Teaching English Language, Vol. 19, No. 2, Winter & Spring 2025, pp. 469-510

Teaching English Language Journal
ISSN: 2538-5488 – E-ISSN: 2538-547X – http://tel.journal.org
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Please cite this paper as follows:
ShayesteFar, P., & Nemati, F., (2025). Challenges in Writing the Discussion of Results Section in TEFL Theses: Supervisor and Student Perspectives. *Teaching English Language, 19*(2), 469-510. https://doi.org/10.22132/tel.2025.492289.1741

Research Paper

Challenges in Writing the Discussion of Results Section in TEFL Theses: Supervisor and Student Perspectives

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Abstract
Globally, the number of second language (L2) students writing a Master's thesis continues to increase. However, writing thesis genre poses challenges to both L2 students and supervisors. As research documents, in many academic contexts, L2 thesis students struggle writing thesis, in particular, writing discussion of results section (DRS) while their supervisors are not aware of unique difficulties and challenges they face when developing this genre-specific section. Much remains, therefore, to be known about a mutual understanding of the problems between supervisors and students. Drawing on this, the current study adopted a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews with eight TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) supervisor-student pairs to probe into their understanding of DRS writing requirements and difficulties. Analysis of semi-structured interview data

revealed that (1) compared to their supervisors, students had a limited understanding of DRS foci, functions and requirements, (2) shared understanding of the nature and causes of the difficulties and challenges students encounter in DRS writing process was not fully found between the two sides, and (3) despite earlier evidence which identified language proficiency level as a default source for students' difficulties, insufficient knowledge about DRS genre, i.e., inadequacy of DRS writing literacy, emerged as a crucial source of encountered difficulties and challenges. Implications of the findings are discussed in view of genre-specific intervention programs, emphasizing the need for enhanced DRS writing support, embedded genre-specific writing instruction into coursebooks, and fostered DRS writing literacy.

Key Words: Discussion of results section (DRS), Genre-specific writing, DRS writing literacy, Perceptions

Received: December 6, 2024
Accepted: May 16, 2025

1. Introduction

With the global rise of Master's programs across the world, various challenges have emerged in the course of text (e.g., thesis) production, from linguistic challenges (Zhang, 2013) to non-linguistic ones (Aitchison, et al., 2010). Most often, writing up thesis text is not easy for postgraduates whose first language is not English (Fergie et al., 2011; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). In this regard, there is an ongoing awareness in academic circles that those students who, nonetheless, are studying in English (for instance, Teaching English as a Foreign Language-TEFL graduates) often experience difficulties in writing research articles and thesis/dissertation sections. Notwithstanding its wide advantages and significant academic upshots, thesis writing is a complex and demanding discourse medium for TEFL graduates and postgraduates. Given such a significant and challenging nature of the thesis writing, an appraisal of

difficulties encountered by writers in various L2 contexts has received prominence over recent decades (Derakhshan & Karimian, 2020; Tillema, 2012).

Difficulties and challenges encountered by L2 graduates and writers have been the focus of a host of research (e.g., Braine, 1989; Cheung, 2013; Hyland, 2019; Li & Flowerdew, 2007; Paltridge, 2002; Williams, 1999) for more than two decades. The outcome of these studies can be categorized along different major lines. The first relates to difficulties at linguistic (i.e., grammatical), stylistic or writing mechanics levels (see Allison et al., 1998; Khodabandeh & Kasir, 2019; Zhang, 2013) and the second line focuses on difficulties at rhetorical and discoursal levels. The latter captures problems in understanding the purposes of the thesis, appropriateness of contents for different sections or chapters, structuring an argument or persuasion, and contextualizing arguments in relation to the relevant literature, with balance and consistency (see Dong, 1998; Keck, 2014; Parry, 1998; Tardy, 2009). An assumption underlying much of these debates is that the difficulties are often the result of a limited knowledge of the thesis genre. The assumption clearly implies the significance of "understanding the requirements of the thesis genre" (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006, p. 6) as well as building genre-specific knowledge "in order to communicate actively, appropriately, and successfully within a specific domain or disciplinary discourse community" (Tardy, 2009, p. 19). The existing evidence, therefore, demonstrates that writing the thesis genre, as a multidimensional communicative process, demands specific competence and control lack of which, according to Nunan (1999), results in a blurring of meaning, breakdown of communication, and inefficient argumentation.

Writing the thesis genre is still a most formidable task for L2 students in tertiary education due to the high standards to which the theses are held (Chen

& Nassaji, 2015; Hyland, 2019). In other words, writing the thesis genre is highly conventionalized and strictly rule-governed (Fitzmauric & O'Farrell, 2015) and demands a wide range of discipline-specific knowledge and experience to write different sections effectively. For instance, there is convincing evidence suggesting discussion of result section (henceforth called DRS) as one of the most difficult sections perceived by Master's students when writing their thesis (e.g., Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Geng & Wharton, 2016; Shen et al., 2019). Few students have adequate *DRS writing literacy* since they often receive less or no explicit instruction on how to develop DRS sections of a thesis or a research article. One possible reason is that supervisors or advisors are rarely aware of their students' writing expectations, experiences and perceptions. Therefore, they are less likely to pitch their instruction at their students' current level to scaffold their genre knowledge and writing skills effectively. Much earlier, the importance of student perceptions and expectations was raised by Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) and Wenden (1999) who clearly addressed the values and impacts of postgraduate students' perceptions on their performance.

The importance of perceptions is derived from the epistemological view that students should be regarded as active participants, but not as passive pawns (Den Brok, 2001). Far more attention is, therefore, to be paid to students' psychological responses such as perception as a crucial intermediate variable between instructional context variables and students' subsequent performance and behaviors (Kiany & Shayestefar, 2011). In view of this, students' perception of their writing problems will make their teachers aware of the difference between what they expect as students' problems and the real ones perceived and self-reported by the students, in practice. Recent studies (e.g., Chien & Li, 2022; Shen et al., 2019), for instance, evidenced that supervisors tend to see genre convention difficulties such as students' inadequate

understanding of the purpose of writing the DRS while students perceived generic writing problems such as local versus global writing problems, topic selection difficulty, and problems in establishing conceptual framework. According to Cohen (1998), such a divergence might explain students' real writing problems. It will also play an important role in adopting and implementing a genre-based writing program to help students get equipped with a good start in the program.

To date, the published research has mostly focused on L2 students' problems of thesis writing as a whole; nonetheless, few such as Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) were undertaken on the extent to which these problems or difficulties continue to be problematic for L2 postgraduates when writing specific genres such as the DRS. Furthermore, the existing literature reports on the problems perceived by postgraduates and supervisors as separate groups. Notwithstanding the growth in Master's-level studies, little empirical evidence has yet emerged about a mutual understanding of the DRS difficulties and challenges between L2 postgraduates and their supervisors.

2. Literature Review

In the world of higher education, writing a thesis or dissertation will always be a final requirement that must be fulfilled by students to get their qualifications and degree. To present their research findings or new knowledge, students need not only to focus on the theory and knowledge of their disciplinary field (Quintana & Hermida, 2020) but also apply the theory and knowledge of thesis writing to their research report as a prerequisite for their graduation. Writing this genre in its daunting size, therefore, involves a body of knowledge lack of which will increase the inevitable challenges students encounter in the process of thesis writing.

There is now a considerable number of research studies which examined the nature of scholarly writing for publication (e.g., Jalilifar, 2007; Li & Flowerdew, 2007; Petrić & Castelló, 2025), structure of different sections of research reports (e.g., Jackson, 2024; Hasrati & Street, 2009; Oj & Siyyari, 2024; Williams, 1999), identity construction during thesis or dissertation writing (e.g., Starfield & Paltridge, 2019), and disciplinary writing literacy (e.g., Casanave, 2002; Tardy, 2009). While the literature has addressed several challenges students face during academic writing, for instance, organizational and rhetorical challenges, research on specific difficulties L2 writers face in composing their thesis or dissertation DRS remains relatively limited (e.g., Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Chien & Li, 2022; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007).

Findings from empirical studies indicate that linguistic factors, particularly in L2 contexts, are among the most commonly reported difficulties in thesis writing (Puspita, 2019). Cooley and Lewkowicz (1995) found that 88% of the surveyed supervisors identified linguistic competence as a significant barrier that affects the development of coherent ideas and potentially obscures communicative success. These findings were corroborated by Lestari's (2020) survey results that showed L2 students have difficulty with grammatical accuracy, spelling and punctuation accuracy, and vocabulary appropriateness. However, attributing writing challenges solely to language proficiency and linguistic inaccuracies is a reductive perspective that overlooks issues such as the deeper structural and argumentative coherence problems. Allison et al. (1998), for instance, argued that students' writing problems can also result from a lack of consistency in structuring and substantiating arguments with evidence. This implies that L2 thesis writing difficulties extend beyond the sentence or paragraph level and encompass challenges at the genre level. Some thesis problematic areas are, therefore, the results of limited

knowledge of genre features and neglect of disciplinary expectations and rules (Swales, 2004).

L2 writers need not only assistance and guidance in designing and carrying out their research but also assistance with the presentation of their research findings in a convincingly comprehensible and acceptable form. More reasons for the provision of such assistance and support come from research conducted within the framework of genre-based instructions or interventions (e.g., Allison et al., 1998; Peng, 2018). These studies revealed that genre-based writing instruction should involve a focus on explicit strategies, methods, and stages of genre writing process in a motivating environment (see Cai, 2013; Dong, 1998; Elton, 2010). Drawing on evidence from students' problems and difficulties at rhetorical, discoursal and linguistic levels can inform the genre-based instruction cycle. Since genre-specific level problems are often identified, to a lesser extent, by the students, and more so, by supervisors (Bitchener and Basturkmen, 2006), a detailed analysis of both groups' perceptions will give a more balanced picture of the difficulties Master's students encounter when developing their thesis DRS genre. Therefore, in order to probe possible causes, reflect on them, and propose pedagogical interventions to enhance students' DRS writing competence, a synthesis of supervisor-student pairs' perceptions would be more insightful. There is an awareness that evidence from one source (either supervisors or students) will not indicate where matches or mismatches in the perspectives of students or teachers are (Bitchener and Basturkmen, 2006; Brown, 2009).

There is evidence indicating divergence between supervisors and students' perceptions (e.g., Chien & Li, 2024; Woodward-Kron, 2004). Literature reports that a number of supervisors perceive their postgraduate L2 students' problems are situated in their failure to position arguments and value their findings appropriately (Williams, 1999). Consequently, students may

overestimate or underestimate the value of their claims. Similarly, Chien and Li's (2022) surveys of advisors and their students' perceptions revealed conflicting responses, in particular, in the areas of writing purposes, understanding students' problems in writing thesis sections, and understanding of appropriate disciplinary genres. Part of such mismatches comes from supervisors' and students' different perceptions. As a result, students get confused about the conventions and rules of academic writing.

The problems are more compounded when the supervisors do not possess the knowledge and skills to identify exactly what needs to be done in order to improve the comprehensibility and appropriacy of thesis genre sections. One reason why the requirements of this genre are not met by the students is, therefore, supervisors' tacit knowledge of the characteristic features of the thesis in their discipline (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). Consequently, L2 students may not develop an explicit knowledge of the thesis genres and subgenres, and therefore, encounter a range of difficulties when writing different sections of a thesis. In other words, the over-reliance on tacit knowledge by supervisors exacerbates the challenges for L2 students, leaving them to navigate thesis genres and subgenres with limited support. Given this, it is important to explore the level of understanding that supervisors and their students have of this section.

Each thesis section comprises a part-genre having peculiar characteristic features which are demanding. There is now a body of evidence which suggests that the cognitive demand of DRS probably makes this section challenging for postgraduate L2 writers (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). One problem is that having only a single chapter devoted to the discussion section produces "an unwieldy and out-of-balance monster chapter" in the middle of the text (Swales, 2004, p. 108). According to Allison et al. (1998), L2 writers may start writing their thesis after they complete their research methods course.

Besides, only a small portion of the published advice on the structure and organization of thesis/dissertation sections has devoted a substantial amount of space to this topic and the range of options that might be available to students (Paltridge, 2002). As a result, the short research project experience does not guarantee that postgraduates will acquire DRS literacy and apply this knowledge to writing the genre.

While the literature highlights the challenges faced by L2 postgraduate writers during their academic writing, particularly within the framework of genre-based thesis writing, critical gaps remain in addressing the misalignment between students' and supervisors' perceptions. Furthermore, the existing literature mostly reports on the perceptions of supervisors and students in ESL contexts and in disciplines other than TEFL. This lack of focused inquiry into the discipline-specific challenges, particularly in contexts such as TEFL, further underscores the need for empirical exploration. The present study aims to bridge these gaps by synthesizing the perceptions of both supervisors and TEFL postgraduate students to provide a more balanced understanding of the difficulties in developing thesis DRS genres. In light of the paucity of research in TEFL contexts, the present study aimed to contribute to current understandings of a range of difficulties, particularly those faced by discipline-specific TEFL students writing the DRS genre to their discourse community. To meet these aims, the following research questions were investigated in this study:

1)What do TEFL postgraduate students and their supervisors perceive as the function of thesis DRS?

2)What do TEFL postgraduate students and their supervisors perceive as the main challenges or difficulties in writing thesis DRS?

3. Method
3.1 Participants

To obtain a more comprehensive picture of difficulties TEFL postgraduate students have when writing their thesis DRS, 8 supervisor-student pairs from 5 universities of Iran: Persian Gulf University (2 pairs), University of Isfahan (one pair), Tarbiat Modares University (3 pairs), Iran University of Science and Technology (one pair), and Ershad University (one pair), were invited to participate in the study (N=7 males and 9 females). The provinces (Tehran, Booshehr, and Isfahan) from which the universities were selected are among the most highly populated provinces of the country and their universities encompass both MA. and Ph.D. English majors including TEFL, English Translation, Linguistics, and English Language and Literature.

Besides their qualifications and voluntary consent, the supervisors were recruited based on their specializations in various language-related disciplines, including linguistics (N=2), assessment and evaluation (N=3), psycholinguistics (N=1), teacher education, and teaching and learning-related issues (N=2). Another selection criterion was supervisors' MA-level teaching experience, which ranged from 4 to 20 years. In total, the sample included 8 supervisors, all PhD holders (aged 40 to 59), and 8 Master's students (aged 24 to 35).

3.2 Instruments and Procedures: Interview Guides

To investigate queries about the participants' conceptualizations of the DRS function and the difficulties they encountered in developing this section, a series of interviews was conducted by the researchers. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most convenient method for eliciting the required data. Eight pairs of in-depth interviews were, thus, conducted toward

the end of the supervisory process when students were writing up or had already submitted their thesis draft including the DRS chapter. At this stage, L2 students had received their supervisor's feedback, either in the form of summarized comments in the margins or through brief discussion with them. Seven students had conducted largely quantitative studies and one had carried out a qualitative-descriptive ESP study. All were required to include their findings and discussions in a single chapter, as per the TEFL departments' guidelines in the country.

Taken from Bitchener and Basturkmen's (2006) study, a two-part interview schedule was used. The supervisors' interview guide included general items related to supervisors' experience in supervising TEFL theses as well as items soliciting for both their conceptualizations of DRS key function, and the difficulties they noticed their students had while writing this section. The next move of the interview included items eliciting supervisors' perceptions of their students' conceptualization of DRS. A modified version of the supervisors' interview schedule was used to obtain students' perspectives and views. This helped the researchers better compare students' perceptions to those of the supervisors.

Prior to the interviews, one supervisor and one advisor reviewed the content and face validity of the items. Semi-structured interviews, each lasting 25 to 45 minutes, were audio-taped and the recorded responses were transcribed and closely examined to explore the main problem/s referred to by each supervisor and student. Besides tape-recordings, simultaneous note-taking was also kept during the interviews. Four supervisors preferred to e-mail their answers. *Detailed inductive content analyses,* using three distinct processes of data analysis, i.e., 'open, axial, and selective coding process' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), were performed to identify and label relevant key themes and categories. To make sure that most of themes had been identified,

the initial interview database was read over, broken down into distinct chunks, examined based on their underlying themes or meaning units, and finally categorized into separate categories. On such a base, the data were first segmented analytically and then conceptually labeled. Theme development process included main stages of transcribing, coding, abstracting, classifying, comparing, labeling meaning units, and finalizing relevant themes. To maintain participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to each.

Meanwhile, the reliability of the content analysis was confirmed by interrater consistency, with an expert teacher independently assisting in the analysis, during broad level of reading and a micro-level analysis of the data. The results showed 90% agreement between the researchers' analyses and the external examiner's assessments.

The coding process for thematic analysis stemmed from a series of relationships among the themes and categories, ensuring that each code not only represented an individual idea but also contributed to an interconnected framework that revealed overarching patterns within the data. Open coding phase concerned with identifying, naming and describing phenomena, events or ideas as reflected in the text. That is, the data pool was first segmented analytically, compared against each other for thematic similarities and differences, and then conceptually labeled as distinct theme. The conceptually similar and related themes, extracted from individual sentences and phrases, were then grouped under more general concepts (i.e., categories, as termed by Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The following excerpt from a supervisor might help clarify the way the coding process proceeded in practice:

> The difficulties in writing the discussion of the result section
> include a range of issues, including inability to (1) discuss the

results properly, (2) justify the results, (3) present whyness of the results or (4) reason critically, as well as difficulty in (5) evaluating the results appropriately (SU2).

According to this coding procedure, the transcribed dataset was broken down into five separate chunks, each presenting a particular concept (e.g., inability to reason critically). The chunks were then examined with regard to their underlying theme and similar concepts/themes formed categories and their subcategories (e.g., lack of genuine appropriate discussion). In axial coding, the merged codes were refined and related to each other in a network of relationships. Subsequently, the emerged subcategories were related to one axial category that was repeatedly checked for tentative statement of relationships. The final phase, i.e., selective coding, therefore, took place at a higher level of analysis involving identifying core categories to which other categories systematically related. For instance, lack of genuine appropriate discussion, lack of a critical analysis and inability to synthesize and analyze the findings formed the core category of '*absence of reasoned argumentation*'.

4. Results

In this section, the results of re-examinations, comparisons, and finalizing the emerging themes are presented under the main aims of the study: (a) conceptualization of DRS functions (7 categories); (b) perceptions of the difficulties and challenges in writing DRS (7 categories); and (c) comparisons of perspectives within supervisor-student pairs. As to the underlying units/themes, 83 themes were initially identified and subsequently subsumed under 14 categories (47 themes for the functions and content of DRS and 36 for difficulties in writing DRS, respectively). Results showed that 'giving a detailed profile of the findings and discussing them',

'contextualizing the results', and 'interpreting the findings' were the most frequently preferred category among the responses with 24 hits. The summarized responses are reported in Table 1 (supervisors' views) and Table 2 (students' views). In this report, capital letters SU1-8 were used for all the supervisors and MS1-8 for each respective student.

4.1 Functions and content of DRS: Supervisors' and Students' perceptions

Re-examination and re-consideration of the initial emerging categories resulted in seven finalized categories. A close analysis of the themes determined how the respondents' perspectives and commentaries were connected to an image of DRS. As Table 1 shows, the supervisors showed similar perspectives to a great extent. Each identified five to six functions of DRS. They all made it clear that DRS should (1) provide a profile of the related findings and discuss them, (2) consolidate, (3) contextualize and (4) interpret the results, and (5) discuss the implications of the findings. Additional function/content areas were identified by some of the respondents, including (6) explaining the reasons and (7) presenting the credibility and validity of the findings.

Comments that supervisors made about the functions of DRS revealed their perceptions and views, for example: "They neglect the constraints of the topic or go beyond what they really look for" (SU8), or "…consequently, it is necessary for the researchers to contextualize their findings, in other words, to link their findings to the theories and knowledge of the field, and explicitly show how their findings support or contradict research conducted previously in that area" (SU3). Moreover, all supervisors acknowledged the importance of the DRS in view of discussing the implications of the findings. For instance, "…it is in fact, a genuine discussion coming from the minds of the

researchers, a sort of discussion which is got to be somehow creative and different from other parts of the thesis…presumably, a little bit of implications of the results, that is, 'why so' and 'so what' of the findings, or their contribution to the gap in the field" (SU2). Though 'presenting the credibility and validity of the findings' was not explicitly addressed by every respondent as a major function of DRS, 'consolidating the findings', 'giving a detailed profile of the findings', and 'interpreting them in a clear stance' were emphatically addressed by all of them.

Table 1.
Supervisors' Perceptions of DRS Function and Contents

	Main themes	N
1	Giving a detailed profile of the findings and discussing them (*To discuss how results happened in the way that happened)*	8
2	Consolidating the findings (*To juxtapose or amalgamate and link the results consistently, coherently, and logically to each other and to elaborate on them)*	8
3	Contextualizing the results *(To link the results to the models, theories, and findings in literature, showing congruence or incongruence with it)*	8
4	Interpreting the results *(To interpret the results within a tangible position/voice)*	8
5	Discussing the implications of the findings *(To discuss implications of the results, or 'so what' of the findings, or their contribution to the gap in the field)*	8
6	Explaining the reasons *(To discuss the 'whyness' of the results, or providing a reasoned argumentation)*	5 (SU1, SU2, SU3, SU5, SU6)
7	Presenting credibility and validity of the findings	2

(*To report on the internal validity, i.e., to show whether the results are outcomes of what they did in the study)*	(SU4, SU7)

Note: SU1-SU8 show Supervisor 1 to Supervisor 8

Student viewpoints were also examined and reported in Table 2. As this table indicates students identified four to five functions each. In view of the importance of DRS, it was expected that all students would identify major functions, in particular, 'elaborating the findings', 'interpreting the results in a logical and critical voice', 'discussing the implications of the findings', and 'discussing the results in form of a detailed profile'. Nonetheless, all of the students reported that the primary purpose is to 'present the findings', 'discuss the results and justify the reasons', and 'link the findings to the relevant literature'. In addition, more than half of the respondents perceived the role of DRS in offering 'interpretation of the results in a logical voice'. Yet, no student mentioned DRS as having the function of 'summarizing the results', and only two (MS3 and MS7) identified 'discussing the implications of the results' as a major function of DRS as considered by all professors. Given the elaboration function, only those students who went through their detailed presentation and technical discussion of the results perceived DRS as having the 'elaborating function', that professors unanimously believed. As indicated in Table 2, shared understanding with reference to the last two (i.e., themes 3 & 6 in Table 2) was very limited. Only two students listed all roles intended by DRS.

Table 2.
Students' Perceptions of DRS Punction and Contents

	Main Themes	Number
1	Presenting the findings (# giving a detailed profile of the findings)	8

2	Linking the results to the findings in literature, showing if they marry up with it (# contextualizing the findings)	8
3	Elaborating the results and linking them coherently and logically (#consolidating the results)	3 (MS3, MS4, MS7)
4	Interpretating the results in a logical side (#interpreting the results within a tangible voice)	6 (MS1, MS2, MS3, MS6, MS7, MS8)
5	Discussing the results and justifying the reasons (#providing a reasoned argumentation)	8
6	Discussing the implications of the findings or 'so what' of the findings (#discussing the implications of the findings	2 (MS3, MS7)

(#) shows supervisors' themes displayed in Table 1

4.2 Difficulties in writing DRS: Supervisors-student pairs

When asked in the open-ended interview questions about the difficulties encountered by TEFL postgraduates in writing their thesis DRS, all interviewees listed several perceived difficulties as illustrated in Table 3 (supervisors) and Table 4 (students). An analysis of supervisors' responses revealed similar perspectives about the topic of DRS as a *genre*. All supervisors believed that 'students' lack of enough understanding of DRS genre' is a major hurdle in opening and structuring a well-developed discussion chapter. In other words, an important problematic area for students, as uniformly identified by their supervisors, is 'insufficient knowledge about DRS genre' which encompasses major functions ranging from 'structuring and presenting argumentation', 'linking ideas together and contextualizing the findings' to 'interpreting' and 'substantiating' the findings. For instance, all supervisors raised making a coherent link between

the findings and ideas as a major stumbling block for students. One supervisor described the problem

> Most of the students do not know what the discussion genre is, they think it is simply a kind of conclusion or summary of the findings. Sometimes they have problem in putting different result sections together. It seems that they have difficulties with understanding the subsections, in particular, putting the findings in the existing literature, and explaining them with reference to the discipline theories, and models. (SU1)

Other difficulties perceived by all supervisors were inability to 'interpret the results consistently and coherently' and 'discuss the implications of the results, in particular, pedagogical implications, sufficiently to the field'. With respect to a 'reasoned and strong argumentation', more than 50% of the supervisors were not positive about the students' ability to discuss the results genuinely, justify clearly, think and reason critically, and evaluate properly. SU2 described the block in terms of the critical thinking in discussing the results

> DRS problems couple with the fact that there is no much of creativity involved in the majority of students' writing, nor are critical perspectives. I can remember one of the professors in England, professor [XX], whom we had a course with, and we were supposed to write essays. We did write well when it came to the literature chapter, but when it came to the last part which was the genuine discussion of one's own idea, we faced problems, and I remember that professor [XX] crossed all the pages with red pens over and

said, "I know better about these than you do, and these are very much available in the literature, so, what is your own ideas? what is your own genuine understanding and your critical discussion of the results?"

In relation to 'lack of substantiation of the findings', as another element of DRS, convergence was observed among almost two-thirds of the supervisors (N=5). They believed 'invalidated and disproved results' jeopardize validity and generalization of the research results. One supervisor acknowledged

> Often times, Master's students have problems in supporting their findings with evidence or proofs from reliable sources. To validate their research outcome, and subsequently, generalize the outcome to other research contexts, they must generally refer to credible sources, evidence, and references. (SU7)

Notwithstanding addressing these specific problems by the majority of the supervisors, no respondent, except one (SU3), reported 'language proficiency level' as a major hindrance.

Table 3.
Supervisors' Perceptions of Difficulties in Writing DRS

	Main themes	Number
1	Lack of knowledge about DRS as a genre (i.e., DRS genre-specific conventions)	8
2	Lack of connecting ideas and sections to each other and to the literature (i.e., disconnected ideas)	8
3	Absence of reasoned argumentation (i.e., lack of genuine discussion, critical thinking and reasoning, justification, and evaluation of the results)	5 (SU2, SU3, SU5, SU6, SU8)

	Challenges in Writing …	
4	Lack of consistent and coherent interpretation of findings	8
5	Accounts of invalidated and disproved results (i.e., lack of validity and generalizability of the results) (substantiating)	6 (SU1, SU2, SU3, SU4, SU5, SU6)
6	Insufficient discussion of implications of the study	8
7	Language proficiency difficulties	1 (SU3)

Students' comments about the difficulties they encountered during DRS writing were closely examined as well. As Table 4 indicates, students identified four to seven problems each. There was a convergence of students' thinking about 'lack of understanding of the DRS, its components and structure'. Though they did not overtly use the term 'genre' as was used by the faculty members, the students all repeatedly reported that their problems derived from 'not knowing what is essentially required to be included in DRS section', 'how to organize and harmonize all contents in one section', or 'what subsections should go in it'. MS1, for instance, described her difficulties with DRS development, overall, and with the 'inclusion of appropriate subsections, specific contents, and results discussion', in particular. In her words,

> I need my supervisor to confirm the inclusion and appropriateness of any specific elements, contents or arguments in my thesis DRS. I wonder if I can provide a separate discussion section for each piece of finding or to include some sort of general thorough discussion at the end, as a whole. Also, I feel like I have difficulty in positioning

> myself in arguments and have no idea how to go on with the arguments in a strong voice.

As a conspicuous problem, ‘inability to connect ideas and sections to each other and to the related literature’, was raised by all students. Like their supervisors, the students all believed ‘disconnected ideas or lack of contextualization of ideas, concepts or evidence’ was a major hurdle to their DRS development. A consistent view was ‘I really do not know how to link my findings to mainstream research’ (MS3).

Other difficulties perceived by almost two-thirds of students (N=6) were inability to ‘interpret the findings in a coherent logical way’, ‘present whyness of the results, and evaluate the results in a critical view’. The latter corresponds to a similar theme acknowledged by their supervisors, i.e., inability to present a ‘reasoned argumentation (i.e., lack of genuine discussion, critical thinking and reasoning, and evaluation of the results)’. “I suppose providing reasons for the findings is of utmost value and importance.” (MS1) said. “I couldn’t justify my results with total confidence.”, she continued. Interestingly, no one addressed ‘substantiation of the results’ or ‘inability to validate or approve the results through substantiated evidence or sources’. Furthermore, unlike their professors, few students (N=2) referred to the DRS blocks in terms of ‘pedagogical implications of the results’. Only MS4, whose thesis was conducted in the ESP area (English for specific purposes) clearly described the problem in “not knowing how to relate the findings to real-world problems especially those of language pedagogy”.

With reference to language proficiency problems, similarities were found between the supervisor-student pairs in that less than half of the respondents (N=3) raised the topic of language proficiency as a hurdle to

their writing well. Yet, these students, further, elaborated on language skills and components, unlike their professors. In their view, the problematic areas appeared to be word choice (e.g., a limited range of vocabulary, and verb tenses), consistent use of specific terms, writing styles, in particular, paragraph writing, and coherence and cohesive ties within and between the sections and subsections.

Table 4.
Students' Perceptions of Difficulties in Writing DRS

	Main themes	Number
1	lack of knowledge about organization, content and rules of DRS development (i.e., hows and whats of DRS)	8
2	Inability to connect the ideas to the literature (lack of contextualization of findings)	8
3	Inability to present a reasoned argumentation (lack of discussing reasons or whyness of the results in argumentation, evaluating the results and thinking critically on them)	6 (MS2, MS3, MS4, MS6, MS7, MS8)
4	lack of coherent interpretation of the results (including absence of proper data analyses and interpretations)	5 (MS2, MS3, MS5, MS6, MS7, MS8
5	insufficient discussion of implications of the study in TEFL contexts	2 (MS4, MS8)
6	Language proficiency difficulties (Word choice, writing mechanism and style, logical organization and presentation of ideas and paragraphs…)	3 (MS1, MS2, MS5)

Though each supervisor-student pair was asked about students' strengths and weaknesses in writing the DRS subgenre, the present study focused on the difficulties rather than the strengths. Following Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006), students' major problems were analyzed more closely through their supervisors' perception lens. Such a detailed investigation into the content-analyzed data led to the formation of four images as follows. Students' comments are pictured as well to reveal what they perceived as their problematic areas in DRS writing.

Image 1: Too much projections of beliefs

Two supervisors (SU1 & SU5) referred to their students' (MS1 & MS5) putting 'too much weight on their comments, justifications, and interpretations of the results'. They felt their students needed to link their argument with the bigger picture of existing literature and clarify their findings with regard to this picture. Though they emphasized the importance of interpreting the results within the writer's voice, they felt their students gave too much prominence to their own ideas with a high degree of certainty. One of the supervisors described the image

> Discussion of the result section challenges are miscellaneous: from difficulties in content inclusion and organization, data sampling and analysis presentation to interpreting and substantiating the results with the literature. One of the biggest challenges, for instance, is that students struggle to put their own thoughts and ideas into the results section whereas what goes into the heart of a good academic results section is justifying and supporting arguments or opinions with credible literature evidence. (SU5)

On the other hand, MS1 and MS2 felt that a main function of DRS was to discuss the results based on their own opinion, in other words, *their personal projected justification*. This was, however, different from the sub-themes 'grounding the results much in the literature', and 'filling the gap in the literature by indicting convergence with or divergence from the literature' that were extracted from the interview data. MS1 referred to her writing problems as her main difficulties, feeling that the major hurdle was her English language proficiency, in particular, difficulties in word choice and grammar that hindered her from linking ideas to the literature. She reported that she had unclear and long sentences due to her proficiency level while SU1 did not consider language-related problems as a crucial matter at all.

Image 2: Scratching the surface

SU2 observed that MS2 writing 'lacked a critical stance and a genuine interpretation expressing 'whyness' of the results. "Of course, this is a general problem faced by almost the majority of the thesis students", he said. Another supervisor (SU5) saw not much of the critical arguments and reasoning involved in her student's DRS draft especially when it came to SU5' explaining 'why' and 'how' of his research results. SU2 also felt his student lagged behind presenting and explaining the ideas with a clear and coherent meaning. As he commented, "She was one of the average students in writing performance". He added, "…maybe her insufficient grasp of language resources launched her into a myriad of details about her findings or lagged her behind expressing the ideas within a critical reflective framework in DRS".

MU5 did not ascribe her difficulties in writing DRS much to her language proficiency. While she pointed out her difficulties with English

language proficiency, she did not perceive it as a big hurdle. As a clear instance, she only referred to her inappropriate use of verb tense or voice, problems with word choice, and overuse of incomplete or dangling structures. The supervisor, on the other hand, felt that to thoroughly accomplish the DRS task, students' experiences in analyzing, presenting, interpreting and discussing the results in DRS are essential.

Image 3: Losing voice

'Inappropriate stance or position in interpreting the results' was considered a significant problem by the supervisors. In SU3's words, there was a need to have a sufficient grasp of 'voice' to interpret the results reasonably, evaluate them clearly and strongly, and link the findings to the field unambiguously. In such an attempt, SU3 felt his student needed to "position himself to be heard since this deals with the essence of DRS in any research report".

Nonetheless, MS3 commented that he "would find it difficult to harmonize all the subsets in one section to be quite reader-friendly". In other words, he referred to his difficulty with organizing the content, dealing with the length of the chapters where he had to make too many subsets and sections integrated. 'Substantiation of the results' with evidence from the literature was perceived as a problem by MS3 and MS7. Referring to this, MS3, for instance, believed his research was of a unique type in scope and subject (a huge quantitative Entrance Exam project) and he had no clear idea of how to go on with it and use the evidence from the literature to substantiate the findings and get the message across.

Image 4: Intangible picture

SU4 and SU8 addressed difficulties with DRS in general that a majority of students have, not just those their students perceived in particular. For instance, SU4 felt that students often mix up what *they* find with what *others*

said. He commented, “Masters students do not discuss their findings clearly within the constraints of their research”. SU8 ascribed students’ problem in expressing their meaning both to their ‘insufficient acquaintance with the principle of writing research papers and thesis’ and to their ‘insufficient foreign language proficiency’. In his words, students mostly do not provide a ‘*tangible image’,* partly due to their ‘unfamiliarity with the research genre’ and partly due to their ‘insufficient grasp of language as a tool’. In his interpretation, “Since students have serious problems with language, they often cannot meet the requirements of obtaining a clear stance in their report or their field. Subsequently, it would be difficult to make their findings message understood”.

MS4, during his interview, referred to his somewhat ‘unawareness of the written discourse tools and rhetoric to help take his stance throughout the whole writing process’ as a problematic area. However, he further recognized “how to come to a sound interpretation of my research study results” and “how to substantiate the results with the available findings and relate the findings to real-world problems, especially those of language pedagogy” as his main problems. In effect, he repeatedly underscored all these problematic areas with relevance to a bigger problem: “lack of disciplinary knowledge of DRS as a specific genre rather than language proficiency”.

4. Discussion

There is convincing evidence suggesting discoursal, stylistic, and strategic differences between L1 and L2 writing (e.g., Hinkel, 2002; Myles, 2002; Zhang, 2013). As they enter their dissertation or Master’s studies, L2 postgraduates encounter a prestigious academic writing genre (Brown, 2014)

which is rhetorically, linguistically and strategically different from their L1 writing (e.g., Cai, 2011; Flowerdew, 2019). This genre-specific competency develops over time, and few students possess this knowledge or the necessary skills at times they enter their research program. Since the stakes of writing a thesis or dissertation are high, inadequate genre writing knowledge inevitably presents particular challenges to both postgraduate students and their supervisors or advisors (Starfield & Paltridge, 2019).

Research on academic writing challenges and problems among ESL/EFL students has been carried out in different L2 contexts (e.g., Cheung, 2013; Li & Li, 2022; Shen et al., 2024; Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Yet, studies addressing postgraduate students' understanding of scholarly genre writing such as their thesis genre and subgenres (e.g., DRS) and the associated challenges and problems are still scarce (e.g., Chien & Li, 2022; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). Given the current proliferating number of Master's students required to "argue logically and coherently the meaning of the research results" (Dong, 1998, p. 369), there is a pressing need to investigate their understanding of the functions of thesis results and discussion section and their perceptions of the difficulties involved in this genre writing (Cheung, 2013; Flowerdew, 2019). In light of this, TEFL thesis students' and supervisors' perceptions of the DRS function and the difficulties the students encounter when writing their thesis genre in English have been the core attention of the present study.

The results of exploration into the understanding of the DRS function/content as perceived by the supervisors revealed a common thread running through all their comments. Such a common understanding fell within our expectations given the supervisors' writing up their research projects, and a good level of experience in supervising their dissertation/thesis students. However, degrees of variation were observed in

supervisors' commentaries. This could be attributed to sectional requirements and emphasis within the disciplinary genres, as rightly argued by Swales (2004). As to the supervisors' perceptions, therefore, the obtained evidence is congruent with the results reported by Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) with regard to major functions such as 'discussing and detailing the results', 'interpreting', 'substantiating' and 'contextualizing the results within the literature'. Further areas, in particular, 'discussing the implications of the results, or 'so what' of the findings, and their 'contribution to the gap in the field', 'explaining the reasons or providing a reasoned argumentation of the results', and 'taking a critical position' were emphasized by the supervisors as well.

Likewise, commonalities in students' perspectives were observed in functions 'presenting a detailed profile of the results', 'contextualizing the results', 'discussing and justifying the results', and 'interpreting the results in a tangible voice'. Given the considerable amount of time reported, by students, to have been spent on developing their first DRS draft and the good amount of feedback and instruction they received, as acknowledged by the students and their supervisors during the interviews, it was expected that all students would have shown a close understanding of DRS function/content. However, as Table 2 enumerates, differences were found in responses 'discussing the implications of the findings' (25% of student respondents) and 'elaborating the results and consolidating them' (37% or one-third of student respondents).

A possible reason to account for students' partly limited understanding of some of the DRS functions is that postgraduate students, in practice, embark on writing their thesis genre before acquiring a knowledge repertoire of its individual sections or subgenres (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). For instance, as acknowledged by Paltridge (2002), available sources

that give detailed instruction and guides on the organization and structure of a thesis and the contents fitting them are not adequate, nor is there an optimal amount of feedback. Most often the feedback is given at micro levels (e.g., grammatical or lexicon choice) rather than macro levels (e.g., DRS functions and content requirements). The latter, however, puts more cognitive demands on students and, consequently, makes it difficult to develop the DRS more adequately and appropriately than other sections (Allison et al., 1998), particularly when students have not been educated to develop critical orientation at times of interpreting and reporting their results. Another reason, in Bitchener and Basturkmen's (2006) view, lies in the time-lapse between writing the literature and DRS sections, especially if the literature, written months earlier, is not reviewed and revised by the students. On such bases, Master's students might not have acquired enough knowledge about the DRS requirements and functions.

Investigation of participants' perceptions of the difficulties in writing the DRS genre revealed a good deal of similarity in supervisors' perspectives. This participant layer unanimously addressed 'lack of coherent link between the results and the literature', 'lack of a thorough conceptualization of DRS as a genre', 'inconsistent interpretations', and 'insufficient discussion of the implications of the results' as the most frequently encountered difficulties and challenges. The results corroborate what was reported by earlier research (Allison et al., 1998; John, 1993) and several recent studies, including Cheung (2013), Lestari (2020) and Tardy (2009). Nonetheless, the results are inconsistent with those studies reporting 'linguistics proficiency' as a major difficulty (see, for instance, Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Dong, 1998). Globally, given the number of years postgraduate students have been exposed to English learning and its impact on their academic performance in English-

medium programs (Daller & Phelan, 2013; Rudd & Honkiss, 2020), the result is not surprising.

Some of the main difficulties identified by the supervisors were also reported by their students. Like their supervisors, the Master's students referred to their 'inability to develop DRS within an interrelated framework' as one of the most serious problems they encountered in the course of the thesis development phases. As points of convergence, 'presenting a reasoned argumentation of the findings', 'lack of contextualization and substantiation of the results', and 'lack of knowledge about the organization, contents and rules/conventions of DRS development (i.e., lack of knowledge about DRS as a genre), and 'inability to interpret the results coherently' were identified as sources of difficulty by the two participant layers. Notwithstanding that such an analogous understanding emerged from both layers' comments and descriptions, students tended more to see the difficulties and problems at specific 'microstructures' whereas their supervisors reported more on the level of 'content and rhetorical knowledge'.

'Insufficient discussion of the pedagogical implications of the results', 'absence of a critical evaluation of the results', and 'lack of substantiating and generalization of the results for presenting a bigger picture of the research findings', as identified by supervisors, made it obvious that the supervisors were more aware of students' difficulties and problematic areas. Some possible explanations may account for the degrees of divergence found between supervisors' and students' perceptions of what mainly counts as the problematic areas for students in each pair. A likely explanation lies in students' views of assistance and instruction. Students may hold different views from their supervisors as to what counts as help in the first place. While supervisors may count an informal check or a casual talk with students as help or assistance, students may register only formal conferences and

written comments on their drafts as help. It is argued that supervisors' judgments are not occasionally perceived as part of formal procedures of assessment (Allison et al., 1998) but as part of an ongoing dialogue between the supervisor and the student where the student is in a position to accept or reject. From Woodward-Kron's (2004) stance, some supervisors fail to provide the necessary scaffoldings and feedback for students. As a consequence, students may not be able to cognitively internalize the advice and feedback they receive. The results, specifically, highlight the importance of tailored and timely feedback to ensure students are supported during the DRS development process without feeling overwhelmed. By providing detailed and clear feedback, supervisors can address specific areas of improvement such as structure, clarity, and critical analysis, allowing students to better understand the rationale behind suggested changes and develop critical skills (see Bastola & Hu, 2023; Woodward-Kron, 2004). This approach not only increases the effectiveness of the feedback but also fosters a more supportive and interactive learning environment.

Overall, these findings echo supervisors' urgent role in establishing supervisor-supervisee network ties or interactions to help their supervisees identify sources of problems (Dong, 1998), acquire scholarly writing genre-specific literacy (Flowerdew, 2019) and, in particular, Master's genre writing through familiarization with its typical functions and conventions (Hyland, 2007).

5. Conclusion and Implications

The present research evolved from an exploration into L2 postgraduates' conceptualization and understanding of the thesis DRS genre as well as the difficulties and problems they encountered in their struggle to develop this

genre-specific writing. Data for such an investigation came from a series of paired interviews with TEFL Master's students and their supervisors. The diagnostic framework, designed through analytic procedures, initially revealed main functions, ranging from discussing, explaining, consolidating, contextualizing and interpreting the results to presenting the validity, credibility, and implications of the results, with degrees of divergence and convergence between the supervisor and student layers. Students' interview results revealed that they were still unaware of some major functions or unsure about them.

Different perceptions of the challenges and difficulties the present Master's students confronted also emerged from the present qualitative dataset. Overall, the recurring emerging themes revealed students' (a) inability to connect the ideas to each other and the literature coherently, relevantly and reasonably; (b) inability to generalize the results appropriately and report their validity properly; (c) incompetency about DRS genre-specific conventions; and (d) inadequacy in critical reasoning and stance keeping, and evaluation of the results. The findings do not corroborate those research findings highlighting L2 linguistic knowledge and proficiency problems as major hurdles in developing a well-written persuasive DRS (e.g., Dong, 1998), due to the specific nature of the TEFL discipline.

Regarding a clear picture of the difficulties encountered during their thesis development phase, Master's students reported limited understanding than their supervisors'. From the supervisors' views, the greatest number of the difficulties and problems, by far, occurred at the 'macro' level of functions and overall structuring of the DRS genre rather than at the 'micro' level problems of sentence and paragraph development. Supervisors all went beyond the mere overall organization of paragraph and idea development into a deeper level of logical and critical presentation and substantiation of the

results, understanding of which requires content and rhetorical knowledge of the genre. The findings, thus, bring to light more evidence about the challenges L2 students need to rise to in order to meet the DRS genre-specific competence. This was evident from the functions, contents, difficulties and problematic areas identified by the present students, compared to those reported by other students from different disciplines (e.g., Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Cheung, 2013; Swales, 2004).

The findings of this study have implications for integrated DRS literacy instruction. From a perspective, the findings about students' relatively limited understanding of the DRS genre and the difficulties associated with the uncertainty about what should go in it suggest that the genre-specific concepts and contents need to be viewed critically by their supervisors and practitioners in the field. It is in light of a more comprehensive and deeper identification of their supervisees' challenges and difficulties that the supervisors can fruitfully adopt the genre-specific conventions and rules and verbalize their tacit knowledge to make explicit to the students the expected and valued writing practice of the discipline and resolve the problems within their supervision period. This implies that supervisors should treat more macro-level problems besides treating linguistic knowledge. It is only when the supervisors and their students share conceptualizations that their relationships become productive (Belcher, 1994). In other words, it is only through exchanging information and sharing expertise that TEFL supervisors can provide rich and authentic instruction for postgraduate supervisees to meet the demands of writing the DRS genre in the discipline. Today, supervisor-supervisee communication and contact, as an effective solution, is much more convenient than before due to the mediation of technological advancements, in particular, online writing

tutoring (Dugartsyrenova & Sardegna, 2022), various social media applications, emails or computers (Karunaratne, 2018).

Relevantly, knowledge of this genre from the early supervision period should be included in the supervision program in order to raise students' awareness of the problems experienced when writing the DRS. Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) claimed that through identification of the underlying causes of such problems, supervisors can assist with writing this genre. Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) asserted the difficulties in presenting, arguing, or substantiating the findings are as much as cognitive issues as linguistic ones. Therefore, in light of the present study findings, our supervisors and practitioners are, at least, one step ahead, since difficulties that are related to specific genre requirements might be easier to resolve than those of linguistic ones. This could help them devise an appropriate pedagogy to cater to the generic writing needs of their students. Within L2 writing, "excluding genres from the classroom is not really an option, as they are the primary means through which humans communicate in writing" (Tardy, 2016, p. 129).

Building on the present findings, it is realized that early supervision should not only expose students to the specific challenges of writing the DRS but also equip supervisors with a deep understanding of these genre-specific issues. The findings, therefore, underscore the need to systematically integrate DRS literacy into the academic curriculum and professional development programs for supervisors. Higher education programs, for example, can embed focused modules on DRS literacy within training programs, including workshops and seminars. Such intervention would equip supervisors with the tools to better support and scaffold their students, and ultimately, evaluate the overall quality of the DRS writing.

Relevant to the need for enhanced supervisory feedback and curriculum integration, the findings also point to implications for the development of instructional materials and resources. Textbooks, as argued by Swales and Feak (2012), could feature annotated exemplars of effective and ineffective DRS writing, providing a roadmap for writing this genre. In the current era of technological advancements, there is even a call for leveraging digital platforms to create interactive e-modules focused on DRS Literacy. Such modules might include guided activities that offer instant feedback or revision exercises that reinforce not only the theoretical aspects but also the practical applications of DRS writing.

The findings of the study bring some issues to attention. A limitation of the work that has been reported here is its situation-specific nature, although this might be, in some ways, a strength. Although this study has gained in-depth knowledge of the generic difficulties and problems in DRS writing of Iranian TEFL students from supervisor-supervisee perspectives, it contributes to our current understanding of the relation of writing the DRS genre to its discourse community. Therefore, if the same writing problems appear to be common across contexts and disciplines, adaptations will prove to be useful to assist students with the challenging task of writing the DRS in these contexts. Information about DRS challenges and functions could be used by other thesis supervisors and academics to anticipate, reflect on, and solve similar problems or challenges in thesis supervision.

The findings, thus, brought into light the need for further research with a wider sample and more rigorous data collection procedures and analytic techniques to support the suggestions of this research.

Declarations

Funding

'Not Applicable'

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all supervisors and students who participated in this study.

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