ prowess in using language effectively; and second, language use and other aspects of the thesis literature review writing like information synthesis and criticality are intertwined such that poor expression and inappropriate use of linguistic resources can affect the overall presentation of the thesis literature review.

Further, some observations have been made with respect to critical issues such as plagiarism, establishment of niche, and structuring of the thesis literature review. A supervisor in the study mentioned plagiarism as an issue among postgraduate students in the writing of thesis literature review. The persistence of plagiarism among postgraduate students may be as a result of their lack of experience in writing essays (Ashworth, Bannister, & Thorne, 1997; Pecorari, 2001) or the feeling that they cannot improve upon the existing literature, and consequently, resort to plagiarizing rather than expressing their thoughts (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Biggs, 1994). Regarding the establishment of niche, it is interesting to note that, unlike Liu (2007) and Komba (2015), the present study, through the interview data, did not emphasize identifying a research niche as a problem for Ghanaian postgraduate students. Indeed, for the disciplinary community of History, Premaratne (2013) has this to say about the

thesis literature review: "it is not unnecessarily critical of previous work for the sake of finding a gap in the literature" (p. 248). Adopting an appropriate structure for the literature review also received scanty comment by supervisors. This may well be a challenge to postgraduate students in Ghana, an ESL context, in line with Hidalgo and Razo (2014), who studied the challenges of two Mexican novice writers face in their thesis literature review in an EFL context. These findings on students' challenges are largely in conformity with the taxonomy recently provided on the challenges that postgraduate students encounter in their TLR (Chen, Wang, & Lee 2016): a) methodological b) linguistic c) conceptual, and d) ontological, as presented in Figure 1.

Challenges	Taxonomy
Information synthesis and criticality	Methodological
Referencing or citation and language use	Linguistic
Reading and comprehension of texts	Conceptual
Sourcing appropriate materials	Ontological

Figure 1: Matching Findings on Students' Challenges against Existing Taxonomy on the Challenges of Postgraduate Students in Writing TLRs

In Figure1, it is clear that the challenges unveiled in the current study match with the taxonomy on postgraduate students' difficulties with writing the thesis literature review.

Consistent with the literature on previous studies of second language learning in academic settings, students in the present study adopted varied and numerous strategies which are mainly described as cognitive, metacognitive, social (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) and searching (Riazi, 1997) to counter the challenges they face in writing the thesis literature review. The positive ones involve referring to literature reviews in previously passed theses, summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, concept mapping, defining scope of literature, text graphing, interacting with supervisors and other faculty, and identifying relevant literature. From the perspective of supervisors, the explicitly positive strategies were not always properly handled; thus, becoming problems in themselves, as noted from the earlier discussion. For instance, where students looked up to supervisors for guidance, they often abandoned their role of adequately proofreading their drafts. In summarizing texts consulted in the thesis literature review, the end product of students often did not match the content of the text, in the view of one supervisor, while paraphrasing was not effectively done. Although students, as part of their strategies in writing the thesis literature review, depend on supervisors, the literature notes that students were poorly prepared for the dissertation, failed to take their comments and feedback into account when revising. Unlike studies among Asian students, the present study does not ask about the role of translation as a strategy in thesis literature review writing (Hsiao, 2016; Qian & Krugly-Smolska, 2008). This is obviously because, operating within an ESL context, postgraduate students did not have such a challenge. It is also revealed that most of the strategies that students adopt in handling the thesis literature review including stringing together abstracts and summaries, shadowing (hiding behind a chorus of voices of source writers), and patchwriting appear inadequate and lead to further problems. Krishnan and Kathpalia (2002) refer to these as 'coping' strategies and Allison (1997, p. 68) points to "a largely unmotivated listing of reviews of different studies". The stringing together of abstracts and summaries has the tendency of betraying students' lack of comprehension of the original texts and lack of attention to originality in content, poor language use, and inability to effectively integrate various sources in a more coherent manner.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study sought to examine, from supervisors' perspectives, MPhil students' challenges and strategies adopted in thesis literature review writing. In all, nine supervisors, three from each department in [XXX], a Ghanaian public university, were interviewed.

Analysis of the interview data with respect to the challenges postgraduate students encountered showed some interesting findings. These findings indicate that there are more ingrained and perceptible problems associated with thesis literature review writing for Ghanaian MPhil students, and possibly other students elsewhere (e.g. Akindele, 2008; Boote & Beile, 2005; Holbrook *et al.*, 2007; Swales & Lindeman, 2002). Our analysis also indicates supervisors' awareness of students' deployment of various strategies (cognitive, meta-cognitive, social, and searching) to deal with the kinds of challenges they encountered in their thesis literature review. However, as shown in the discussion, these strategies were far from being sufficient and efficient. In other words, students tended to adopt some 'coping mechanisms' (Leki, 1995) and accommodationist posturing (Benesch, 2001). Such acts reflected, as supervisors pointed out, the students' individual backgrounds and needs, as well as their broader disciplinary, cultural, and educational backgrounds.

Both supervisors and university management can help to deal with the problems specifically identified in this study. For instance, with the problem of reading and comprehension of texts, supervisors can help students identify relevant portions of texts they read. Students' mastery over the English language and information synthesis and criticality abilities can be tested and made a criterion during admission interviews and selections. These skills just mentioned above, in addition to referencing or citation skills of students, can further be sharpened through courses and activities of Academic Writing Units. With regards to the problem of sourcing appropriate materials, universities can provide easy access to materials through access to high impact journals and digital libraries of other institutions. In the same light, departmental librarians can also provide constant support to students.

The findings highlighted above also have pedagogical implications, calling for continual and close monitoring of not only students but supervisors in students' thesis literature review writing. Although postgraduate research students may become more competent as they proceed through their course work, research, and thesis writing, explicit instruction in writing thesis literature review can be helpful to them because some may not discover all that they need to learn by themselves (Cronin, Ryan, & Coughlan, 2008). As indicated in the literature (Zaporozhetz, 1987), literature review seems to be given the least instructional consideration among thesis chapters. Consequently, supervisors drawing on the several pedagogues/pedagogical texts including Afolabi (1992), Boote and Beile (2005), Freer and Barker (2008), Swales and Lindemann (2002), and Swales and Feak (2004) can offer one-to-one, hands-on help as the most effective assistance for students who are writing the thesis literature review. Again, faculty can be encouraged to adopt a more explicit mode of instruction on thesis literature review, enabling postgraduate students to acquire the requisite skills. Research methods courses, in terms of content and teaching approaches, should support students through the thesis literature review process. Equally important is the need to give students time for exposure through reading well-written literature reviews and practicing the writing of more review genres (such as critical review, book review, and annotated bibliography) for content, linguistic form, rhetorical effectiveness, and style. Such well-written

literature reviews can be discussed in class to help students identify what makes the samples outstanding. To better meet postgraduate research students' needs, the Writing Centre or Unit that offers services could collaborate with departments across the campus in identifying the specific thesis literature review writing challenges faced by these students and continually adjust the recently approved graduate academic writing course in [XXX] to reflect students' needs and progress and on their supervisors' feedback. Supervisors can be taken through workshops and trainings on innovative ways of teaching and helping students to effectively handle the thesis literature reviews.

At this point, it is vital to acknowledge limitations to our study. The research participants (that is, supervisors) are all from the Humanities, so the findings of this research need to be tested on research participants from other disciplines, particularly Hard Sciences and Soft Sciences so that EAP or ESP instructors can take advantage of the findings in their Seminar and Research Writing classes for Hard Sciences and Social Sciences graduate students. Again, participants in this study are male dominated and future research in the area will need to involve the views of female supervisors. At the least, this study shows that more research is needed on supervisors in particular contexts – discipline-specific, cultural, and institutional settings and their experiences in providing support learning to write thesis literature reviews. More ethnographic research is needed to investigate supervisor perception and support for students in writing other high-stakes part-genres (e.g. methodology as well as analysis and discussion) of theses/dissertations in departments from both Humanities and non-Humanities contexts. Moreover, future studies will need to triangulate the views of supervisors with interviews from graduate students.

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