Narrative Approach to Explore Mentees’ Perceptions

Sasiporn Phongploenpis, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

Abstract: In Thailand, EFL mentees meet challenges in schools during a one year school placement and one of them is the quality of the support from mentors. The present study aims to acknowledge the gap between idealistic and realistic roles of mentors and to shed some light on a sustainable and successful mentoring training programme as well as the criteria and processes used to select experienced teachers to serve as EFL mentors. In this study of two English student teachers, narrative accounts both in written and verbal were employed to investigate the two research questions as follows: “through the lens of mentees, what kinds of support did they receive and expect from their mentors?”, and “how did mentees feel about the support they received from their mentors?” All data were analysed by following the procedures of qualitative content analysis. Even though there are substantial guides to mentoring, the findings acknowledge that the actual scaffoldings mentees received did not match with what is said in sociocultural theory. The mentees still required more scaffolding from their mentors especially concerning reflections on their teaching practices. The study seeks to raise awareness of problems during teaching practicum period by focusing on the support given by mentors and to encourage the formation of appropriate scaffolding given by mentors to student teachers during their school placement.

Keywords: EFL mentors/mentees, teaching practicum, scaffolding, narrative research

Introduction

According to socio-cultural perspectives, learning can emerge in particular locations (Richards, 2008). As such, the experience of school placement is essential for all student teachers on teacher education programmes. One of the professional standards announcements of the Secretariat Office of the Teacher’s Council of Thailand relates to teachers’ experience (Pilan thananond, 2007), stating that, a student teacher must complete teaching functions in a school for one academic year. Experiences of teaching practices in a school shape learning in regard to teacher development and teacher education that is dependent on relationships with mentors (Richards 2008).

Student teachers expect support from cooperating schools, especially their mentors. Medwell (2007) acknowledges that mentors are expected to provide support such as observing some of student teachers’ teaching and giving feedback, and being aware of student teachers’ workload. In this sense, the mentor’s role has a major influence on student teachers’ teaching and learning attitude, as well as socialisation during their teaching practicum. Farrell (2001) defines ‘socialisation’ as the process of becoming a member of the teaching profession, involving learning teaching methodologies and all pedagogical requirements. Farrell (2001), in his case study of one trainee teacher, found that there was a lack of support and communication from the school and colleagues during his teaching practicum, and this resulted in de-motivation with respect to his future teaching career. A mentor’s role has a great impact on teacher learners; however, according to Yan and He (2010), of the six most common problems occurring during the teaching practicum, one is little supervision by supervisors and mentors.
There is little understanding of how mentors manage and reflect on their advisory practice in terms of supporting their mentees (Clarke, 2006). Exploring and reflecting on how mentors support their mentees and on mentees’ difficulties during teaching practicum can help teacher educators solve problems of education programmes more effectively. Based on the research rationale, the research questions investigated in the present study are: “through the lens of mentees, what kinds of support did they receive and expect from their mentors?”, and “how did mentees feel about the support they received from their mentors?”

**Literature Review**

Socio-cultural theory for learning and teaching is grounded in the present study. It is to reveal the crucial role of a mentor and mentoring processes enabling student teachers to become more competent and gradually autonomous in handling duties during the teaching practicum. I begin by reviewing the research literature on three areas: mentor teachers’ roles from socio-cultural perspectives, challenges of the teaching practicum, and narrative research in TESOL.

**Mentor teachers’ roles from socio-cultural perspectives**

When a student teacher starts a professional placement at a school site, s/he will be trained by and assessed by a school mentor. Dennen (2004) states that mentoring refers to the relationship between a more experienced teacher and a novice one. Veteran teachers, hereafter mentors, are expected to assist novices or mentees to realise their potential and to overcome some barriers as well as developing a career for them. Undertaking a case study examining mentor mentee perceptions toward collaborative interaction and assistance, Samaras and Gismondi (1998) reported that student teachers have seen support they gained from partnership practicum as a solution of dilemmas and a gateway to knowledge of pedagogy, of learners and content knowledge.

Samaras and Gismondi (1998) acknowledge the Vygotskian principle saying that cognition involving learning, thinking and knowing is always socially mediated, internalised, and arises from social relationships, and learning becomes internalised when mediation to address a real problem occurs. It might be argued mentees can solve immediate problems and expand their understanding and knowledge about teaching profession through mentor mentee interaction and scaffolding from their mentors. For example, eliciting his/her mentees’ personal stories and critical incidents occurring during field experience, mentors can enable their mentees to frame and reframe their stories to mediate their teaching beliefs and professional development (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2007).

Dennen (2004) states that social constructivist learning theory is the fundamental principle of scaffolding, modelling, mentoring, and coaching as methods of teaching and learning, and of learning occurring in authentic settings. Scaffolding is a provision of guidance and scaffolding in education involves helping learners reach their goals with a good structure during the early stages of a learning activity. The structure is gradually removed when they internalise and master the needed skills (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Dennen, 2004). For example, through asking questions, mentors can assess how much scaffolding mentees need (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2007). In addition, mentors observe their mentees to understand their needs regarding the teaching practices and through considering the needs in this way, mentors use direct and guided instruction to help with their mentee’s most immediate need (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2007).
Mentoring is a form of scaffolding (Dennen, 2004). According to Goos (1999, p.11), “the theory behind the mentoring process originated from the scaffolding interpretation of the zone of proximal development.” Grounded in socio-cultural theories of learning, the mentoring relationship generates knowledge, hereafter teacher knowledge, through social interaction and contexts where learners gradually become able to survive in the particular community with scaffolds through the available greater expertise (Whipp, 2003). Mentors as a mirror reflect on mentees’ teaching beliefs through questions and rephrasing their response so that mentees can reconsider their initial thoughts and conclusion about their teaching (Yendo-Hoppey & Dana, 2007). When mentees are confident in ones’ teaching ability, mentors gradually remove the scaffolding, by for example refusing to answer some questions and letting mentees make a decision (Yendo-Hoppey & Dana, 2007). As soon as mentees are ready to survive on their own, mentors gradually removes support and encourages them to become more independent (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2007).

Goos (1999, p.11) states that “the mentor’s role in scaffolding involves modelling strategies to analyse lessons, offering feedback on their mentees’ work, questioning to elicit reflections that the mentees would not produce alone, and providing a consistent structure to help them organise and explain their experience.” A mentor could be a role model in this regard through four steps of reflective coaching cycle given by Yendol-Hoppey and Dana (2007). They explain that the cycle starts from building a trusting relationship between mentors and mentees and sharing each other their teaching and learning philosophy (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2007). Then mentors engage mentees in a ‘preconference visualisation’ of mentees’ selected lessons and guide them in the strategies and tactics to be used (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2007). After that, mentors observe mentees’ teaching acts to discover their needs. Lastly, both parties engage in a post-lesson conference to collaboratively review the teaching performance and to set a teaching and learning action plan for future lessons (Yendol-Hoppey & Dana, 2007).

Dennen (2004) presents two types of scaffolding, namely directive scaffolding and supportive scaffolding. Directive scaffolding as a part of teacher-centeredness means that an instructor devises skills and strategies to teach specified content, whereas supportive scaffolding as learner centeredness allows learners to construct knowledge in collaboration with others (Dennen, 2004). Samaras and Gismondi (1998, p. 717) suggest that “instructions should be aimed at the learner’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) where the mentor and mentees shared responsibility to enhance learning through mentor-mentee relationships in the form of content-specific, contingent feedback and reflective assessment.”

Through a variety of interaction forms, the mentors help the mentees concretise and reveal expert knowledge. The role of cooperation and collaboration is necessary. By these roles, mentors have an influence on new teachers in terms of work socialization, career satisfaction, professional perceptions, teaching philosophies, instructional practices, as well as the decision to continue working in the teaching field (Hammon & Romano, 2009, p. 2). However, the mentor’s roles might not be able to take a supportive scaffolding approach because of many limitations which will be discussed in the next section.

**The challenges of teaching practicum**

According to the General Assembly of the State of Indiana, mentors in the Beginning Teacher Internship Program (BTIP) should have four qualifications: having at least five years of teaching experience, teaching at a same grade level and/or similar subjects as mentees,
teaching in the same building as mentees, and being able to guide their mentees through mentor’s teaching experience (Abell, Dillon, Hopkins, McInerney, & O’Brien, 1995). However, appointed mentors in Thai schools are not always fitted with these four criteria because of the teacher shortage.

The research on mentor quality conducted by Arnold (2006) illustrates that the best mentor is firstly a person who can share the mentee’s sense of humour and is sensitive to the mentee’s feelings, religion, and experiences. However, Hudson et al. (2008) find out that less than 50% of 106 Vietnamese student teachers responses to their mentors’ personal attributes as supportive (46%), assisted in reflecting (45%), listened attentively (44%) and instilled positive attitudes (42%).

Arnold (2006) states that the second element is a high standard of professional qualities and knowledge; however, a mentee of his study reported that his/her mentor emphasised on the number of pages that the mentee would cover in one lesson rather than observing his/her teaching practice and helping him/her reflect on what s/he did. Furthermore, Hudson et al. (2008) reveal that the most necessary support, from the mentees’ perspectives, involving pedagogical knowledge is a guidance on teaching preparation and assistance with classroom management (52% each).

According to Arnold (2006), the third element includes the ability to model proper behaviour: “commitment and enthusiasm” (p. 118), to observe lessons attentively and to give useful feedback indicating mentees’ weaknesses and helping them develop their teaching ability. On the contrary, the majority of mentors in his research let their mentee struggle with planning lessons despite regular meetings and some mentees found the feedback useless and inappropriate (Arnold 2006). Relevant to the study undertaken by Edwards and Protheroe (2004), 79% of feedback conversation given by mentors is “descriptive reiterations of observed events” (p. 185) and this kind of feedback does not enhance professional development in student teachers.

Providing proper supports as the fourth element in his framework for evaluating mentor qualities of Arnold (2006) involves personal support (helping mentees overcome feelings of anxiety) and professional support (developing mentees and being responsive to their needs as teachers). However, his participants’ narratives acknowledged that most mentors were concerned about mentees’ English proficiency. On the contrary, English ability is not the main concern of mentees but classroom and discipline problems are (Arnold 2006). By sceptical views about less English proficiency of mentees, mentors restrict mentees to teach as a study of Yan and He (2010) stating that through reflective paper-writing of 210 Chinese student teachers on EFL teacher education program, mentors do not trust mentees’ teaching ability and assign many routine tasks instead of providing opportunity to teach.

Mentors seem uncertain with their roles when working with their mentees, Clarke (2006) investigates how five mentors understand their work with student teachers. By the in-depth interview with five mentors, the emergent expressions are constant uncertainty, anxiety, and insecurity after reflecting themselves on their advisory practices (Clarke, 2006). According to the self-reflections, mentors admit that they fail to provide proper feedback to their mentees and that they require professional development in feedback strategies in making and sharing judgments about their mentees’ teaching practices (Clarke, 2006). Unclear definitions and
expectations about support and supervision cause role confusion which results in less favourable teaching practicum (Hammon & Romano, 2009).

Narrative research in TESOL
The attraction to narratives has evolved into the field of language education and has encouraged language teachers to critically reflect on their own identities and positioning in society. Richards (2008) states that associating with critical self-reflection narratives, student teachers are aware of their own identities as non-native speaker and become realise if such identities force them into limitation of teaching abilities to fulfil their potential. Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) have also used narrative frames in their research on investigating the experiences of language teachers, as well as Barkhuizen (2008) has used narrative approach to explore context in language teaching.

Clandinin et al. (2007) state that narrative inquiry is an educational research methodology exploring lived experience of teachers and teacher educators. While recounting their stories of experience, teachers have an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and gain an understanding of their teaching knowledge and practice (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). Narrative inquiry comes out of people consciously telling their experiences through lively stories (Bell, 2002). Bell (2002) used narrative approach examining L2 literacy and found that narrative enabled him to gain more understanding in his participants’ learning struggle and to discover hidden research assumptions directing implications for teaching and learning. Researching on the appropriate supports to mentees, Beattie (2000) asserts that the narrative inquiry allowed mentees’ voices to be heard as they spoke out their anxiety and ways of learning experience and of education life. Narrative inquiry is; therefore, a particular valuable approach for members of language teacher education as well as TESOL profession. Despite narratives produced by a small number of participants, the attentive analysis could produce evidence being able to provide a meaningful understanding to share with a whole community (Elloitt 2005).

Research Methodology
This research was conducted by using an interpretive qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore kinds of support mentees received and expected from their mentors, and their perceptions toward the support they received during their field experience. I collected the data after they were successful from the teaching practicum and had already graduated Bachelor of Education degree (English major) from a Thai university. Pseudonyms were used for all names of mentees throughout the paper.

Participants
The criteria for selecting the participants included voluntary participation, the student teachers who were under my supervision, and who were supervised by different mentors. Of the seven student teachers initially approached, three were best fit the criteria. One student teacher withdrew from the study so it was completed by two student teachers majoring in English. Yaya was placed in a primary school. Her mentor has 25 years of teaching experience. She is the only teacher majoring in English and she is also appointed as a vice director of academic affairs. The mentor’s office is located in the other building. Pip was placed in a secondary school. Her mentor is one of four English teachers in the school. She has two years of teaching experience. Both of them work in the same teacher’s room.
Data collection and data analysis
Narrative accounts were written in Thai by Yaya and Pip. They recounted kinds of support given by their mentors during one year field experience. They also provided verbal narrative accounts in the form of the one-on-one interview using Thai language. It was audio-taped unstructured online interviews, approximately 45-60 minutes in length. I adapted the Balan type (Elliott, 2005) grid given to them completing before the interview. The complete grid depicted the experience of their school placement from the beginning to the end in relation to their responsibilities and indirect or direct support from their mentors. During the interview, nine item-open-ended questions were used to elicit interviewees to recount on specific time and situations. Subsequently both written and verbal narrative accounts were translated into English by me and latterly reviewed by the participants. Finally, all data were analysed by following the procedures of qualitative content analysis.

Research Findings
In this section, I shall discuss the themes of this study based on the data from the findings, supported with quotes from the narrative accounts. I have organised these findings according to the two research questions: “through the lens of mentees, what kinds of support did they receive and expect from their mentors?” and “how did mentees feel about the support they received from their mentors?” Following the discussion of the findings, I shall interpret the results of the study in the light of the literature findings.

Theme one: Support mentees received and expected from their mentors
The analysis emerged from three major sub-categories and characterised perceptions of two student teachers toward ‘support of teaching practices’, ‘support of non-teaching practices’ and ‘no support given’. The feelings towards the support they received and did not receive will be explored in the ‘theme two’ section.

Sub-theme one: Support of teaching practices
Support of teaching practices could be provided before, during and after teaching. Pre-teaching support includes guidance (scaffolding) on lesson preparation, in-teaching support includes teaching observation and post-teaching support includes teaching evaluations and reflections. The narrative accounts reported that two mentors observed only the first teaching practice of two student teachers. Yaya said, “My mentor observed only my first teaching act in both grades. For the next teaching, I taught the pupils and control my classrooms myself.” They received the good support in terms of managing and getting rid of disruptive behaviours occurring during their teaching. Pip said, “My mentor is always available to support me when my students are too noisy or have a fight with other students passing my teaching class.” Both of them agreed that classroom management and discipline were important and they desired that their mentor could help them handle classes with misbehaving students. Yaya said, “I told her that one of the students did not study attentively and talked with the others. She only entered the classroom and told that student to behave oneself.”

Sub-theme two: Support of non teaching practices
Apart from the teaching practices, two student teachers were responsible for administrative tasks. They stated that their mentors did not protect them from excessive responsibilities and did not provide them sufficient support. Pip said, “As a junior teacher in the school, she could not protect me from not being tasked by the other teachers.”
Scaffolding in designing English tests and in justifying forms of all kinds of evaluation was given through mentors’ advice and questions. Pip said, “She said that the tests should relate to knowledge the students learnt from classes and be suitable for all levels of students. Yaya said, “My mentor only asked why I made the tests so difficult for the students and if the students learns what they were tested.” Instead of the test design, the feedbacks given focus on grammatical errors and the format of the tests. Pip said, “When I submitted my test to her, she corrected some items which were grammatically wrong. Then the tests were passed to the head department who asked me to make the tests tidy-looking.”

**Sub-theme three: No support given**

When the student teachers cannot refuse to be tasked, the excessive work resulted in their quality of teaching practices. Pip said, “Because of these (administrative) tasks, I had not enough time to prepare my teaching and to check my students’ homework. Additionally, these tasks overwhelmed my performance on teaching practices.” Unfortunately, scaffolds could not be given to the mentees properly because the mentors are too busy and have not any experiences on these tasks. Pip said, “My mentor did not advise me how to complete the jobs because she had no experiences in administrative field.” Yaya said, “However, I had to work on my own most of the time. She is busy with academic work.” Scaffolds, in this case, are in the form of clear instruction and examples which can facilitate mentees’ learning and overcome difficulties appeared in the tasks. Yaya said, “In some cases, she did not explain anything. I needed clear instructions and an example to do the job.”

Yaya also required more feedbacks and comments in relation to the design of English tests but her mentor did not provide any. She said, “Seemingly, she thought that all my tests were correct. She accepted there might be some students who failed the test because she thought that most of students’ English are usually not so good.” In addition, Yaya added that she had to create her own ways to assess student’s English learning skills and her students’ behaviour without any support. She said, “My mentor accepted the results I got from the way I evaluated the students’ English are usually not so good.” In addition, Yaya added that she had to create her own ways to assess student’s English learning skills and her students’ behaviour without any support. She added, “I submitted the score report to my mentor but I did not get any comments.” Even though her methods used were approved by her mentor, it was still difficult for her especially to judge an autistic student’s behaviour. The results reported that there was no support for this task. Yaya said, “She told me to just do what I want.”

**Theme two: Feelings towards the support they received and did not receive**

Both student teachers expressed differently their feeling toward the received teaching observation. The teaching observation put the pressure on Pip. She said, “My mentor observed my teaching practice only once; however, I felt relaxed and was able to create activities more comfortably.” However, she still required more suggestions or advice about teaching techniques, media production, learning activity, etc. On the other hand, for Yaya, the teaching observation is very important for her future teaching practices and she required more of it. She said, “I wish she observed my teaching practices at least once a week. If she doesn’t have much time, once per two weeks is fine.”

Both of them agreed that comments toward teaching practices were useful for further lessons. Pip said, “Through the discussion, I have been acknowledged that my learning activity needed an adjustment to encourage students’ learning and that my instruction should be following the lesson plan.” Two student teachers still expected more feedbacks to improve their teaching abilities despite receiving support toward teaching practices. Yaya said,
“Without her regular observation, I do not know how to improve my teaching practices.” They felt that support they received from their mentors in this regard is not enough because their mentors are too busy. Pip said, “My mentor had many teaching hours. When she was free from teaching, she had to do many jobs from academic affairs department.”

Through the mentees’ lens, support of classroom discipline was effective; however, teaching advice is still prior expected support. Pip said, “She came to my class by herself to keep them quiet. Nevertheless, I still need more advice and suggestions to improve my teaching.”

Regarding the design of English tests, the mentees think that they deserve to get more support or advice for this task but they never get that. Yaya said, “When I submitted the students’ final grade to her, she only took a glance at it and said that it was ok. Actually, I want to know how a practical test is created and if it is different from ways I learnt from the university or not.”

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The results revealed that two student teachers were support well from their mentor in accordance with classroom management. Their mentor helped them overcome problems from disruptive students. Still, the student teachers required the reflection on their teaching practices to improve their teaching skills. However, their mentors could not supply this because they were too busy. Non teaching tasks assigned to two student teachers make a negative impact on the quality of teaching practices. Similarly, the mentor could not support them because of their limited time and non-experience in the fields.

The research results imply three reasons forcing mentors not to be able to provide appropriate scaffolds to their mentees. Ehrich et al. (2001) state that lack of time is one of two common problems to mentors in education. Ganser (2002) acknowledges that every mentor is an outstanding teacher and it is usual that s/he involves many important duties. In the present research, two mentors responsible for academic affairs were forced to spend less time supporting their mentees. Ganser (2002) infers that mentees could not be supported properly unless mentors are free from other professional responsibilities.

The second problem is lack of mentoring training (Ehrich et al. 2001). The reported support and the review literatures (Arnold 2006; Clarke 2006; Hammon & Ramano 2009; Yan & He 2010) inferred that a practical mentoring course is essential for a teacher serving as a mentor. Without any mentoring programme, mentors probably scaffold mentees through ‘telling’ rather than ‘discussing’. Based on the research result, the ‘telling’ is obvious when two student teachers get help discipline the disruptive learners. The notion of zone of proximal development (ZPD) which scaffoldings are gradually removed rarely presented when two student teachers work out the challenging tasks; for example, test design. Improper guidance caused them to redo the tasks and discouraged them to complete them.

Finally, school environment is not supportive for mentoring process. It is essential that all members of the school community (principals, department heads, staff, students and parents) understand about mentoring program (Ganser, 2001). When all school members understand the mentoring program, they are ready to provide support to mentees experiencing successful internship. School principles can also support mentoring process through lessen responsibilities undertaken by mentors and mentees (Ganser, 2001).
The research results call for further research on what the socio-cultural theory and the role of cooperation among members of school communities, teacher educators from universities, mentors and mentees in mentoring processes may shape a successful and practical mentoring programme. I believe that the results with in depth data could reveal the current mentoring process in education resulting in developing new mentoring strategies of which all members in the mentoring community should be aware.

References


