

The (potential) impact of Mentoring on English language teaching in Chile at school level

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Abstract

This article briefly surveys the various uses of the newfangled term Mentor and its recent application(s) in the realm of English language teaching. It also presents successful experiences of mentoring programmes in the light of the needs of the Chilean education system.

Key words: Mentor, mentee, mentor trainer, mentoring programme

Resumen

El presente artículo revisa los diversos del novedoso término Mentor y las aplicaciones recientes en el ámbito de la enseñanza del inglés. Presenta, además, algunas experiencias exitosas de programas de Mentoría a la luz de las necesidades del sistema de educacional chileno.

Palabras clave: Mentor, mentee (quien recibe la guía de un mentor), entrenador de mentores, programa de mentoría.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring is a new buzz word which has gradually crept into the high-flow pedagogical parlance; yet the scant literature available makes it difficult for those involved in English language teaching to grasp the true underlying meaning.

When reviewing the literature, we find that the various uses of the term 'mentor' share the some core features. Mentor, following the Greek mythology, was the son of Alcumus and a friend of Odysseus, who entrusted Mentor with his son and his palace; hence the strong sense of somebody caring contained in the subsequent applications of the term.

A broad survey of the literature (Malderez & Bodóczyk: 1999; Randall & Thornton: 2001; Wajnryb: 1995) suggests that a mentor is somebody who:

- (i) helps young people achieve their potential;
- (ii) encourages positive choices and promotes high self-esteem;
- (iii) is caring and devotes time to a younger person;
- (iv) develops in mentees self-awareness and interpersonal skills;
- (v) inspires and shows the mentee the ropes;
- (vi) acts as a sounding board;
- (vii) is there for you when the mentee is going through a bad patch.

The above characterisation seems to accommodate to the fairly varied array of settings in which the term is being used, viz. day-to-day living, workplace, schools, faith-based communities, business, and English language teaching –amongst others.

It has been found, for instance, that the impact of mentors in a day-to-day living context can be indeed far-reaching. A report from the book *Handbook of Youth mentoring* by DuBois, D. & Karcher, M. (2000), claims that youth who meet regularly with their mentors are 46% less likely than their peers to start using illegal drugs. In workplace, mentors help young people set career goals, aside from teaching them how to seek and secure jobs; in schools, the dropout rate is dramatically reduced on account of the work done by mentors. As can be expected, in faith-based communities, there exists a long tradition of instilling spiritual values in the form of discipleship.

2. Mentoring in English language teaching

The origins of Mentoring in English language teaching can be traced back to the early 90s in Hungary, where the structure of the curriculum changed into a four-year programme, whereby three of which were devoted to the major –English proper and the skills and knowledge required by novice teachers, plus one solid year of teaching practice. This meant a whole re-structuring process where the school-based supervisor was urged to take on clear-cut responsibilities that had formerly fallen out the scope of a traditional supervisor. First and foremost, as Malderez & Bodóczy put it (1999: 1), they closely collaborated with university-based tutors who put their heads together in order to help the student-teacher (or mentee, for that matter) to ‘achieve the aims and objectives of the programme’. As the aforementioned book states, some of the new responsibilities taken on by the spin-off mentor involve (ibid) ‘helping student-teachers to demonstrate:

- (i) ability in planning, implementing and evaluating appropriate learning experiences for their pupils
- (ii) ability in using and where necessary adapting ELT textbooks commonly in use in schools
- (iii) ability in evaluating and reflecting on their own teaching
- (iv) ability in modifying their teaching strategies in the light of self-evaluation and peer evaluation
- (v) ability in dealing with the most common role relationships, conflicts, negotiations, counselling, needs, etc. encountered in the world of school

Even though mentoring in English language teaching started off as an impromptu scheme, whose theoretical underpinnings are partly based upon –as the authors (*ibid*: 2) admit– their ‘own experiences in motherhood, psychiatric nursing, counselling, training and drama, teaching, as well as EFL teaching and teacher education’, it is interesting to observe the momentum that mentoring has gained over the last years. So much so that by quickly surfing the Net, one learns, for instance, that ‘the project ‘PRESETT PARTNERSHIP: Towards a Coherent and Effective Partnership Between Universities and Schools in Pre-service Teacher Education’’ was launched by The British Council in the summer of 2002 in Latvia’, and that there was a mentor training course in November 2004 in Serbia and Montenegro, and that the teaching programme in Manchester involves teaching ‘classes under the guidance of an experienced English teacher who acts as your mentor...who observes some of the lessons... and helps to plan the lessons, deal with marking and assessment and improve ...teaching skills’.

3. The need for a mentoring programme in Chile

Teacher-training colleges in Chile used to offer five-year programmes, yet the curricula in most programmes are being compressed into four years without necessarily introducing the changes conducive to effective English teaching at school level. It has become evident that English teachers, particularly trainees, are in dire need of support from, as Jeffrey and Ferguson put it (1992), ‘...an older and more experienced person’ who must, in turn, be able to maintain a sound relationship with the teacher-training college. Sadly, this inter-connection amongst the above entities (plus the Ministry of Education, local authorities, the school PTA, and so on) is most often virtually non-existent. The full implementation of a large-scale mentoring programme will surely have an impact in the quality of English teaching(/learning) at school level.

3.1 Some testimonies gathered as a Mentor Trainer, lecturer, and seminar group supervisor

First-hand compelling testimonies from some of the mentor teachers I have trained, seminar students doing their practicum and school children attest to the claims made in 3.0. Some of the disheartening accounts I have informally collected over the last months can be summed up as follows:

- (i) A fair number of (school-based) English teachers grade their students

on the basis of the neatness of their writing, for no real content teaching takes place. Why such 'teachers' do this falls outside the scope of the present discussion.

- (ii) A fair number of school-based teachers see in teacher trainee some breathing space, and thus hand over their classes, together with course-books, to the 'newcomer' who inevitably feels utterly helpless when s/he sees that the person who epitomises their hope literally walks off.
- (iii) Contrary to the scenario described above, there are other school teachers who won't allow teacher trainees to even greet their students. Consequently, teacher trainees are relegated to a seat at the back of the room to devote themselves to their note-taking.
- (iv) English teachers insist on de-contextualised verb conjugations to students as young as 7 year-olds.
- (v) A significant number of 'English teachers' find themselves performing a role they were not trained for, particularly at secondary-school level. Some of them are given no choice when the allocation of hours for the following year is decided on. As a result, teachers whose command of the English language can well be equated with that of the students are assigned hours of English teaching, and are faced with the dilemma of teaching a language they might even dislike.

In sum, I trust the overall quality of teaching and learning of English will certainly improve by establishing a much-needed permanent connection between teacher-training colleges and schools, and by installing mentors in every district.

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