Teacher Mentoring: Sharing An Experience

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Abstract: **This study investigated the impact of a training course designed for English as a Foreign Language teachers. The program aimed to equip the EFL teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to improve their classroom practices. A qualitative approach was adopted, utilizing interviews and instructors' observations. 22 trainees and 6 trainers were involved in the study. Based on the findings, most of the participants reported a positive experience and believed the course significantly improved their teaching abilities. The key areas of improvement shown in the results included lesson planning skills, teaching aids creativity, classroom management, and technology-mediated teaching. The findings have also shown that the instructors observed noticeable positive changes in the teachers' performance throughout the course. The study emphasizes the importance of well-designed training programs for educators and highlights the need for further research to explore comprehensive mentoring models tailored to satisfy the specific needs of EFL teachers.**

Keywords: **mentoring, mentors, mentees, professional development.**

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

The English language department at the Administration for University Requirements of the University of Khartoum offers courses in both general English and ESP to more than twenty colleges of science and humanities. A commonly feature of the recent entrants of these colleges was the low standard of English language. It has been noticed that the standard of English language of the new university entrants vary annually. In that, the standard of English of the recent batches seemed to be lower than that of the previous ones. To stop the lowering standard of English among university entrants and rectify the situation in general, the department of English has taken two major steps: tailoring in-home teaching materials that meet the new entrants' deficiencies and providing a teacher training program for English language teachers at basic and secondary schools.

The educational process is a multi-pillared process. The primary pillars of the educational process are the students, the teachers, and the teaching materials. Other factors whether economic, social, political or psychological could also contribute to the success or failure of the process. Such supporting factors are as important for the success of the process as the primary pillars themselves. However, rectifying any flaw in the process requires giving priority to checking these pillars of the educational process first. Then come the supporting factors second in priority.

1.2. Statement of the problem.

According to the Ministry of Education officials in (2013), about 9 thousand teachers of English in Khartoum State and 30 thousand teachers in the other states across the country needed training. At secondary schools in Khartoum State, a survey on teacher training had shown that only about 40% of the sample of the study had attended formal training programs, (Gubair, 2011). The survey results explain the current inglorious reality of teaching English in the Sudan. In response to such a reality, the English department has tailored and executed a training program targeting English language teachers at both basic and secondary stages in Khartoum state. The teacher training program aimed to empower the English language

teachers professionally by providing them with the linguistic knowledge, the required skills for what to teach, how to teach it, what strategies and techniques to adopt, and what things to bring to classrooms so that the class can be interesting and vibrant. As well, the program aimed at raising the trainees' awareness of what makes good teachers stand out as good teachers. Furthermore, the program included practical teaching models and templates using samples from the current curriculum to show the trainees how they could carry out their job professionally with the available resources. This research paper traces the efficacy of the training program on the trainees' professional development.

1.3. Research questions.

The research paper tries to find answers to the following questions:

1. What attitudes did the trainees have before and after attending the training program?

2. To what extent did the training program improve the trainees' classroom practices?

3. In what ways did the trainees find the training program supportive to classroom teaching practices?

4. To what extent did the program meet the trainees teaching knowledge needs?

1.4. Research hypotheses.

1. The participants were expected to hold positive attitudes towards the training program as it represented a valuable chance for them to attend a formal training program.

2. As most of the participants haven't received formal training, the program will have a positive effect on the trainees' teaching practices.

3. The training program was expected to be supportive to the trainees' teaching practices in a variety of ways. The trainees got trained in lesson planning and delivering, classroom management, teaching aids creation…etc.

4. The program meets most of the trainees' teaching practices needs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Mentoring: A Historical and Theoretical Perspective

Although the practice of mentoring can be traced back to times immemorial, the term itself lacks a universally accepted definition (Miller 2002, Zimmerman et al. 2007). It also lacks an explanatory theory for the roles and functions involved in a mentoring experience and how the experience is being perceived (Jacobi 1991, Philip and Hendry 2000). Scholars like Murray (2001) focus on the one-on-one aspect of mentoring, highlighting the transfer of knowledge and development of specific competencies. Others, like Blackwell (1989), emphasize the hierarchical nature of the relationship, where a senior figure guides and facilitates the intellectual growth of a less experienced individual. Still, some others view mentoring as a strategy that teachers can learn with and from each other or as a key method in assisting teachers in their professional growth, as it provides mentees with a practical support to gain self-confidence, solve problems and apply critical thinking skills to situations affecting student learning. (Mullen 2000, Sundli, L2007, Crow 2007). In spite of the ongoing debate surrounding terminology, the value of mentoring in teacher education and professional development remains undisputed.

In the current research paper, the researchers adopt the definition which emphasizes the hierarchical nature of the relationship, where a senior figure guides and facilitates the intellectual growth of a less experienced individual. In the study there were senior mentors (university instructors) who had guided a group of mentees. The mentees themselves were of two types. Teachers with long experiences gained by trial and errors and novice inductees who have never received any form of formal mentoring.

2.2 Mentoring and EFL Teacher Development

Mentoring programs offer several advantages for EFL teachers. These include practical support by providing guidance and assistance to help teachers navigate the challenges of the classroom environment. Mentoring enhances Self-Confidence through constructive feedback and encouragement. It also develops critical thinking Skills and promotes reflective teaching by encouraging teachers to critically analyze their teaching practices, explore innovative approaches, reflect on their experiences and foster continuous learning and improvement.

2.3 Reflective Teaching and Professional Growth

Reflective teaching is a cornerstone of effective mentoring. This process involves teachers critically examine their own motivations, thoughts, and teaching strategies. Cruickshank and Applegate (1981) define reflective teaching as 'the teacher's thinking about what happens in classroom lessons, and thinking about alternative means of achieving goals or aims.' Richards and Lockhart (1994) define reflective teaching as: 'teachers and student teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching'. Learning by reflecting requires teachers to critically examine their own motivation, thinking and practice (Stanley 1998). Reflection may be viewed as a process of connecting and coordinating existing knowledge with new evidence (Maclellan 2004). Popper (1966) claims that criticism 'is the only way we have of detecting our mistakes and of learning from them in a systematic way'. Furthermore, Popper (1999) believes that human beings and our scientific knowledge are inherently fallible and subject to error, and thus there is a need to search for and eliminate mistakes/errors through critical discussions, experimentation or application of our theories so as to gain new insights and understanding of our teaching practice in order to contribute to knowledge growth. Through reflection, teachers can connect existing knowledge with new information, identify areas for improvement, and develop new teaching methods.

2.4 Challenges in EFL Mentoring

Although it is so valuable, mentoring in the context of EFL teacher development faces some challenges. First of these is the limited scope of mentoring. Traditionally, mentoring has focused solely on lesson observation and feedback. In such a case, mentoring is not a supporting strategy but an evaluation tool that could potentially hinder the teachers' development (Hu, 2005). The second challenge is the mentor Qualifications. Mentors who lack expertise in the specific language, culture, and current pedagogical trends might not be able to provide adequate support (Liu, 2005).

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The current study examines the teacher trainees' perception of the training program offered by the English department (AUR) of the University of Khartoum. The paper tries to find out about the trainees' opinions on the efficacy of the training program in developing their knowledge and classroom practices. It also seeks their attitudes towards the components of the program and the extent to which such components satisfy the participants needs and expectations. The study adopts a qualitative methodology using two tools for data collection: an interview with the trainees and trainer's observations.

3.1 Technique of data collection

This interview-based study dug into the attitudes of trainees towards a professional development program, with a particular focus on their perceptions of program content, alignment with expectations, and fulfillment of individual needs. Through structured interviews, trainees were prompted to articulate their opinions on the program's curriculum, their preconceived expectations, and the extent to which the program addressed their learning needs. Additionally, data promoted from trainers' observations during training sessions supplemented the qualitative insights assembled from the interviews. Both methodological approaches were employed with the generic goal of elucidating trainee attitudes, needs, and expectations, while also assessing the program's efficacy in enhancing participants' pedagogical knowledge, skill sets, and classroom practices.

3.2 Participants

The subjects were English language teachers at basic and secondary stages in Khartoum state. 22 trainees were randomly selected from a pool of 300 English language teachers attending the training course planned and executed by the English department, (AUR) of Khartoum University. They were of both sexes and of different teaching experiences. However, what was common to most of them was the lack of formal training in teaching English language. 6 teacher trainers also provided their observations regarding the efficacy of the program on improving the trainees' teaching abilities.

3.3 Procedures

Three batches of basic and secondary English language teachers were trained. The total number of the trainees was 300 English language teachers. Then 25 teachers were selected from among the three hundred trained teachers as potential teacher trainers to be given more doses of training. At the end of the program, the randomly selected teachers were interviewed about their attitudes on the program and the ways in which the program has made a difference in their teaching

experiences. As well, the teacher trainers who executed the program were also asked to submit their observations on the trainees' progress and the efficacy of the program in improving the trainees' professional experiences.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical data in this research paper were acquired through two distinct methodologies. Firstly, qualitative insights were derived from structured interviews conducted with English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. These interviews were designed to elicit detailed reflections from participants regarding their engagement with the course, encompassing their experiences prior to, during, and subsequent to the course. Secondly, quantitative data were gathered through the observations of instructors. These instructors were tasked with observing mentees' instructional sessions and facilitating post-lesson discussions. Their observations provided valuable data regarding the implementation and efficacy of pedagogical strategies employed by the mentees. Noteworthy among the participants' remarks were reflections on their instructional experiences, challenges encountered, and insights gained, thus enriching the empirical foundation of this very paper. The following were some of the participant's comments:

- I have been a graduate of a faculty of law. After graduation, my father had frankly told me that he wouldn't be pleased if I worked in the field of my specialty, as an advocate or judge. To please my father, I have joined the field of education as a teacher. I thought that mere having a good command of English would make of me a good English language teacher. I have been teaching English for over seven years at secondary school. Yet, I have never received any kind of formal training. When I met my students after having spent only two days in the course, I had the feeling that I was totally different. My performance has improved a lot. I have felt a lot of confidence in me and a considerable satisfaction with my performance.

- I believe that I have learned a lot from the course. However, I entered the course with an attitude that it would not differ so much from the one we had attended a couple of years before. I was pleasantly surprised to find out that the contents, assignments, presentations and the discussions sessions, evaluations were great. I have quite enjoyed the course. The course has been helpful in preparing me to become a good teacher. Thanks a lot, to everyone who helped making the course successful.

- I have found the course helpful. I have used several ideas from the course such as lesson planning, lesson delivering, and teaching aids preparing. I used these ideas in preparing and delivering my classes. Group discussions, as well as counseling sessions were also very valuable.

- I have gained a lot from the experiences of my instructors and peers. Specially the discussion after each model lessons. I learned how to assess a lesson and report back to the group what has worked and what hasn't.

- I have learned how to prepare my lessons using the computer for the first time. I liked the computer assisted classes. I find your course has been helpful in preparing me to use technology in preparing and executing my classes.

4.1. The EFL teachers' attitudes

Generally speaking, the EFL teachers who have attended the training course held positive attitudes towards the course. Most of the participants believed that they have learnt a lot from the course. They also said that they have found good ideas in the course that they would use in their professional practices. Some of the teachers were surprised by the gains they have had from the course. It seems that the reason for being surprised was that these participants had had previous experiences which represented background against which new experiences to be judged. Some others liked the lesson preparation practices, teaching aids preparation and use, classroom presentations, assessments and evaluations. It seems that almost all of the participants liked the idea of using technology in preparing and/or inventing teaching aids. Some participants said that they had never had such an experience before and that the course has given them an access to using computer-assisted teaching practices.

4.2. The training courses and the trainees' professional development.

As is clear from the trainees' comments, most of the trainees believed that they benefited from attending the course. The most remarkable statement in this regard was by the trainee who graduated from the faculty of law when he said:

"…. When I met my students in the class after having spent only two days in the course, I had the feeling that I was totally different…"

This statement indicated a turning point in the professional track of this trainee. He had had the feeling that the course had refined his teaching skills and made him a new teacher full of confidence and pleased with his teaching abilities.

"…. My performance has improved a lot. I have felt a lot of confidence in me and a considerable satisfaction with my performance."

As stated earlier, the participants were mixed group. Some of the participants were graduates of faculties other than education. And some of them were graduates of disciplines other than languages, like the one above. Such participants lacked the knowledge of how to teach languages and the awareness of most of the classroom norms and principles. They relied heavily on copying and /or adopting the ways they were taught when they were students in previous stages. So, the impact of the training course has shown up clearly in their performances. They benefited from skills such as planning a lesson, classroom managements, lesson assessment and evaluation, creating and using teaching aids, games and a variety of activities for recycling new words or grammatical items.

4.3. The ways in which the training program was supportive to EFL teaching practices

The participants talked about getting benefits from most of the course contents. While some of the participants believed that they have benefited   from classes on lesson preparation practices, teaching aids making and using, classroom practices, assessments and evaluations, others found using technology and computer -assisted lesson preparing and planning, creative teaching aids inventing and games designing were more interesting. This may be due to the fact that most of the participants were not digitally literate.

4.4. The training program and professional development needs

The trainees' comments have shown a general satisfaction among the participants with the contents of the course. It seems that the course met most of their professional development needs. At least the ones they were aware of, as most of the participants were not well-grounded in the teaching knowledge culture and most of their experiences were gained by means of trial and error or by copying or imitating their previous teachers when they were students.

4.5. University instructors' observations

The course instructors were the designers of the course and model lesson planners and instructors. They were also the directors of the discussion and counselling sessions. The instructors faced a number of challenges at the beginning, the greatest of which was getting the course approved by the administration of the general education. The course was unprecedented in general education and therefore faced strong resistance from the part of the educational authority regarding the question of viability. The instructors had to convince the authority that a 10-day training program was viable and could make a difference. They had finally managed to convince the administration. Another challenge was freeing the trainees from their teaching loads so that they could attended the course. They have arrived at a compromise with the authority and the trainees were freed three days a week for three successive weeks instead of two complete successive weeks as proposed earlier. Of course, there were other challenges such as the premises where to execute the course and how to meet the expenses and the administration costs of the course. However, these challenges compared to first ones were minor.

The instructors were surprised by the success of the program and the praise that the program won from the participants, the administration of general education and the ministry of labor and welfare officials who were present at the closing day ceremony.

As for the participants' professional developments, the instructors unanimously agreed that there were noticeable developments in the trainees' teachings abilities. They said that the trainees' performance during the course has reflected reasonable improvements.

5.   CONCLUSION

Mentoring offers a powerful tool for supporting and developing EFL teachers. Recognizing the limitations of current practices and ensuring mentors possess the necessary qualifications are crucial for maximizing the effectiveness of these programs. This research traced the impact of a training course for EFL teachers on the participants. The findings showed that most participants found the course valuable and learned new skills. The course has improved teachers' lesson planning ability, teaching aids creation, classroom management, and technology use. One teacher, new to the profession, reported a significant positive change in their teaching confidence and effectiveness. A number of challenges faced the course designers and executors. The most noticeable ones were the difficulty gaining approval and securing time for teacher participation. Regarding the course impact on the participants, instructors observed noticeable improvement in teachers' abilities and received praise from various stakeholders.

All in all, the training course appears to have been successful in enhancing the professional development of EFL teachers. Further research is required to explore and implement more comprehensive mentoring models that address the unique needs of EFL teachers, ultimately contributing to their professional growth and enhancing the quality of foreign language education. Such research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between professional development initiatives and the diverse needs and expectations of educators, thereby informing future program design and implementation strategies.

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