Metaphorical expressions for successful doctoral study abroad

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ABSTRACT

Timely positive feedback to students pursuing a Ph.D. program motivates completion. Drawing upon Skinner's Reinforcement theory and Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), this study aimed at uncovering metaphors employed in feedback practices by exploring the linguistic expressions of supervisors and peers, which encouraged students to complete their Ph.D. studies in Australia. The methodology employed the use of a semi-structured interview to delve into the lived experiences of two Indonesian Ph.D. students (currently EFL lecturers) during their studies in Australia. The results that the use of positive expressions from supervisors and peers strongly motivated the students to complete their Ph.D. programs. The four types of expressions used serve to praise, give hope, give direction as feedback to support completion, and reminders to keep the student on track. The following expressions were commonly used to motivate completion: "Do not worry, mate, you will get there," and "Wow, it's great work! I understand it is not easy to write academically in such good English, but you did." These expressions metaphorically imply that: "PhD study is a journey," and "Work speaks louder than words." These findings suggest that positive verbal feedback from supervisors' and peers' can motivate PhD students' completion.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in Indonesian students pursuing doctoral programs abroad, primarily in English-speaking countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and America. This academic quest for a research identity researcher (Mantai, 2019; Xu, 2022) in a foreign country is not without challenges. The challenges experienced by foreign students abroad can be classified into personal and cultural ones (Dombroski et al., 2018; Phan et al., 2019; Xu, 2021; Weng, 2020). This is because, over and above the academic pursuit, international students also experience psychological issues impacting their well-being (Hargreaves et al., 2017). The psychological issues experienced include: uncertainty, hope, risk, and identity transition (Carter, 2020). Regardless of these challenges, international students must struggle in carrying out research and writing their academic reports.

Moreover, previous studies have shown that not all doctoral students have adequate research experience (Hargreaves et al., 2017). About one-third doctoral students surveyed intended to drop out at some phases of their studies (Castelló et al., 2017). Furthermore, most of those who completed their Ph.D. studies took more time than initially planned, and many failed to complete their doctoral programs (Kennedy et al., 2015). In extreme circumstances, some doctoral students committed suicide because of their inability to overcome their unexpected feelings (Universities UK [UUK], 2015). Especially for non-native English speakers undertaking the doctoral program in an English-speaking country, these challenges can be exacerbated because working in English is not natural for them.

Previous research reported that the challenges experienced by doctoral students have several causes. Among them are: students' dissatisfaction with their supervisors (van Rooij, 2021), their inability to find a social niche (Bean, 2005) and marginalization (Thelamour et al., 2019). The inability to find a social niche that provides a sense of belonging is associated with their mental health and can be a significant factor in their decision to persist or drop out (Bean, 2005, as cited in Azmitia et al., 2013; Thelamour et al., 2019). There is, therefore, a need for providing timely solutions, mainly by the host universities; to ensure mental health for successful completion. It is important to reduce feelings of stress and isolation among international students through academic, peer and family support. A good rapport between doctoral students and their academic advisors impacts completion (Devos et al., 2017; Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Universities should provide many interventions, such as activities that enhance peer connections, building good relationships with supervisors, providing information and resources, developing student services advice and support, and carrying out training and development (Jackman et al., 2021). The Australian government, for instance, implemented an intervention that

increased study completion rates by creating specific postgraduate pathways, training programs and funding opportunities for international students (Torka, 2020).

Another way of ensuring foreign doctoral students complete their studies could entail providing motivation or reinforcement, through the deployment of motivating expressions. In this regard, a discourse linguist, such as Halliday (2010), point out that language is not only used to communicate but also to reinforce positive behavior. According to Skinner's Reinforcement Theory (Skinner, 1953, as cited in Rodrigues Neto & Pereira, 2020), it is necessary to support doctoral students using positive and negative verbal reinforcement. Drawing upon Skinner's Reinforcement Theory of Motivation, many previous studies have shown a strong link between motivation and performance (e.g., Beiramipur & Echresh, 2022; Fayyaz et al., 2021; Marinda & Suhardi, 2020; Rafi et al., 2020; Wei & Yazdanifard, 2014). Since positive reinforcement influences an individual's behavior positively, there is an increased likelihood of repeating the behavior, with positive consequences than with negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is desirable because people appreciate acknowledgment of their effort. Despite these understandings, little has been done to uncover the effect of the verbal expressions of supervisors and peers on doctoral students' motivation and achievement during their Ph.D. studies abroad.

This research intends to fill this gap by exploring the metaphorical expressions employed in reinforcement practices for Indonesian doctoral students studying in English-speaking countries. Studying reinforcement expressions from peers and supervisors to doctoral students through a metaphorical lens is vital as it yields understandings on how doctoral students conceptualize their supervisors' and peers' support, which would otherwise be abstract. To understand abstract concepts, scholars usually use implicit metaphors to accommodate unfamiliar or abstract concepts into a knowledge base (Chan et al., 2018; Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Similarly, Gravett (2021) stated that doing a Ph.D. program is a metaphorically rich undertaking. Therefore, this study explores the magical words from supervisors and peers that strongly motivate Indonesian doctoral students to complete their doctoral programs abroad. The study answered the following research questions:

1. Which verbal expressions from supervisors and peers inspired and motivated doctoral students to complete their doctoral programs?
2. What metaphors are implicit in the expressions of the supervisors and peers of the doctoral students during their studies?

2. Literature review

This research uses both theoretical frameworks of Skinner's Reinforcement Theory of Motivation and Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to uncover the metaphors used to encourage doctoral students in the course of their studies.

2.1. Skinner's reinforcement theory

The reinforcement theory of motivation, also called operant conditioning, was developed by B.F. Skinner and his associates (Lussier & Achan, 2016). It states that an individual's behavior is a function of its consequences. In Skinner's hypothesis, an individual will repeat actions that bring about positive outcomes and will not repeat behaviors that produce bad outcomes (Skinner, 1953, as cited in Rodrigues Neto & Pereira, 2020). Positive reinforcement at work happens when a person's positive behavior is rewarded, such as through praise, awards, and recognition (Susanto et al., 2021). Consequently, reinforcing a person's activities results in favorable outcomes, conversely, undesirable behavior should be negatively reinforced to discourage continuation. According to Lussier and Achan (2016), drawing from the principles in the reinforcement theory, an individual's motivation can be engineered externally.

According to literature, the reinforcement theory comprises four elements, namely: positive, avoidance, punishment, and extinction (Lussier & Achan, 2016; Watson, 2012). According to Skinner (1953). Positive reinforcement refers to giving rewards and incentives to the desirable behavior from an individual in order to encourage repletion of the same. Avoidance or negative reinforcement prevents people from committing behaviors that violate the rule (Lussier & Achan, 2016). Similarly, punishment is also a behavioral concept given to deter undesirable behavior and steer behaviors towards the intended outcome (Watson, 2012). Lastly, extinction is an approach in Skinner's reinforcement theory used when positive reinforcement and avoidance measures are unsuccessful in changing employee behavior, resulting in termination of service (Lussier & Achan, 2016).

Drawing upon the Reinforcement Theory of Motivation, this study considers it necessary to positively reinforce students' positive deeds in order to motivate progress. The doctoral students conducting research and writing their dissertations may be inspired by words or other motivating means. Such positive acknowledgement and appreciation of effort from supervisors, peers, and family members is vital for successful completion of doctoral programs. Seeing the expressions used to inspire completion from a metaphorical lens enhances understanding of their role in ensuring successful completion of Ph.D. programs by international students.

2.2. Conceptual metaphor theory

Lakoff and Johnson developed Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) in 1980 (Perez, 2019), later, the theory was refined and expanded by Kovecses (2002, 2010, 2017) According to Kovecses (2002) conceptual metaphor refers to a systematic set of correspondences between two domains of experience: the abstract one and the concrete one. Metaphors are pervasive in all languages; and serve to reveal abstract and conceptual ideas (Lakoff, 1993). Lakoff and Johnson (1980, as cited in Kövecses, 2017) also noted that some unstated concepts underlie metaphorical use.

The CMT proposes that metaphor is not limited to the language aspect but also a part of thought, thus is referred to as thought metaphor and conceptual metaphor (Gibbs Jr., 2011). In this theory, conceptual metaphors can be identified from metaphorical linguistic expressions. Linguistic expression refers to explicit speech rich in conceptual metaphors or ways of thinking (Kovecses, 2017). An example of a CMT, is seen in Kovecses (2002, as cited in Usman & Mawardi, 2022, p. 874) use of the metaphor 'love is a journey" by employing the following linguistic expressions:

> Look how far we've come.
> We're at a crossroads.
> We'll just have to go our separate ways.
> We can't turn back now.
> I don't think this relationship is going anywhere.
> Where are we?
> We're stuck.
> It's been a long, bumpy road.
> This relationship is a dead-end street.
> We're just spinning our wheels.
> Our marriage is on the rocks.
> We've gotten off track.
> This relationship is foundering.
> (Kovecses, 2002, p. 5)

The CMT example above illustrates that all linguistic expressions cited relate to a journey. For instance, 'How far we've come' and 'at a crossroads' uttered by a lover to his loved one imply the distance covered and uncertainties experienced at crossroads. Other linguistic expressions relating to a journey include: 'going anywhere,' 'spinning our wheels,' 'on the rocks, "turn back,' 'a long, bumpy road,' 'a dead-end street,' off the track,' and 'foundering.' The lovers' linguistic expressions are apparent manifestations of the conceptual metaphor 'love is a journey.'

2.3. Previous related studies

Previous studies have explored the essential role played by language in motivating students' progress during their Ph.D studies. For instance, Gravett (2021) and Taylor and Adams (2019) use the metaphor 'journey' to map out the course of a Ph.D. program. In this way, students are sensitized on the journey to a Ph.D., the various challenges encountered along the way, yet the commitment to keep working is indispensable. In this regard, Gravett (2021) suggested that doing a Ph.D. program should not be seen as a linear journey towards a fixed endpoint but an irregular, fluid, and messy journey because doctoral students experience multiple and ongoing changes, evolving and changing throughout a doctorate program and beyond.

Kennedy et al. (2015) used grounded theory to explore the role of the support provided by universities to doctoral students. The study revealed a strong relationship between attrition and support issues relating to advisers' support, dissertation process

support, and program office support. This study suggested that in addition to support from supervisors, there should be support from peers to secure successful completion. This is so because undertaking a Ph.D. project is a complex process and may lead to feelings of isolation (Ames et al. (2018). Ames et al. (2018) who researched how to reduce attrition among doctoral students found that introducing private doctoral workspaces significantly helped improve their perceptions of more effective communication with their dissertation committees. On the contrary, the study found that introducing the technology did not change their perceived isolation, which underscores the importance of the human interaction element.

Byrom et al. (2020) have also investigated the experiences of doctoral students and identified factors that cause mental wellbeing and stress. Their study showed that good relationships with supervisors and their confidence in their work were influential in reducing stress. Moreover, students' well-being and lower level of stress were exhibited because of the family support, good general health, sleep, and low levels of self-depreciation. Students who had high confidence about their future careers and felt well prepared for their studies and had reduced stress, and those with an orientation of achievement had better mental wellbeing. More importantly, according to Xu (2022, p. 12), doctoral programs need "to embark on an inner journey of mindfully and critically reflecting on the richness and fluidity of their identity development" for improved student wellbeing and achievement.

All the reviewed studies suggest it is important to pay attention to the causes of attrition and the intention to quit among doctoral students and provide proper support to encourage progress. Assigning caring supervisors and peers during their PhD journey could reduce stress and help students complete their studies. Hence, the host university should train potential thesis supervisors on the use of linguistic expressions as a way of providing psychological and academic support to PhD students. In this research, we focus on exploring motivating expressions from supervisors and peers to Indonesian doctoral students during their Ph.D. program in English-speaking countries, such as Australia. We also argue that generating metaphors from these expressions provides a better understanding of the process of completing a Ph.D. program.

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative narrative inquiry design as proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) to analyze the participants' narratives, as used in several previous studies on this topic (e.g., Gravett, 2021; Mantai, 2019). It analyzed the narratives of the Indonesian students' (now EL lecturers) with their supervisors and peers during their doctoral programs in Australia. Eligible participants were purposively selected from those enrolled for PhD studies in Australia and invited to participate in this study via emails. The selected participants then consented to participate in the study and co-author this article.

Semi-structured interviews were used to delve into the lived experience of the PhD graduates from Australian universities. In this article, pseudonyms Bu Khoi and Pak Jeje are used instead of their real names to ensure confidentiality. The pseudonyms are derived from the Indonesian cultural context where "Pak" is a descriptive name for a respected male person, while "Bu" refers to a female person in the Indonesian context. Thus, one male and one female respondent participated in this study in order to reduce gender bias in the findings.

Table 1
Profile of study respondents.

No	Students	Programs	Ages	Current Age	Host Country	Current Jobs
1	Bu Khoi	Ph.D.	43 years old	52 years old	Perth, Australia	EFL Lecturer
2	Pak Je	Ph.D.	40 years old	50 years old	Melbourne, Australia	EFL Lecturer

As shown in Table 1, this study involved two EFL lecturers, aged 50 and 52 years, who completed their doctoral programs at two different universities in Australia. The two respondents currently work as lecturers at a state university in Aceh, Indonesia. The interviews were recorded in English, and transcribed for analysis in line with the central research question: "*What linguistic expressions from your supervisors or peers strongly inspired and motivated you to complete your Ph.D. program*?"

Following the semi-structured interviews with the EFL lecturers, the data were analyzed using the six phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step is data familiarization that involves reading the transcripts and generating initial codes in relation to the research questions, followed by searching for themes from the codes produced, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally writing the report.

Regarding the quest to identify the metaphorical purpose of linguistic expressions by PhD supervisors and peers, CMT by Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003) was used to analyze the transcribed interactions. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, cited in Authors, 2022, p. 878), "*metaphors are grounded on the people's experiences and depend on their personal interpretation of the phenomena.*" It was therefore possible to identify metaphors from the linguistic expressions occurring between the Ph.D. students and their supervisors or peers. For instance, when a peer says, "*No worries, you will get there,*" it is evident that "*get there*" means going there or reaching the destination – graduating with a PhD and "you" implies the traveler who is the PhD student, within the metaphor of "Doing PhD is a journey" (as in Excerpt 4.1 below).

4. Findings

After collecting and analyzing the data, this study arrived at four meaningful expressions that motivate doctoral students to complete their studies. They are:

> *Do not worry, mate, you will get there*
> *Writing Ph.D. thesis in English is great*
> *Writing is not by speaking*, and
> *Two paragraphs daily are enough for thesis completion*

These expressions depict several metaphors as discussed next.

4.1. Doing PhD is a journey

Excerpt 4.1.

This excerpt is from a conversation with my peer student in the final phase of his PhD program, and with whom I shared a workspace with three other doctoral students. On the occasion of this interaction, my peer student looked happy with a smile on his face while I was feeling isolated and frustrated with the progress of my Ph.D. thesis. I was wondering how he could smile while dealing with such highly challenging tasks. I then engaged him as follows:

> Pak: *"Hi, mate, how do you manage your progress in the Ph.D. program?"*
> A peer*: Do not worry, mate, <u>you will get there</u>.*

> The peer PhD student's answer was very inspiring for me for several reasons. Firstly, his response suggested that I did not need to worry at that stage of my research as I would get there with time. I therefore gleaned that if I kept going on my PhD journey, I would eventually get to where I expected to be. As such there was no need to. From that time, I kept saying to myself that I would complete my PhD in the near future if I kept going.

Excerpt 4.1 above shows that the experienced final phase students' remark not only relieved tension and encouraged the less experienced PhD student through his words, "*<u>Do not worry</u>, mate, <u>you will get there</u>,*" but also served to depict the Ph.D. process as a journey achieved over time. The words "*<u>Do not worry</u>, mate, <u>you will get there</u>,*" from the experienced Ph.D. candidate seem to suggest several essential things. Firstly, the experienced student could perceive the new student's anxieties in relation to PhD studies, and had the assurance that it was a passing feeling. Secondly, the experienced student attitude to the new students' anxiety seems to suggest that the issues concerning the new student were not worth worrying about. Thirdly, there was no need to worry about the

destination, rather, the vital thing to do was to keep going on the right track until the journey was complete.

Metaphorically, the words used in the phrase *"don't worry mate, you will get there"* suggest that: *"Doing a PhD is a journey."* The student is seen as the traveler should not worry about reaching the destination, nor the challenges and tensions rising along the way, as these are a normal part of the journey. In this regard, the Ph.D. students are expected to keep walking so as to reach the intended destination, which is to be scholars in their fields of study.

4.2. Writing a thesis in English for non-native speaker is a great work

Excerpt 4.2.

One day, I had an appointment with my primary thesis supervisor. When I handed her a part of the thesis, she said: "*Wow, it's great work! I understand it is not easy to <u>write academically in such good English, but you did."</u>*
What my thesis supervisor said was like a panacea for my sickness at that time. It strongly improved my confidence because what I had done met my supervisors' expectations. So, I am writing in that quality.

Excerpt 4.2 shows that the expression the supervisor used when guiding her supervisee can be categorized as positive reinforcement which increased the confidence of the doctoral student to keep writing his thesis. The words also provide feedback on the quality of his writing, which is deemed to have met the expectations of a doctoral thesis. This excerpt implicitly conveys the metaphor: *"Work speaks louder than words,"* this is because in the process of undertaking a PhD study, what is written is more important than what is said when completing his Ph.D. thesis.

4.3. Writing is not by speaking

Excerpt 4.3.

As Ph.D. students, we would meet up informally at café and talk about our research projects. One day, my peers and I sat at a café talking about my research and thesis experience. I spent about a quarter of an hour explaining what I planned to do in my thesis. As soon as I stopped talking, a peer who was halfway through his PhD studies said: *"No matter <u>how long you talk, it will be useless</u> if you don't write it. <u>Your supervisor will only review your writing</u>, not your speaking.*

This comment from my peer halted my speech. The remark suggests that to successfully accomplish a PhD project, writing it up is valued over taking about it. I strongly agreed with my peers that the written work presented to my supervisors for review is what meaningfully counted for my progress.

Excerpt 4.3 above presents a scenario which challenges the habit and thought process of a doctoral student. It suggests that even though talking is vital in completing a Ph.D. program, writing what is in mind is more important. This observation is in tandem with the English proverb, which states that, "*The faintest ink is better than the best memory.*" This is so because a written Ph.D. thesis is the basis for review for further progress. Similarly, writing up the PhD thesis can be summed up as follows: "*Writing a PhD thesis is realizing the intentions,*" which requires high motivation and focus.

4.4. Two paragraphs daily for thesis

Excerpt 4.4.

One of my PhD peers had a casual side job while taking his PhD in Melbourne, Australia. One day I approached him and asked:
Pak/Bu: "Hey, brother. I heard you are about to submit your final-phase thesis even though you keep doing your side job. I am wondering how you manage your time?

My peer: For me, I just keep <u>writing at least two paragraphs daily to keep up my thesis progress</u>. My friend, I tell you the truth, earning Australian dollars to bring to our home *country is also important for our future life."*

What peer X said opened my mind at that time. It helped reduce my tension. From the statement, I got a strategy for accomplishing my PhD programme while taking opportunities to earn money for the future. With a good strategy, it appears that some doctoral students are able to work in the course of their PhD studies abroad.

Excerpt 4.4 above provides more than a strategy for completing a Ph.D. through writing up small but meaningful parts for sustained progress; it also encourages taking up opportunities for earning money while studying abroad. From a metaphorical lens, the peer's expressions implicitly relate to the metaphor: "*Writing PhD thesis is paying a big debt by installment.*" meaning that one must strive to update the write-up daily with high commitment and a clear purpose for progress.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study show that the supervisors' and peers' expressions positively affected students' motivation during their doctoral studies abroad. The motivating words of the supervisors and peers fall into two of the four aspects of Skinner's reinforcement theory (Rodrigues & Pereira, 2020), these are positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement.

Positive reinforcement is apparent in the expression, "*Do not worry, mate, you will get there,"* which motivated the student to keep working on his Ph.D. thesis and not worry. Another expression that falls into the category of positive reinforcement is, "*Wow, it is a great job! I understand it is not easy to write academically in such good English, but you did."* Here the student is praised for producing a great piece of work and is motivated to keep doing it.

On the other hand, negative reinforcement, as put forth by Skinner's Reinforcement Theory (Rodrigues Neto & Pereira, 2020), is evident in the expression: *"No matter how long you talk, it will be useless if you don't write it. Your supervisor will only review your writing, not your speaking."* Moreover, the expression: "*For me, I just keep writing at least two paragraphs daily to keep up my thesis progress."* can also be taken as negative feedback because it can stop his former way to try to practice his friend's way. The former suggests that the student should prioritize writing up the thesis over talking about it, and the latter emphasizes the need to work smart by writing small sections regularly. Both fall under the negative reinforcement of motivation, as developed by Skinner.

Generating implicit metaphors from linguistic expressions is crucial to support and motivate Ph.D. students, by helping them to understand and feel relaxed about the complex process of doing their Ph.D. programs. Thinking metaphorically will enable prospective students to consider how to successfully accomplish their doctoral degrees. The metaphor "*Ph.D. study is a journey*," for instance, might enable prospective doctoral students to conceive of the PhD process as a journey rife with surmountable challenges, which they should approach with a positive attitude, while diligently working towards the advised direction. Similarly, the metaphor *"Producing work during Ph.D. study is more powerful than producing words,"* may motivate students to writing more than they talk about their PhD project. In the same vein, the metaphor "*Ph.D. study is a debt payment by installment*," serves to inspire the habit of routinely working on the PhD thesis, even in small bits. Routinely writing up small bits is more valuable than doing big chunks of writing, which rarely occurs in practice.

The findings in this study which posit that doing a Ph.D. study is a journey is consistent with many previous research findings, such as those by Jairam and Kahl's (2012), which revealed that encouragement from supervisors helped mitigate students' feelings of stress and isolation during their Ph.D. program. Additionally, this research finding corroborates Ames et al.'s (2018) findings that private doctoral workspaces helped improve effective communication with their dissertation committees because of intense interactions with peers, especially those in their final stage of the Ph.D. program as their

experience in the PhD process can provide vital supportive information and feedback to students in the early stages of the process. To some extent, these research findings also support Byrom et al.'s (2020) observation that a good relationship with their thesis supervisors and confidence in writing up a thesis are essential for Ph.D. study completion.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored motivating metaphorical expressions received by two Indonesian EFL students during their Ph.D. studies in Australia and generated metaphors from them. Drawing upon Skinner's reinforcement theory of motivation, this study concludes that there are several ways of providing positive reinforcement to doctoral students' by supervisors and peers. These include: praise, good hope, a way to reach the destination, and a reminder to keep on track. Therefore, supervisors and doctoral students must be mindful of words used during supervisory interactions as words and expressions significantly impact doctoral students' ability to survive and complete their programs. Additionally, doctoral programs should provide Ph.D. students with workspaces that facilitate frequent interactions with their peers to alleviate feelings of isolation and tension. Furthermore, doctoral programs should prepare thesis advisors to interact with students throughout their candidacy.

Nevertheless, this study is limited to the positive influence of thesis supervisors' and peers' words on doctoral students' motivation to complete their studies at only two universities in Australia. Future research should be carried out on the positive and negative influence of supervisors' and peers' words on successful and unsuccessful students during their candidature in more universities from many countries. The expected findings can create an awareness among supervisors and peers to avoid using demotivating words in interactions with doctoral students as they can negatively affect their progress.

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