



Exploring Postgraduate students' challenges and strategy use while writing a master's thesis in an English-medium University in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

With the growth of English medium instruction (EMI) on a global level, the number of multilingual students writing their master's theses in English is increasing. However, research on students' experiences of writing them in English in non-English speaking contexts is scarce. This paper reports on the challenges and strategic learning efforts of eight Kazakhstani students while working on their master's thesis projects in a Kazakhstani EMI university. The qualitative data collected from a written narrative and three subsequent semi-structured interviews revealed that almost all the participants had a clear preference for a directive supervision style, whereby supervisors give stage-by-stage guidance. The result was a clash of expectations, miscommunication and confusion between supervisors and supervisees in some cases, especially since most supervisors come from English-speaking countries. Two participants, however, favoured a *laissez-faire* supervisory style where the supervisor orchestrated their supervisees' learning efforts implicitly by giving them room to work independently. All participants also articulated certain effective strategies to confront the diverse challenges associated with constructing a new identity for themselves as researchers, time management, and 'imposter syndrome'. From this qualitative study, practical recommendations for developing the effectiveness (quality) of master's thesis supervision in EMI universities are made.

Keywords Master's theses · Challenges · learning strategies · Kazakhstani students · Qualitative inquiry

Introduction

In higher education, with the growth of English medium instruction (EMI) on a global level, the number of multilingual students writing a master's or doctoral thesis in English continues to increase. There is a good deal of research looking at doctoral level

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supervision, evidenced by its increasing presence in recent publications (e.g., Casanave, 2019; Mochizuki & Starfield, 2021; Morton & Storch, 2019; Starfield, 2019; Xu & Zhang, 2019). Starfield (2019, p. 206) attributes this mainly to the fact that writing a doctoral dissertation represents the highest level of assessed student writing and ‘the essentially dyadic nature of doctoral supervision and its duration over a number of years’.

Comparatively little work, however, has been done on master’s thesis supervision, and almost all the published work has focused on international students’ experiences writing their master’s theses in English-speaking countries (e.g., Hajar, 2018, 2019; Harwood & Petrić, 2017, 2020; Pringle Barnes & Cheng, 2019; Woodrow, 2020) and, to a lesser extent, in Europe (e.g., Eriksson & Nordrum, 2018; Filippou, 2019). International students are those who have crossed borders for the purpose of study. Very few empirical studies have been conducted in Asian contexts to disentangle postgraduate students’ experiences of writing their master’s theses in English (e.g. Abdu Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2016; Sadeghi & Shirzad Khajepasha, 2015; Saeed et al., 2021) and none of them have addressed the experiences of Kazakhstani students. The qualitative research study reported in this paper makes a start at addressing the above research gaps by exploring not only the challenges that postgraduate Kazakhstani students confront while working on their master’s theses in a Kazakhstani EMI university, but also examining these students’ use of particular strategies mediated by influential social agents like their thesis supervisors and peers.

The terms ‘thesis’ and ‘dissertation’ are used slightly differently in different parts of the world. In Britain and Australia, master’s students produce ‘dissertations’, whereas in the USA, they write ‘theses’ (Woodrow, 2020, p. 1). As the Kazakhstani EMI university where the data for this study were collected adopts the research terms used in the USA, this paper uses the term ‘thesis’ to define a document that reports a piece of research of roughly 15,000–20,000 words in length that master’s candidates need to complete as partial requirement for the completion of their academic programme. The major purpose of writing a master’s thesis is to help students to conduct research and produce work of respectable quality and of both academic and practical usefulness. In what follows, sociolinguistic changes in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, together with the importance of demystifying postgraduate students’ experiences of master’s supervision are explained. The objectives of the study are also presented, and the qualitative data analysed in rich detail. The paper concludes by providing practical recommendations to develop the effectiveness (quality) of thesis supervision in EMI universities.

Sociolinguistic profile of Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the largest Central Asian country to become independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Its location in the centre of the Eurasian continent gives Kazakhstan an economic advantage in terms of transport, communications, and logistics. Language policy in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is primarily guided by *The State Program for the Development and Functioning of Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011–2020*, Presidential decree No.110, adopted on 29 June 2011 (Reagan, 2019). The purpose of the *Program* is for at least 15% of the population to be proficient in three languages (Kazakh, Russian and English) by 2020. The roles of each of these languages are as follows: Kazakh is the official state language and the symbol of Kazakh nationalism, Russian is the language of interethnic communication, and English is the language of successful integration

into the global economy to achieve independent economic returns for Kazakhstan (Goodman & Montgomery, 2020). Kazakhstan is the first country in Central Asia to actively develop a trilingual education policy of teaching different subjects in Kazakh, Russian, and English in secondary schools and higher education institutions (Goodman et al., 2021). Reagan (2019, p. 448) suggests that Kazakhstan's growing focus on English reflects 'the neoliberal agenda of the government as it seeks to become a player in the global economic community'. Kazakhstan's former president, Nur-Sultan Nazarbayev, in 2015 offered the following rationale for introducing English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in science subjects in secondary schools and universities.

The transition to EMI in upper-secondary schools and universities has also been indicated as Step 79 in "The Plan of the Nation: The Path to the Kazakhstan Dream". The President emphasized that the main goal was to enhance the competitiveness of graduates and the growth export potential of the education sector (cited in Karabassova, 2020, p. 44)

Related to this, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan set up 20 Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NISs) for gifted children around the country in 2008. NISs is the main site for testing Kazakhstan's trilingual educational model of Kazakh, Russian and English to ensure 'the transformation of Kazakhstan into a country with competitive human capital' (Shamshidinova et al., 2014, p. 72). NISs use EMI in most science subjects and cooperate with outstanding international institutions, like Cambridge University (UK) and University of Pennsylvania (USA). Currently, Kazakhstan aspires to internationalise higher Education and introduce EMI in multiple universities across the country (Goodman & Montgomery, 2020). Karabassova (2020) points out that over 40 out of 125 Kazakhstan universities in 2016 had programmes with English as the medium of instruction, and this number is growing rapidly. One of these universities is where the current study was conducted. One of the programmes offered is a 2-year master's degree programme. This university has a competitive entry process; only 20% of applicants are admitted. Candidates are mainly screened through the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), their overall undergraduate grade point average and an interview. Admitted students take courses on the theories, issues, and debates at national, regional and international levels. Some courses also concern research methods and thesis development. Each master's programme culminates in a thesis in English—nearly always an empirical study of varying topics and research designs—of up to 20,000 words. In this university, most of the teaching staff come from overseas and have academic degrees and extensive research experience in top universities in English-speaking countries.

Theoretical considerations

Review of research on students' experiences of writing master's theses

There has been little focus on master's contexts in general, and on what perceptions post-graduate students bring to their master's thesis projects, in particular. The existing research (e.g., Hajar, 2019; Harwood & Petrić, 2017; Paltridge & Starfield, 2020; Pringle Barnes & Cheng, 2019) has revealed that students who speak English as a second or additional language often find writing a master's thesis daunting. Paltridge and Starfield (2020) ascribed

this partly to postgraduate students' lack of information about the supervision process: they have little understanding of where the responsibility for choosing the research topic lies, or the research methodology and the quality of the writing of the final product. Consequently, a clash of expectations, miscommunication, uncertainties and confusion between the supervisor and their supervisees may easily occur during master's supervisions.

The process of writing a master's thesis in English has been described by some researchers as an 'opaque, poorly understood' phenomenon (Harwood & Petrić, 2017, p. 3), a 'capstone activity' (Woodrow, 2020, 1), a 'black box' (Goode, 2010, p. 33), an 'elusive chameleon' (Pilcher, 2011, p. 37) and 'a secret garden where students and supervisor engage with little external scrutiny and accountability' (Halse, 2011, p. 557). Pringle Barnes and Cheng (2019) note that writing a master's thesis in English is an especially complex task for international students, who have less experience of academic writing or of searching independently for academic resources. Barnes and Cheng (2019) further contend that most international students find it difficult to demonstrate adequate critical and analytical skills in their written work, often due to the cultural influence of their countries of origin if students are encouraged to remain passive in class rather than question the teacher or any other academic authority. In a similar vein, some researchers (e.g., Brown, 2007; Dong, 1998; Fan, 2013; McKinley, 2013) claim that many international students can be classified as surface or rote learners, which means their work is likely to be repetitive and based on rote memorisation strategies. With this in mind, Fan (2013) examined the challenges of a group of postgraduate business students, mostly from China and India, when writing their master's theses in English at three UK universities from the perspectives of the students and their supervisors. Fan (2013, p. 3) assumed that the grades international students' master's theses achieved were likely to be at least one point below those of domestic students. He found that most supervisors in the study claimed that a large number of their international students had not been trained to work independently or demonstrated critical thinking in their thesis work. Their language deficiencies also tended to limit their ability to take advantage of their supervisors' feedback to improve their work.

Paltridge and Woodrow (2012) point out that managing time challenges native and non-native English speaking students alike, when working on their master's or doctoral theses. This may be for different reasons, including choosing a research topic that is unfamiliar and hence they need time to delve into the related literature (Paltridge & Woodrow, 2012), taking more time than expected to obtain ethics committee approval before starting to collect data (Hajar, 2019), having a difficulty in balancing between study, work and family responsibilities (Rudestam & Newton, 2007), and sometimes underestimating the time needed to complete their theses (High & Montague, 2006). In one of the very few empirical studies conducted in Asia about master's students' academic experiences, Sadeghi and Shirzad Khajepasha (2015) examined 60 Iranian students' challenges while working on their master's thesis at three universities in Iran. They found that the participants faced three main challenges, namely, their lack of language proficiency, their lack of the necessary management skills to meet deadlines and not understanding their supervisors' feedback well enough to incorporate it into their theses. Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2016) investigated 24 Vietnamese students' challenges when writing the Literature Review chapter of their master's theses at a Vietnamese university and found that most participants did not demonstrate adequate critical skills and overused direct quotations of previous work without commenting on them, along with having grammatical and spelling errors in their written work.

The 'social turn' in higher education research

With the 'social turn' in education (Block, 2003), the landscape of learning research has challenged the ascendancy of psycholinguistic and individualistic perspectives that construe knowledge as residing in the mind and learning as an individual achievement with paying scant attention to social, political and cultural factors. Socially oriented theoretical models perceive learners as complete people with whole lives instead of separating their minds, bodies, and social behaviours into separate domains of inquiry (Coleman, 2013). Hajar (2019) stresses that learning does not occur in a sociocultural vacuum, but rather it is a social process whereby culturally and historically situated individuals are in active pursuit of their objectives. Sociocultural perspectives, which refer to a variety of approaches to learning that underline the prominence of social, political and cultural processes in mediating learners' cognitive and metacognitive processes, have recently become more established in the field of higher education. In this sense, the sociocultural perspective does not aim to erase the individual from the picture, but is rather concerned with 'the dialectic between the individual and the social; between the human agency of these learners and the social practices of their communities' (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 308).

In response to the 'social turn' in education, Paltridge and Woodrow (2012), therefore, argue that the stereotypical perceptions of international students working on their master's theses have been asserted rather than demonstrated. They further claim that much of the evidence for the way such students engage in their master's research project is premised on Western supervisors' perceptions, which are filtered through their own values, expectations and standards. Elsewhere, Paltridge and Starfield (2020, p. 11) challenge the notion that many Western research supervisors hold in relation to 'pre-judging students' writing and making assumptions about it solely on preconceived ideas about Chinese and English academic writing, and the student's ethnicity'. Huang (2008) examined Chinese students participating in postgraduate tourism and hospitality programmes' notion of critical thinking and the challenges they faced in using analytical and critical thinking skills in their work at a UK university. Huang (2008) found that the notion of critical thinking is quite broad and not clearly defined by academics, and concluded that it was therefore to be expected that not just Asian, but Western students as well are likely to have problems understanding what it means to think critically, and how to do it.

Paltridge and Starfield (2020) underline the importance of not adopting a stereotypical view of how a student from one language and culture will necessarily write in another. Paltridge and Starfield (2020) also point out that only a handful of empirical studies underpinned by sociocultural learning perspectives exist that can help clarify the overarching effect of the contextual conditions (e.g. supervisors' and peers' practices and assessment mode) on the experiences of master's students' while working on their theses in English (e.g., Hajar, 2019; Paltridge & Woodrow, 2012). Related to this, Hajar (2019) asserts that the 'social turn' in education offers a new dimension to the study of learning strategies through adopting sociocultural approaches, whereby individuals' learning strategy use is not confined to their cognitive predispositions or personality traits. Individuals' learning strategies are also the outcomes of the mediational processes of particular learning communities. These processes include the artefacts and practices, and the relationships between people. With the above in mind, this study adopted a sociocultural perspective to capture the challenges and situated use of learning strategies of a group of Kazakhstani students while writing their theses in a Kazakhstani EMI university.

The study

Aims

Researchers who conducted this study became interested in examining this topic due to their extensive involvement in master's thesis supervision for a long time and in different parts of the world. While both researchers completed their studies in the West, where they also accumulated expertise as faculty members and researchers, their curiosity took them to different parts of the world to hold university positions. Their combined expertise means they have supervised an average of 10 theses a year for over a decade in Europe, America, Africa, and Asia. This extensive experience of diverse groups of students, most multilingual, striving to study, learn, read and write in the English language, has honed their expertise. Although they are not from Kazakhstan, their decision to document and study students' experiences of writing a master's thesis in Kazakhstan is because they are currently faculty members at the target EMI university. Also, there has been no empirical study that specifically explored the challenges and strategy uses of Kazakhstani students working on their master's theses in an EMI university in a non-English speaking country. Guided by sociocultural theories of learning, this qualitative study conducted in a Kazakhstani EMI university sought to address this lacuna by seeking the answer to the following research questions:

1. What difficulties did the participants face while writing their master's theses in English?
2. What strategies did they use to deal with these difficulties?
3. What influenced the participants' strategy uses while working on their theses projects?

Participants

The sample used in the present study is purposive in that the participants were specifically selected and had shared experience of a given phenomenon. Purposive sampling has been argued to provide optimum data to ascertain how exactly a phenomenon is experienced. The present study centered on eight participants, five females and three males, aged between 23 and 27 years of age. All of them were Kazakhs and had not lived or studied outside their homeland. This enabled the focus to be on the participants' expectations of the challenges they faced and their strategy use when writing a thesis in English to be better understood. In addition, none of the participants had been known to the researchers prior to the data collection stage. They had different research supervisors and pursued their postgraduate studies in the same area as their undergraduate specialisation. A meeting between the Kazakhstani postgraduate students in a Kazakhstani EMI university and the researchers was arranged. During the meeting, the researchers explained in simple terms the significance and the purpose of the study. Eight students who had met the criteria set by researchers expressed interest in participating in the study. In the light of the sensitive information to be uncovered, we were particularly conscious of the need for anonymity. Therefore, information about the participants' discipline and department is withheld. To protect the participants' privacy, pseudonyms were used. The participants' profiles are provided in Table 1, which also includes interview number and duration.

Data collection and analysis

All the data used in this paper were collected between 15 July and 12 October 2019 by two researchers in a leading EMI university in Kazakhstan. Due ethical procedures concerning confidentiality were followed to gain the informed consent of the participants. The participants were asked at the first meeting to write about themselves, their past language learning experiences, their expectations of their supervisor, and the reasons for choosing their research topics. They were allowed to use the language with which they felt most comfortable. All of them used English to write their essays. To help them write their essays, they were given a set of questions (See Appendix 1). In the present study, this method enabled the researchers to enter into the life-worlds of the participants through their own expositions and to construct subsequent interview questions relevant to each person's situation (see Appendix 2 for a sample of interview questions). Three semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each participant were conducted by both researchers. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and took place in a private room on the university campus. With the participants' permission, all the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

For the data analysis, the paper was informed by Clarke and Braun's (2013) model of thematic analysis to arrange the participants' perceptions of writing a master's thesis into themes. The researchers familiarised themselves with the data through reading and re-reading the interview transcripts 'actively, analytically, and critically' (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 205). After the process of familiarisation, the data were coded to generate initial codes in relation to the aims of the research study questions. For this purpose, a selected reading approach was used; as the researchers read the transcripts, they highlighted statements that captured the influences of diverse contextual factors on the participants' experiences of writing their master's theses in English, including their strategy use. After this, the codes that shared features in general were collated to generate themes. Two core themes were identified: 'the impact of social mediating agents' and 'dealing with insecurities'. The tentative themes derived from the coded data and the entire data set were tested, then, the sub-themes within each theme were identified. A final thematic map of the data was then produced (Fig. 1). Once all the themes and sub-themes had been obtained, the researchers provided extracts from each theme to highlight the participants' detailed experiential accounts, which will be explained in the next section.

Table 1 Demographic data of the participants

Name	Gender	Age	Duration of interview 1	Duration of interview 2	Duration of interview 3
Altyn	Female	23	1:05:22	59:02	57:33
Aizhan	Female	25	59:23	1:08:03	58:10
Irina	Female	27	57:09	1:05:15	54:55
Leila	Female	23	54:49	1:02:55	1:02:06
Marita	Female	25	1:09:02	1:02:13	1:05:09
Ziyat	Male	24	1:01:44	58:09	1:01:44
Adil	Male	26	1:07:54	1:04:12	59:54
Kamil	Male	25	57:03	1:07:02	58:19

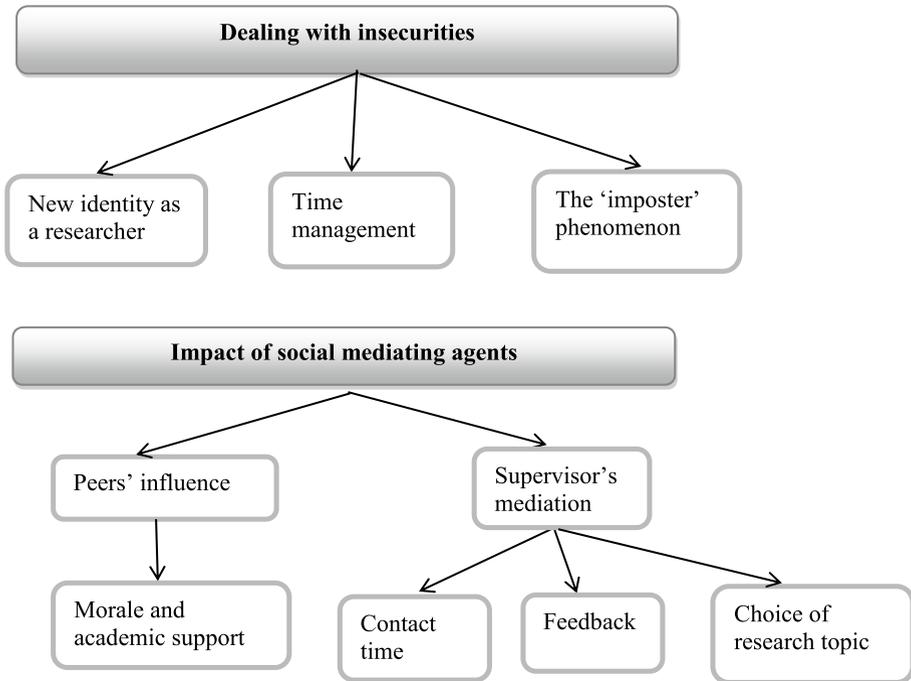


Fig. 1 The final thematic map derived from the data

Findings and discussion

This section examines the two main themes emerging from the analysis of the qualitative data: the ‘impact of social mediating agents’ and ‘dealing with insecurities’. Notably, these emergent themes which influenced the participants’ thinking and strategy deployment sometimes operated jointly. For example, the practices of many thesis supervisors played a remarkable role in fostering or deterring the participants’ new identity as researchers, as will be described in the next sub-sections.

Impact of social agents

In examining the data related to the mediating role of a group of individuals on the participants’ academic learning and strategy use while working on their master’s theses projects, two chief agents were identified; their thesis supervisors and their peers.

Impact of thesis supervisors’ practices

Master’s thesis supervisors are likely to be the most influential actors in mediating their supervisees’ strategic learning efforts during the process of researching and writing up their theses, given that they are the immediate readers and assessors of students’ work. Regarding the choice of research topic, all the participants mentioned that they wrote a

research proposal at the end of the second term of their academic programme. The participants divulged that they chose their research topic based on their personal interests, and their supervisors' support was limited to helping them narrow down the focus of their research topic or paraphrase some key words in the research title. This is explained in the following extracts from the interview transcripts of Kamil and Altyn.

Extract 1:

I chose my research topic by myself, but my supervisor helped me organise my thoughts and paraphrase some words in my thesis title such as 'patriotism'. We changed it to 'national identity' because 'patriotism' is somehow difficult to measure. (Kamil, 1st interview)

Extract 2:

I made only minor changes to the topic I presented in my research proposal. It was a bit broad, therefore, my supervisor helped me to frame it and make it more specific and researchable...He referred to the process of narrowing down the focus of my research topic as 'planting the seed'. (Altyn, 1st interview)

The picture that emerges from the above extracts is of supervisors fostering their supervisees' growing sense of agency by encouraging them to research a topic of their choice. The participants then used some cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as selective attention, planning and identifying the purpose of each task. This finding concerning the participants' understanding it was their responsibility to write their thesis proposal carefully and to choose a research topic researchable within the given time frame does not concur with that of Hajar (2019). In his qualitative study with a group of international students from the Middle East working on their master's theses at a UK university, Hajar (2019) reported that some participants submitted carelessly designed and written proposals without doing any preliminary research. These participants believed that it was their supervisors' responsibility to choose a research topic for them. Similarly, one of the findings of Hetrick and Trafford's (1995) study was that master's supervisors expected their international supervisees to have developed a research statement before the first meeting, while students believed that the aim of the first tutorial was to receive help from their supervisors to work out a feasible research statement.

The data analysis also suggests that like the findings of Harwood & Petrić (2017) qualitative study of the experiences of Asian master's students at a UK university, almost all the participants appreciated supervisors who arranged regular face-to-face meetings, gave detailed written feedback on their drafts and provided very clear deadlines and stage-by-stage guidance. This view was aptly described by Aizhan:

Extract 3:

My relationship with my supervisor was very warm. It was easy for me to communicate with her. She was always available to help...She acted like a guide for me in every stage of my thesis. She gave me detailed and useful feedback on every part of my thesis. (Aizhan, 3rd interview)

That is, many participants preferred a more directed and authoritarian supervision approach, since they were accustomed to the teacher-centered legacy of Soviet education system, characterised by ‘uniform and exceptionally rigid conceptions of pedagogy and formal “didactic,” authoritarian and teacher-centered learning, overloaded and centrally mandated curricula, and insufficient attention to the quality and nature of individual student learning’ (Silova, 2009, p. 296). Nevertheless, three participants (Adil, Leila and Kamil) expressed their dissatisfaction with both the effectiveness and the time their supervisors took to give written feedback, the number of supervisory meetings permitted and late responses to their emails. They made the following comments:

Extract 4:

My supervisor was sometimes busy. I sometimes sent an email and needed to wait for one week for his answer... I had a lot of questions while writing my methodology, and he was not always approachable. This made me nervous. (Leila, 2nd interview)

Extract 5:

While some of my peers used to meet their supervisors weekly, I met my supervisor only four times...she was very busy, but she sometimes tried to help me by e-mail... When I brought her a draft, I felt she didn’t check it carefully...I sometimes became stressed because I didn’t know whether I was on the right track or not. (Adil, 1st interview)

Extract 6:

I can’t say I was positive about the feedback I received from my supervisor. Sometimes it was just like a few sentences at the end of my paper. It was not in-depth feedback...I wanted to see my paper in red with notes on the right in Microsoft Word. (Kamil, 1st interview)

The above extracts reveal elements of a dysfunctional supervisor–student relationship and poor communication. The respondents in extracts 4–6 found that their supervisors’ late or brief comments on their work were not sufficient or clear enough to guide them. This finding recalls the claim by Moses (1984) that some supervisors are reluctant to provide timely and detailed written comments to their supervisees. The same supervisors were equally unclear about the ‘frequency and duration of meetings, about finding time themselves and sometimes pinning down elusive students’ (Moses, 1984, p. 163). Commenting on this issue, Harwood & Petric (2019) point out that research supervisors should not only make their written feedback explicit and detailed, but also check—in a follow-up supervisory meeting—that their students have grasped the key messages they wanted to transmit. However, the number of supervisees and the number of drafts they submit can significantly affect the effectiveness and speed of each supervisor’s written feedback. Accordingly, some researchers (e.g., Harwood & Petric, 2019; McCallin & Nayar, 2012; Woolhouse, 2002) underline the need for academic supervisors to clarify their research students’ responsibilities and rights in the first meeting to overcome any qualms or worries about supervisory practices. Woolhouse (2002) explains how better, more regular communication can enhance supervisees’ experience:

I now ask students to come to their first tutorial not only with a clear idea for the focus of their study but also to have thought about what they expect from me as their supervisor. I ensure that there is time in the first tutorial for discussion about our expectations of each other (Woolhouse, 2002, p. 143).

Clarifying expectations (e.g., in terms of rights and responsibilities, the number of supervisory meetings permitted and the type and amount of feedback) through tutorials can be regarded as one of the key elements of effective supervision. Unlike the other participants, an analysis of Altyn' and Ziyat's data showed that they fully satisfied with their supervisors' style of supervision, which was reminiscent of Gatfield's (2005) *laissez-faire* style. This supervisory style implies that a supervisor 'is non-directive and not committed to high levels of personal interaction' and they 'may appear very caring and non-interfering' (Gatfield, 2005, p. 267). Ziyat, for instance, made the following comment:

Extract 7:

My supervisor was the best I could possibly have. She used a democratic approach. She encouraged me to do the research project I chose, and helped me with narrowing down the focus of my research...She gave me the freedom to choose the setting and research methods for data collection...she was flexible about the submission deadlines of my drafts.... I was able to meet the deadlines by myself, without being informed 'do this, or do that!' (Ziyat, 3rd interview)

Altyn' and Ziyat's preference for having a degree of freedom while working on his thesis resonates somewhat with McClure's (2005) study of a group of Chinese doctoral students' experiences of supervision during the first year of their studies in Singapore. McClure (2005) found that three out of six students enjoyed the freedom of choice involved in their research study, and that one participant decided to change her supervisor because s/he intervened too much in her research and gave her little room to work independently. This finding aligns with the argument put forward by Harwood & Petric, 2019, p. 161), that academic supervisors should enact 'adaptive' supervisory pedagogy, varying their style and degree of directiveness from student to student, according to each student's needs. As Harwood and Petrić (2020) remark, although there is little or no consensus in previous research on the roles and duties that academic supervisors are expected to undertake, one essential characteristic of a good supervisor is to be adaptable and flexible. They need to provide their supervisees with varying amounts of input and degrees of intervention, according to each student's cognitive abilities and affective situations. In a similar vein, de Kleijn et al. and's (2016, p. 1469) study showed how one of supervisors likened his supervisory style to that of 'a chameleon', stating that '*as a supervisor I show chameleon-like behaviour...Parker [a student] is somewhat easy-going, so I show a certain type of supervision behaviour. When I have a less bright student in front of me, I show rather different supervision behaviour*'.

Peer influence

The data collected in the research suggest that four of the participants (Aizhan, Irina, Marita and Adil) reported that their peers did not play any significant role in facilitating their experiences of writing their theses in English. They thought this was mainly because there were few class lectures or seminars while writing their

theses. However, the other participants indicated that they were inclined to discuss their research issues and share their academic and non-academic problems with colleagues, especially in the last month before submitting their theses. When asked whether peers boosted or daunted their learning efforts when working on their theses, two participants reported:

Extract 8:

We had very few classes while writing the thesis. However, a month before the thesis had to be submitted, I and some peers worked each day in a room on the university campus. The atmosphere was one of real work. We encouraged each other, shared our supervisors' feedback and exchanged some ideas and resources. (Marita, 2nd interview)

Extract 9:

I wrote the last part of my thesis with three of my groupmates. We gathered in the university lab...Sometimes when I had completed some part of my thesis, I asked my peers to give me their feedback...When I felt overwhelmed and stressed with all the things I had to do, they pushed me...Social support is critical in the process of writing a thesis. (Altyn, 2nd interview)

The above extracts demonstrate the participants' use of certain affective and social strategies to overcome the difficulties that they confronted while working on their theses. Examples of these strategies were asking questions, cooperating and empathising with their colleagues. Although one of the key aims of writing a master's thesis is for students to prove their ability to undertake independent, self-directed work, research students can benefit from discussions with their peers about their research projects. For instance, a supervisor can ask their supervisees to create a blog to pose questions, share and exchange ideas, recommend resources and reflect on the research process and thesis writing. In her study of a group of master's students at an Australian university, Johnston (1995) found that the thesis performance of many participants was negatively affected by isolation and the feeling of not being part of the university. One of the participants commented 'I miss having small groups to discuss my work with people who have the same material' (Johnston, 1995, p. 283). Johnston (1995, p. 284–285) suggested that the university should allocate some rooms to research students to meet and work together and organise a series of regular seminars open to all students and supervisors to discuss different topics such as 'Getting started', 'How to Analyze data' and 'Good writing habits'.

Dealing with insecurities

Although all the participants managed to submit their master's theses successfully, they found the process of writing a thesis a challenging and burdensome task. They articulated some issues they needed to deal with. This section discusses three main notions: (1) the 'imposter' phenomenon, (2) adjustment to a new identity as a researcher and (3) time management.

The 'impostor' phenomenon

Paltridge and Starfield (2020) suggest that postgraduate students may suffer from *imposter syndrome* while writing their research project in English. *Imposter syndrome* refers to the feelings of uncertainty, confusion and self-doubt that research students may experience (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020). Although Anglophone research students are not immune from the *imposter syndrome* (e.g. Casanave, 2019), non-native English speaking students, in particular, tend to experience it because many of them believe their theses can never be good enough or as good as those of native English speakers, especially when both native and non-native speaker students are on their course, which can lead to procrastination. That is, these students tend to associate English proficiency with intellectual ability. As Badenhorst (2010, p. 72) remarks, some students working on their research project tend to believe 'everyone else writes flawlessly the first time' and thus 'set idealistic and unreachable goals for themselves'. However, the notion of the *imposter syndrome* has been sparsely investigated in master's thesis supervision (e.g. Paltridge & Woodrow, 2012). In this research study, Irina explained how her excessive perfectionism contributed to seeking feedback from different professors and peers and hence having feelings of anxiety and inadequacy.

Extract 10:

My supervisor gave me written feedback on my literature review chapter. I was not satisfied because he said almost everything was perfect. I wanted to receive some criticism. Therefore, I asked another professor and some peers to check my draft. They also said it was fine...I kept encouraging myself and saying I'm doing well and am up to any challenge. Therefore, I left this draft as it was. (Irina, 3rd interview)

This extract reveals how Irina deployed some social and effective strategies (e.g. asking questions, cooperating with counterparts and self-talk) to reduce the passive effects of anxiety and to develop her self-confidence and self-efficacy. In this regard, Paltridge and Starfield (2020, p. 47) advise research students to remember that a degree of perfectionism is a good thing, but their research project 'doesn't need to be worthy of a Nobel prize'. Elsewhere, Paltridge and Woodrow (2012, p. 95) found that their participants who came from different non-English-speaking backgrounds (e.g. China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea and Vietnam) were seriously afraid of being 'found out' as incapable researchers while working on their dissertations in an Australian university. For example, one of Paltridge and Woodrow's (2012, p. 96) participants put it like this: 'I looked at everyone and thought to myself that I was in the company of experienced researchers; was my work good enough, would I "cut it" as a researcher? I realise now, although I didn't know it at the time, that I was suffering an acute attack of the dreadful Imposter Syndrome'.

Adjustment to the new identity of researcher

The interview data also reveal that four participants (Aizhan, Altyn, Marita and Ziyat) commented on their new identities as neophyte researchers when dealing with the new experience of writing their master's research project in English. Although they expected to receive more assistance than they received from their supervisors, they acted agentively by adopting a range of effective strategies to overcome different challenges, chiefly those of finding and accessing resources appropriate to their topics and collecting data. This is

exemplified by the following extracts taken from the experiential accounts of two participants (Altyn and Marita):

Extract 11:

During the data collection, I found that many interviewees didn't take my research seriously because I was young, and they were all experienced teachers. I wasn't very comfortable during the interviews...After collecting and analysing my data, I decided to arrange a workshop in the school to share my initial findings. I did that and most teachers, including my participants, showed interest in my research and appreciated my work. Only at that point did I feel I was a researcher. (Marita, 2nd interview)

Extract 12:

When I started writing the literature review section, I didn't know how to find the appropriate resources. I went to a librarian at our university. She showed me how to find resources from the library catalogue using keywords...Although I knew my work was not 100% high quality, I wanted to disseminate my thesis findings. I used some strategies to do this. I participated in a conference in Kyrgyzstan funded by my university. I also plan to have one article published based on my thesis. (Altyn, 3rd interview)

Extracts 11 and 12 exemplify the way in which some participants deployed effective strategies such as planning, self-monitoring and self-assessment (i.e. metacognitive strategies), asking questions and seeking help from different resources (i.e. social strategies), and encouraging themselves to disseminate the findings of their research and discussing their feelings with others (i.e. affective strategies). The same extracts also depict the attempts made by the university to enable its postgraduate students to enact their new identity as researchers by allocating funding to postgraduate students for participating in local and international conferences.

Unlike all the other participants, Adil showed his lack of clarity of the possible benefits of doing research; he confined the purpose of writing his thesis to a short-term goal related to accomplishing his master's programme successfully to meet his family members' expectation. Extract 13 explains this:

Extract 13:

I do not see myself as a researcher. I am only a student who developed some basic skills that I needed to collect and analyse the data. When I was writing my thesis, I asked myself 'what is the point of doing research if nothing is going to change?' and 'who is going to read my thesis apart from my supervisor?' I think no one...For me, my dream is to work at university and make my mother proud of me. Having a master's degree is necessary to achieve this. (Adil, 2nd interview)

Consequently, research supervisors need to help their supervisees possess long-term goals by, for example, displaying more commitment and interest in their students' work, encouraging them to pursue a topic which excited their interest and providing concrete

evidence of how the writing thesis process can present academic, professional and national benefits to a researcher.

Time management

According to Odena and Burgess (2017), time management and regular writing are necessary for thesis successful completion. Five participants (Altyn, Aizhan, Irina, Marita and Ziyat) showed a level of autonomy in using diverse metacognitive strategies to plan organise and manage their time efficiently while writing their theses. These participants showed their awareness of deadlines, balancing between study and family and/or work responsibilities and allowing sufficient time to revise their work by themselves or a proofreader. For example, Aizhan described how she set deadlines for her thesis development to make it possible for her supervisor to read several of her thesis drafts, and she revised these drafts carefully, following her supervisor's comments. She made the following comment:

Extract 14:

I have good time management skills, which helped me complete my thesis successfully. I had a clear plan with definite dates when I should complete each section of my thesis. This helped me get timely feedback from my supervisor. I said to myself 'during this week, I have to finish this section in literature review'. No matter what, I had to finish it and I did. I could not finish my thesis without giving myself deadlines and sticking to them. (Aizhan, 3rd interview)

One participant, Marita, also explained how she organised herself and submitted her work on time, creating a balance between family and/or work responsibilities along with writing her master's thesis in English. The following extract clarifies this idea.

Extract 15:

There were many responsibilities on me while writing my thesis. I was working as a part-time teacher and looking after two children. However, I have a supportive husband...He sometimes cooked for us and helped me with the children...Time management and planning in thesis writing are crucial. Therefore, I had always to write at night and during the whole weekend. (Marita, 2nd interview)

This finding seems to be inconsistent with that of Paltridge and Woodrow (2012) who described how some of their participants struggled with managing family and study responsibilities, which led to the delay of submitting their theses. For example, a participant in Paltridge and Woodrow's (2012, p. 96) study made the following comment regarding this challenge: 'the reason causes my progress moving like a snail is the duty to take care of my baby...when he's unwell I can barely have time to study'.

Surprisingly, perhaps, three out of the eight participants (Kamil, Laila and Azamat) mentioned they could not hand in their thesis work on time. Kamil ascribed this to the delay in obtaining ethics approval from the university, as his target participants were under 18 years old, and the ethics form was complicated and lengthy, without clear explanation from his supervisor or in the faculty handbook. Extract 16 illustrates this.

Extract 16:

Getting ethics approval was a bureaucratic hurdle-jumping process. It was lengthy and stressful. This is because my study involved more than minimal risks to the participants, who were secondary school students. I needed to obtain ethics approval from the University Research Ethics Committee rather than from my department...I didn't receive my supervisor's feedback on the ethics form as she was busy. I had to resubmit the form twice and waited for more than 5 weeks...All my peers collected their data before me. (Kamil, 3rd interview)

This finding was also found in Jonbekova's (2020) qualitative study examining the clumsy ethics review process in three Central Asian countries –Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In her interviews with education researchers from these countries, Jonbekova (2020) found that while research is sometimes conducted in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan without ethics approval from the researcher's institution, Kazakhstan appears more committed to the advancement of research, and the ethics review process has been recently adopted by Kazakhstani universities. Nevertheless, the participants in Jonbekova's (2020, p. 357) study described the process in Kazakhstan, as 'unnecessarily lengthy, involved too much paperwork and in some cases, even hindered the process of their research'.

Laila missed the deadline for submission, due to the level of bureaucracy involved in gaining access to schools, along with the late and negative feedback she received from her supervisor on some parts of her thesis. In addressing this point, Leila stated:

Extract 17:

I wanted to collect data from one of the gifted schools. After waiting for more than two weeks, I received a rejection letter from the school principal without any clear reason. Hence, I had no choice but to change the focus of my study... I received late feedback on my results and discussion chapters. My supervisor said that I did not answer my research questions and I had to rewrite these chapters again. I was frustrated because I thought I did a great job. There were only 20 days before the thesis submission deadline. Therefore, I asked for one-week extension and got it. I rewrote some sections of the two chapters, but I am still not satisfied with them. (Leila, 2nd interview)

This finding affirms that prompt and detailed written feedback given by supervisors on their students' work can contribute to helping students actively think, improve their written drafts and subsequently complete their thesis writing within the stipulated deadline.

As regards Adil, he claimed that he was fully responsible for not handing in his work as scheduled because he was struggling to organise himself and remained out of control for a month in the middle of the supervision period. Therefore, he was too late in sending his drafts to his supervisor and receiving the required feedback accordingly. He made the following comment:

Extract 18:

I have a problem with time management not only while writing my thesis but also in my personal life. I don't know what to do with this. If I have 5 tasks to do, I start with what I like most rather than with the urgent one. Therefore, I always have a problem

with the deadlines...I wasn't a good student. I didn't send my drafts to my supervisor timely. Therefore, I didn't get much feedback. (Adil, 3rd interview)

As a result, two participants (Leila and Adil) suggested that their department should organise thesis preparation workshops related not only to how write a research proposal but also to supervisor-supervisee expectations and time management. As Leila states:

Extract 19

The majority of my groupmates and I had very bad time-management skills. The university should run some sessions about this because writing thesis is mainly an independent task. Although we are adults, we need to be trained how to manage our time properly and meet the deadlines. (Leila, 2nd interview)

Conclusion and implications

The qualitative study reported in the current paper represented the first empirical study that uncovered the challenges and strategy uses of Asian students from Kazakhstan while working on their master's theses in a Kazakhstani EMI university. It revealed that many participants experienced feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, uncertainty and anxiety, mainly due to a dysfunctional supervisor–student relationship and poor communication. They expected and preferred a supervisor who adopted a close, prescriptive style to one's style which could be described as *Laissez faire*. Consequently, the present study underlined the importance of clarifying expectations regarding different supervisory roles and styles, and problems of miscommunication. EMI universities can organise workshops for both supervisors and their supervisees to attend, and alert students to common supervisory practices, including the expected number of face-to-face supervisory meetings with the best ways to meet deadlines and how to process and respond to supervisors' feedback. A dialogic approach, where supervisors not only give timely and detailed written feedback on completed drafts but also discuss work in progress, appears particularly effective. Student and faculty handbooks should explain the number of hours supervisors are required to spend supervising, how often they should meet supervisees, how much feedback should be provided, in what form, and when. Written feedback in particular, and supervisory feedback in general for thesis writing, are obviously areas that demand further research because student uptake of feedback can affect their writing and identity development. As Inouye and McAlpine (2017, p. 14) aptly suggest, how far research students are 'agentive in using/evaluating feedback may serve as evidence of scholarly development (increased ownership of one's work and a greater understanding of academia)'.

As shown in the present study, two participants complained about the complicated process of obtaining ethics approval or gaining access to schools for data collection, which led to procrastination and delay in submitting their theses. This dilemma largely stemmed from the research students' unfamiliarity with research ethics guidelines, lack of support from their supervisors and the bureaucratic procedures of some gatekeepers asking for too much paperwork. As Jonbekova (2020, p. 352) aptly remarks, researchers in Central Asia often encounter several ethical and methodological challenges in the process of gaining access to sites and participants, mainly due to 'a persistence of Soviet style controls, an underdeveloped research culture and use of standard research ethics guidelines'. While it

is essential for research students to obtain the necessary approval to protect their own and their participants' safety, to save time, the research ethics guidelines should be clearly laid out in faculty handbooks and a student's ethics form should be checked by their supervisor before being submitted to the University Research Ethics Committee. In addition, the university should adopt certain procedures to help research students gain access to certain sites for data collection.

In some higher education institutions, especially in the UK, postgraduate students have personal tutors assigned to them. Therefore, EMI universities can allocate or activate the role of personal tutors during the master's thesis supervision. The responsibilities of personal tutors range from academic support to deeply personal concerns. Surprisingly, perhaps, none of the previous studies on academic supervision has examined the possible mediating influence of personal tutors on research students' experiences while working on their master's theses in English. Hence, it might be argued that collaboration between academic supervisors and personal tutors during the thesis supervision process should be promoted, because it would be useful for students to receive feedback from more than one source, along with clarifying what the supervisee is entitled to expect from their supervisors with the aid of departmental guidelines outlining the supervisory policy. Personal tutors can also inform research students about the availability and importance of attending free training sessions offered by their university, especially those related to critical thinking, gathering and analysing data electronically and time management skills.

While introspective data can offer valuable insights into postgraduate students' situated and their actual use of learning strategies, care must be taken when interpreting students' experiential accounts because 'first-person accounts may not be fully accurate or complete due to the limitations of memory' (Jackson, 2017, p. 102). Therefore, when conducting the interviews, the researchers in this study checked the information against the responses given in the previous interview and carried out member checks by giving the participants transcripts of their interviews to review and asking them to indicate if they accurately represented their perceptions and experiences at each point in time. Also, it is important to note that this study only relied on a small number of Asian students from a Kazakhstan background as the research participants. Future studies which include supervisors, personal tutors and administrative staff would enrich the data base available.

Appendix 1

Prompts for Initial Essay.

Write an essay that covers the following points:

- (1) Could you please write general information about your background (e.g. your parents' job, the number of your brothers and sisters, your city/village, etc.)?
- (2) How long have you been learning English?
- (3) What about your expectations of your master's supervisor?
- (4) Which kind of support do you need most while writing a thesis?
- (5) Did you choose your supervisor?
- (6) When and how did you write your research proposal?
- (7) What are your current learning goals? What kind of activities or steps do you intend to use to achieve your goals?

Appendix 2

Indicative interview protocol

- (1) How did you choose your research topic?
- (2) Why did you use a specific methodology in your study?
- (3) Which kind of challenges did you face while writing your thesis?
- (4) How did you deal with these challenges?
- (5) Do you feel that you did well on your thesis writing? Why?
- (6) How was your relationship with your dissertation supervisor?
- (7) Were you satisfied with the feedback you received from your supervisor? Why?
- (8) What were your learning goals while writing your master's thesis?
- (9) Any person that either enhanced or deterred your learning goals?
- (10) What do you think about your own identity as a researcher and as an academic?

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