Mentor Feedback for the Professionalism of the Teacher Candidate

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Abstract: In Turkey, foreign language teacher candidates, registered at a faculty of education, have compulsory teaching experience courses which are conducted under the guidance and supervision of mentors- namely the practicing school teachers and faculty field supervisors. These experiences are important collaborative processes between the teacher candidates and their mentors because the constructive feedback received from the mentors are vital for the teacher candidates' professional growth and success. However, at times the teacher mentor may not be skillful in giving feedback pertaining to various reasons such as refraining to give knowledge to the candidate due to avoiding conflict or perhaps even lack of pedagogical knowledge.

Within the framework of such concerns, the aim of the present study is to become familiar with the types of feedback that the teacher candidates receive from the teacher mentors during or after the candidates teaching experience performances. In order to investigate this situation, data collection for the study is comprised of a questionnaire administered to 70 final year students at a faculty of education English language teaching department. The questionnaire consisting of 20 items was originally designed and published by the author.

The results of the study display that the feedbacks are mainly based on the following dimensions; the ensuring of learner participation and interaction, the development of communicative competence in learners, the improvising of teaching methodology, and current trends in language teaching.

Key Words: feedback, mentoring, teacher candidate.

Background to the study

In Turkey, English Language Teaching undergraduate programs conducted at a Faculty of Education are composed of both theoretical language teaching courses and also practicum courses such as the "School Experience II" and "Teaching Practice." These two compulsory courses are conducted in the fourth/final year of the program and are important prerequisites for graduation. Both courses are conducted theoretically at the university and the practicum is carried out in the participating school which is in partnership with the university. The practicum, under the supervision and assistance of mentors, provide field experiences offering teacher candidates the chance to practice their teaching and to reflect on their experiences with their mentors.

At these schools which are in partnership with a state university, the classroom teachers who are assigned for the mentoring of the teacher candidates are monetarily compensated. This application has been adopted because the role of the mentor is crucial in the assistance of the inexperienced teacher candidate and it is assumed that the duty of mentoring can be made more attractive by awarding the mentor teachers financially. In addition, another major reason for the provision of the compensation is due to the fact that in a majority of state schools, the classrooms are already overcrowded and the teachers working hours are overloaded. Therefore, under these competing pressures it is difficult to find mentor teachers who are not only willing to share their own classrooms but also to able to deal with each of the teacher candidates individually. "Many experienced and highly skilled practitioners also do not volunteer or reject offers to act as mentors as they perceive that it is time consuming, takes them away from their prime job of teaching, offers few benefits or incentives to participate and may become an enduring commitment from which they cannot escape (Long, 1997)."

In a situation as stated above, where there are authoritative policies offering incentives and support for mentor teachers in order that they can prepare teacher candidates more effectively for the profession, it is the duty of educational researchers to investigate more than surface knowledge on this major component constituting teacher programs. Although explorations in educative mentoring are "grounded in Dewey's (1938) model of educative experience and influenced by theories of socially constructed cognition (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978), the learning of the mentors and mentees occurs through meaningful social communication, interactions and practice in reaching co-constructed goals (He, 2009; 269)." To date, within this educational experience in order 'to provide the best opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers to become reflective practitioners, we as TESOL professionals must first gain a better understanding of how the teacher-supervisor relationship can enhance, or hinder, professional development (Chamberlin, 2000; 654).'

In the article titled "The state of mentoring research: A qualitative review of current research methods and future research implications," the researchers' Allen et. al. (2008) state the importance of focusing on methodology within the mentoring literature is critical because methodological choices influence both the breadth and depth of what we know about these important organizational relationships. Therefore, within this perspective the present study was undertaken in an attempt to increase awareness on the importance of mentoring in the development of the professionalism of the teacher candidate by providing a grounded picture of the personal and professional support constituted by the mentor's verbal feedback.

Allen et. al. (2008) also stress that as within any area of research, the failure to use content and construct valid measures leads to serious threats of validity and interpretive problems. Along these lines, it must be noted that the present study is the second stage of a former research which was built on the author's first investigation of designing a reliable and valid questionnaire on mentor feedback. This questionnaire can be found in the article titled "Designing a questionnaire attempting to discover mentors' feedback in the professionalism of the foreign language teacher candidate (Pekkanli, 2011)." The present study is the second stage in which the questionnaire is implemented and the findings are evaluated. This stage also aims to stress the point that teacher candidates, provided that the feedback is both objective and constructive, must be able to not only monitor the feedback but also be able to evaluate the value and objectives of the feedback in order to enhance and refine their teaching skills.

Mentoring and Feedback

According to Feiman-Nemser (1993) since the early 1980's mentoring had burst into the educational scene as part of a broad movement aiming to improve education and as a result, policy makers and educational leaders pinned high hopes on mentoring as a vehicle for reforming teaching and teacher education. Therefore, for years the issue of mentoring in pre-service and in-service teacher training has been investigated in detail. Research based on mentor teacher investigations in teacher training contexts range from mentor preparation to roles and functions (for eg. Penny et. al., 1996; Arnold, 2006; Allen et. al., 2008; Hobson et. al., 2009).

Within the range of investigations, it is possible to observe that various studies have reached consensus on the point that being a teacher does not mean that one can also be a teacher mentor. For example, according to Brooks and Sikes (1997) "not everyone can, or should be, a mentor. Simply being a good teacher is not enough, for mentoring is not a straightforward extension of being a school-teacher. Different perspectives, abilities, aptitudes, attitudes and skills are necessary (p. 66)." Mentoring requires preparation to fulfill the tasks of supporting the teacher candidate in "classroom management, basic lesson design and delivery, evaluating student progress (Little & Nelson, 1990; 2)."

According to Little & Nelson (1990) mentors must be able to not only "describe and demonstrate underlying principles of teaching and learning but also need to learn how to "talk clearly and straightforwardly about teaching without offending the teacher (p. 4)." Mentors feedback comprised of a flux of shortcomings and negative criticisms relating to the observed lesson can demoralize the teacher candidate and have a negative impact on his teaching behavior. Whereas, between the mentor and the teacher candidate "the opportunity to exchange insights is embraced as a chance to develop skill and experience with feedback, participants can gain heightened awareness of the power of their positive and negative comments, finding optimal ways to offer guidance that inspires rather than disheartens (Stillwell, 2009; 354)."

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

In the academic year of 2009-2010, there were approximately more than 220 fourth/final year students enrolled at Uludag University, Faculty of Education, ELT Department. In order to assist internal validity of the study, a total of 70 students/teacher candidates achieving to pass the "school experience II" and "teaching practice" courses with high scores (BA and AA) participated in the present study.

Teacher candidates were administered a structured questionnaire eliciting data on constructive feedback (see Pekkanli, 2011). The teacher candidates answered the questionnaire according to the feedback they gained from their mentors at the secondary schools where their practicum courses were conducted.

The questionnaire consists of three dimensions covering 20 items which are designed on a five-point Likert scale. The five points range from the end points being labeled as '1= strongly disagree' and '5=strongly

agree'. The three dimensions; I-mentor effectiveness, II- mentor openness, and III- mentor support, are individually examined so as to shed light on which dimensions displayed marginal differences in the total percentages. In order to determine the types of feedbacks gained, percentages of the options marked were calculated (see Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3). However, since the questionnaire aims to determine constructive feedback, in the comparison of the three dimensions (see Table 4) the negatively stated items 7, 13, 19 and 20 were reversely scored.

Data Analysis and Results
Dimension I of the questionnaire has the following eight items (see Table 1) concerning statements based on feedback that are associated with the mentor's effectiveness in terms of meaningful social interaction, enhancement of teacher candidate's self-assessment, and supporting the teacher candidate's professional development.

Table 1. Dimension I – Mentor Effectiveness

Item Number	Strongly Disagree N=70 %	Mildly Disagree N=70 %	Neutral N=70 %	Mildly Agree N=70 %	Strongly Agree N=70 %
2- My mentor acknowledges and works through conflicts openly with me.	0.0	18.6	40.0	31.4	10.0
6- My mentor checks for my comprehension of the verbal messages.	0.0	37.1	48.6	14.3	0.0
8- My mentor evaluates the effectiveness of the task and processes that I perform.	0.0	8.6	37.1	54.2	0.0
9- My mentor assists me in developing my personal skills in planning.	0.0	31.4	31.4	37.1	0.0
10- When giving me feedback my teacher first praises me.	0.0	18.6	37.1	37.1	7.1
12- Before giving feedback my mentor asks me to self-assess first.	0.0	31.4	42.9	12.8	12.8
15- My mentor limits what s/he is covering when giving feedback.	0.0	42.9	37.1	12.8	7.1
16- My mentor concentrates on what I can change for the better in the teaching practice.	0.0	20.0	37.1	42.9	0.0

As can be seen in Table 1, the highest percentages gained for mildly agree was 54.2 for item number eight. This finding shows that slightly more than half of the teacher candidates perceive their mentor to be able to effectively evaluate their performances. The highest percentage gained for 'mildly disagree' was 42.9 for item number fifteen. This item also gained 37.1 for 'neutral,' these percentages display the point that the mentors lack the skill of limiting what they are covering when giving feedback. Another notable finding is that before the feedback, a third of the teacher candidates are not asked to self -assess first.

The second dimension of the questionnaire (see Table 2) named as 'mentor openness' aims to identify whether the mentor provides feedback relating to teacher candidates' experiences on classroom management, and the familiarization of classroom tools and material.

Table 2. Dimension II - Mentor Openness

Item Number	Strongly Disagree N=70 %	Mildly Disagree N=70 %	Neutral N=70 %	Mildly Agree N=70 %	Strongly Agree N=70 %
1- My mentor respects and is tolerant of the individual differences of the teacher trainees.	0.0	7.1	48.6	31.4	12.8
3- My teacher works for consensus on decisions with me.	0.0	48.6	25.7	25.7	0.0
5- My mentor trusts, supports and has genuine	0.0	31.4	48.6	20.0	0.0

concern for my development.					
11- My mentor encourages my usage of various classroom tools and materials.	12.8	12.8	42.9	31.4	0.0
14- When there is conflict between the students and myself, my mentor handles the situation.	0.0	31.4	42.9	12.8	12.8
17- My mentor develops my awareness of the tools and material which can be used in the activities.	0.0	31.4	54.2	14.3	0.0
18- When giving feedback my mentor comments on specific behaviors and achievements.	0.0	25.7	65.7	8.6	0.0
19- When giving feedback my mentor gives me general comments.	0.0	18.6	31.4	37.1	12.8

Table 2 displays the results of the teacher candidates' tendencies towards the aspect of being 'neutral' for six of the eight statements. This distinctive finding sheds light on the point that the teacher candidates were not able to identify their mentor's strengths of providing feedback for the two separate constructs of classroom management and strategies of implementing instructional tools.

Dimension III, under the heading of 'mentor support' has only four statements dwelling on the issue of the mentor's understanding and support of the teacher candidate's emotional satisfaction with the experience and the mentor's ability of positively questioning of the experience.

Table 3. Dimension III – Mentor Support

Item Number	Strongly Disagree N=70 %	Mildly Disagree N=70 %	Neutral N=70 %	Mildly Agree N=70 %	Strongly Agree N=70 %
4- My mentor shares openly my personal feelings and opinions about the teaching situation.	0.0	48.6	25.7	25.7	0.0
7- The tone of voice of my mentor makes me feel inferior.	7.1	37.1	24.3	31.4	0.0
13- When giving me feedback my mentor criticizes my teaching.	7.1	24.3	24.3	44.3	0.0
20- While I am getting feedback from my mentor, I feel accused of my teaching practice.	7.1	14.3	35.7	35.7	7.1

Table 3 highlights the general view of the teacher candidates' total scores in this dimension to be the highest for item thirteen. The teacher candidates, when getting feedback are criticized for their teaching. The mentor's act of criticizing, whether positive or negative, can be interpreted as the mentor's behavior to be authoritative rather than collaborative.

Table 4. Comparisons of Dimension I, II, and III

Dimension	Disagree (-) %	Neutral (0) %	Agree (+) %
I Mentor Effectiveness	26.07	38.92	35.00
II Mentor Openness	31.42	45.00	23.57
III Mentor Support	36.42	27.50	36.07

The feedback questionnaire responses highlighting the degrees of mentor feedback in terms of mentor effectiveness, mentor openness, and mentor support are presented in Table 4. For this comparison the options 'strongly disagree' and 'mildly disagree' were grouped as 'disagree'. Likewise, 'mildly agree' and 'strongly agree' were grouped as 'agree'. As can be observed from Table 4, teacher candidates are mostly 'neutral' for

mentor effectiveness and mentor openness. However, mentor support is a dimension which displays opposing views between more a third of the teacher candidates 'disagreeing' and 'agreeing'.

Discussion and Conclusion

Though mentoring is viewed as essential in the teacher candidates' professional development, the mentors addressed in the present study were not formally trained for the process of mentoring. These mentors were either assigned by the school principal or the principal had called for them amongst the volunteering staff. Therefore, for these mentors there is no such aspect of the "guarantee that the mentoring role is clearly delineated with the necessary tasks and skills mapped against a formalized program of mentee development (Gagen & Bowie, 2005, as cited in Long, 2009). Consideration of such a background and the findings of the present study, it can be stressed that the mentor teachers assigned in supervising the teacher candidates during the practicum or pre-service period require mentor training notably in the area of assistance skills for providing constructive feedback to the teacher candidates.

The concept "assistance skills" formerly mentioned in the recommendation above refers to the concept defined by Stroble and Cooper (1982). These researchers had proposed for training programs for supervising teachers and mentor teachers where they will be taught and trained on assistance skills, "that is, clinical supervision skills of observation, analysis of teaching, interpersonal communication, and support (p.236)." With these skills the mentors who are able to "concentrate on helping others to reflect and come to conclusions for themselves will likely have more fulfilling post-conference discussions, as they can more candidly explore the successes and failures of the various techniques employed (Stillwell, 2008; 359)."

Teaching is a challenge and in the preparation of the teacher candidate for this challenge, the mentor feedback generating negative memories and developing a feeling of inferiority within the teacher candidate can only hinder the teacher candidate's motivation and passion for this challenge. To sum up, being a teacher is not a sufficient criteria or standard for taking on the role of mentoring because not all teachers are equipped of being able to effectively communicate and provide constructive feedback to the teacher candidate. Therefore, before the commencement of the 'school experience II' and 'teaching practice' courses, it is essential for Uludag University to provide a mentoring program or even establishing a short training course for the school teachers who are assigned or volunteering to act as mentoring teachers.

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