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What do EFL preservice teachers expect from their mentors?

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Abstract

Preservice teachers learning to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) require mentoring within the profession. EFL speakers learning to teach EFL may require particular attributes and practices from their mentors to advance their professional school experiences. What do EFL preservice teachers expect from their mentors? This study involved a written survey administered to 91 Vietnamese preservice teachers involved in an EFL degree. Results indicated that these preservice EFL teachers had specific needs when considering mentors' personal attributes. These included a mentor who is enthusiastic (57%), helpful (27%), friendly (25%), and knowledgeable (20%) with communicative competence (18%). It was also claimed that desirable mentoring practices should involve constructive guidance, especially sharing experiences (32%), checking lesson plans before teaching an EFL lesson (21%) and providing more opportunities for EFL teaching (12%). In addition, these preservice teachers ($n=91$) required a mentor who could provide an understanding of the system requirements (e.g., curriculum 38%, school policies 32%, and assessment 18%), model EFL teaching (e.g., method and manner of delivery 52%, pronunciation 25%, and writing lesson plans 15%), articulate pedagogical knowledge (such as teaching strategies 37%, classroom management 34%, motivating students 17%, and dealing with unexpected situations 13%), and provide direct and detailed feedback about EFL teaching performance (56%) and English content knowledge (23%). Preservice teachers have particular mentoring requirements that may assist their development as EFL teachers. These attributes and practices include developing personal inter-relationships and directing mentors to provide system requirements, specific pedagogical knowledge, modelling EFL teaching practices, and articulating feedback on such practices. However, further research is required to bridge the gap between mentors' practices and mentees' needs towards guiding such practices through university programs.

Key words: EFL teaching, preservice teachers, mentoring, personal attributes

Since the late 1980s, mentoring preservice teachers in general, and EFL preservice teachers in particular, in their initial school-based field experience has been advocated as a reform in preservice teacher education. In teacher education, mentoring is typically described as a process to help develop teaching practices, involving a nurturing relationship between a less experienced person and a more experienced person who provides guidance as a role model and adviser (Bigelow, 2002; Haney, 1997). A preservice teacher (mentee) is normally assigned to an experienced mentor (supervising or cooperating teacher) in the school for the period of the practicum. The supervising teacher's role (mentor) is to engage the preservice teacher in learning to teach in developing their teaching practices and in overcoming context-specific

difficulties. Feiman and Nemser, and Parker (1992) also prove that mentoring roles and functions are reported to include those of motivator, teacher, role model, supporter, counsellor, advisor, demonstrator, guide, change agent, companion, and coach.

Mentor quality and expectation

There is no ideal type of mentor. According to Blank and Sindelar (1992), “mentors appear to be a unique blend of intuitive sensitivity and technical expertise” (p. 23) and, moreover, all mentors are individuals with individual ideas about teaching and mentoring. Nevertheless, there are attributes and practices considered to be more favourable in mentoring preservice teachers. Indeed, the presence of a mentor alone is not enough; the mentor’s knowledge and skills of how to mentor are crucial to the mentoring process (Ganser, 1996, 2002). The literature below analyses these quality and expectations in some detail.

Mentor’s professional knowledge and qualities

According to Hutto et al (1991, as cited in Sinclair, 2003), a mentor is defined as an “experienced, successful and knowledgeable professional who willingly accepts the responsibility of facilitating professional growth and support of a colleague through a mutually beneficial relationship” (p. 79). Mentors need competent knowledge, skills, and professional proficiency in the chosen field. Mentors are expected to pass on their years of professional knowledge to the less experienced preservice teachers, which requires being available for discussions (Ganser, 1996, 2002). Therefore, these mentors should be highly-proficient teachers with adept pedagogical knowledge and successful teaching experiences (Blank & Sindelar, 1992; Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Gray & Smith, 2000; Kay & Hinds, 2002). More specifically, mentors must know not only the subject with planning and implementing effective practice but also knowledge about classroom dynamics and the school’s professional and social context (Arnold, 2006; Jarvis, McKeon, Coates, & Vause, 2001; Zachary, 2005). Some researchers (Hudson, 2004a; Tickle, 2000) claim that professional knowledge tends to centre around subject matter, learners, classroom management, pedagogical skills, the working context of the school, curriculum, assessment, and the routines and functions of being a teacher.

Personal attributes

Aside from mentor’s professional knowledge and experiences, the personal attributes of a mentor has played a vital role in professionally developing a mentee. Galbraith and Cohen (1995) and Sinclair (2003) emphasise the importance of interpersonal skills and communication skill in effective mentoring. The literature has identified several personal attributes for being an effective mentor, which includes motivating, listening, sharing, influencing, counseling and being trustworthy (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002; Kay & Hinds, 2002). Brooks, Sikes, and Husbands (1997) list some personal qualities of a mentor such as “honesty, openness, sensitivity, enthusiasm, sense of humour, organization, self-awareness and reflectiveness” (p. 33). To these can be added personal traits such as “approachable”, “patient”, and “understanding” (Gray & Smith, 2000, p. 1546). Empirical and statistical data reveals that the mentor’s personal attributes may be noted when displaying enthusiasm, being comfortable in talking, encouraging reflection on practice, instilling confidence and positive attitudes, and most importantly, being supportive (Hudson, 2002, 2004b;

Hudson, Skamp, & Brooks, 2005). Indeed, the mentor's supportiveness alone can be multifaceted.

Day (1999) contends that mentoring is often seen as a structured personal support for learning or learner support. The nature of support to beginning teachers can be categorised into two kinds of support: psychosocial support and professional support (Allen, Russell, & McManus, 1999; Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; Kram & Isabella, 1985). Psychosocial support may help mentees overcome their "stressful, conflict-laden situations" (Stokes & Stewart, 1994, p. 34) by serving as a role model of appropriate attitudes, values, and behaviours for the mentee (role modelling), conveying unconditional positive regard (acceptance-and-confirmation), providing a forum in which the mentee is encouraged to talk openly about anxieties, fears, and their personal concerns (counselling), and interacting informally with the mentee at work (friendship).

Kram (1988) purports that professional support should be provided by nominating the mentee for desirable projects (sponsorship), providing the mentee with assignments that increased visibility to organisation and exposure to future opportunities (exposure-and-visibility), sharing ideas, providing feedback, and suggesting strategies for accomplishing work objectives (coaching). Furthermore, reducing unnecessary risks that might threaten the mentee's reputation (protection), and providing challenging work assignments (challenging assignments) are supportive measures facilitated by competent mentors. Kram (1985) suggests that the greater the number of support functions provided by the mentors, the more beneficial the relationship will be to the mentee. In a recent study into mentor's support for beginning teachers, Lee and Feng (2007) found that the most frequent types of mentoring support were the provision of information, mutual lesson observation, collaborative lesson preparation and frequent discussions. This finding is aligned with Glatthorn (1995) who elaborates professional support in the modes of professional dialogue, curriculum development, peer supervision, peer coaching and action research. Regarding this issue, Hobson (2002) claims that mentors must be able to find time to provide support that is purposeful, constructive, and pro-active.

With the vast array of personal attributes and supportive measures, not all teachers possess the personality, professional knowledge, and skills to be a mentor. Mentors should be committed to the mentoring role and believe in the potential of the mentee (Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002; Sinclair, 2003). Mentors should be able to provide information and assistance, model appropriate practice and provide positive, sensitive feedback regarding mentee's development and progress; therefore a mentor's ability to adapt to different situations is critical (Sullivan, 1992; Klausmeier, 1994). This includes the ability to model effective teaching strategies (Klausmeier, 1994), manage time (Blank and Sinderlar, 1992; Klausmeier, 1994), and provide feedback (Anglin et al., 2002).

Mentoring EFL teaching

Within English language teaching, Malderez and Bodoczky (1999, p. 4) advocate five different roles for a mentor, namely: (1) a model who inspires and demonstrates; (2) an acculturator who provides a clear understanding of the education system; (3) a sponsor who introduces the mentee to the appropriate people; (4) a supporter who acts as sounding board and provides safe opportunities for the mentee to discuss teaching

practices; and (5) an educator who facilitates pedagogical ideas to help the mentee achieve professional learning objectives. These roles are at the centre of attaining professional and practical knowledge for implementing EFL teacher education. Thoughtful mentors organise their mentees' professional development by "advising on effective practices, making the theory-practice link overt, and evaluating and reporting upon their practicum performance" (Sinclair, 1997, p. 309).

As can be noted above, research has investigated mentor's roles and expectations. However, it seems there is little research in the field of mentoring in EFL teacher education. In addition, there appears no research studies that investigate what EFL mentees need or expect from their mentor before they are involved in the process. This study fills this gap by investigating Vietnamese preservice teachers' needs for their mentoring in the EFL classroom. EFL speakers learning to teach EFL may require particular attributes and practices from their mentors to advance their professional school experiences. The research question was: What do EFL preservice teachers expect from their mentors?

Research context

The research study described in this paper was conducted within a six-week practicum for preservice EFL teachers (about 250) at College of Foreign Languages (CFL), Viet Nam National University (VNU) where clusters of preservice EFL teachers are placed in different secondary schools in Hanoi or nearby areas. After studying EFL teaching methodology courses which equip them with current trends in English language teaching, preservice EFL teachers do their practicum at one of the assigned secondary schools. The practicum is a one-off period where they experience first-hand teaching practice in real classrooms. Students progress through these field experiences as a cohort group, and are placed with a university supervisor who works with them in the university-based ELT methodology courses. In each school, two or three of preservice EFL teachers are assigned to a cooperating English teacher and a form teacher. These school mentors are expected to guide preservice teachers towards effective English language teaching and class management.

Data collection methods and analysis

This research investigates 91 Vietnamese preservice teachers' needs for their mentoring in the EFL classroom. In particular, it examines their requirements of mentors' attributes and practices that would assist their development as an EFL teacher. These participants were completing a four-year undergraduate degree. A semi-structured questionnaire with open responses was designed to gather data from these preservice teachers before commencing their final six-week field experience in upper secondary schools in Hanoi. The questions focused on these preservice teachers' needs about mentors' personal attributes and teaching practices including understanding system requirements, pedagogical knowledge, modelling EFL teaching practices, and articulating feedback on such practices. For example, one question asked about the ideal personal attributes they expected from their school mentors.

The completed responses (83 females; 7 males) provided descriptors of the participants (preservice EFL teachers). These preservice teachers' were 21 years of age (45%), 22 (42%), 23 (11%) and 24 years of age (2%). In the data analysis, themes and categories were coded for each question, tallied, and descriptive statistics were used to quantify the data (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). To illustrate, 52

participants (57%) specifically stated “enthusiasm” as a desirable personal attribute for mentors to have during their mentoring of preservice EFL teachers.

Results and discussion

The results provided an understanding of these Vietnamese preservice teachers’ needs and requirements for mentoring their EFL teaching. The following highlights preservice teachers’ needs for having particular mentoring attributes and practices including mentors’ personal inter-relationships and requiring mentors to provide system requirements, specific pedagogical knowledge, modelling EFL teaching practices, and articulating feedback on such practices.

Personal attributes of mentors required by these preservice teachers were versatile and included a mentor who could be enthusiastic (57%), helpful (27%), friendly (25%), and knowledgeable (20%) with communicative competence (18%). Yet, there were other attributes that these preservice teachers required of their mentors. Apart from the Table 1 attributes, other attributes included their mentors to be sympathetic, devoted, flexible, creative, caring and a good listener. At the lower end of the percentages, the range of attributes may be a testament to the varied personalities within any cohort. Indeed, there were 8% who required the mentor to be serious while 12% wanted a humorous mentor and 5% wanted an easy-going mentor whereas 10% required a devoted mentor. There was only one preservice teacher who expressed the need to have a mentor who “loves children”. As can be noted by the varied required attributes, matching the mentor with a preservice teacher becomes an arduous task. Nevertheless, the key attributes clearly indicated in Table 1 can become an initial platform for ensuring preservice teachers in their roles as mentees are suitably matched with mentors.

Table 1

Mentors’ Personal Attributes and Supportive Practices (n=91)

Mentors’ personal attribute	%*	Supportive mentoring practice	%*
Enthusiastic	57	Sharing experiences	32
Helpful	27	Modelling EFL teaching	22
Friendly	25	Clear advice and explanations	21
Knowledgeable	20	Checking lesson plans	21
Communicative competence	18	Feedback on teaching methods	16
Cooperative	16	Constructive feedback	12
Open relationship	16	Presenting opportunities for teaching	12
Responsible	15	Providing reference materials	6
Cheerful/humorous	12	Information about students’ abilities	5
Taking an active role	12	Developing critical thinking	3

* %=Percentage of preservice EFL teachers who indicated the attribute and supportive practice.

Supportive mentoring practices required by these preservice teachers included providing constructive guidance such as sharing teaching experiences (32%) and giving clear advice (21%). There was also a need for mentors to model EFL teaching (22%) and to check preservice teachers’ lesson plans before they teach EFL lessons (21%). Although preservice teachers require constructive feedback, especially on their teaching methods (16%), they also wanted more opportunities to teach (12%; Table 1). The supportive mentoring practices further included being provided with clear

instructions, information about students' levels, timely interference, content knowledge, and ways to motivate students' classroom involvement. These requirements for a supportive mentoring environment appear realistic and achievable unlike the wide mix of personal attribute requirements.

These preservice teachers ($n=91$) required a mentor who could provide an understanding of the Vietnamese education system requirements such as knowledge about the curriculum (38%), school policies (32%), and assessment requirements (18%; Table 2). Furthermore, there was a need to know what school resources were available, planning requirements, teaching responsibilities, and time allocations for EFL classes. In addition, these preservice teachers needed to have effective modelling of EFL teaching practices, which included the method and manner of delivery (52%), pronunciation and grammar (25%), and writing lesson plans (15%; Table 2). There was sprinkling of other needs articulated by these preservice teachers such as modelling: the presentation of a stimulus to introduce a lesson, time management, dealing with student errors, and general classroom organisation (Table 2). If mentors have knowledge of modelling practices required by mentees then there may be greater opportunities for mentees to observe such practices.

Table 2

Preservice Teachers Needs - System Requirements and Modelling Teaching (n=91)

System Requirement	%*	Modelling practice	%*
Curriculum	38	Teaching methods and manner	52
School policies	32	Content knowledge	25
Assessment	18	Classroom management	15
Teaching methods	12	Writing lesson plans	15
School resources	10	Introductory stimulus	8
School rules and regulations	10	Addressing student levels	8
Extra curricula activities	8	Classroom organisation	6
Assessment	8	Dealing with student errors	6
Content	6	Motivating students	5
Time allocations	6	Time management	5

* %=Percentage of preservice EFL teachers who indicated system requirement needs and mentors' modelling of practices.

These preservice EFL teachers ($n=91$) wrote about the importance of mentors providing particular pedagogical knowledge. Indeed, they require their mentors to articulate pedagogical knowledge such as teaching strategies for EFL classes (37%), classroom management (34%), motivating EFL students (17%), and dealing with unexpected situations (13%; Table 3). They also indicated a need to know about blackboard writing skills, assessments and marking students' work, how to develop a rapport with students, and non-verbal communication. In general, there was concern expressed by many of these preservice teachers about survival in the EFL classroom, yet there was also recognition that particular pedagogical knowledge would assist their survival towards becoming effective teachers.

Table 3

Preservice Teachers Needs for Developing Pedagogical Knowledge (n=91)

Pedagogical knowledge	%*
Teaching strategies	37
Classroom management	34
Motivating students	17
Organising the classroom	14
Dealing with unexpected situations	13
Implementing lesson plans	10
Catering for mixed ability groups	9
Assessment practices	8
Writing on the blackboard	8
Planning a lesson	6

* %=Percentage of preservice EFL teachers who indicated particular pedagogical knowledge requirements.

Finally, these preservice teachers articulated their needs about what and how feedback should be provided by their mentors. These preservice teachers mainly focused on their mentors' provision of direct and detailed feedback about EFL teaching performance (56%), lesson planning and preparation (24%), and English pronunciation and grammar (23%) and content knowledge (10%; Table 4). Of course, classroom management and teaching strategies were consistent themes throughout the various categories outlined in this study; hence it was not surprising to find connections between system requirements, modelling of practices, pedagogical knowledge, and feedback.

Table 4

Preservice Teachers Needs about Mentors' Feedback (n=91)

Feedback (What)	%*	Feedback (How)	%*
Teaching performance	56	Detailed and useful	44
Lesson planning and preparation	24	Sincere, frank, objective	23
Pronunciation and grammar	23	Constructive (tactful and encouraging)	22
Classroom management	18	Supportive	21
Content knowledge	10	After each lesson	20
Teaching strategies	8	Face to face	5
Student rapport	8		
Student involvement	8		

* %=Percentage of preservice EFL teachers who indicated their needs for mentors' feedback.

Summary and conclusion

Preservice teachers have particular mentoring needs and requirements that may assist their development as EFL teachers. This study showed that EFL preservice teachers expect versatile mentor attributes and practices, which include: developing personal inter-relationships and directing mentors to provide system requirements; specific pedagogical knowledge; modelling EFL teaching practices; and articulating feedback on such practices. This study also highlighted that mentoring EFL preservice teachers requires an enthusiastic, helpful, and knowledgeable mentor with communicative competence. Mentees rely upon their mentors' English language skills to assist in developing personally and pedagogically. EFL mentors need to share their teaching experiences and check their mentees' lesson plans before teaching an EFL lesson.

There is no doubt that mentors should provide an understanding of the system requirements so mentees are beginning their induction into a specific education system. Importantly, these preservice teachers wanted mentors who could model EFL teaching, particularly the method and manner of delivery and pronunciation of the English language. It was indicated clearly that articulating pedagogical knowledge such as teaching strategies, classroom management, motivating students, and dealing with unexpected situations was high on the preservice teachers' list of needs. Finally, these mentees required of their mentors direct and detailed feedback about EFL teaching performance and English content knowledge.

Universities may better assist their preservice teachers by conducting a needs analysis to determine their teaching and mentoring requirements related to specific contexts. Universities can play a role in facilitating more effective mentoring within practicum experiences by providing guidelines to mentors that outline desirable mentoring attributes and practices. It would also be beneficial to have mentees aware of these guidelines to further connect a two-way mentoring process. Indeed, mentees need to take responsibility for their own learning, and being empowered with particular mentoring expectations may assist mentees to facilitate their own mentoring. Although preservice teachers may have personal attribute requirements of their mentors that appear conflicting (e.g., an easy-going mentor who is serious), the main attributes are consistent with the literature and can be a means for mentors to consider enhancing their own interpersonal skills. Modelling and pedagogical knowledge practices are also linked to the literature but have other specifics that may advance contextual practices for the EFL classroom. Further research is required to understand mentors' practices in relation to the mentees' needs for EFL teaching in order to facilitate a change in mentors' practices aligned with their mentees' needs.

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