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Reflections on supervising an in-service English language teacher's undergraduate dissertation in Oman (on developing writing skills)

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Abstract

Supervising undergraduate dissertations has received relatively little attention in the literature, despite the pivotal nature of such activity in supporting knowledge growth. Drawing on qualitative case study research methodology, including classroom observations and interviews, this article offers a reflective account of the process of supervising an undergraduate thesis, that of an in-service English language teacher carrying out action research aimed at improving writing skills at lower secondary school level in Oman. The teacher was studying on a Bachelor of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programme, conducted by a British university for the local Ministry of Education. Findings reveal the supervisory experience was not without challenges. These included balancing the twin roles of teacher educator and research supervisor, and managing communication, record-keeping and time. Conclusions that emerge from this study might interest transnational educators supervising undergraduate research in other contexts.

Keywords: *undergraduate research supervision; language teacher education; reflective practice; qualitative research; the Middle East*

Introduction

Supervising research projects, like other forms of education such as coaching, mentoring and teaching, is essentially a reflective process. It can be rewarding and exhilarating, and can lead to positive outcomes of various kinds, including improved learning and the sharing of results. Conference papers

and academic articles, after all, are generally produced by those who have been successful supervisees. However, our less successful experiences of supervising research also need to be fully engaged with, assuming we wish to develop our capacities. These may do more to encourage soul-searching re-examinations of our practices than successful partnerships. If we then share such experiences, others can learn as well as ourselves.

In this article, I reflect on my own practice of supervising dissertations on a University of Leeds in-service Bachelor of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (BA TESOL) project in Oman, a Middle-Eastern country that has developed rapidly in recent decades. Before focusing on one case in particular that was less successful than expected, I first outline the context, relating this to the literature on supervising undergraduate research projects.

Background

The three-year BA TESOL was held for six successive cohorts of English language teachers who held teacher training college diplomas; over 900 completed the course between 1999 and 2008. Entry requirements included four years teaching experience and a level of language proficiency, measured by a Pass in the Cambridge Preliminary English Test or an overall IELTS (International Education Language Testing System) score of at least 4.5 (rather low, but the course included a language element). The teachers received input from University of Leeds staff, attending intensive six-week summer and two-week winter schools each year, held in Oman apart from one trip to the UK (Atkins & Griffiths, 2009).

Throughout the rest of the year, the teachers taught four days per week and spent the other weekday at a regional training centre (the course was run in eight different regions). Here they used a library dedicated to the project and attended lectures, seminars and tutorials provided by a regional tutor, who also visited their schools once per semester, observing lessons and giving feedback. Assessment was mainly through exams and practically-oriented assignments that were marked in the UK (Lamb & Borg, 2009).

I conducted research with Cohort 4 (January 2003 – December 2005) while working, as a regional tutor, with a group of 35 teachers throughout their degree. They were introduced to practical research early in the programme (Al-Sinani, Al-Senaidi and Etherton, 2009) and, indeed, the very first assignment (submitted in March 2003) involved them in planning an intervention, observing the learners' engagement, assessing learning outcomes, reflecting and evaluating. They subsequently gained further practice of doing research before formal input on researching TESOL was provided on the second year summer school in the UK (June – August 2004).

When the teachers returned to Oman, they needed to identify a research focus (September 2004), supported by the regional tutor, and develop a 3,000-word research proposal (November 2004). This was a crucial phase. To a much greater extent than with any of their earlier assignments, the focus and direction of their dissertation project would be determined by the teachers themselves. As with undergraduates in other contexts, they needed to establish the parameters of their projected work and develop researchable questions allied to feasible research methodology (Todd, Bannister & Clegg, 2004).

A positive relationship with the research supervisor (regional tutor) could facilitate their research engagement, particularly if this person possessed qualities identified by Nulty, Kiley and Meyers (2009) as vital: enthusiasm, sensitivity, respect and unselfishness, together with subject specialist knowledge and the ability to scaffold but not over-direct. Getting the balance right in such relationships can be challenging. As Todd, Smith and Bannister (2006) explain, supervisors might take on a more directive role at the beginning before progressively slipping into the background once issues of focus, design and ethics have been dealt with. However, there is a danger of their interests unintentionally over-influencing the student's decision-making (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009); reflexivity is needed constantly.

If the relationship works, the dialogic approach to learning that supervisor-supervisee tutorials encourage can develop critical thinking (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009) and a range of self-management skills (Boud & Costley, 2007). Engaging in research can be highly motivating, leading to a powerful sense of both ownership and autonomy. An undergraduate quoted in Greenbank and Penketh (2009, p. 467) described it, for example, as his "own little baby", for which he could set the timetable and devote energies to as he wished. However, it is not all positive. There are critical moments during the research process when the supervisor can play a pivotal role, e.g. in providing support to help the supervisee through "the emotionally unsettling experience of intellectual confusion" (Todd et al., 2004, p. 336) undergraduates doing research often encounter in their unfamiliar role of semi-autonomous knowledge producers.

Returning to this specific BA TESOL, following feedback on their proposals (January 2005), the teachers needed to meet the regional tutor again and then conduct primary research (March-May 2005). As noted by Todd et al. (2004), collecting and analysing primary data for a dissertation generally requires engagement that is prolonged and intense. Undergraduate researchers often need ongoing reassurance from their supervisors while making this commitment.

In the summer school (June-July 2005), there were taught sessions for the 'Dissertation' module and the teachers made 10-minute assessed

presentations of their interim findings (worth 25% of the total mark) to two examiners and their peers. As well as a grade and the examiners' brief written comments, this enabled them to get some informal peer feedback. However, as Greenbank and Penketh (2009) have argued, peer support is likely to be less effective for dissertation work than it is for regular assignments on undergraduate programmes, as peers inevitably tend to be focused on different topics with different research questions.

In the final semester (September–December 2005), the teachers wrote up their 6,000-word dissertations, supported by further regional tutor supervision. There were continuing opportunities then for dialogic learning (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009).

As the above timeline demonstrates, the dissertation was an integral part of the last half of the three-year course, though it only accounted for 20 credits (30 including the 10 for 'Researching TESOL'). During this period, the teachers were additionally studying for other modules that made demands upon their time. Managing time, particularly when there are other assignments to be worked on concurrently, has been identified as a challenge in other research contexts (Todd et al., 2004; Greenbank & Penketh, 2009) and was regarded so here (Lamb & Al-Lawatia, 2009).

To try to avoid the scenario of some teachers receiving excessive support and to encourage parity across regions, there were constraints (set by the university and agreed to by regional tutors) on the amount of research supervision provided. The academic guidelines (University of Leeds, 2005) stipulated that teachers were entitled to regular tutorials, but limited the feedback they could receive on their written work; they were allowed to show the regional tutor just 600 words of the dissertation draft each semester. Accordingly, notes and outlines assumed a greater importance than they might in higher education contexts where a reading of complete drafts is permitted. This led to a greater emphasis placed on the quality of the structuring rather than on the writing itself, a focus which can be valuable in supporting the development of academic literacy (Rowley & Slack, 2004; Green, 2013). However, one regional tutor (Gracey, 2009) has argued that the restriction placed on the number of words that could be read made supervising effectively more difficult.

Supervising well can be challenging. Inevitably, some undergraduates might prefer to follow their own course of action regardless of advice (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009), while others may not turn up to meetings. Alternatively, some may be over-dependent, either because they lack self-confidence or, in contrast, are highly ambitious (Todd et al., 2006). A further source of frustration is that supervisory encounters are often brief, partly because supervisors often have numerous other supervisees to see (Rowley & Slack, 2004), as was the case in the context of the BA TESOL. In such circumstances,

Rowley and Slack argue, it can be difficult to keep track of where everyone is and to influence their progress within the limited time available.

BA TESOL tutorials were conducted in the regional training centre or held off-site in teachers' schools. If dissertations were practitioner- and classroom-based, then the once-a-semester observation and feedback session could provide the regional tutor with a further research supervision opportunity. If teachers wished to change their research design in any significant way, there was a requirement this was negotiated in advance. The regional tutor tried to keep abreast of all developments by maintaining a log, briefly recording the main points discussed in each meeting.

There were various unique socio-cultural dimensions to the supervisory relationship in this particular context. Firstly, these were teachers of *English*, a choice of subject which might suggest a positive disposition to the language and to the culture of many of its speakers, including their 'colonialist' legacy (Al-Issa, 2005). The bloodless coup of 1970 that brought His Majesty Sultan Qaboos to power was supported by the British, and when the education system was developed it was with the help of British advisors (Harrison, 1996). Secondly, there is evidence many teachers felt positively about the BA TESOL, conscious of its various benefits (e.g. Al-Bureikhi et al., 2009). Thirdly, there was "the legendary warmth and hospitality of the Omani people", which facilitated regional tutors' attempts "to establish cooperative and friendly relationships early in the programme" (Gracey, 2009, p. 69). These relationships could deepen over time, so that considerable trust could develop (e.g. Wyatt & Arnold, 2012). There may, nevertheless, occasionally have been misunderstandings, due to the 'cultural and ideological baggage' of the supervisor (Holliday, 2002), resulting perhaps in "misconceptions of the foreign other" (p. 173).

In terms of the supervisory style regional tutors tended to adopt, Lamb (2009, p. 46) has described this as "autonomy-supportive", involving listening, eliciting, and the encouragement of both reflection and the making of informed decisions. In Lamb's view, this style, which was 'novel' in this context, appears to have been valued by many of the teachers, though a minority may have preferred "more direct and explicit advice" (p. 44).

The BA TESOL took place at a time of curriculum renewal. The Ministry of Education wished "to move away from whole class teaching that rewards rote learning, towards student-centred methods that emphasize group work and individualized approaches which promote inquiry learning and display evidence of analytical and higher order skills" (Atkins & Griffiths, 2009, p. 4). This required fresh materials and teachers able to exploit them, teachers who were themselves highly autonomous critical thinkers. The dissertation had a role in developing these qualities.

Research methodology

As noted above, I am reflecting here on my own practices of supervising undergraduate dissertations in Oman. Given that “experience, an ongoing professional commitment to development and engagement with reflective and reflexive practice” (Nulty et al., 2009, p. 696) are thought to improve supervisory practices, this is likely to be worthwhile. Such endeavour has the potential to generate insights into the challenges, which have received relatively little attention in the literature (Boud & Costley, 2007; Todd et al., 2006).

Though many of my experiences of research supervision in Oman were positive, my focus here is on a less successful than expected experience. The teacher supervised (Fahad: pseudonym) was one of six initially part of a larger study that followed teacher development throughout the course (Wyatt, 2008). Some seemed to thrive on the dissertation component (e.g. teachers in Wyatt, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Wyatt & Arnold, 2012), but not all (e.g. Wyatt, 2012) and perhaps not Fahad, whose case I have not discussed before.

This is a qualitative study focused on the particularities of experience (Stake, 1995) and drawing on data collected over three years. Research methods included classroom observations, in which my role was ‘non-participant observer’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) and semi-structured interviews, which were usually conducted just after observations. I also analysed Fahad’s reflective assignments (including his dissertation), collected feedback on these provided by University of Leeds markers, and kept field notes. Using these various methods allowed for triangulation of several types (Stake, 1995), e.g. observed practices compared with reported practices and underlying cognitions, my judgements compared with markers’ judgements, data collected through the same means but at different times. Fahad was a volunteer who signed an informed consent form guaranteeing anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time, in accordance with the ethical guidelines followed; for more details of the research methodology employed in the multi-case study, see Wyatt (2009; 2010c; 2011). I now describe the case, blending data from different sources to create ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973).

The case

My starting point is a quote taken from the limitations section located towards the end of Fahad’s dissertation, which he submitted two days late (thereby incurring a penalty) in December 2005: “First of all, I think I wasn’t so lucky in choosing my topic, not because it was not significant but rather because it was too much to deal with...”. This quote concerns me as one of the key responsibilities of the research supervisor is to help the undergraduate develop an appropriate focus (Todd et al., 2004). Had I somehow failed Fahad in this regard?

Fahad's topic was writing and specifically, to quote the title of his November 2004 'Researching TESOL' proposal: 'Improving my Grade 6 EfM (English for Me) learners' writing skills'. EfM was the new curriculum used in his purpose-built secondary school for boys; this had a computer room and learning resource centre and was far more modern than the school he had worked in before. The boys had earlier studied in a mixed gender primary school for Grades 1-4 with female teachers before transferring and thus already had five years experience of EfM. Justifying his choice of dissertation topic, Fahad wrote in his November 2004 proposal:

Last year I started teaching the new EfM curriculum, and I thought these pupils will be better... but only in writing I found the opposite. They were worse. The majority of them have many mistakes in spelling, grammar, punctuation and the formation of letters. It was difficult for me when marking the pupils' books because I was always spending a lot of time highlighting their mistakes. This year I am teaching pupils of Grade 6 and I found that the problem is still there. These pupils are good in all the language skills apart from writing. Therefore, I decided to do my best to help them improve their writing, and I chose this topic for my research because I am very concerned about it.

This seemed a valid reason to engage in action research, particularly so, from my perspective, as I had observed the problem first-hand in an April 2004 lesson, which was on the topic of extinct animals. After speaking, listening and reading activities that seemed to go well, the focus had shifted to writing and the boys had to produce sentences. Fahad demonstrated what they should do, writing neatly in cursive script on the whiteboard; 'Men hunted the mammoth for its meat and skin'. "I tried to write the first sentence, the example", he told me afterwards, "and explained that the other sentences should be the same structure", as in 'Men hunted the dodo for its meat and feathers'. Fahad checked understanding before starting, and then monitored, going from group to group, focusing especially on the groups he knew contained "the weak, more weak pupils", and "tried to help them by explaining in L1" (Arabic). While Fahad was monitoring, I got up and walked around. "Some struggling to write", I noted at the time. My observation, reported to him later, was that "some could hardly do anything". After nearly ten minutes, most of the boys had produced very little.

However, while Fahad's plan to support writing through action research seemed entirely appropriate, was the initial research design workable? As stated in his November 2004 proposal, Fahad planned to investigate the problem of poor writing by interviewing the teachers of his school and of other schools, analysing earlier stages of the EfM curriculum, observing "a number of weak pupils" during writing activities and interviewing them afterwards. He would also interview their parents or alternatively survey them. Having explored the nature of the problem in this way, Fahad would then seek to discover how widespread it was by testing 60 students (of 90 in

the year group) several times each week for a month. The tests would focus on grammar, spelling, punctuation and skills in forming/joining letters. This would lead into action research when he would focus on one problem at a time in class, experimenting with different techniques and monitoring their effectiveness. When he found a solution, he would move on to another problem.

Elements of this plan seem entirely appropriate, e.g. interviewing primary school teachers to learn more the problem, observing learners who were struggling and intervening to try to help them. Classroom-based action research, involving observing and intervening, was central to the research designs of other teachers I was supervising in the same regional cohort, though the topics were different, e.g. group work, speaking, low achievers (Wyatt, 2010b). Fahad's design, in contrast, was rather more ambitious in the context of an undergraduate dissertation, involving multiple stages in an open-ended way, and multiple methods.

The danger of teachers burdening themselves with over-ambitious research designs, incorporating greater methodological complexity than was practical, was flagged by Goodith White, the University of Leeds 'Dissertation Co-ordinator', during the January 2005 BA TESOL winter school. Some teachers may have been trying too hard to impress the assessors, a disadvantage perhaps of the proposal carrying 10 credits. Others may have had lingering beliefs, not fully dispelled by the 'Researching TESOL' module, that research needed to be large-scale; such beliefs are unfortunately common amongst language teachers in international contexts (Borg, 2009), who therefore need more support in how to do research.

Fahad's 3,000-word proposal, marked by a university of Leeds lecturer, was scored in the Lower Second band. It actually received quite positive comments about the methodology, e.g. "the procedure includes action which is very appropriate". The biggest criticism was "evidence of a very limited amount of reading", although there was also criticism of how the learners' writing would be assessed: "I do not think you can just count the mistakes. Some mistakes are more important than others in terms of how they affect meaning". The general comment was:

This is generally sound as a proposal although you need to define more clearly what you mean by writing. I think you are viewing it quite narrowly as being related to accuracy but this could be reflected in the title.

I considered this January 2005 feedback carefully when planning a tutorial with Fahad the following month. I took as my starting point his research question and mind-mapped points he might need/want to consider:

Table 1: Planning for a tutorial with Fahad

<i>Fahad's research question</i>	<i>My notes</i>
How can I	As designer of activities, facilitator, monitor, scaffolder?
<i>help</i>	Modelling/instructing (using L1), designing activities, monitoring, giving feedback (evaluative, strategic, corrective), motivating?
my Grade 6 EfM pupils	What does the syllabus require them to write? What approaches to teaching writing does it follow?
to improve	What are their problems? What are the reasons for these? Family background, educational, lack of strategies/practice?
their writing	Task type (essays, letters, short answers, handwriting)? Criteria - accuracy, fluency, complexity? Relevance, organization (introduction, conclusion, paragraphs, linkers), language (appropriacy and range of grammar and vocabulary, mechanics: spelling, punctuation, letter formation)?
in English?	As a foreign language, as Arabic speakers/writers?

Looking at these notes, I can see that my initial concern was motivated by my primary role as educator, rather than my more specific role of research supervisor. If my primary concern had been with the latter, I should have focused immediately on the feasibility of his proposal. However, struck by the marker's comment about the apparent 'narrowness' of Fahad's approach to teaching writing, and with my 'educator hat' on, I wished to raise his awareness. I was conscious that, while Fahad had received some input on developing writing skills, there was still a module on this to come (in the 2005 summer school).

I organized a tutorial with Fahad in early February 2005, a hectic time. My 35 students had each received feedback on their 3,000-word research proposals and needed to take their plans forward. Due to the project design (above), these proposals had been marked by others, but I had skimmed through them and had the UK markers' comments to discuss with the teachers. In the space of three very busy days, I arranged to see most of the teachers, visiting the schools that lay within 120 kms south and 70 kms north (those in more remote places I saw the previous or following week). The tutorial with Fahad, held in his school towards the end of a baking hot day, started as follows:

I (Interviewer): What types of writing do the learners do?

F (Fahad): Writing in general, writing any word or any sentence.

I: In Grade 6 what types of writing do the children need to do actually?

F: There's not much writing, to be honest, there's not much writing in Grade 6. This is their skills book. You can see, there's not much composing (no), just writing words and some separate words, short sentences and so on.

I: OK they write words, they write short sentences (yes). Do they write anything longer, do they write...?

F: Yes, sometimes they write diaries.

I: OK, so in diaries they can maybe put sentences together into a paragraph (yes). Do they write things, for example, about what they did on holiday?

F: Yes, they write them.

I: So, for example, they can write short narratives really (yes). OK ... what does the teachers' book say about the goals for writing at this level? [*picking up the teacher's book and looking at the contents*] write an email, write a cartoon story (yes), write a tongue twister, so that's really sentence level, write a rap verse, so that's extended isn't it (yes), write a simple autobiography, write diary pages. So in the book there are things they are expected to write, types of genre aren't they (yes), types of discourse, so perhaps you need to explore writing at different levels?

After this attempt at awareness-raising, I tried to relate curriculum requirements (and the different types of text the learners were required to produce) to theory. The discussion moved on to the types of knowledge needed by skilled writers, knowledge of not just grammar, vocabulary and spelling but also of structuring discourse, and of using language for functional purposes in different socio-cultural contexts (Bachman and Palmer, 1996). Fahad seemed reasonably familiar with these ideas, which related to a module 'Assessing Children's Language Learning' he had been doing. I was eliciting as much as possible, but then summarized:

I: OK so if we think about writing in those terms, then it's larger, isn't it, than just...

F: Yes larger than just spelling or combining words to make sentences, but this, I think, is all for a higher level than Class 6...

I: Yes, but if we look at the text types the learners are supposed to produce...

I was trying to help Fahad see developing writing skills in a rather different way, as an interactive process in which both top-down (i.e. drawing on imagination and experience of the world) and bottom-up strategies (i.e. focusing on accuracy of spelling and grammar) could be employed (Cameron, 2001). However, I have been troubled since by the thought I may have been imposing an alien Western perspective here, as part of my own 'cultural and ideological baggage' (Holliday, 2002). Is a bottom-up approach to developing writing skills simply more natural in the Arab world? In her 2006 marker's report on the Cohort 4 'Dissertation' module, Goodith White noted that across the different regions there was a tendency amongst teachers interested in developing writing skills to focus on the use of bottom-up strategies. However, such an approach was certainly not universal. Al-Jardani (2008), for example, also working with Grade 6 learners, but in the capital, Muscat, focused not so much on achieving formal correctness, but on developing process writing skills (Tribble, 1996), e.g. brainstorming around a topic,

planning content and organization, drafting, redrafting and editing, getting feedback from peers as well as the teacher.

I asked Fahad about the action component of his research and he reported: "I should discover their problems and the reasons... then I can try to solve these problems. For example, if they have a weakness in spelling I can give them more practice..." He felt he should observe the learners engaged in writing rather than just rely on an analysis of their homework: "there are some reasons for [their] weaknesses that teachers can't discover unless they watch the pupils". This suggests small-scale action research, of the type some of Fahad's peers were doing, as noted above. About 25 minutes into the tutorial (which in itself suggests, from a researcher rather than an educator perspective, I may have spent too much of the very limited time available on exploring the concepts), I asked Fahad:

I: How many learners are you going to focus on? Have you decided?

F: About 30

I: 30? (astonished voice)

F: Less, I think less, much less (quick speech)

I: It's going to be in one class, isn't it?

F: I chose samples from three classes... I think there are 15 pupils from three classes.

I: What criteria did you use to select them?

F: They are from different levels... some are good, others are medium and some weak.

I: Right... so you changed your idea, did you, because initially you said it was going to be the weak pupils, I think?

Reviewing this now, I am struck, firstly, by the uncertainty in Fahad's voice when he said "much less"; his research design was clearly still evolving in his own mind. Secondly, I was not as familiar as I could have been with the details of his November 2004 research proposal, partly due perhaps to volume of work (35 x 3,000-word proposals to process, none of which I had actually been given to mark, and 8-10 tutorials per day during early February) and the consequent need to base planning for the tutorials on the UK markers' feedback; hence I was astonished at '30', when in fact his proposal had suggested even more participants. At the same time, in light of Goodith White's comments at the January 2005 winter school, I was conscious some teachers would be scaling back on over-ambitious research designs; the most important thing seemed to be to work towards one that was achievable. So was the basic design OK?

I think I should have done more to check it was. I reminded Fahad that changes as significant as shifting the focus from 'weak' students (a term I use here but generally felt uncomfortable with and tried to steer teachers away from [Wyatt, 2010a]) to all should really be cleared with me before they became part of his research design. I then pointed out that in his research he

needed to consider time constraints, before alluding again to the action element that might help:

I: For example, you use feedback, different types of feedback.

F: Oh yes, yes, this is very important. After collecting the books and finding the mistakes, I always have from 5 to 10 minutes to show the mistakes. I get the pupils to correct their partners' mistakes and I discuss them.

When I left Fahad's school that day, I had the impression he would be observing learners writing in class, collecting their work, identifying different types of errors and giving feedback on them, all in a rather bottom-up way. It occurs to me, with hindsight, I did not gain a sufficiently clear picture of what he was planning to do. Maybe my questions were not focused enough or his plans were still developing. I did ask him to note down his revised plans and show them to me at the regional training centre, but this did not happen; updates were oral and brief. I should have insisted more firmly on a revised proposal in writing.

Two months later (April 2005), I visited Fahad's school to observe a lesson connected to his action research. It was one of a series of 'extra' lessons, Fahad afterwards explained he was providing, focused on helping learners with three aspects of their writing: handwriting, spelling and grammar. As the 30 boys filed in, found their places in traditional rows (unlike the normal classroom group work arrangements) and settled, their attention would have rested on 4 parallel lines drawn on the whiteboard a few moments earlier to support handwriting.

After greeting the class, Fahad collected homework. He then spoke to a boy, "Ahmed, come out. I want you to write *abc*." Using the lines on the whiteboard to guide him, Ahmed did as he was asked, writing these letters in the cursive font used in the coursebook. The next boy, coming forward to replace Ahmed, struggled to form the letter '*d*' in the way expected, and Fahad intervened to help him. A succession of learners then came forward, adding three or four letters each in cursive script, some receiving advice on joining letters. After this, there was individual handwriting practice; the learners needed to copy a text about Ibn Battuta, the explorer. Fahad circulated, monitoring their work carefully. "I want to see the best handwriting," he reminded the class a few minutes later. "No, don't hold the pen like that," he told a boy. While they were engaged in the task, I quietly got up and walked around, looking at the quality of the learners' work; some were writing in a rather 'untidy way', but the majority were producing 'very neat text'. After 10 minutes Fahad brought the activity to an end, reminding them: "Anyone who didn't finish can complete later. Put them in your portfolio." There was then a short spelling/vocabulary activity (jumbled up words that needed unscrambling, e.g. '*ckocl*', with handwriting a focus during the checking) before a grammar activity. Fahad had previously collected the learners' books and, while marking them, had chosen grammatically incorrect statements to form the basis of a worksheet. He now used this in the last few

minutes of the lesson, focusing on a statement that lacked capitalization and punctuation (*my name ahmed ali my age is 13*). He managed to elicit corrections before the bell rang, and then gave homework.

Fahad's intervention (this extra lesson) was already the fifth of a series he was providing for the class (borrowing class time on a daily basis from the teachers of other subjects). I had not realized beforehand he was planning to put so much emphasis on handwriting, as we had hardly discussed this. Fahad's own handwriting was exceptionally neat. He explained this in the discussion following this lesson, saying he had attended a workshop about 7 years earlier, run by a school inspector, on improving teachers' handwriting, and had found this very useful. He now justified focusing on handwriting in his research, as part of a bottom-up approach, by arguing "to achieve something is better than to achieve nothing". And his concern was not just with neatness; it was also with speed. Copying things from the board, many students were very slow. But if their writing was neat too, he argued:

this might encourage them in other writing skills, in spelling, in grammar, in text production and so on, and the opposite is correct. If their handwriting is not good they will be afraid, they will not take risks to write more and more.

So, it seems a focus on handwriting (which was implicit, though undeveloped, in his initial research design) had become central to Fahad's action research. The post-lesson discussion provided insights as to why. In the previous month, he had conducted exploratory research, interviewing teachers in other schools, and had been influenced by what he had learned. For example, he had visited a friend in the mountains, who taught the same curriculum but in a very different environment (small class sizes, fewer distractions as the village was small, parents who were relatively well-educated - not a necessarily common phenomenon in remote areas [e.g. Wyatt 2012]) and was surprised to be shown writing that was very good; his friend invited him to observe a lesson; "many pupils were writing well, joining [letters]". He had hypothesized there was a lack of practice in the Grade 3 and 4 curriculum, but his friend explained this was not the case, though there was perhaps less than under the previous curriculum. This friend suggested that maybe the teachers (of the primary schools in the catchment area around Fahad's urban school) had not provided "sufficient focus" when it came to writing activities. "I can't accuse the teachers", Fahad said quickly, "they couldn't do it". In a later interview (September 2005), I asked him to elaborate on this:

I don't want to accuse any teachers... they have their excuses you know because the curriculum is too much. Each lesson has many activities; the teacher is running, yes he feels that he is running out of time so he wants to finish, finish off his activities anyway, do anything, let them... but this is not good. I think it is better to decrease the number of [coursebook] units so that they can give the opportunity to teachers to distribute, to divide the lesson, especially the writing lessons, into 2 periods so that they can get pupils to

practise hand movements especially and joining letters; some things require time.

Other dimensions to the problem, he reported in April 2005, related to the learners' psychology and social arrangements, linguistic challenges and the government's educational policy. A lack of motivation among learners was an issue: "many pupils here don't try, they don't care about studying unfortunately... also there's no support, parents don't come to school to ask about their children's level". A further issue Fahad alluded to was that promotion exams had been abolished under the new system (previously, students who failed the end of year exams had been kept in the same class for another year or two, which itself could be highly demotivating [Wyatt, 2012]). Now, Fahad reported, "pupils here in basic education succeed, they know they will succeed, there's no failure in this system and I think this might be one reason for their weakness". Rather than studying, he said, the pupils spent their time playing; "many of them don't care about improving themselves". Nor, he claimed, was this just his perception. Interviews with other Grade 6 teachers in his geographical area suggested that, in their view too, the problem with low levels of writing in English was widespread, and that a major reason for this was a lack of practice; the biggest challenge the learners, whose first language was Arabic, faced was simply developing the mechanical capacity to write from left to right, rather than in the contrary direction, as he subsequently indicated in his dissertation (December 2005).

Clearly, Fahad was trying to tackle what he perceived to be a major weakness at the heart of the education system. The exploratory first stage of his research in March 2005 had provided insights that had informed his developing research design, and the subsequent action in his research, which involved providing these extra lessons a month later, was obviously motivated by a strong commitment to help. Fahad was adopting very much a bottom-up approach to the problem. He acknowledged under questioning the need for higher order skills; the learners struggled to write creatively and imaginatively, but were required to do this to complete the project-type tasks in the coursebook. However, he maintained:

If, in the next step, if I find they have enough, sufficient practice and they are now able to produce neat handwriting, even if they're the weakest ones, then I can shift to... I will find some ways to improve their lack of imagination.

Fahad's focus on the bottom-up was also evident in his design of the interviews with teachers, as evident in the appendices of his December 2005 dissertation. He had asked about handwriting, spelling, grammar and punctuation, eliciting problems they perceived, possible reasons and suggestions for remedy.

In his action research, he was then acting in a highly principled way, devoting extra time to remedial teaching in April 2005 (when he had many other responsibilities) in an effort to solve the various problems, with his own social

justice agenda. So, as a teacher, for the attitude and commitment, he deserves great credit. How well operationalized was his action research, though?

Two major concerns I had were with the data he needed to analyse (the learners had walked away with the writing they had produced during the observed lesson) and the criteria he would use to assess improvement. Fahad assured me, in the April 2005 post-lesson discussion, the learners would put their writing in their portfolios and he affirmed he could collect these later and make copies. To help him focus on specific criteria, I suggested, towards the end of this discussion, he could show me a small sample of the learners' writing (coursework tasks before and after the intervention) and we could analyse this together for evidence of progress. I felt this support could help provide him with the tools to apply when analysing the rest.

In fact, though, unfortunately Fahad had subsequent problems with his data. When he tried to collect the portfolios, most of the work had disappeared and there was very little to analyse. And he never took up my offer to look at a small sample of the students' writing with him.

During the June-July 2005 summer school, Fahad seemed anxious about his research, anxiety he seemed to channel into discussing his title. In fact, after outlining what he had already done, Fahad asked several University of Leeds lecturers for their advice. One of them, who I was in conversation with at the time, recommended he emphasize his action research approach was bottom-up. Fahad looked uncertain, but did subsequently employ this term (which he was familiar with through course input) in the introduction to his dissertation. Fahad was being provided "autonomy-supportive" supervision (Lamb, 2009), but, though this is conjecture, may have been hoping for more directive advice. In his December 2005 dissertation, Fahad wrote: "It would have been much better if I had changed my research question to deal with only one aspect, like handwriting".

Why did this not happen? He never specifically asked. Had he done so, it would not have been too late, even at the end of the 2005 summer school and he would not have met resistance. Fahad would have needed to narrow down his literature review and exclude some data but, at that stage, this editing/refining process should not have been too difficult.

Why was I not more directive? With students who were struggling, I did tend to give more explicit advice. Fahad did not fit the profile of a struggling student, though. Over the 120 credits at Level 2 (the first half of the course, as these in-service teachers were excused Level 1), Fahad was a high achiever. My records show that he ranked 5th of the 35 students in my regional cohort, with a mean average of 60% (on track for an Upper Second). He started Level 3 badly, though. In fact, for the first 50 Level 3 credits, as of August 2005, he was 27th of 35, with a mean average of 44%. This was largely a result of failing

'Assessing Children's Language Learning' (a 20-credit module assessed by a 6,000-word assignment, the longest he had been asked to produce so far). He scored just 30%, but had not scored over 54% in anything. What had happened?

This poor result had shocked Fahad, he told me in September 2005. He felt it was not his "real level", but was due to various circumstances, including issues with study skills. For example, he reported in the same interview he had not acquired the ability to skim. Although, as directed, he had tried to practise this "very important" sub-skill from the beginning of the course, he always "stuck" with the same technique of reading "physically word by word". He was aware of the consequences, acknowledging: "if I spend 2 or 3 days reading one article, not being able to extract specific information easily, it might cause a problem". Fahad may have lacked flexibility in this key area, then, and fallen behind as the course became more demanding. He valued accuracy above everything else, it emerged in this interview, in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar. While he was speaking on this occasion actually, I became increasingly conscious of how carefully he was choosing words.

Fahad did not fail his dissertation, but did not gain a very high score (in the Third class range - partly due to the late submission). The University of Leeds marker, the lecturer who had advised him in the summer to emphasise his approach to developing writing skills was bottom-up, wrote about it so:

There are some admirable things here! The idea for the research is original and brave, in that you wanted to investigate all the bottom-up skills together. Your analysis of the problems in the initial section of the dissertation also seems useful for fellow-professionals. However, the action research part isn't so impressive - it seems that you ran out of time or energy a little! Neither is the organisation of the last pages as impressive as the first part. However, you get credit for recognising the limitations of your research, and I agree that you were probably too ambitious.

These comments tally with my own analysis of Fahad's December 2005 dissertation. Regarding the action research, for example, there was an account of the intervention, but very few data were presented. Reference was made to a few samples of students' work in the appendices, but the analysis of improvements in their writing over time, perhaps influenced by the intervention, was hampered by the lack of clear criteria (a concern I had had earlier). So the outcome of an intervention in which Fahad had invested a great deal of time and effort was disappointing from a research perspective, although there may have been educational benefits. I now reflect more fully on this case in relation to the literature.

Reflections

One of the challenges I faced in supporting this dissertation was that I had two roles, teacher educator and research supervisor. In the former role, I was

conscious that Fahad still had a module on developing writing skills to come when he developed his November 2004 research proposal, and, particularly after seeing the marker's January 2005 feedback on this, felt I needed to engage in awareness-raising to help Fahad gain a broader understanding of what writing involves. His apparently limited awareness of the range of writing activities in the new curriculum he was using, which became evident at the beginning of the February 2005 tutorial, seemed to justify this focus. However, I may have spent too much of the limited tutorial time available on this occasion on raising awareness of the educational issues, leaving insufficient time for practical issues relating to his research design.

Of course, this would not have been such an issue if there had been regular follow-up meetings until everything was clearer. This should have been possible, as Fahad came to the training centre one day per week in early 2005. After my 3-4 hour class with his cohort, I always had at least one hour (while others worked in the library individually or in groups) to devote to individual tutorials with the 16 teachers in attendance. Inevitably, the keenest ones sought out regular support, while I also gave plenty of attention to those who might be struggling, singling them out for extra help. At this time, Fahad's grades were still good and he may have 'slipped under the radar' to a certain extent. When I reminded him of the revised plan I had requested in February 2005, polite excuses were made. Furthermore, he reported he was unable to bring in the sample of writing to co-analyse, as per my April 2005 suggestion, as he was still trying to collect the students' work. Perhaps I should have been more insistent that he have something to show me, but possibly relied too much on friendly encouragement as part of a low-key supervisory style that generally worked well with the in-service teachers on this project. Realistically, though, while there is an understandable tendency towards self-blame, there is perhaps only so much the research supervisor can do, if supervisees do not avail themselves of the opportunities presented despite encouragement (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009).

Communication could clearly have been better. The teachers in Fahad's cohort were informed firmly on several occasions they should clear any significant changes in research design with me before going ahead. I reminded Fahad of this in the February 2005 tutorial when he had indicated he would be assessing not just 'weak' but also 'good' and 'average' students. Nevertheless, he did not heed this advice, as can unfortunately happen sometimes in such relationships (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009). Indeed, without gaining approval, it appears he changed his research design even further during March/April 2005, as I had no inkling of the shape his intervention was taking when I visited his school in April 2005 to observe. This suggests to me I should have insisted more strictly that every change was put in writing, but perhaps I was too relaxed, accepting excuses too readily, in empathizing with the teachers, given their heavy assessment loads. And it is not as if Fahad disappeared. He was at the training centre every week, also

getting support for modules other than the dissertation, for many of the consultations I conducted between March and May 2005 needed to focus on supporting the teachers' work towards other assignments. Such other commitments, as noted by various researchers (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009; Rowley & Slack, 2004; Todd et al., 2004), inevitably cut into the time available for dissertation support supervision meetings on both sides.

It occurs to me that one possible reason for Fahad's apparent lack of confidence during the 2005 summer school may have been an intuitive sense, though he never articulated this, that tutors such as myself were relatively sceptical about his research approach. For example, as an educator, I did emphasize in the February 2005 discussion that the students needed higher order writing skills, and suggested, through inviting him to reconsider theory, these skills could be supported through a more interactive approach. Then, during the 2005 summer school, it was emphasized by the teaching staff that we considered his approach to be 'bottom-up', and therefore just one possible strategy. However, once Fahad's approach was set, supervision was tailored to support it. Re-reading the transcripts of the April 2005 post-lesson discussion, I note that Fahad was invited to reflect on the lesson at length, with my observation notes stimulating recall; it seemed necessary at that point simply to help him make the most of his data, regardless of any reservations about the approach he had used.

These reservations should be acknowledged. Did I consider the focus on the mechanics of handwriting trivial, in some ways, I ask myself? (After all, my own handwriting is not particularly neat, but even so I love writing.) Did my 'cultural and ideological baggage' (Holliday, 2002) prevent me from appreciating how much a remedial focus on handwriting was needed? In the April 2004 observation, I had noted at first-hand that students struggled to complete the writing task; the handwriting of some was certainly undeveloped. Was the problem just handwriting, though? Could it also have been motivation and/or relate to environmental factors? Checking my records, I see that the April 2004 writing task took place just after midday in the sixth period of the day, soon before lunch (the morning assembly would have started at 7.15am). Tiredness, hunger and heat (given that April and May are the hottest months of the school year) could all have taken their toll.

In my view, an appropriate goal for handwriting support would have been legibility. Fahad, though, valued very neat handwriting. In the September 2005 interview, he told me: "I have found a few pupils with very *very* nice handwriting. Today in the last period I found one pupil... I liked his writing very much". As noted above, Fahad felt that if the learners' handwriting was neat, this could be motivating. I agree, but believe appropriately challenging tasks encouraging imaginative commitment might also motivate, and therefore favour the use of a variety of strategies together, rather than just the bottom-up. In accepting his approach, I respected Fahad's view, but in

retrospect must acknowledge that if he sensed my expectations were different from his, so that I was not fully endorsing his approach, this could have been unsettling, particularly if his self-confidence was low.

Supervising effectively if there is a lack of synergy between supervisor's expectations and supervisee's research design is likely to be more difficult. Compromises are required. While holding true to educational principles, the supervisor needs to be as selfless as possible (Nulty et al., 2009). Having just re-read the transcripts of both April and September 2005 interviews, I can find no evidence that my ideological stance was setting the agenda; both interviews were focused on helping Fahad get the most from his data. However, as noted, he would already have formed a clear idea of my expectations at an earlier stage, and, although we had a very friendly relationship, I wonder if he would have done better with another supervisor, one more committed to his research approach.

Conclusions

Supervising undergraduate dissertations can be challenging for various reasons and there were additional complications in this context, given the transnational nature of the collaboration, with the supervisee being an in-service teacher of TESOL from a different culture and with different linguistic concerns. This reflective account set out to explore some of the various issues.

The tensions I experienced as a research supervisor were partially to do with my two different roles, including that of educator. There were dilemmas here that have received relatively little attention in the literature. More common concerns are with research supervisors possessing insufficient subject specialist knowledge (Nulty et al., 2009) or exerting undue influence on the supervisee, while the latter is refining the research focus (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009). In fact, I tried to exert more influence, in the February 2005 tutorial, but was unable to, as Fahad's approach, if not his research design, was set. At this stage, perhaps I could have spent more time supervising and less educating, and am concerned my 'cultural and ideological baggage' (Holliday, 2002), as this applies to developing writing skills, may have intervened. Other challenges I faced related to the limited time available due to contextual factors and the communication breakdowns that occurred when research design issues that concerned Fahad were not shared.

Though Fahad's research was disappointing from some perspectives, there may, however, have been some positive educational outcomes, i.e., although the evidence presented was limited, he may nevertheless have helped some learners improve, particularly in handwriting, and, if this was the case, he deserves credit. Fahad did 'own' his research, which is positive, and through engagement with it had the opportunity to develop critical thinking (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009) and self-management skills (Boud & Costley, 2007), though these were stretched. The main weakness was the lack of focus

it is so important is established early (Todd et al., 2004) before the supervisor slips into more of a backseat role (Todd et al., 2006). Fahad had opportunities to refine this focus, but did not take up all the supervisory support on offer. Nor did he seem to benefit, in terms of sharpening his focus, from discussions with his peers. Although these peers were focused on different topics, which admittedly might have restricted his learning opportunities to some extent (Greenbank & Penketh, 2009), I believe Fahad could nevertheless have gained through exposure to their compact workable designs. For others in Fahad's cohort, including some of his friends, did produce outstanding dissertations that gained scores in the First class band, e.g. Al-Alawi (2008), Al-Mahrooqi (2008), and several of the teachers in Wyatt (2010b).

Clearly, Fahad's level of achievement was shaped to a certain extent by personal factors (and a limitation of this study is that it is of one individual). Nevertheless, there might be some implications for supervisory practice. Firstly, the academic procedures of the University of Leeds for supporting dissertations could have been followed more rigorously and indeed extended. Dissertation support tutorials were logged by the supervisor, with brief notes made after each meeting. This was fine, but given the volume of work and the rapid succession of tutorials on busy days notes were sometimes inevitably quite brief. Supervisees could have been required to minute the meetings as well (a practice I follow in my present post). Of course, time was limited and this particular BA TESOL was assessment-heavy (Atkins & Robinson, 2009), but similar courses in future could build in more meticulous minuting procedures involving students and ensure quality time was allocated to them. Another key lesson relates to ensuring proposed research is feasible. This requires sufficient 'what?' questions at an early stage in the supervisory relationship.

Broad generalizations might seem inappropriate, given the particularities of this case. Engaging qualitatively with these data at a distance, though, I can see reflective engagement with this experience and others has changed me as a research supervisor. Practical considerations now come more quickly to the fore. Time is always limited. There is always a danger the supervisee will stop attending meetings if there are too many other commitments. One can never assume supervisees understand how to do research. The reality is that unnecessary layers of complexity may need to be stripped away at the beginning, leaving the supervisee more focused, relaxed and confident than they were before the initial meeting, with a manageable project ahead. However, every case is different and we cannot assume any particular strategy will work. Alertness and flexibility are needed constantly. The dialogue must remain open, with any changes in focus given space for articulation and then documented carefully.

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