# Perceptions and Roles of University English Teachers on Supervising Undergraduate Students' Term Paper Research

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## Abstract

Researching is one of the most challenging tasks for the students and so, they have some worries and anxieties in doing research. The final year students of B.A. English Program have to submit their term paper research to get a degree in universities of Myanmar. The role of English supervisors in universities, thus, is increasingly important in these days. The structure of supervision may be different depending on the mission, vision, and guidelines of the universities. There are many factors that determine the success of research students in doing their undergraduate programs. Of these are the supervisors and effective supervision. Thus, the aim of this research is to pinpoint the perceptions and expectations of university English teachers on supervising undergraduate English specialization student research. The questionnaire data were used to gain English teachers' perceptions, roles and their expectations on the students' performance. A total of 128 English language teachers from selected research-focused universities in Myanmar participated in the study. Based on the data gathered through the questionnaires, English supervisors strongly agreed on the statement "A warm, supportive relationship between supervisor and candidate is important for successful outcome" with the highest mean scores (4.23). The statistics collected from the questionnaire revealed that majority of English supervisors (Mean= 4.04) expected to have close personal relationships as they are essential for successful supervision. Further research can be extended to identify students' perceptions and expectations on supervisors and their supervision on the research.

**Keywords:** Perceptions, Supervisions, Undergraduate Students, Supervisors

## INTRODUCTION

With regard to the missions of higher education in Myanmar, universities have arrived at the following missions: (1) the paramount mission of higher education is to serve the human person and society; (2) through its work of research and inquiry, its courses of study and training, its cooperation activities and its partnerships with various social sectors, higher education is called upon to make a key contribution to opening up and high-lighting new paths to a better future for society and the individual, and to give direction and shape to that future.

For undergraduate English specialization students, there is a lot to be gained from doing term paper research. In foreign countries, supervisors

must choose or be chosen according to their respective fields and their candidates. But it is totally different in Myanmar because supervisors are given responsibilities to supervise by role number lottery or name lottery or in random, and supervisors (teachers) are not given any guidelines or practices to supervise undergraduate students' research. They also have no chance to supervise students according to their interests.

According to Miller ([2002](#)), the benefits of a term paper research include greater understanding of a research topic, social and personal growth, and acquisition of skills for future employment. Thus, researching can promote and develop their life skills. And there are also some reasons for the students to do research. These reasons include improving career opportunities, for promotion, to gain social status and even self-development (Zaitun, [2010](#)). Researching can also make students' academic achievement and thinking skills improved a lot and can also affect the student behaviour in certain ways because supervision includes close monitoring on student performance, self-study, and strong instructional leadership. And it is also a part of effective teaching and learning process. In doing research, some students expect a complete and perfect supervision from their supervisors and so, they become intentionally or unintentionally dependent on their supervisor teachers. The problem here is that English supervisors are not given guidelines and practices to supervise. Supervising research becomes the most challenging tasks for English teachers. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to meet the perceptions of students and of teachers. To avoid this kind of problem, this paper means to identify the perceptions of English teachers on the good supervision.

## Responsibilities of the Supervisor

According to Burton & Brueckner ([1955](#)), the primary function of supervisions of all types is the leadership, plus the encouragement and recognition of leadership in other people. Rowley & Flack ([2004](#)) stated that the supervisor needs to be continually learning about the students learning process, as well as developing their own subject knowledge, networks for access, ability to navigate electronic sources, and repertoire of research methodologies.

## Qualities of a Good Supervisor

Good supervision from a good supervisor is important because it will assist the students to carry out the research that they have to do to improve their learning skills. According to Cullen et al., ([1994](#)), the characteristics of a "good supervisor" are as follows: (i) approachable and friendly; (ii) supportive, positive attitude; (iii) open minded, prepared to acknowledge error; (iv) organized and thorough; and (v) stimulating and conveys enthusiasm for research.

## Factors to Consider in Supervision

There are many factors to consider in the work of supervision to make it more effective and supportive. James & Baldwin ([1999](#)) suggested eleven practices of effective supervisors. They are: (i) Ensure the partnership is right for the project; (ii) Get to know the students and carefully assess their needs;

(iii) Establish reasonable, agreed expectation; (iv) Work with students to establish a strong conceptual structure and research plan; (v) Encourage students to write early and often; (vi) Initiate regular contact and provide high quality feedback; (vii) Get students involved in the life of the department; (viii) Inspire and motivate; (ix) Help if academic and personal crises crop up (x) Take an active interest in students' future careers; and (xi) Carefully monitor the final production and presentation of the research.

According to Halbert ([2014](#)), there are also three factors that influence the progression of the research: (1) student's qualities and personal situation, (2) supervisory and scholarly environment and (3) research facilities and resources. These three broad groups of factors are interrelated. It must be noted too that the nature of the research, the structure of the research program and the scholarly community are broad factors that influence (in often uncontrollable ways) completion times while more targeted strategies include particular financial, professional development and structural supports. Research which foregrounds the perspectives of candidates and advisors is important in framing existing and future institutional measures to promote quality research education and timely completions.

## Aim and Objective of the Study

There are always some gaps between the students' and teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards supervision. So, the aim of this paper is to pinpoint university English teachers' perceptions and expectations of university English teachers on supervising undergraduate English specialization students' research were investigated. The objectives of this paper are:
- to find out the university English teachers' attitudes on supervising the undergraduate research process.
- to investigate the teachers' (as supervisors') expectations on students' performance in supervising undergraduate research process.

Supervising means overseeing and seeking one's work carefully to ensure that work is done according to the intended aim and original plan. The nature of supervision totally depends on exploring new things by learning both for the teachers and the students. All supervisors are regarded and expected as active researchers in supervision as well as the most responsible ones to complete the tasks. Sometimes, the supervisors play the roles of leaders, but sometimes they are facilitators and often they are managers of the students' work.

## METHOD

Supervising research plays a significant role in university English teachers as they must supervise two or three papers a year. It is unavoidable and challenging. In supervising research, there are some perceptions, responsibilities, and expectations of teachers (as supervisors) on the students. Doing this paper is to pinpoint some perceptions, responsibilities,

and expectations of teachers (as supervisors). To achieve this goal, the data were collected using a questionnaire adopted from Cadman (2000). The data were collected through the online poll.

**Table 1.** Demographic data of English teachers (n=128).

| SN | Study Type | Sample Size | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Male | | Female | |
| | | no | % | no | % |
| 1 | Questionnaire Survey | 13 | 10.16% | 115 | 89.84% |

A total of 128 English language teachers from selected research-focused universities in Myanmar participated in the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The research project, or term paper writing, in the form of an extensive piece of writing and investigation, is an integral part of Arts and Science undergraduate courses in Myanmar. It necessitates skills in independent learning – students needing to make judgments and pursue their own lines of enquiry – as well as some familiarity with research methods. There are real divisions amongst management academics about the value of teaching research to undergraduates.

In the questionnaire of this research, there are two sections: each section contains 12 questions each. They can be divided into two categories: English supervisors' perceptions and roles on supervision of undergraduate English specialization students and English supervisors' expectations on the English specialization students' performance. A teacher's preceptive is important in creating a supportive, caring learning environment. The corelation between the learning environment created by the teacher and its impact on the academic achievements of the students is important. Teachers have a significant role in maintaining and sustaining a learning friendly environment and in achieving how well the teachers can facilitate this for students towards language learning.

Note: (5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neutral, 2=disagree and 1=strongly disagree)

**Table 2**. English supervisors' perceptions and roles in supervising undergraduate english specialization students' research (n=128).

| No | Statements | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Mean | SD | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | It is the supervisor' responsibility to select a research topic. | 10% | 8% | 5% | 31% | 46% | 3.95 | 1.31 | Agree |
| 2 | It is the supervisor who decides which | 7% | 10% | 11% | 32% | 40% | 3.88 | 1.24 | Agree |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | theoretical framework and /or methodology is most appropriate. The supervisor should develop an appropriate program and timetable of the research and study of the students. | 9% | 18% | 14% | 27% | 32% | 3.55 | 1.34 | Agree |
| 4 | The supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the student has access to the appropriate services and facilities to the University. | 11% | 41% | 19% | 17% | 12% | 2.78 | 1.20 | Neutral |
| 5 | It is the supervisor's responsibilities to advise the students of the relevant policies, procedures and requirements relating to their candidature. | 3% | 9% | 10% | 37% | 41% | 4.04 | 1.07 | Agree |
| 6 | A warm, supportive relationship between supervisor and candidate is important for successful outcome. | 5% | 5% | 2% | 38% | 50% | 4.23 | 1.06 | Strongly agree |
| 7 | The supervisor | 14% | 17% | 11% | 32% | 26% | 3.39 | 1.39 | Neutral |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | should insist on regular meetings with the student. The supervisor should check regularly that the student is working consistently and on task. | 8% | 12% | 10% | 30% | 40% | 3.82 | 1.29 | Agree |
| 9 | The supervisor is responsible for emotional support and encouragement to the student. | 6% | 10% | 8% | 30% | 46% | 4.00 | 1.22 | Agree |
| 10 | The supervisor should insist on seeing all drafts of work to ensure that the student is on the right track. | 9% | 17% | 11% | 30% | 33% | 3.61 | 1.33 | Agree |
| 11 | The supervisor should assist in the writing of the research if necessary. | 9% | 8% | 1% | 32% | 50% | 4.06 | 1.28 | Agree |
| 12 | The supervisor is responsible for decisions regarding the standard of the research. | 6% | 18% | 7% | 33% | 36% | 3.75 | 1.28 | Agree |
| | **Average** | **8.1%** | **14.4%** | **9.1%** | **30.8%** | **37.7%** | **8.1%** | **1.31** | **Agree** |

The Table 2 presents English supervisors' perceptions and roles in supervising undergraduate English specialization students' research. Based on the data gathered through the questionnaires, English supervisors strongly agreed on the statement "A warm, supportive relationship between supervisor and candidate is important for successful outcome" with the highest mean scores (4.23). As well, most English supervisors were also in favor of assisting in the writing of the research if necessary (Mean=4.06).

According to the analysis, English supervisors with an average mean score (4.04) agreed that it is the supervisor's responsibilities to advise the students of the relevant policies, procedures and requirements relating to their candidature. There is reference to the characteristics of a good supervisor that suggests that a good supervisor should be approachable, friendly and supportive and must have positive attitude (Cullen et al., 1994). Good supervisory practices help students fulfill their potential and contribute to the University's research profile. At many universities, the terms of a supervisory relationship are left almost entirely to the discretion of individual research students and supervisors. While this approach usually works well, it occasionally proves unsatisfactory. A lack of clarity between student and supervisor regarding expectations and responsibilities can adversely affect progress towards the completion of the degree.

**Table 3**. English supervisors' expectation on students' performance (n=128).

| No | Statements | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Mean | SD | Decision |
|----|-----------|---|---|---|---|---|------|-----|----------|
| 1 | Student is responsible to select a research topic. | 12% | 27% | 8% | 30% | 23% | 3.25 | 1.38 | Neutral |
| 2 | Student should decide theoretical framework and /or methodology they wish to use. | 13% | 19% | 16% | 22% | 30% | 3.37 | 1.41 | Neutral |
| 3 | The student should make development of the program and timetable of the research. | 35% | 20% | 12% | 13% | 20% | 2.63 | 1.55 | Neutral |
| 4 | It is responsibility of the student to ensure that he/she has located and accessed all relevant services and facilities for the research. | 20% | 33% | 15% | 19% | 13% | 2.72 | 1.33 | Neutral |
| 5 | The student is responsible for being familiar with the relevant | 14% | 27% | 17% | 24% | 18% | 3.05 | 1.34 | Neutral |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | policies, procedures and requirements relating to their candidature. | | | | | | | |
| 6 | Close personal relationships are essential for successful supervision. | 6% | 10% | 4% | 34% | 46% | 4.04 | 1.20 | Agree |
| 7 | The student should decide when he/she wants to meet with the supervisor. | 30% | 17% | 12% | 20% | 21% | 2.85 | 1.55 | Neutral |
| 8 | The student should communicate to the supervisor. | 10% | 13% | 6% | 10% | 61% | 3.99 | 1.45 | Agree |
| 9 | The student should work independently and not have to account for how and where time is spent. | 45% | 31% | 7% | 10% | 7% | 2.03 | 1.24 | Disagree |
| 10 | As long as student work steadily she/he can take as long as she/he needs to finish the work. | 10% | 12% | 8% | 37% | 33% | 3.71 | 1.31 | Agree |
| 11 | The student should submit drafts of work only when he/she wants constructive criticism from the supervisor. | 41% | 35% | 5% | 10% | 9% | 2.11 | 1.29 | Disagree |
| 12 | The writing of the research should only be the student's own | 7% | 10% | 10% | 38% | 35% | 3.84 | 1.21 | Agree |

| | work and the student must take full responsibility for presenting the research. | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Average** | **20.3%** | **21.2%** | **10.0%** | **22.3%** | **26.3%** | **3.13** | **1.51** | **Neutral** |

Table 3 expresses English supervisors' expectation on students' performance. The statistics collected from the questionnaire revealed that majority of English supervisors (Mean= 4.04) expected to have close personal relationships as they are essential for successful supervision. This is consistent with the practices of James & Baldwin ([1999](#)) in which he suggested that ensuring the partnership is right for the project as the top priority. The data also revealed that the student should communicate to the supervisors, confirmed with a mean score of 3.99 followed by the writing of the research should only be the student's own work and the student must take full responsibility for presenting the research (Mean=3.84) as student's qualities and personal situation are important factors that influence the progression of the research.

## Discussion

In higher education, knowledge transfer is an inevitable process and English supervisors' perceptions and roles in supervising undergraduate English specialization students' research are largely associated with B.A. English Program. The supervision of undergraduate students at universities is one of the core responsibilities of academics and is considered a measure of academic output. Supervision not only transfers research and related skills, but is also an intensive and interconnected form of educator-student engagement. The role of the supervisor in providing a supportive, constructive and engaged supervision process is important in the development of next generation practitioners who have the correct educational and skills mix to fulfil the future needs of the profession. As the student gains competence in the basic skills of conducting research in a particular field of study, he or she will move to a deeper understanding of the nature and reality of that field.

Based on the results of this study, the English supervisors in the sample are on average seen as displaying rather much leadership, helping/ friendly, understanding behavior and providing a lot of student freedom and responsibility. Most of the English supervisors want to take responsibilities to advise the students of the relevant policies, procedures and requirements relating to their candidature. They strongly agreed that a warm, supportive relationship between supervisor and candidate is important for successful outcome. This is in line with qualities of a good supervisor claimed by Cullen et al. ([1994](#)).

Supervision requires professional commitment, as it is an intensive form of educator-student engagement. The multiple layers of the supervisor-student relationship need to be recognised and engaged with in order for a successful outcome to be achieved. The findings from this study confirms a

significant relationship between English supervisors and English specialization students' academic performance. There may be differences in perceptions of the supervision process due to the varying levels of experiences in supervising undergraduate research. The need for adequate support can enable novice supervisors to deliberately use and learn from their personal supervision experiences. Such support is essential, due to the changing nature of undergraduate research supervision process. Based on the results of this study, English supervisors can reflect on their own supervisions and improve their supervision practices. Students' satisfaction with supervision and degree completion are very closely linked, and the relationship with the English supervisor therefore becomes the key to English specialization students' success. The majority of English supervisors expect close personal relationships for successful supervision. Also, they think that the writing of the research should only be the students' own work and the students must take full responsibility for presenting the research. So, there is reference to factors to be considered in supervision suggested by James & Baldwin (1999).  Accordingly, most of the EFL teachers were engaged with research and thought that research practice influenced their professional teaching practice.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study aimed to explore perceptions and roles of university English teachers on supervising undergraduate   English specialization students' research. Rowley & Slack (2004) highlight the importance of shedding light on the changing nature of the undergraduate research supervision experience, stating that the lack of a more proactive approach to supervisors' conception would lead to serious degradation of the supervision experience and outcomes. The findings show that most English  supervisors viewed their roles as guidance providers and they viewed students' role as autonomous learners who conduct the research themselves.

It is also found that EFL teachers supervising undergraduate English specialization students' research are more confident and autonomous in their teaching performance. They also claim that they can understand their students better when they are engaged with them in conducting research. The supervisor's role entails guiding students towards independence, and thus the supervisor should maintain a balance in feedback between giving too much or too little direction. Moreover, supervisors need to take responsibility for making suggestions and provide options for change and improvement of the supervised materials, in such a way that the student takes the responsibility for the improvement and the academic development. From what the EFL teachers perceptions and expectations regarding their research practice, it might be suggested that EFL teachers' engagement with and in research in ELT context develop their professional teaching performance and contribute to their students' English language learning.

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