

Japanese and British Supervisors' Perceptions of Literature PhD Theses: *A Descriptive Study*

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1. Introduction

There has been rapid growth in the number of studies dealing with PhD theses or PhD supervision. A PhD thesis is acknowledged as an academic genre, more specifically, the thesis genre, across countries and languages (Swales, 1990), while writing a PhD thesis is regarded as “a most formidable task for many graduate students” (Dong, 1998, p. 369). The thesis genre has been explored from various perspectives, such as the perceptions of thesis writers and supervisors (Arabaci & Ersözlü, 2010; Belcher, 1994; Belcher & Hirvela, 2005; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Shaw, 1991), the development of thesis-writing courses and programmes (Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, & Nunan, 1998; Richards, 1988; Starfield, 2003), PhD topic selection (Hasrati & Street, 2009), and educational perspectives (Barbara & Pat, 2004; Dudley-Evans, 1988; Eley & Jennings, 2005; Franke & Arvidsson, 2011; Halse & Malfroy, 2010). Among such perspectives, supervisor perceptions have been taken into consideration in dealing with the thesis and dissertation genres in higher education and disciplinary contexts. The following paragraphs review major research findings with a focus on the perceptions of supervisors, since the present study centres on this aspect of the thesis genre.

In the US context, Samraj (2008) conducted textual analysis of the macrostructure and introductions of Master's dissertations in three disciplines (philosophy, biology, and linguistics) and interviewed supervisors in a US university. The perceptions of the supervisors in each discipline varied considerably, revealing different views on the structure of thesis introductions. The philosophy supervisor identified a problem-solving pattern as a discipline-specific macrostructure, whereas two biology supervisors described a schematic structure similar to Swales' (1990) *Create a Research Space* (CARS) model, which consists of three moves, namely, *establishing a territory*, *establishing a niche*, and *occupying the niche*.

In contrast, three supervisors in linguistics showed intradepartmental variation in their perceptions of thesis introductions. In another study with a focus on the field of science, Dong (1998) conducted an interview-based survey in two universities, involving 137 non-native graduate students and 32 supervisors from 23 departments. She described that a successful thesis or dissertation requires that students acquire not only substantial genre and disciplinary knowledge, but also highly developed writing skills.

In the UK context, Thompson (1999, 2001) explored perceptions of PhD supervisors in agricultural botany and agricultural and food economics. Supervisors in agricultural botany viewed the PhD thesis as a report and regarded the Introduction-Method-Result-Discussion format as a fundamental macrostructure of a thesis in this discipline. On the other hand, supervisors in agricultural and food economics perceived the nature of a thesis to be an argument without any particular view on a conventional macrostructure in their discipline. These differences in supervisor perceptions seem to be related to disciplinary culture and departmental thesis-writing norms.

Despite this existing research on the thesis genre, the majority of such work has been carried out with a focus on departments and institutions in English-speaking countries. Consequently, perceptions of PhD supervisors in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts remain unexplored (Ono, 2012, 2014). Moreover, no published research has focused on the perceptions of Japanese supervisors of the thesis genre in the Japanese context. While supervisor perceptions in the fields of science and social science have been investigated, those in the humanities, especially in literature departments, need more research. Furthermore, to my knowledge, cross-cultural comparisons have not been made in terms of such perceptions of supervisors in the field of literature, despite the importance of this topic in higher education.

Although the perceptions of supervisors of humanities theses need more research, features of humanities PhD theses have been documented by Parry (1998), who examined 12 PhD theses in various disciplines in Australian universities in terms of “structure of argument, forms of citation and acknowledgement, and the tacit expression of discipline-specific knowledge” (p. 276). An overview of findings concerning humanities theses is shown in Table 1.

In humanities discourse, individuality is a central characteristic wherein concepts and phenomena are interpreted from thesis writers’ own perspectives in making arguments.

Table 1 *Language Features of Humanities PhD Theses*

Criterion	Language features
Focus of the discipline	To provide an individual interpretation of the world of human experiences.
Focus of the thesis	To argue for an individual interpretation. To provide new insights.
Structures	Argument with recounting and narrative.
Characteristics of the language	Highly metaphorical and abstract. Information is read metaphorically. The emphasis is on interpretation and argument.
Structure of argument	Strong hortatory argument that argues for one's own interpretation. Intellectual fashions substitute for paradigms; paradigms are individualistic. Footnoting is a qualifying and contextualising device.
Paragraph structure	Long paragraphs (often one page or more) with a mixture of linking patterns depending on purpose. This purpose may shift within the paragraph.
Reference to existing authors and research	Explicit but infrequent. The degree of appraisal varies. Range from harsh (philosophy) to considerate (history). Form of referencing mainly footnoting. Information or source focus, depends on the field.
Clausal relationships	Complex sentences with many clauses, using colloquialisms that create a literate, spoken language.

Note. Adapted from Parry (1998, p. 297).

Arguments are presented in a recounting or narrative style, which is a typical linguistic feature in humanities writing.

The present study, which is part of a larger study, aims to compare perceptions of Japanese and British supervisors regarding literature PhD theses in Japan and the UK cross-culturally. This study centres on PhD supervisors who are involved in thesis-writing processes as supervisory board members because their role and decisions are important at each stage of writing a PhD thesis and understanding their perceptions is crucial for thesis writers to write successfully. Supervisors' views on literature PhD theses are revealed with a focus on introductory chapters, since an introduction is one of the most important and difficult genres in academic discourse (Swales, 1990). This study defines a 'thesis' as a text "written for the research degrees of Ph.D. and M.Phil., while a much shorter 'dissertation' is one of the final requirements for a taught Master's degree" (Bunton, 2002, p. 75).

Two research questions (RQs) were established in this study:

RQ1. What constitutes a good literature PhD thesis according to Japanese and British supervisors?

RQ2. What kinds of difficulties are associated with the writing of an introductory chapter of a literature thesis according to Japanese and British supervisors?

2. Methods

2.1 Selection Criteria so as to Study Comparable Departments

Selecting comparable departments is essential since building up comparable corpora is the key for cross-cultural research (Moreno, 2008). Coverage of a wide range of literature studies, such as national literature (i.e., English literature in England), international literature, and comparative literature, was viewed as a major feature of a target department in finding comparable departments for cross-cultural and intra-cultural comparisons in this study. In order to select comparable departments, the following criteria were considered: the size of the department, the number of students, the time when the university was founded, and the academic rank of the department. Ranks of British universities and departments are determined using the nationally established ranking system in the UK called the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)¹⁾. RAE shows the quality of the research output as the academic level of departments and universities. In this regard, three comparable departments were selected from the UK: the Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex, the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick, and the School of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia (UEA). As counterparts, Japanese universities that had doctoral programmes in literature studies and that dealt with a wide range of national and international literature were selected. The two departments selected were the Doctoral Programme in Literature and Linguistics at the University of Tsukuba and the Doctoral Programmes in Japanese, Asian, European, and American Studies at the University of Tokyo. These two Japanese universities were originally established as national universities and they are currently under the remit of the National University Corporation, which establishes and runs national universities under the National University Corporation

Law.

2.2 Doctoral Research Guidance and Procedures

Thesis-writing procedures and guidance varied among the two selected doctoral programmes in Japan and literature departments in the UK. Using information obtained from university websites or handbooks, guidelines regarding doctoral studies and arrangements for PhD supervision are described below.

PhD theses in Japanese universities are classified into two categories, depending on the status of the author of the thesis. One is a PhD thesis written by a student author and the other type is written by a non-student author (Niibori, 2002). The latter type of thesis is usually written by academics who already teach at university. Although both groups are required to pass a viva (i.e., *oral defense* in the US context) at the end of the thesis-writing process, they write a PhD thesis under somewhat different conditions following different procedures. In general, the student author group tends to have more formal and structured supervision, whereas the non-student author group seems to receive less supervision, which is also less formal. Furthermore, the doctoral degrees awarded to the two groups differ. The student author receives a PhD degree called *katei hakase* or *katei hakushi* (課程博士), whereas the non-student author is awarded a *ronbun hakase* or *ronbun hakushi* (論文博士), indicating that the two types of degree are equivalent in value (Niibori, 2002). Since the focus of this study is on theses written by PhD students, only student author theses are focused on here.

The system of doctoral programmes in Japanese universities is more similar to the American higher education system than the British one. In Japan, the period of study for a PhD is normally five years of an integrated programme, within which both MA and PhD are obtained. Therefore, students in the programme are required to write an MA dissertation within the first two years and a PhD thesis in the last three. In Japanese theses, the number of pages tends to be taken into consideration rather than the number of characters. As for supervision, a Japanese PhD candidate normally has a supervisor and at least two vice-supervisors, who are included in the committee for supervision. The supervisor is selected from the same department as that to which the candidate belongs, whilst the vice-supervisor can be chosen from another department at the same university, depending on the subject matter of the thesis and the candidate's need. The Japanese

system has formal meetings, which have a similar function to supervisory board meetings in the British system. The committee members are responsible for organising meetings with the candidate. The oral examination in Japan tends to be ‘open’ and ‘public’, where an audience from the same or other departments can participate. Doctoral programmes or graduate schools in Japan require the publication of papers as one of the conditions for thesis submission, whereas the British departments do not require PhD students to publish a certain number of papers before the submission of a thesis, although it might be encouraged.

A doctorate at British universities, on the other hand, traditionally requires “three years of independent research” (Murray, 2002, p. 28), which is considered supervised research. In addition to a mainstream PhD, some universities or departments offer an integrated ‘new route PhD’, which is a four-year programme, consisting of a Master’s of Philosophy or Master’s of Research integral to the PhD in the same department. When the student pursues a PhD part-time, it lasts five years at the University of Warwick, while it takes six years at the University of Essex and UEA. All PhD candidates in the three departments are registered for an MPhil at the beginning of their doctoral study. Their PhD status is confirmed by a supervisory board or a panel at the end of the first year or at the beginning of the second year by a confirmation board or a transfer panel. With regard to the length of the PhD thesis, students at Essex and Warwick are required to write a thesis of no more than 80,000 words, excluding footnotes and the bibliography. In contrast, a thesis submitted at UEA must be no more than 100,000 words, excluding the bibliography. As for supervision, a supervisory board or committee that consists of the supervisor and two other members of academic staff is arranged for every PhD student. The term *supervisor*, which is commonly used in British universities, refers to a professional academic staff member who plays a primary role in supervising a PhD thesis and has a responsibility to deal with both general and specific matters about the thesis and the candidate. In some cases, co-supervision is favoured when the subject matter of a PhD thesis is interdisciplinary and two supervisors are required from the same or different departments. The supervisory board is obliged to hold a meeting with a full-time student twice every year and with a part-time student once every year. In these meetings, one of the board members plays a role as the chair and is responsible for keeping a record of the student’s research progress and issues arising in the thesis-writing process. After writing a

thesis, an oral examination, called a *viva*, takes place. The thesis is examined by two examiners, one internal and one external. The internal examiner is chosen from the institution where the candidate is enrolled and the external examiner, selected from another institution, is normally responsible for making a final decision regarding the assessment. The supervisor is not allowed to be his/her own student's internal examiner, although the supervisor is allowed to attend the viva in a passive role at some universities or departments: "There also may be a senior academic from the home university present who acts as chair and is there to make sure that no unseemly wrangles or hostilities break out" (Swales, 2004, p. 145). The viva can be seen as 'closed' and 'private', since it is not open to the public and attendance is restricted to the candidate and internal and external examiners.

2.3 Interviews

In this study, semi-structured interviews were applied since they were considered most appropriate in this context to compare supervisors' perceptions in different groups and to explore their views on literature PhD theses, as this type of interview has flexibility, to some degree, in terms of the format, style, and order of interview questions. As for interview informants, members of academia who had been involved in thesis-writing contexts as a supervisor as well as an examiner were selected from the Japanese and British universities in order to investigate their perceptions of literature PhD theses. Five criteria were established for selecting the interview informants: (1) experience as a supervisor or a vice-supervisor (more than five theses to completion); (2) experience as an internal examiner or an external examiner (more than five theses); (3) experience teaching in higher education in Japan or the UK; (4) educational background (MA and/or PhD degrees obtained in Japan or the UK); and (5) nationality (ideally Japanese or British). These criteria are arranged in decreasing order of importance.

The interview schedule for this study was established on the basis of Samraj's (2008) and Thompson's (2001) studies, since the foci of their studies were similar to that of this study, namely, investigating rhetorical structure in the thesis and dissertation genre and the perceptions of supervisors. The interview schedule consisted of the following four parts: (1) academic experience; (2) overall organisation of literature PhD theses; (3) abstracts; and (4) introductory chapters. The first category explored the interviewees' experiences as

supervisors and examiners, whereas the second part concerned the length of a thesis, the thesis macrostructure, the number of chapters, the writing support students receive, and supervisors' feedback. Regarding thesis abstracts, the interview schedule investigated elements to be contained in the abstract and the order of these elements. The fourth part concentrated on introductory chapters of PhD theses by eliciting interviewees' conceptions of a good introduction, elements to be included in the introductory chapter, and the order of these components. Among a series of questions, this study particularly deals with the following three questions:

- What constitutes a good or a poor thesis in your discipline?
- Which chapter causes most problems for students, in your experience? What about the introduction?
- What sorts of problems do students encounter when writing an introductory chapter?

In total, seven Japanese supervisors (Tsukuba: $n = 5$; Tokyo: $n = 2$) and ten British supervisors (Essex: $n = 6$; Warwick: $n = 3$; UEA: $n = 1$) were interviewed (see Appendix for profiles of the interviewees). All the Japanese supervisors were native speakers of Japanese, whereas seven out of ten British supervisors were native speakers of English, whose nationality was British. Of the other three, two supervisors were from other English-speaking countries and one academic was a European who had obtained a PhD at a British university. All of the interviews were audio-recorded after obtaining permission from the subjects.

The Japanese and British supervisors' perceptions of what constitutes good literature PhD theses were categorised into ten aspects: (a) originality and contribution, (b) subject matter and core question, (c) literature review and the identification of debates, (d) argumentation, (e) presentation, (f) comprehending literary works, (g) methods and approaches, (h) writer-centred statements, (i) knowledge, and (j) structure. Each of these aspects was further analysed by focusing on which aspects were emphasised by the Japanese and British supervisors. In addition, supervisors' views on problems and difficulties that thesis writers encounter when writing introductory chapters were analysed using the following six aspects: (a) survey and review previous studies, (b) indicating a gap in existing research, (c) argumentation, (d) reading and interpreting literary works,

(e) identifying the core issue, and (f) readers' expectations.

3. Findings

The following sections first focus on the supervisors' perceptions of what constitutes a good literature PhD thesis. Then, their views on problems and difficulties associated with writing an introductory chapter are explored. When referring to individual responses, codes are used to indicate Japanese or British universities as follows: JTS = Japanese/Tsukuba, JTO = Japanese/Tokyo, BE = British/Essex, BW = British/Warwick, and BU = British/UEA.

3.1 Conception of a Good Literature PhD Thesis

The Japanese and British supervisors varied in their views of what constitutes a good literature PhD thesis. Among ten elements identified by the supervisors, some were regarded as important by both groups of supervisors, while other elements were stressed by either Japanese or British supervisors. The wide variation of elements pointed out by the supervisors indicates that a good thesis is produced through successful realisation of multiple elements. The findings are summarised in Table 2, showing both cross-cultural similarities and differences. The following paragraphs detail each of the findings, by presenting the interviewees' views on each element.

3.1.1 Cross-Cultural Similarities

Both Japanese and British supervisors considered five aspects to be important elements for a good literature thesis: (a) originality and contribution; (b) subject matter and core question; (c) literature review and the identification of debates; (d) argumentation; and (e) presentation.

(a) *Originality and Contribution*

The most common response was associated with originality and contribution. A total of 14 out of 17 supervisors, six Japanese and eight British, considered this element essential. BW1 asserted that a good thesis is "*an original piece of research which adds something to what we know*", which indicates that originality and contribution are seen as

Table 2 *Elements of Good Literature PhD Theses*

Cross-cultural similarities		Cross-cultural differences	
		Japanese supervisors only	British supervisors only
Elements perceived	(a) originality and contribution	(f) comprehending	(g) methods and approaches
	(b) subject matter and core question	literary works	(h) writer-centred statements
	(c) literature review and the identification of debates		(i) knowledge
	(d) argumentation		(j) structure
	(e) presentation		

being of value for research. The 14 supervisors individually emphasised different aspects of originality, and the Japanese and British supervisors also seemed to place emphasis on different aspects of this concept. The Japanese group often spoke of outcomes and the writer's contribution regarding findings and his/her opinions and argument, whereas the British group tended to mention the research topic, methodology, and materials. This subtle distinction between the two groups may indicate that the Japanese supervisors tended to pay attention to product-related aspects in identifying originality and contribution in literature PhD theses, whereas the British supervisors focused on process-related aspects. For instance, originality can be viewed in terms of a research topic, as in BW2's observation that "*a good thesis is one that investigates a new area*". Another area where a thesis can show its originality is by investigating "*primary material which has been looked up before but tak[ing] a new approach*" (BW2). Materials to be investigated including "*original archival work*" (BE5) are also viewed as an original aspect of research. BE4, for example, stated that "*a good thesis... actually researches completely new material*".

On the other hand, Japanese supervisors tended to focus on outcomes of the study as originality, except for JTS1, who focused on both process-related (i.e., methodological procedures, materials) and product-related (i.e., findings) aspects of originality. JTS5 assumed that "*it is better if a thesis has new findings which are absolutely its own*". Japanese supervisors also emphasised the writer's contribution in terms of his/her own opinions regarding the subject matter. The writer's argument can also be regarded as originality.

繋ぎ方っていうんですね。例えば、ある作品を論じるのに、何を持ってくるかっていう、そういう関係性の作り方の新しさとかそういうのもあると思いますし。(JTO2)

[It is a matter of argumentation, I guess. For example, in order to discuss a certain work, I think, what material the writer brings into his/her argumentation, in other words, how to make the connection between a literary work and materials, is also viewed as novelty.]

Importantly, originality is not always seen as either present or absent, but rather as a quality that is present in degrees. BE1 referred to different degrees of originality as a factor in differentiating an excellent thesis from an ordinary one. The exact level of originality may not be measurable, but the degree of originality seems to affect the assessment of the thesis.

(b) *Subject Matter and Core Question*

Six supervisors, one Japanese and five British, considered the selection of good subject matter to be important. Both groups of supervisors indicated that the writer should choose good subject matter to which to dedicate him/herself, justify the choice of research subject, and formulate a clear question that leads to the thesis. The selection of a good research subject is considered to be central to PhD theses.

問題設定が魅力的であるっていうことが大きいですね。つまり、なぜその論文を書く必要があるのかってことが自明の前提になっていない。(JTO1)

[It is crucial to set up an attractive subject. In other words, the reason why the writer needs to write a thesis on the subject is not a self-evident assumption.]

JTO1 emphasised the importance of justifying the necessity of research on the selected topic. This may be because the value of addressing a particular topic is not always clear to examiners and readers, without an explicit justification of the study. What makes a topic appropriate for a thesis is considered in relation to the writer's attitude towards the study. For instance, BU1 states that "*students need to have a subject which they are strongly committed to, which is serious to them, and I think it applies to all kinds of theses*". Some supervisors believed that whether the writer has "*a good core of questions*" (BW1) that orient his/her research or whether the writer "*open[s] up a field by asking new questions*" (BE6) is a central factor affecting the quality of a thesis.

(c) *Literature Review and the Identification of Debates*

Although both groups of supervisors stressed the importance of reviewing previous work on the topic, they differed in terms of their focus on the functional aspect of reviewing the literature. The Japanese group referred to a thorough review of previous studies in the field, whereas the British group stressed the identification of important debates and taking a stand on them. Four Japanese and three British supervisors identified the importance of reviewing previous research for writing a good thesis.

The Japanese supervisors seemed to consider that it is necessary to cite a sufficient number of previous studies in the literature review, ranging from less to more relevant research.

先行研究を全部見なきゃ…先行研究をしっかりピックアップして読むということでしょうかね。(JTS5)

[All of the previous studies should be read... They need to be picked up thoroughly and read.]

The British supervisors, in contrast, perceived that the literature review should not only report or review previous research, but also identify arguments and debates in the literature that are relevant to particular subjects students are writing about. BE4 emphasised that “*a good thesis... has not only familiarity with critical debates in the field, but also creatively engages with them*”.

(d) *Argumentation*

Considering argumentation as an important element for a good thesis, two Japanese and six British supervisors perceived that a good thesis has clear and effective arguments regardless of the subject matter. In the Japanese group, JTS1 focused on consistency in argumentation, where many new findings are expected to be present.

論旨が一貫している上に、発見に富んでいるものっていうのが良い論文かな。(JTS1)

[I think a good thesis is full of discoveries, in addition to consistent arguments.]

The British supervisors stated that a good PhD thesis has “*a strong and clear argument*”

(BW2) and it should be “*cogent*” and “*suitably eloquent*” (BW1). BE5 also stressed that “*a kind of conceptual command of the argument*” is essential in order to argue well in the thesis. As illustrated above, the content and quality of arguments seem to play a vital role in writing a good thesis, where arguments were often considered together with an effective presentation.

(e) *Presentation*

Effective presentation was considered to be an important factor for a good thesis by one Japanese and five British supervisors. Both groups of supervisors identified that a thesis should be “*well presented by marshalling its material*” (BW2) and reader-friendly by having a successful presentation of arguments and a good command of writing. From a reader’s point of view, JTO1 emphasised the importance of presentation and style of writing in the thesis in order to engage and direct readers while they are reading the whole thesis. JTO1 acknowledged that good presentation and language skills are required in a good thesis, where arguments are displayed in a well-informed way.

3.1.2 Aspects of Good Theses Considered by Japanese Supervisors Only

Only two Japanese supervisors stressed (f) comprehending literary works as an important element in order for thesis writers to make an appropriate and effective argument. They believed that thesis writers should fully digest what they have read, regardless of the language used in the target literature. This process was recognised as a fundamental step in writing a thesis.

文学の場合ですと、原典となる文学作品の読み込みがしっかりしているというのは言うまでもないですね。(JTS4)

[In cases of literature, it is crucial that a thesis writer is fully capable of comprehending the original text of literary works.]

The thesis writer’s reading comprehension of literary works in a foreign language was also considered essential. Both JTS4 and JTO2 highlighted the importance of digesting the original text accurately. In JTO2’s department, thesis writers are asked to submit a piece of writing together with the original text written in a foreign language, which they refer to, so

that supervisors can check whether they understood and interpreted the original text appropriately. This scrupulous process suggests that not only JTO2 but also other supervisors in the same department consider digesting literary works crucial for writing a good thesis.

Thesis writers' careful attention to literary works seems to be related to the particular discipline of this research. JTO2 explained the different attitudes towards texts between social science and humanities. JTO2 felt that a particular focus on texts and detailed examinations of texts required in the field of literature are not necessarily crucial in theses in other disciplines. Owing to the nature of the field, the Japanese supervisors perceived that high levels of language ability are required when thesis writers deal with the target literature, particularly when writing about literary works in a foreign language.

3.1.3 Aspects of Good Theses Emphasised by British Supervisors Only

Only British supervisors focused on the aspects of (g) methods and approaches, (h) writer-centred statements, (i) knowledge, and (j) structure in considering elements of good theses.

(g) *Methods and Approaches*

Five British supervisors considered that methodology is an important aspect of a good thesis, particularly knowledge of methodologies and sources used in research. Given the fact that the British supervisors placed emphasis on methodological issues as an aspect of originality, overall, they placed considerable focus on methodology compared with the Japanese ones. The strong relationship between questions to be addressed and methods to be used was highlighted by BU1, who said that “*a good thesis... has a clearly articulated method or approach for addressing those questions*”. BU1's view suggests that a method or approach to be employed in the thesis needs to be justified clearly in relation to a selected question or subject. Similarly, BW1 expected theses to be “*methodologically sound*” and thesis writers to demonstrate their awareness and a mastery of materials involved in their theses.

(h) *Writer-Centred Statements*

Only two British supervisors referred to writer-centred statements. The expressed

ideas about the appropriateness of writer-centred statements varied among the individual supervisors. BE4 viewed inclusion of writer-related expressions as interesting and valuable, particularly in explaining how the thesis writer's background relates to his/her chosen topic or material. BE4 also believed in the necessity of such statements in some cases, where the thesis writer needs to provide background information regarding his/her personal or cultural circumstances in order to situate the study.

It's always very interesting to find out where the writer is coming from and cultural origins, why that meeting takes place with the material and the writer... because obviously a PhD thesis is such a massive undertaking in terms of its actual length and the duration of the research, so he always has to sort of resume some personal level. (BE4)

With regard to writer-centred statements, BE6 demonstrated a preference for using personal pronouns in the thesis genre, saying that *"I like subjective 'I' first person. So, I feel there is a real person as a writer, not a machine or some kind writing a dissertation"* (BE6). However, BE6 noted that supervisors varied in their preference for the use of personal pronouns and that *"there is a tradition that people don't use first person"* (BE6) in literature theses.

(i) *Knowledge*

Half of the British supervisors (five out of ten) emphasised the importance of knowledge display in the thesis. They considered that it is crucial for the thesis to present adequate knowledge of a subject, materials, and field, which is viewed as intellectual content. BE2 stated that a good thesis *"demonstrates a mastery of the field"* and BE1 expected thesis writers to *"have a fair knowledge of all the relevant material"*. Unlike the British supervisors, no Japanese supervisors claimed that knowledge-related aspects are essential for a good literature thesis.

(j) *Structure*

While five British supervisors considered the structure as an essential element of good theses, none of the Japanese supervisors mentioned it. BW1 explained how knowledge and materials used should be organised in arguments.

People arrive with a very good idea and the crunch is whether they can organise less coherent materials and show both the breadth of their knowledge but also their ability to organise their thought and to organise research in a coherent way, which finds a structured line and a structured argument. (BW1)

Similarly, other British supervisors regarded that a good thesis has a “tidy structure” (BE4) and a “sensible structure” (BE1), since the successful demonstration of knowledge does not only rely on good ideas but also requires an appropriate structure.

3.2 Difficulties in Writing an Introductory Chapter

3.2.1 Different Degrees of Difficulty in Writing an Introductory Chapter

The Japanese and British supervisors revealed varying perceptions of the difficulty in writing an introductory chapter. A total of nine out of 17 supervisors, three Japanese and six British, viewed the introductory chapter as the most difficult chapter to write based on their experience of supervision. However, one Japanese and four British supervisors stated that the difficulty depends on the individual and not every thesis writer finds it difficult. Discipline-related thesis-writing difficulties were recognised in terms of general conventions and methodologies. BE6 perceived that humanities theses are less conventional and traditions are not necessarily explicit and easy to follow, compared with scientific disciplines.

It's less difficult for more scientifically shaped subjects, if it has some conventions and traditions which will guide you. I think humanities subjects which are much more open and conventions are much less explicit, I think that is more difficult there. (BE6)

BE6's view implies that there are different perceptions in humanities subjects compared with those in the sciences or social sciences in terms of general thesis-writing conventions.

Another discipline-specific difficulty was suggested by BW1 concerning methodological procedures and variations in literature research where different methodologies are brought in from multiple disciplinary fields and different approaches are reconciled. This view on interdisciplinary research is consistent with Turner's (2003) study, which found research in the field of literature to be interdisciplinary, wherein

Table 3 *Aspects of Difficulties with Writing an Introductory Chapter*

	Cross-cultural similarities	Cross-cultural differences	
		Japanese supervisors only	British supervisors only
Aspects perceived	(a) survey and review of previous literature	(f) comprehending literary works	(h) readers' expectations
	(b) indicating a gap in existing research	(g) stating the value of the research	
	(c) identifying the core issue in the thesis		
	(d) argumentation		
	(e) process of writing introductory chapter		

theories and methods from other disciplines are often incorporated.

3.2.2 Difficulties Identified by Japanese and British Supervisors

The Japanese and British supervisors identified a variety of difficulties that thesis writers come across when writing an introductory chapter. Table 3 shows cross-cultural similarities and differences in this regard.

Both Japanese and British supervisors highlighted issues regarding (a) the survey and review of previous literature, (b) indicating a gap in existing research, (c) identifying the core issue in the thesis, (d) argumentation, and (e) the process of writing and revising an introductory chapter. Cross-cultural differences were revealed in that the Japanese supervisors focused more on (f) comprehending literary works as well as on (g) stating the value of the research, while the British supervisors placed more emphasis on considering (h) readers' perceptions.

(a) *Survey and Review Previous Studies*

Two British (BW1 and BW2) and one Japanese (JTS2) supervisors viewed the literature survey and review of previous research, which is part of writing an introductory chapter, as being challenging for thesis writers.

I think students really struggle with writing a literature review in their first year, but it's

an important exercise because it's the way of identifying their own approach... And I think students find it really really hard to survey the whole field and position themselves within it. (BW2)

BW1 also mentioned the difficulty of the literature survey due to its time-consuming nature and critical perspectives required in order to evaluate the relatedness of previous studies to the thesis writer's research.

JTS2 perceived that the difficulty of the literature survey for an introduction is occasionally caused by limited resources available in the field. When the subject matter of a thesis is not well known or the field of research is not well established, a survey of previous literature becomes more challenging. The degree of difficulty in conducting a literature survey and writing the literature review within the introduction may vary from thesis to thesis, depending on the subject matter and the chosen field.

(b) *Indicating a Gap in Existing Research*

Supervisors from both groups (one Japanese and one British) viewed identifying a gap between previous literature and the present study as being difficult. Both BW2 and JTS4 similarly considered a common mistake that often occurs when thesis writers specify a niche for their own study. BW2 pointed out their common problem of an insufficient literature review in order to establish a niche in the introduction. JTS4 stressed that the introduction should clearly establish a research space for discussion to be argued substantively in relation to previous studies. This perception that thesis writers should create their own research space suggests that it is crucial for thesis writers to overview the field effectively (Move 1) and state an aim or argument of their own study (Move 3) in order to make a gap (Move 2) (Swales, 1990, 2004).

(c) *Identifying the Core Issue*

One Japanese (JTS2) and two British (BE5 and BW3) supervisors regarded identifying the main issue of the thesis as difficult. JTS2 and BW3 considered that thesis writers have difficulty conceptualising and clarifying the thesis subject from a broader perspective, which is more likely to happen at the initial stage of research and near the end of the thesis-writing process. BW3 said that “*students have to answer the question of what is*

my thesis about. That's quite hard for them". Similarly, BE5 perceived that identifying the core issue in the thesis is challenging for thesis writers as the focus needs to be clear and the scope of the issue ought to be appropriate for the PhD project.

(d) *Argumentation*

Three Japanese (JTS4, JTS5, and JTO1) and one British (BE2) supervisors regarded making a clear argument as one of the major difficulties for thesis writers. They considered that a lack of clarification and articulation of arguments results in a poor thesis. JTS5 and BE2 referred to the difficulty of synthesising arguments in the thesis, where, they suggested, the degree of difficulty "*depends on students' ability*" (BE2) and not all students struggle with synthesis. JTO1 discussed a common tendency of writers to struggle with clear arguments on the main target of research. Thesis writers' challenge seems to be finding a new perspective or material in order to make their own argument when dealing with a well-established field or a well-known topic.

(e) *The Process of Writing an Introduction*

Both Japanese (JTO2) and British (BE1) supervisors identified the difficulty related to the recursive and intricate process of writing an introductory chapter. They noted that thesis writers "*always have to go back and adjust the introduction at the end to make sure it is introducing what you have written*" (BE1). Supervisors' views on the process of writing an introductory chapter varied to some extent. Three out of seven Japanese (JTS2, JTS5, and JTO2) and all of the ten British supervisors considered that an introductory chapter should be written "*to finish the thesis*" (BU1) after the other chapters are complete. This understanding seems to be cross-culturally and intra-culturally shared across the British departments. Among the 13 supervisors who mentioned the process of writing an introduction, one Japanese (JTO2) and four British (BE1, BE4, BE5, and BW2) stated that the introductory chapter needs to be drafted at the beginning to "*identify their own approach*" (BW2). In line with the process of writing a thesis, three British supervisors (BE2, BE3, and BU1) identified a general difficulty of 'getting started' in thesis and dissertation writing. BE3 believed that this difficulty occurs because of thesis writers' unclear vision of the whole project and the research process at the beginning of research.

(f) *Comprehending Literary Works*

Only one Japanese supervisor (JTO2) mentioned a difficulty in relation to the process of reading and digesting literary works. This is a fundamental task for literature research and one of the first steps for a successful thesis, since arguments are developed based on what has been read and interpreted. JTO2 pointed out that accurate reading and understanding of primary texts is challenging for thesis writers, especially when they are written in a foreign language. At the same time, JTO2 emphasised a vital role of the reading and interpreting stage, as it affects the quality of the entire research.

(g) *Stating the Value of the Research*

Only one Japanese supervisor mentioned stating the value of the research as a difficulty. JTS1 considered that this is the only component with which the majority of thesis writers struggle in writing an introductory chapter. JTS1 believed that this difficulty has to do with their lack of clear recognition of their significant achievements in their theses, which requires a broad perspective by evaluating their contribution to the related field. JTS1 stressed the importance of the value statement and claimed that it should be provided clearly both in the introduction and in the conclusion in order to ‘sell’ the research.

(h) *Readers’ Expectations*

Only two British supervisors (BW1 and BE4) reckoned that considering readers’ perceptions is a challenge for thesis writers. BW1 considered it crucial to have a clear picture of readers and to determine carefully the appropriate level of detail to be included in an introductory chapter in order to match readers’ probable level of knowledge.

PhD level’s particular difficulty is to identify who your readers are, who you are writing it for. And therefore, the introduction has to set the tone of the whole thing. And you’ve always got the sense of what is too obvious and shouldn’t be said, and what is, on the other hand, leaving out too much. (BW1)

On the other hand, BE4 asserted that the difficulty of anticipating readers’ perceptions comes from the nature of the introduction, since “*it’s the first contact with the reader, that’s*

something that students find difficult to negotiate”.

Among the eight aspects of difficulties discussed above, some refer to the process prior to the actual writing, which covers (a) the survey of previous studies and (f) comprehending literary works. On the other hand, other aspects are more directly related to the actual writing of an introductory chapter, namely, (b) indicating a gap in existing research, (d) argumentation, and (e) the process of writing an introduction. The difficulties regarding (c) the identification of the core question, (g) stating the value of the research, and (h) addressing readers' expectations are associated with the entire process of conducting research, which seems to affect the approach to writing an introductory chapter, as well as the whole thesis.

4. Discussion

The perceptions of Japanese and British supervisors have been investigated in terms of what constitutes a good literature PhD thesis and the difficulties of writing an introductory chapter. As for RQ1, the two groups of supervisors shared cross-culturally similar perceptions about what constitutes a good literature thesis. These views shared across the discipline indicate that supervisors of literature theses belong to the same “discourse community” (Swales, 1990) across institutions and countries. Among the ten aspects identified, the element of originality and contribution was highlighted most by both groups of supervisors, which indicates that this aspect is vital for a successful thesis, regardless of language and institution. On the other hand, cross-cultural differences were revealed in that only Japanese supervisors were concerned with the comprehension of literary works, while only the British supervisors emphasised the other four aspects, namely, methods and approaches, writer-centred statements, knowledge, and structure, as concepts required for a good literature thesis. The fact that five British supervisors stressed the importance of thesis structure, whereas none of the Japanese supervisors did so, implies that British supervisors pay considerably more attention to the overall structure of the thesis and the structure of each chapter than do Japanese supervisors when supervising and reading theses.

As for RQ2, nine out of 17 supervisors viewed writing an introductory chapter as the most difficult among the chapters in a thesis. This finding supports Swales' (1990, 2004)

view that writing an introduction is challenging. In fact, the Japanese and British supervisors identified various challenges that thesis writers encounter at different stages of writing an introductory chapter. Cross-culturally similar views were identified in terms of difficulties concerning (a) the survey and review of previous literature, (b) indicating a gap in existing research, (c) identifying the core issue in the thesis, (d) argumentation, and (e) the process of writing an introduction. On the other hand, cross-culturally different perceptions were found in that only the Japanese supervisors emphasised (f) comprehending literary works and (g) stating the value of the research, while only the British supervisors addressed (h) readers' expectations.

Interestingly, this study found a connection between the supervisors' views on what constitutes a good literature thesis and difficulties of writing an introductory chapter; specifically, both groups of supervisors considered that the following four aspects are associated with a good thesis as well as the difficulty of writing an introductory chapter: original contribution, subject matter and core question, the identification of debates in literature, and argumentation. This finding suggests that good literature theses are produced when thesis writers conquer these difficulties. Moreover, these four aspects are not necessarily unique to literature PhD theses. Rather, they seem to be common in humanities thesis writing where individuality and argument play a vital role, as Parry (1998, p. 297) recognises a prominent feature of humanities discourse to be argument for "an individual interpretation" and "new insights".

Furthermore, the present study obtained new insights into genre research in that literature supervisors identified particular elements that constitute the CARS model (Swales, 1990, 2004) and the revised CARS model (Bunton, 2002), for instance, reviewing previous literature, indicating a gap in existing research, methods and approaches, and stating the value of the research. This finding is in line with the results of Samraj's (2008) study, which reported that supervisors of MSc dissertations in the field of biology recognised a schematic structure similar to the CARS model. These findings imply that the thesis genre shares certain rhetorical conventions across disciplines and languages.

This study has two pedagogical implications. First, with regard to genre and disciplinary knowledge construction, supervisors are encouraged to explain features of literature theses and their expectations by referring to the features exhibited by good literature theses and the genre structure. This can be achieved through one-to-one

consultation or in a group consultation, such as a seminar. Supervisors may also recommend several good literature theses as models, so that writers can learn by reading them. Second, with regard to individuality, supervisors need to understand individual writers' problems and concerns regarding the writing of a thesis in the field of literature. They are expected to offer different advice or solutions directly or indirectly and adjust them flexibly, depending on individual theses and individual writers' situations and needs. In so doing, individuality should not be neglected in the writing and supervision of literature PhD theses, since it exists at different stages of writing and supervision to varying degrees, not only cross-culturally, but also within the same discipline, department, and institution.

NOTES

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1) This is now called the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

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Appendix

Profiles of the Japanese and British Supervisors Interviewed

Country	University	Informants	Position	Gender	Nationality	Ph.D.	Work experience at the current university (years)	No. of Ph.D. theses supervised to completion		No. of Ph.D. theses supervised to completion in the last 5 years		No. of current supervisees		No. of Ph.D. theses examined	
								as a supervisor	as a non-supervisor	as a supervisor	as a non-supervisor			as an internal examiner	as an external examiner
Japan	Tsukuba	JTS1	Prof.	F	Japanese	Japan	20	2	8	2	6	6	10	10	0
		JTS2	Prof.	M	Japanese	Japan	21	5	10	3	4	1	15	15	0
		JTS3	Prof.	F	Japanese	Japan	18	2	35	2	15	0	37	37	0
		JTS4	Prof.	M	Japanese	Japan	16	0	20	no data	no data	3	20	20	2
		JTS5	Lecturer	M	Japanese	Japan	3	0	11	0	11	0	11	11	0
	Tokyo	JTO1	Associate prof.	M	Japanese	N/A	10	0	22~23	0	no data	6	22~23	22~23	0
		JTO2	Prof.	M	Japanese	Europe	14	1~2	8~9	1~2	no data	6~7	10	10	0
		BE1	Prof.	M	British	UK	30	25~35	N/A	15~20	N/A	9~10	10~15	10~15	15~20
		BE2	Reader	M	British	UK	33	14	N/A	5	N/A	5	2*	2*	2*
		BE3	Lecturer	M	Non-British	UK	31	15~20	N/A	4	N/A	1	10	10	2
UK	Essex	BE4	Senior lecturer	F	British	UK	11	2	N/A	2	N/A	4	6	6	1
		BE5	Prof.	M	Non-British	Non-UK English speaking country	8	2	N/A	2	N/A	2	2	2	14
		BE6	Prof.	M	British	N/A	44	30	N/A	10	N/A	0	40	40	
		BW1	Associate prof.	F	European	UK	18	13	N/A	6	N/A	7	10	10	
		BW2	Prof.	F	British	UK	15	4	N/A	4	N/A	1	0	0	11
	Warwick	BW3	Prof.	M	British	UK	11	20	20	10	no data	6	5	5	40~50
		BU1	Prof.	M	British	N/A	38	30	N/A	10~12	N/A	6	15	15	8

Note. * indicates the data in the past 5 years. Data was collected between 2009 and 2010.

JTS = Japanese/Tsukuba; JTO = Japanese/Tokyo; BE = British/Essex; BW = British/Warwick; and BU = British/UEA.