

THE IMPACT OF MENTORING ON PRIMARY LANGUAGE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT DURING THE PRACTICUM

Stella Kourieos

Introduction

For the last four to five decades, teacher learning has become a major research area in the field of teacher education and has been extensively studied and discussed in the scientific and academic community worldwide. As a consequence, research and publications in this field have increased, especially with regard to the teaching practice (Farell, 2007; Richards & Farell, 2011; Ong'ondo & Borg, 2011; Gebhard, 2009; Caires et al., 2012; Daloglu, 2006; Gurbuz, 2006; Caires & Almeida, 2005), which has come to be recognized as one of the most important components of the teachers' initial Education and their early development. This paper attempts to unveil pre-service teachers' experiences and expectations of their mentors during their practicum in the Cyprus context. Findings from this study allow a deeper understanding of the value attached to the practicum experience as regards (in)effective mentoring from the student teachers' perspectives and call mentors to reassess their current practices.

Background to the study

Between the 1960s and early 1980s effective teaching was associated with the training of the 'right skills' which had to do with the manner in which teachers managed their classrooms, organised activities, planned lessons and generally the way in which their skills, methods, techniques affected pupils' learning. Therefore, much of the guidance given by the mentors, i.e. Teaching Practice (TP) supervisors and cooperating teachers, centred on issues concerning general pedagogical knowledge dealing with general classroom management. Teacher education was therefore rooted within a training framework which focused on the transmission of generic skills and techniques rather than on the content of instruction (Tsang & Rowland, 2005: 2). The main aim of teaching practice was the achievement and application of these skills, which would enable teachers to appear effective without necessarily having any kind of expertise (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986;

Verloop et al., 2001). Such an emphasis, however, on manipulating discrete classroom behaviours and on replicating a particular set of activities has been criticised by Moore (1998), and James (2001) among others as being rather limiting as it provides neither broad perspective nor flexibility of approach. Zuber-Skerritt (1992: 219) asserts that "training, which represents a more traditional approach to teacher preparation, has been shown to be unsatisfactory in recent times when work situations and conditions are rapidly changing and require different competencies than in the past".

Over the past two decades, there has been a gradual shift to the process of *learning to teach* which focuses on producing critical, thinking and most importantly autonomous professionals who will constantly engage in personal construction of meaning, use sound reasoning (Richards, 1998; Johnson, 1999) and theorise from practice rather than passively practise the received knowledge.

This means that teaching practice should no longer be understood as merely putting theory into practice; rather, it should be seen as a learning opportunity in which student teachers engage in the process of thinking *what* and *how* they are doing and the acquisition of an adequate base of facts, principles and experiences from which to reason. In this sense, teaching practice should become the process during which student teachers are helped to make explicit their needs and concerns for teaching (Nilsson, 2008) and to develop the core competences of a language teacher, which include observation skills, self-reflection, critical thinking and decision-making (Kalebic, 2005: 109). According to Neville et al. (2005: 13), "the richness and value of the clinical experience vary depending on the quality of the supervisor and the amount of time she or he spends monitoring and coaching the student". Similarly, Mayer and Austin (1999) argue that the success of the practicum is dependent to a large extent, on the supervisors and their supervision practices. There is little doubt then, that learning to teach is a complex process, which, by no means relies

solely on an individual interest and engagement in this process, but one, which acknowledges and values the involvement of significant others.

This in its turn certainly implies a change in the roles of those involved in the supervision of teachers during the practicum. Teacher candidates should assume a more active and collaborative role in their learning to teach while the teacher educators (TP supervisors and classroom teachers) should take on the role of the facilitator, triggering change through raising the teachers' awareness (Freeman, cited in Richards 1989: 7) and through equipping them with an appropriate knowledge base (Linguistic Competence, Pedagogical Content Knowledge) that should provide the grounds for choices and actions. This requires them to share their expertise with student teachers rather than impose it on them. Their roles should be to propose instructional approaches to the student teachers but at the same time encourage their professional growth through reflection on the process and constructive feedback. Neville et al. (2005) found that many practicum students in Education lacked skills in professional reflection and self-evaluation, which further reduced the ultimate benefit they received from the practicum experience.

The practicum is a very important aspect of language teacher learning (Johnson, 1999; Borg, 2006; Farrell, 2008) and supervision is a key aspect of the practicum (Tang, 2003; Bailey, 2006; Youngs & Bird, 2010). For every student teacher this is a critical period during which the transition from student to teacher occurs under the supervision of 'more knowledgeable' others. This, highlights the need for more extensive research into the impact of key actors (Teaching practice supervisors and cooperating teachers) on teacher candidates' professional development during their initial education, this being the issue that this study seeks to address.

The Cyprus context

In Cyprus Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for primary school teachers takes place via a four-year university programme of study leading to a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree. The curriculum and the Teaching Practice organization at the university where this study took place are typical of other universities in Cyprus (both private and public) where the Teacher Education programme is offered. Students on the BEd programme attend generic courses in educational psychology, philosophy of education and general pedagogy, which provide

them with skills in classroom management and the management of public school systems as well as with knowledge of the basic concepts and of contemporary teaching methods which underpin the teaching of most subjects in the primary curriculum. The aim of the English modules, which are compulsory in most universities in Cyprus (three out of four) where the Teacher Education programme is offered, is the improvement of student teachers' language skills rather than their language teaching skills. Since mastery of the target language is the sole aim of the English language modules, it is often the case that students who have a certificate in the English Language (International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), General Certificate in Education (GCE) Cambridge Proficiency) do not have to attend the English courses.

This programme also includes supervised field experiences (the practicum) in a variety of grade and subject areas. The practicum involves an observation component, which usually takes place in the second year, during which student teachers are required to observe classroom teachers conducting real lessons in schools. It also involves a practice component which takes place in the third and fourth year of the programme. For one semester during the third year, student teachers are required to prepare and teach twenty-five lessons whereas in the fourth year they are required to prepare eighty lesson plans and teach full lessons on a daily basis for a whole semester. Three university lecturers, who are not subject-specialist, are assigned to be the TP supervisors, which means, they have to observe and supervise students during their field experience. One or two supervisors may observe a student each time. However, because of time constraints, they rarely observe each student more than once. Their role is mainly to assess the way student teachers conduct the lesson on the day they are observed. Lesson plans, which student teachers have to prepare for all the subjects they teach during the whole semester, are also a major source for determining student teachers' grades. Their visits to schools are often pre-arranged so the students are informed about the day of their being evaluated beforehand. Part of their role is also to organize a pre-observation and a post-observation seminar; the former is mainly informative and student teachers are given instructions in relation to the number and structure of the lesson plans they are expected to prepare and the aspects of their teaching which

they will be evaluated on. The post-observation seminar is in the form of a shared discussion between all the student teachers and the three TP supervisors and takes place after the teaching practice has been completed. The aim of this seminar is for the student teachers to share their views of the practicum experience and report any kind of difficulties they may have encountered, which, however, are usually associated with discipline and classroom management problems as well as possible shortcomings of the particular school where they completed their field experience, such as lack of facilities and old classrooms.

The TP supervisors are not the only ones responsible for guiding student teachers during the practicum. Another important element in the supervision process is the classroom teachers in the placement schools, who are supposed to observe *all* of the teaching done and unlike the TP supervisors, they do not formally assess the student teachers but should provide advice on planning and teaching and feedback on completion of every lesson conducted by the student teacher. However, the appointment of the classroom teachers is largely decided on by head teachers in schools and the former are not always fully briefed on their role. This means, that, in many cases student teachers take over whole lessons whose methodology and content are dictated by the classroom teachers, yet, in the absence of the latter, leading them to conduct unsupervised lessons with no feedback on their performance. It is also important to mention that classroom teachers are most of the time inadequately or inappropriately qualified to teach English to children as this kind of training (related to English language teaching) was in most cases absent from their initial education.

Methodology

Aim of study and research questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify the kind of impact that mentoring had on student teachers' learning to teach during the practicum. In order to investigate this area, the following three questions were developed:

1. To what extent do you feel that the teaching practice prepares you to teach English as a foreign language in primary schools?
2. To what extent do you feel that you have benefited from the support/guidance you received from the TP supervisors?

3. To what extent do you feel that you have benefited from the support/guidance you received from the classroom teacher?

The first question sought to investigate the extent to which participants felt that mere exposure to real teaching was sufficient in preparing them for the realities of primary language teaching. The other two questions were more directly related to the specific support from supervisors and classroom teachers.

Data collection and analysis

Data were gathered through focus group interviews with 14 student teachers studying at a private university in Cyprus. The comparisons which participants make among each other's experiences, comments and behaviour are a valuable source of insights into complex behaviours and motivations (Morgan, 1997), which is why I felt that focus groups were an appropriate instrument of data collection for the purposes of this study. Student teachers were chosen based on year of study (one group of 3rd year and one group of 4th year student teachers), language teaching experience during the practicum, interest in the study and accessibility. In order to encourage more free expression of views and a more honest sharing of experiences, the student teachers were divided into two focus groups based on friendship groupings.

Following guidelines in Braun and Clarke (2006), and Dörnyei (2007), the data were transcribed and analysed thematically; that is, they were primarily grouped in relation to the pre-determined questions outlined in the focus group interview protocols and subsequently, based on participants' overlapping responses/comments, they were classified into three more focused categories (The role and suitability of the TP supervisor, The role and suitability of the classroom teacher, the prescriptive nature of the practicum). Relevant ethical issues such as confidentiality, anonymity and permission to withdraw from the study were fully considered during the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation (Cohen et al., 2007).

Results and discussion

What was particularly interesting in participants' comments was the fact that while they felt that the teaching practice could contribute invaluablely to teacher learning as it allows for the practical application of the theoretical aspects of language teaching studied at university, it would be fragmented if the support and guidance given by those involved in their education was

insufficient and had little bearing on their real needs. Their comments revealed that they were not solely concerned with developing their practical classroom know-how but also with developing an understanding of particular issues through reflection and evaluation (Ellis, 1997). Special emphasis was placed on three areas: The role and suitability of the Teaching Practice supervisor, the role of the classroom teacher and the prescriptive nature of the practicum, which was again attributed to the former.

The role and suitability of the TP supervisor

Participants' reported feelings indicated that they did not 'interpret' the practicum as a learning opportunity but as an assessment period during which their successes depended on the extent to which they managed to teach the lesson in a way that was considered 'right' by the TP supervisors and their mistakes were turned into low grades rather than learning opportunities.

Participants also showed dissatisfaction with the infrequent visits of the TP supervisors in schools, their limited knowledge of the subject-matter they were supposed to give feedback on and most importantly the lack of constructive feedback they received from them. The TP supervisors were negatively criticised by five participants, who argued that the fact that they were not specialized in the subjects they were asked to evaluate prevented them from giving student teachers any useful advice or feedback on the methods or activities they used which were specific to the particular subject. Verbal feedback was rarely given but when it was, it centred around the aspect of general pedagogy and classroom management issues and was in the form of vague comments on their overall approach such as "good lesson today" or "not very good today, you could have done better" without really getting into more detail. This, as they claimed, did not leave much space for improvement because they were never aware of what aspects of their teaching needed to be improved and which ones went well. The comments of two student teachers regarding the feedback they were given indicated that it did not seem appropriate to ELT and it did not help them in any way develop professionally:

Personally, I would like the TP supervisors to give us more constructive feedback. For example, I would like to know the criteria based on which I am evaluated. Getting a grade which I don't know what represents is not helpful at all! It's really not a matter of getting A, B or C but a matter of knowing how the supervisor ended up giving me this grade.

My biggest problem is, not knowing what I do wrong. I need to have the opportunity to talk to the TP supervisor otherwise I don't see how I can develop into a good teacher. If I continue getting B, it's obvious that I do something wrong, and if they don't tell me what I do wrong I cannot improve, so for me the TP as it is now doesn't serve its purpose.

Student teachers were thus generally deprived of feedback on English language teaching (Ong'ondo & Borg, 2011), which meant that they were unlikely to develop their pedagogical content knowledge, an essential skill for every professional teacher. Participants felt that this pattern was related to lack of content and content-specific pedagogy due to limitations in the TP supervisors' knowledge base in relation to the subject-matter, findings which were also found in the studies of Borko and Mayfield (1995), and Nilsson and Van Driel (2010). This inevitably turned the practicum into a stressful, disempowering and unproductive experience for participants whose aim became to please 'significant others' in order to get a good grade which made their transforming into a teacher a difficult and sometimes impossible task to be accomplished. It was evident from the participants' comments that they felt they would have benefitted more from discussions in which they would have had the chance to explain and discuss their views and perceptions of their teaching. In other words, they preferred the supervisors' feedback to be more constructive and reflective in a supportive and non-threatening way, a finding which was also found in a study carried out by Hyland and Lo (2006).

Another negative aspect reported by the participants regarding the role of the TP supervisors had to do with the fact that the latter were unfamiliar with the students and the school context, thus unsuitable to provide useful feedback. With a few exceptions the university supervisors were reported as having played a limited role in the process of learning to teach. Their role seems to reflect the traditional knowledge-transmission model to teacher learning which treats student teachers as passive receivers of knowledge rather than active sense-makers. They seem to be dominant figures who are 'in control' of the learning process while student teachers are the passive listeners who are expected to agree with their opinion and ultimately follow their prescription, or at least give this impression. These findings were consistent with the studies of Hyland and Lo (2006), and Gebbard and Oprandy (1999) which found that the pre-service teachers accepted the

dominant role of supervisors in the feedback process due to the assessing roles the latter held, which forced pre-service teachers to accept their comments rather than disagree and negotiate with them. This clearly fails to view the TP supervisor as a teacher *educator* (Richards, 1989) capable of providing a supportive environment with enhanced learning opportunities where student teachers are helped to identify areas for development, to become willing to investigate themselves and their teaching, to become better at noticing and to develop complex, insightful and 'robust reasoning' (Scaife & Scaife, 1996; Bailey, 2006).

The role and suitability of the classroom teacher

Bearing the obvious dissatisfaction expressed by the participants regarding the limited and unproductive mentoring received by the TP supervisors, they tended to view classroom teachers as having more experience and wisdom and therefore placed more value on the support and guidance received by them. They seemed to believe that prospective teachers could be helped to a great extent by working closely with a classroom teacher and stressed the importance of receiving verbal feedback as opposed to grades given by the TP supervisors. Most participants (9 out of 14) felt that cooperating teachers were in a better position to help prospective teachers because, unlike TP supervisors whose feedback was mainly based on the theories they taught, classroom teachers could provide them with advice and feedback which were based on their own experience and thus closer to reality. The following comments are indicative of the importance placed on the feedback received by the classroom teacher:

She always checked the lesson plan I had prepared before I started the lesson, and then she would probably suggest replacing certain exercises or activities either because the others would be more effective or because they would take long and time was not enough. This helped me a lot in managing my time which I believe it's one of the most important aspects of language teaching and something that needs time and practice to achieve.

Apart from the fact that I actually taught a real class during my teaching practice, which was, of course, useful, looking back now I feel I was particularly helped by the classroom teacher. She always gave me advice on how to structure my lesson, what activities to include and then he would comment on how the lesson went, commenting on the time allocated to each activity.

The expertise of the classroom teachers was perceived to stem from their daily contact with

the curriculum and the classroom, which led them to have a sound practical knowledge of the curriculum, which is not readily available to the TP supervisors. Similarly, four participants posited that there was a big gap between the theory learnt at university and actual teaching practice in schools, arguing that it was the cooperating teacher who could really tell student teachers what really went on in classroom and how to handle pupils. Three participants had a slightly different view regarding the role attached to the classroom teachers. Although they also agreed that student teachers could gain a lot from classroom teachers, they pointed out that the latter should act as advisors rather than the prime educators for future teachers involved in language teaching. They explained that most primary teachers who were currently teaching English were not adequately trained and therefore not suitable to educate others.

The importance of classroom teachers on student teachers' professional development was also highlighted by Saffold (cited in Pekkanli, 2011: 601) who claims that "functioning as experts, cooperating (classroom) teachers provide authentic, experiential learning opportunities through modeling and through their actions and articulated ways of thinking, they teach new teachers effective skills and strategies". Because of the significance attached to the classroom teachers' contribution in the process of helping student teachers learn to teach, participants stressed the importance of them being adequately trained and willing to responsibly take on their mentoring roles, which, as they reported was rarely the case.

The prescriptive nature of the practicum

Apart from that, participants of this study argued against the prescriptive nature of the practicum which allowed no flexibility in approach and materials; on the contrary, it seemed to serve as an opportunity to use those prescriptive practices outlined during lectures or those which they were 'dictated' to perform by the TP supervisor or the classroom teacher, most of the time without any form of observation or feedback. The need to be given more freedom to take risks, experiment and generally put into practice the full range of theories they have learnt at university, was therefore expressed:

It's very important to be given some kind of freedom regarding teaching material or teaching approach followed but of course always according to the prescribed syllabus. During my TP I seemed to cooperate quite well

with the classroom teacher until one day she seemed quite upset because I had prepared my own material. She expected me to use the material she had given me and to approach the lesson in the same way as she would. For me, this cannot help you learn. You need to create material, use your own activities, and learn from being completely involved in the process of teaching. Now simply following somebody's orders doesn't mean much.

Similar findings were found in the studies of Doval and Rial (2002), and Mattheoudakis (2007). Johnson (1994: 47) posits that "if the aim of teacher education programmes is to provide student teachers with opportunities to experience real teaching, then teacher educators (in this case the practicum mentors) should make sure that student teachers are granted a reasonable amount of control over what and how they will teach, so that they can test their emerging conceptions of teaching".

Participants' comments revealed that they did not view teacher knowledge as being developed through practicing the received knowledge, but, as being shared, negotiated and co constructed in an environment which allows for a discursive reflection on their teaching practices. Therefore, their conceptions on how teacher knowledge develops does not reflect a need for a prescriptive approach to teacher learning, which seems to be what they have experienced, but a more reflective one which is based on discussion and reflective feedback. It has been widely agreed in the literature that the feedback which the student teachers receive during the observation and in the post-observation feedback sessions about their practices by either TP supervisors or classroom teachers, should be reflective in nature in order to serve as a bridge between theory and practice (Peacock, 2001; Yuksel, 2011). As this study has indicated, feedback that is not based on reflection, is judgmental, serves short-term goals (grades), is intended to confirm the way of delivering the lesson on particular days and is therefore meaningless, stressful and ineffective. Reflective feedback, on the other hand, is a kind of feedback which promotes internal questioning on pre-service teachers' practices and which aims to integrate personal theories, theoretical knowledge and classroom experience, on both individual and collective level (Orland-Barak, and Richards & Lockhart, cited in Yuksel, 2011: 39).

Reflective feedback however, not only involves the individual reflecting on his/her own practices but it also promotes reflection as part of dialogue between the giver, either the TP

supervisor or the classroom teacher and the receiver of feedback, and in this context, it supports the principle of collaborative learning. The aim of reflection should be an integral part of any raising-awareness activities that form part of teacher education programmes. According to Ellis (1997: 27), "the assumption which underlies the use of awareness-raising activities is that the practice of actual teaching can be improved by making student teachers aware of the options open to them and the principles by which they can evaluate the alternatives". Allied to this premise, Freeman (cited in Bailey 2006: 36) argues that one acts or responds to the aspects of a situation of which one is aware. This argument is supported by participants' comments in relation to the feedback they received, which failed to make them aware of their deficiencies or strengths and consequently of any changes required in order to become better teachers. Similar findings were also reported in the studies of Doval & Rial (2002), and Mohamed (2006), where participants said they had rarely been observed while teaching in schools and received no feedback on their teaching, which is why they remained unaware of their inadequacies and could not improve their teaching.

The role and importance of an awareness-raising component during the practicum was investigated and highlighted in a study carried out by Tuzel and Alkan (2009) who found that systematic language awareness activities which occurred under the guidance of TP supervisors and classroom teachers have helped student teachers gain confidence in risk-taking and identify their needs and problems in a more focused way.

Conclusions and implications

The findings drawn from this study support the notion that mentoring serves as a catalyst in student teachers' process of learning to teach. The role of supportive, suitably-qualified and credible mentors has indeed been emphasized. It has become evident that mentors must have a sound knowledge of the subject-matter they are supervising, knowledge about subject-specific methodology which will enable them to provide useful feedback, skills in engaging student teachers in awareness-raising activities in meaningful and non-threatening ways as well as enthusiasm and willingness to perform their mentoring roles responsibly. This means that mentors' suitability and ability to create functional learning and teaching environments

are crucial in leading student teachers into becoming reflective, critical, autonomous professionals, prepared for the complexities of the teaching profession.

Mentors should therefore move away from their prescriptive, assessing roles to the adoption of more assisting, mediating roles (Scaife & Scaife, 1996; Bailey, 2006). TP supervisors should put more effort into visiting and supporting student teachers during their field experience by providing them with as much feedback as possible regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their lesson, instead of simply assessing it with a grade or a comment on their overall pedagogical approach. These results may have implications for the importance of post-observation feedback sessions in raising student teachers' awareness of the aspects of their teaching that need to be improved, which would eventually help them become better teachers. Finally classroom teachers should take more responsibility for their advisory roles and should be made aware that their presence in the classroom and their continuous support of the student teachers are essential components in their preparation (Borko & Mayfield 1995). They should be more flexible and allow or even encourage student teachers to experiment with new methods and ideas. It would also be advisable for both TP supervisors and classroom teachers, whose role, I believe, is the most crucial in the process of helping student teachers learn to teach, to be provided with some kind of training for their supervisory and mentoring roles. Such changes in mentors' roles reflect a constructivist approach to teacher education; an effective mentor should use skilful questioning to dig out teachers' personal theories, showing trainees (student teachers) ways to filter or interpret training interventions or input "so that it fits in with their framework of thinking about teaching" (Roberts, 1998: 27).

The results outlined in the present study are context-specific, yet, they could be useful in creating an awareness of the aspects of the practicum that need to be modified or improved in order to make it a process that would really support the initial development of primary English language teachers. Such aspects mainly relate to the kind of support and guidance required for the professional development of student teachers during the practicum as well as to the kind of knowledge and skills that TP supervisors and classroom teachers are expected to have in order to fulfil their roles more productively. The findings of this study also

highlight the importance of listening to the voices of those directly involved in primary language teaching (student teachers) and to consider the difficulties that they face within the process of learning to teach. Encouraging them to reflect on and interpret the teaching situations they are engaged in is surely a fundamental basis for quality in Teacher preparation programmes.

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