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Supervisors' Feedback in the TESL Practicum as Perceived by Student-teachers: A Case Study in A Malaysian Teacher Education Institute

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ABSTRACT;

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the perceptions of supervisory feedback of student-teachers involved in the teaching practicum in a Malaysian Teacher Education Institute. The sample, which was conveniently selected based on student-teachers' interest and availability, consisted of 24 student-teachers from the Teacher Education Institute. Data were obtained by means of questionnaire. Data were analyzed qualitatively. After considering the perceptions of the student-teachers participating in this study, the findings suggested a characterisation of supervisory feedback that contributed to deepen the existing knowledge about feedback in the teaching practicum context. It enables to shed more lights into the areas of second language teaching in the classroom as the findings would be able to provide more support for future management and development of teacher education in Malaysia.

KEYWORDS: Supervisors, feedback, student-teachers', perceptions, practicum

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The teaching practicum is regarded as one of the most influential aspects of pre-service teacher education (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009). It is critical to the development of student-teachers because it is their first hands-on experience with their chosen career and it creates opportunities for future teachers to develop their pedagogical skills (Leshem & Barhama, 2007). The practicum is "the best way to acquire professional knowledge and competencies as a teacher" (Hascher, Cocard, & Moser, 2004, as cited in Leshem & Barhama, 2007) since, during the practicum, student-teachers can put into practice their beliefs based on language learning theories they acquired in the course of their studies. According to Hascher, Cocard and Moser (2004, p.626), the teaching practicum serves as a 'protected field for experimentation' and 'socialization within the profession', it sets the stage for success or failure in student teaching and it determines a student-teacher's future in education.

Future teachers also consider the practicum experience as the most significant element in their teacher education program. The reason resides in that student-teachers benefit more from spending time in the field observing others teach, than from attending sessions at colleges (Zeichner, 1990). Moreover, the practicum contributes with student-teacher's development by offering a range of goals. Gebhard (2009, as cited in Trent, 2010) lists the following: gaining practical classroom experience, applying theory and teaching ideas, discovering from observing experienced teachers, expanding awareness of how to set goals, and questioning, articulating, and reflecting on their own teaching. The practicum plays an essential role in assisting pre-service teachers to become reflective practitioners, parallel with their intellectual and professional development (Armutcu & Yaman, 2010).

One of the main purposes of teaching supervision is to provide data of a student's performance, "a form of feedback which can take them forward, feed forward" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). According to Copland (2010), a central component of the teaching practice is the feedback offered to the students by an experienced teacher, who is expected to assess the student's teaching and provide support, suggestions and advice. Hence, through supervisory feedback, "supervisors assist teachers-to-be in developing the tactic aspects of professional competence" and are responsible for providing student-teachers with "strong foundations of professional knowledge and with tools for ongoing, independent professional development" in order to become autonomous teachers after graduation (White, 2005, p.177).

2.0 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Since the development and implementation of valid and effective methods to communicate feedback during practicum is critical (Allen, 2011), it is important to first understand student's experiences and perceptions of supervisory feedback to characterise it and deepen the existing knowledge about the practicum. This research study represents one step towards this goal by investigating the perceptions of supervisory feedback of student-teachers that were involved in the teaching practicum during the academic year 2018 in a TESL teacher education program in Malaysia.



3.0 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To investigate the perceptions of student-teachers of supervisory feedback during teaching practicum.

4.0 RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What are the perceptions of student-teachers of supervisory feedback during the teaching practicum?

5.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Hattie and Timperley (2007) characterise feedback as information provided by an agent such as teacher, peer, book, parent, self or experience regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding and they point out that feedback is a consequence of performance. In addition, Brandt (2008) suggests that if the purpose of feedback is to supply information to trainees concerning some aspects of performance, with a view to enhance their practice, then trainees need to know that they are receiving good quality feedback. Hattie (2003), as cited in Hattie & Timperley, (2007) reported that some types of feedback, such as providing students with information about a task and how to do it more effectively, are more powerful than others that involve praise, rewards and punishments.

Moreover, feedback is more effective when a number of conditions are met (Brinko, 1993, as cited in Brandt, 2008). For instance, a) a psychologically safe setting is provided, b) information is gathered from different sources, c) the feedback is mediated by someone other than the individual who made the evaluative judgement, d) the feedback focusses on behavior rather than the person and it is descriptive rather than evaluative, e) the feedback reduces uncertainty for the recipient and allows for response and interaction, and f) negative feedback is 'sandwiched' between positive information. According to Pollock (2012, p.5), feedback has been directly intended as assessment of student's progress and intentionally directed from the teacher to the student. However, Pollock highlights that feedback is a cue to seek more information or instruction and that "the hinge factor is the transfer of information". Therefore, feedback is "the hinge that swings the information about goals and progress between teacher and student".

Supervision in the form of lesson observation followed by a post-observation conference and the communication of constructive feedback plays a vital role in pre-service teachers' professional development (Tang & Chow, 2007). White (2007) investigated the sort of feedback students expected to receive from their lecturer during their teaching practice, and what type of feedback from their supervisor they considered most useful in influencing positive changes to their teaching practice. The findings revealed that most students viewed feedback as involving advice and tips about their practice and expected to receive it in spoken format. However, some students consider written feedback as extremely useful since it challenges, questions and suggests alternative ways of thinking and doing. In addition, students express that feedback offers some benefits to their teaching practice such as provide focus, clarify concerns and questions, and allows future teachers to review and reflect on material.

Following the constructivist view of feedback, Smith (2010) suggests that feedback is the basis for the dialogue, and that student-teachers consider it important for future development to improve performance. Students generally want to receive feedback on tasks, practical suggestions and advice which can be seen as feeding forward to improve performance. In addition, Smith notes that future teachers seem to be open to feedback on weaknesses as well as on strengths, with a strong belief in their own competence. Arribas Arevalo (2010) found out that, for feedback to be effective during the teaching practice, a number of conditions should be met. For instance, supervisory feedback should not be provided immediately after the students have been observed teaching since it is necessary to allow some time for reflection on practice. Moreover, when feedback is spoken, the student should begin conversation since, normally he or she will first mention the aspects of the lesson that need improvement instead of waiting to hear them from the supervisor. Arribas Arevalo suggests that it is important to avoid the use of imperatives as well as ambiguous language when talking about weaknesses. Positive comments and polite, impersonal expressions promote motivation and lead to significant changes.

Consistently, Gonzalez Ramirez (2012) carried out research into students' perceptions of feedback sessions and concludes that students regard feedback as an enhancer of instruction since it provides suggestions and comments that motivate them to try new methodologies and activities that they would not try otherwise. Moreover, Gonzalez Ramirez observes that it is vital to qualify supervisory feedback with explanations to assure students' comprehension of information in order to increase the possibilities of seeing changes implemented in the following classes. For students, feedback sessions imply an opportunity for reflection and adjustment into new teaching structures and practices since during these sessions, they have the chance to interact with supervisors who have vast experience in teaching and personal and professional growth.



According to Bernard and Goodyear (1998, p.163), “when supervisees reflect on their supervision, what comes to mind most often is the quality and quantity of the feedback they received”. Several studies have demonstrated the importance supervisees place on feedback. For example, in a study among training activities, students ranked receiving supervisor observation and feedback as the most effective factor contributing to their skill development (Smith, 1984). According to Wetsberg and Jason (1993, pp.298–304), often “feedback is neglected, inadequate, or late ... Without feedback, mistakes can go uncorrected, and bad habits can develop ..., learners may drop positive behaviors ..., learners may make inaccurate assumptions ..., and when feedback is insufficient, the importance of formal tests can be inflated”. In fact, the failure to provide adequate feedback has been the focus of most ethical complaints involving the supervision relationship (Ladany et al., 1999).

Freeman (1985) recommended that feedback should be timely, frequent, objective, consistent, clear, specific, credible, balanced, and reciprocal. Timely feedback refers to that which is both immediate and ongoing, and includes both formative and summative assessments (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998; Freeman, 1985; Gould & Bradley, 2001). Supervisees are better able to utilize feedback and stay motivated when it is provided in a timely manner (Freeman, 1985). However, it is also possible to overload learners with feedback (Westberg & Jason, 1993). Systematic feedback is that which is objective, accurate, and consistent. It is based on specific behaviorally-defined criteria that are within the control of the supervisee and are amenable to change (Farnill et al., 1997). However, in addition to objective feedback, subjective feedback from a trained supervisor can be quite helpful but should be labelled as such and should be based on professional intuition rather than personal bias (Bernard & Goodear, 1998; Farnill et al., 1997). In addition to being objective and behaviorally-oriented, feedback should be clear, specific, credible, and balanced in terms of positive and negative feedback (Freeman, 1985). A balance of positive and negative feedback in and of itself fosters acceptability and credibility in the eyes of supervisees. Specific suggestions for improvement should also be provided (Turock, 1980).

Future teachers view the teaching practice and supervision as useful in giving them guidance on critical aspects of teaching but state some problems that can affect the effectiveness of supervision. Among them are delays in supervision, little or dialogue between supervisors and supervisees, illegible reports and lack of consensus on the part of supervisors in dealing with similar issues (Rosemary, Richard & Ngara, 2013). In order to provide students with appropriate, meaningful and reflective feedback, it is central to take practicum students’ emotional blocks into consideration and help them overcome their fear, nervousness, and anxiety (Soykurt, 2010). Moreover, according to Brandit (2008), the efficacy of feedback for student-teachers would be greatly enhanced if the value of reflective practice were considered. Practices of reflection can raise awareness of future teachers and lead to appropriate development and relevant change or innovation in practice (Farr, 2011). So, practicum courses can be redesigned to provide more opportunities for feedback sessions and to integrate reflective practice into teaching practice. Student-teachers should be given chances to reflect-in-action and feedback should be non-directive and non-prescriptive. Students’ should find out their weaknesses themselves rather than being told by others to develop autonomy, critical thinking skills, and awareness of their actions and decisions (Gürsoy, 2013).

6.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study was carried out to investigate the perceptions of supervisors’ feedback from the viewpoints of 17 student-teachers from a Malaysian Teacher Education Institute. The site-based experience in schools provides pre-service teachers opportunities to apply theoretical aspects of their coursework to the real-life context of the classroom, trying to bridge the theory-practice gap. During the practicum experience, student-teachers observe other teachers teaching, plan lesson and teach at different levels of education. Mentor teachers observe and assess pre-service teachers’ performance in their respective classes and provide after class feedback (verbal or written). Therefore, feedback acts as an essential means of communication between the supervisors and the student-teachers.

The nature of the research problem determines whether the research should be qualitative or quantitative (Creswell, 2012). According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their words, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. Thus a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study to fully explain the experiences of the participants and gather the necessary data to answer the research question.

The research design for this study was a qualitative case study to explore the student-teachers’ perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of a practicum mentoring program. A case study was used to document the experiences of individuals within a natural setting (Creswell, 2012). It is also used to collect data from multiple sources and perspectives (Lodico, et.al, 2010). Therefore, this study utilized a case study research design using interviews. Through a case study approach, this study involved participants’ experiences, perceptions, and feelings gathered through rich, thick descriptions obtained by interviews (Creswell, 2012; Lodico et al., 2010). According to Creswell (2009), qualitative researchers collect data by examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants. In this study, qualitative methods were utilized to facilitate an understanding of how student-teachers’ perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of a practicum mentoring.



Qualitative research involves an interpretive, holistic approach to what is being studied (Creswell, 2009). It best explores the question of what and how, qualitative research was chosen as the methodology for this study. In this study, the qualitative method facilitated an understanding of how the 17 student-teachers perceived and interpreted their experiences. Instead of studying large groups, qualitative researchers conduct a more in-depth study on a limited number of participants (Creswell, 2012; Lodico et al., 2010). Because this research focus is on a Teacher Education Institute practicum mentoring, a case study design offers the best research design because it involves the depth examination of a single case (Creswell, 2012). This case study provided a systematic method for collecting and analyzing data, as well as reporting results. An intrinsic case study is used when a researcher is interested in a particular individual, group, event, or organization (Hancock & Alogozzine, 2011; Merriam, 2009).

The data collection procedure used to address the research question for this qualitative study was a oral interview with the student-teachers. According to Creswell (2009) and Merriam (2009), data collection in the forms of interviews is considered a common approach in educational research. The data were collected by interacting with the selected participants. The type of data collected was open-ended interviews. The open-ended interviews allowed first hand accounts of participants' thoughts, ideas, and experiences. Seventeen student-teachers were given the questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was to elicit participants' perceptions of the supervisors' feedback in the TESL practicum program.

7.0 FINDINGS

7.1 Supervisory Feedback

In order to investigate how often supervisors provided feedback during the teaching practicum, the questionnaire designed for such a purpose was administered (see Table 1.1). Results are provided here in relation to the most frequent chosen option (*always, sometimes, never*) and according to the value that participants gave to their choices (*positive, negative, indifferent*). Analysis of the data showed that most of the student-teachers *always* received feedback after each lesson taught in their practicum classes whereas a smaller amount of student-teachers (17.6%) *sometimes* received feedback after each lesson. For the majority of the student-teachers (76.5%), "*always*" providing feedback after each lesson was a good choice on the part of the supervisor.

Table 1.0: Distribution and value of communication of supervisory feedback according to student-teachers.

Participant	Frequency - Value	Occurrence	%
Student-teacher (n=17)	Always after each lesson - POSITIVE	13	76.5
	Sometimes after each lesson - POSITIVE	3	17.6
	No answer	1	5.9
	Total	17	100

7.2 Description of Supervisory feedback

Student-teachers' descriptions of supervisory feedback were collected through questionnaires, which asked participants to specify how often supervisory feedback included encouraging comments, made reference to lesson plan, considered the students' learning and student-teachers' classroom management techniques. The results are shown in Table 2.0 below.

Table 2.0: Description of supervisory feedback according to student-teachers

Feedback Description	Frequency	Occurrences	%
Encouraging Comments	Always	13	76.5
	Sometimes	3	17.6



	Never	0	0
	No answer	1	5.9
Reference to the lesson plan	Always	12	70.6
	Sometimes	5	29.4
	Never	0	0
	No answer	0	0
Students' Learning	Always	12	70.6
	Sometimes	4	23.5
	Never	0	0
	No answer	1	5.9
Student-teachers Classroom Management Techniques	Always	13	76.5
	Sometimes	4	23.5
	Never	0	0
	No answer	0	0

As regards to how often supervisory feedback given during the teaching practice contained encouraging comment, the great majority of the student-teachers (76.5%) reported that their supervisors always included them in their feedback. Student-teachers felt that it was positive to receive that kind of feedback during practicum. When asked if supervisory feedback made reference to the lesson plan, the option "always" was chosen by the majority of the student-teachers (70.6%). More than half of the student-teachers surveyed indicated that it was positive to *always* receive feedback that included comments about the lesson plans used during the lessons observed by their supervisors.

When asked about the frequency in which supervisory feedback provided comments about the student-teachers' interaction with their students and the way in which students learned during the lessons delivered by the student-teachers, similar findings were reported. The feedback containing remarks on students-learning process was *always* received by a significant number of student-teachers (70.6%). Regarding feedback that made reference to student-teachers classroom management techniques, most of the student-teachers (76.5%) revealed that their supervisors "always" provided comments on how student-teachers managed their classes. Moreover, student-teachers considered that always providing that kind of comments was a positive choice made by their supervisors.

7.3 Strategies to communicate Supervisory feedback

In order to investigate the strategies employed by the supervisors to communicate feedback and the frequencies in which they were used, a questionnaire was administered. The results are shown in Table 3.0 below.

Table 3.0: Strategies reported to be used to communicate supervisory feedback according to student-teachers

Kind of supervisory Feedback	Frequency	Occurrences	%
Written	Always	17	100
	Sometimes	0	0
	Never	0	0
	No answer	0	0
Oral	Always	12	70.6%
	Sometimes	5	29.4%
	Never	0	0

	No answer	0	0
Informal Discussion	Always	5	29.4%
	Sometimes	8	47%
	Never	3	17.6%
	No answer	1	5.9%
Discussion forums	Always	4	23.5%
	Sometimes	6	35.3%
	Never	6	35.3%
	No answer	1	5.9%
Via e-mail	Always	3	17.6%
	Sometimes	5	29.4%
	Never	8	47%
	No answer	1	5.9%

All the student-teachers reported as *always* receive/provide written feedback after each lesson. Furthermore, student-teachers considered that it was positive that written supervisory feedback was *always* provided after the practice lesson. When asked how often oral feedback was provided after each lesson, the majority of the students (70.6%) answered "*always*" receiving it. Most of the student-teachers considered that it was positive that their supervisors "*always*" provided verbal feedback after each lesson. With reference to the frequency in which supervisory feedback was informally discussed during the practicum, half of the student-teachers surveyed chose to answer "*sometimes*". A lower number of students (29.4%) indicated that supervisory feedback was "*always*" discussed informally.

Consistent findings were reported when the participants were asked how often feedback was communicated through forums organised by the supervisors. 35.3% of the student-teachers indicated "*sometimes*" and "*never*". Whereas only 23.5% indicated "*always*" to organise forums to discuss supervisory feedback with the student-teacher. As regards to the frequency in which feedback was transmitted via-e-mail, a large number of student-teachers (47%) indicated "*never*". 29.4% of the student-teachers indicated "*sometimes*" whereas 17.6% indicated "*always*" receiving feedback via e-mail.

8.0 DISCUSSION

This study investigated the perceptions of supervisory feedback on student-teachers that were involved in the teaching practicum during the academic year 2018 in a Malaysian Teacher Education Institute. The results indicate that student-teachers agree on the fact that feedback is always provided after each lesson and positively value that frequency. Moreover, student-teachers indicate that receiving feedback regularly, or at least at specific points during their teaching practice such as at the beginning, middle and end, is crucial to measure progress and improve.

Most of the student-teachers state that it is positive to receive or provide feedback that includes *encouraging comments*, makes *reference to lesson plan*, refers to the *students' learning* and provides *information about the students' classroom management techniques*. These findings are consistent with previous studies that showed that student-teachers prefer to be given feedback that acknowledges the kind of activities included in the lesson plan and that makes reference to their interaction with the group of students (Leshem & Barhama, 2007). Moreover, confirming White's (2007) findings, student-teachers express that systematic and objective feedback is positive for their professional development and, in agreement with Viáfara González (2005) and Smith (2005), student-teachers expect feedback to clearly indicate what their strengths and weaknesses are.

With regards to the strategies to communicate feedback, all the student-teachers always received written feedback after each lesson. They positively value this strategy but also reveal that verbal feedback should complement the written comments. The results show that, although student-teachers consider them essential, oral strategies to communicate feedback are infrequent. These findings are in agreement with Rosemary, Richard and Ngará's (2013) study which showed that a common problem during the teaching practice resides in the lack of dialogue between supervisors and supervisees, which may impinge on the effectiveness of supervision. The participants reveal that, even though feedback never rejects dialogue, they sometimes or never participate in informal discussions or forums organized by their supervisors. In general, student-teachers reveal that they never



received or provided feedback via e-mail, a strategy found to be appropriate for the practicum since it reduces the stress associated with supervisors' observations and increases independence (Le Cornu & White, 2000).

9.0 CONCLUSION

On the whole, the results produced in this study support previous research (Bunton, Stimpson & Lopez-Real, 2002 as cited in Tang & Chow, 2007) that showed that less structured observation forms that allow more descriptive and questioning comments are likely to encourage a reflective approach to teaching. Moreover, as suggested by Brinko (1993, as cited in Brandt, 2008), the findings illustrate that feedback is more effective when it is provided in a psychologically safe environment and when it reduces student-teachers' uncertainty by allowing for response and interaction. In brief, supervision is to be regarded as a process of interpersonal relationships whereby people would listen to one another, bring alike problems, come together with resources to find solutions and feel secure in the educational process (Wiles & Bondi, 1996 as cited in Hişmanoğlu, M., & Hişmanoğlu, S., 2010).

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