

Mentoring: A Support System in English Language Teaching

M. Rosary Royar

Associate Professor in English
The Research Department of English
Fatima College,
Madurai.
rosaryroyar8@gmail.com

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Mentoring has begun to spread in the educational scene in the early 1980s. It has turned out to be a support system for teachers, policy makers and educationists, who are keen on improving teaching and education. In the US it is a favoured strategy and it has been mandated that the mentored support be given for teachers entering the teaching field. Brewster and Railsback assert, as quoted by Rosalie Mittica, that ESL mentoring is not simply resource support but it is “a means of fostering stronger connections among the teaching staff, leading to a more positive and cohesive learning environment for students.”

‘Mentoring’ derives from Greek mythology. Mentor was the son of Alcumus. He happened to be a friend of Odysseus. Odysseus entrusted Mentor with his son and palace. Subsequently, the term mentoring connotes of maintaining a caring attitude and holding responsibility for the development of the other.

Mentoring is to work as a team and a collaborative teaching becomes an enhanced strategy. It is to work closely with experienced teachers. And the internship site can be the ground for learning, practising, clearing and improving one self. Learning new pedagogies, forming a fraternity, socializing with professionals, channelising the trends, clarifying misconstrued elements, experiencing the creativity of people, equipping with new enthusiasm - these are some of the positive ethos of mentoring. Though it is normally meant for beginning teachers, novice in the teaching profession, it is useful for any willing learner teacher. Sharon Feiman-Nemser assures “the promise of mentoring goes beyond helping novices... If mentoring is to function as a strategy of reform, it must be linked to a vision of good teaching, guided by an understanding of teacher learning, and supported by a professional culture that favors collaboration and inquiry”.

Randall Turk in the article ‘Get on the Team: An Alternative Mentoring Model’ posits the following:

1. Mentoring must be linked to a vision of good teaching and guided by an understanding of teacher learning
2. The program must be supported by a professional culture that favors collaboration and inquiry.
3. Mentoring teams must be “working” teams that accomplish daily work, have stable membership and are self-led.
4. Stable membership is essential for maintaining the important element of trust, which takes time to grow.
5. Trust among team members is the foundation for building caring relationships, a common element of successful teams.
6. Mentoring teams must possess high performance standards with an established purpose and committed to a common working approach
7. Mentors serve as role models, sponsors, encouragers, counselors not as evaluators.
8. Members have complementary skills and are individually and mutually accountable.
9. Each member is committed to the personal growth and success of the other members.
10. Most mentoring provide some orientation training for the mentors. Common topics include: research on effective teaching, beginning teacher concerns, theories of adult learning etc. (From Mittica’s)

The role of mentor and the mentor – mentee relationship are well defined. It anchors on the fact of being people – oriented. The ultimate goal unswervingly relates to the overall development of the learner in the classroom situation. The learners’ performance and communicative competence are the measuring scales that all are concerned about.

The second part of the paper relates with the experiment carried out by a team of teachers, Dept. of English, Fatima College, Madurai. The programme organized specifically for teachers of Govt. schools extended to teachers of Govt. Aided schools too. All the teachers of Madurai Education District handling English from VI to VIII standard were the participants of the programme. A discussion with the CEO of Madurai District facilitated in communicating and ensuring the participation of teachers. Teachers ranging from 100 to 120 from around 95 schools participated in the five day (14.12.09 – 18.12.09) ELT workshop. Each day had 6 hours of interactions, apart from the inaugural and valedictory functions.

On getting the consent from the CEO, the preliminary step was to collect the English Text books prescribed for these classes (VI –VIII) and pooled in the components. Besides the soft skills and pronunciation, teaching of vocabulary and grammar was mainly based on the items in the text books. A team of nine teachers took up the planning and execution of the schedule: two for pronunciation, two for soft skills, two for vocabulary and three for grammar.

The teacher-mentees were of a heterogeneous group; they were not of the same age group; consequently their experience in teaching and the kind of students they dealt with ranged at different scale; their command of the language (English) varied; their success in their profession could not be gauged: the only guiding principle and the desire was to provide a better learning environment for the students in the schools, mainly those who opt to the govt. schools. Besides the corollary supposition is that if they are exposed to language skills and provided with participatory and interactive English classes, their performance and communicative competence would be at a desirable / commendable level. So to achieve this purpose, the teachers have to be oriented/ trained, though the limitations cannot be overlooked.

Creating positive climate was of the utmost need. The programme's success hinged on that aspect. Ronald B. Adler et al., present the Gibb categories of defensive and supportive behavior and the principles for creating favourable climate : evaluation sends threatening message where as descriptive message offers one's thoughts and feelings; secondly controlling communication manipulates while problem orientation message focuses on finding a solution; thirdly replacing strategy with spontaneity initiates being honest rather than utilizing hidden agenda; the behaviour that contrasts with neutrality is empathy and empathy sends across the care and respect: in the place of superiority, equality dominates conveying that equal footing is prevalent; the sixth skill is to maintain provisionalism against certainty (276-282). Adopting these methods did enhance communication. In the programme set up, the atmosphere was conducive and the messages and signals sent across assured a favourable climate. Peter Hudson and Jan Millwater emphasise 'if the relationship is shared democratically between the mentor and mentee with opportunities for collaboration, challenges, and two-way dialogues then mentees can be empowered and more open to develop practices...' (2). That did prove true for the participants approached the mentors and asked for certain tips. Their attendance, in spite of the discomfort and difficulties, testified their eagerness to participate and be part of the process.

At the end of the programme certain observations could be drawn:

Personal

- i) Away from the mundane world, they felt relaxed
- ii) Had time for interacting with fellow teachers
- iii) A kind of new enthusiasm sprang up.
- iv) Had room for developing interpersonal skills.

Pedagogical knowledge

- i) Familiarity with different techniques
- ii) Opening up choices for handling classes in a different way
- iii) Reinforcing of knowledge about the language
- iv) Becoming of their potential in teaching.
- v) Creating self-awareness in the professional line
- vi) Clarifying of certain vague areas took place vocally and silently
- vii) Material provided strengthened their knowledge.
- viii) Realization of humanistic approach to be maintained with learners

The feedback given by the participants was highly positive yet certain constraints emerged on analysis.

Constraints

- i) effective mentor – mentee relationship did not ensue:
- ii) expenditure – no sponsorship nor aid from organization
- iii) follow up programme was lacking
- iv) Uncertain whether the mentees turned to their old methods for adopting learnt techniques would involve change and hard work.

However, it was much needed and the teacher-mentees appreciated the need-based programme. Their assurance did mean bringing about an effective change in the school environment. Effective mentoring is a support system in professional development. It opens up new strategies, kindles creative power, shares the resources and builds up professional climate. Perceptive skills of both mentors and mentees get sharpened and make us realize that teaching is not an easy going process but an all-consumption.

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