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The Native Speaker Mentors: A Qualitative Study on Novice Teachers' Professional Development

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Abstract

Mentoring is a professional development strategy for helping novice teachers adjust to the challenges of teaching and develop into quality educators. It offers a bridge between teacher preparation and the remainder of an educator's career (Wang and Odell, 2002). In the context of English as a Second Language (ESL), much research has gone into the benefits of mentoring particularly on the novice teachers, the relationship of mentor and the novice teachers as well as the impacts of mentoring on the novice teachers. However, what is lacking is research that examines the influences of pairing native English speakers' mentors with non-native novice teachers on the novice teachers' learning experience. This study explores the influences of a mentoring programme, the "Native Speaker Programme" on Malaysian novice ESL teachers' professional development. The "Native Speaker Programme" aims at enhancing the capacity of non-native English teachers by placing Native English Speaking (NES) mentors to train non-native English Language teachers in primary schools. Employing a multiple case study, the data collection techniques of this study include semi-structured interview, observations and personal document analysis. Drawing on the construct of *Furnished Imagination* by Kiely and Askham (2012), the findings of the study discuss novice teachers' professional development through the exploration of the influences of the programme on the novice teachers' knowledge construction.

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1. Introduction

Research has shown that quality professional development can change teachers' practices and positively affect student learning (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2000). In the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher professional development, due to booming demand for ESL education in developing countries, there is an

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increasing need for more effective approaches to ESL teachers' professional development. The understanding of how teachers learn is essential as this knowledge is prerequisite for any teacher professional development programmes to be effective. However, there is a need for more research that explores the complexities of teacher learning in the professional development contexts (Borko, 2004).

In enhancing the professionalism of English language teachers in Malaysia, the Ministry of Education introduced and implemented the "Native Speaker Programme" in early 2011. In the programme, participating ESL teachers receive 75 hours of professional input through individual mentoring at least once a fortnight, in situ mentoring and training, as well as cluster and zone level training which is known as Teacher Professional Development (TPD) workshops conducted by their NES mentors. In the workshops, participating ESL teachers also collaborate among themselves to develop lesson plans and teaching resources. Teachers' teaching and learning activities will also be observed during the visits and feedback on how to enhance the quality of teaching will be given by the NES mentors. Also, the NES mentors facilitate the ESL teachers' teaching and learning activities through co-teaching.

1.1. Statement of problem & literature review

Although novice teachers experience an intricate transition from the teacher education institution to life in a real classroom, this concern is not fully addressed in schools in Malaysia as beginning teachers have the same responsibility as a teacher with many years of service. Novice teachers in Malaysia do not receive adequate support, as there is no specific new teacher induction programmes to prepare them for the transition (Mohd Sofi Ali, 2008). Therefore, it is valuable to explore the novice ESL teachers' learning experience that take place while participating in the "Native Speaker Programme" as it will provide a better understanding of what the novice teachers learn from the programme, how this learning is initiated in the 'Native Speaker Programme', and also how this learning influences their classrooms practices. This understanding also is relevant as a structure that informs future professional development programmes for beginning teachers.

Mentoring is the core essence of the "Native Speaker Programme". Some studies have suggested that mentoring is an important and effective form of supporting the professional development of novice teachers (e.g. Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Brock & Grady, 2007). There are vast literatures on the benefits of mentoring particularly for the novice teachers. However, there is scarce literature that examines closely the novice teachers' learning experience that takes place during mentoring (Kardos & Johnson, 2007). In addition, there is scant research that looks closely at the consequences of the pairing of NES mentor with non-native novice ESL teachers.

Kiely and Askham (2012, p.9) argue that the understanding of teacher learning during a professional development programme can best be understood through *furnished imagination*, which is "an understanding of key elements of the knowledge bases, procedural competence in planning for and managing lessons, a disposition characterised by enthusiasm and readiness, and teacher identity: a sense of belonging in the world of TESOL". The fusion of knowledge, procedural awareness and skills, dispositions and identity serves as a way of understanding how teachers construct their professional knowledge, as a way of tracking their professional identity and as a way of capturing their professional identity formation. Hence, in this article the understanding of novice teachers' learning that takes place during the "Native Speaker Programme" requires will be examined through the one of the core elements of the construct *furnished imagination* (Kiely and Askham, 2012) - teachers' knowledge.

Studies show that through mentoring, novice teachers are able to increase their content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge by continuing to see themselves as learners and by benefiting from the expertise of their mentors (e.g. Hudson, 2005; Halai, 2006). However, little is known about the influence of the pairing of NES mentor with non-native novice ESL teachers in a mentoring programme on the novice teachers' professional knowledge. Therefore, this study seeks to fill the gap in the existing literature by exploring the novice ESL teachers' learning while participating in the "Native Speaker Programme" through examining how the programme influences the novice teachers' professional knowledge.

2. Methodology

This study took place during the implementation of a new professional development programme, the “Native Speaker Programme”. A sense of need to know and understand teacher learning that takes place during the programme, form the foundation of this study.

2.1. Selection of Participants

To explore the novice ESL teacher learning experience in the “Native Speaker Programme”, four ESL novice primary schools teachers; Helmi, Alice, Amina and Zahara (pseudonyms), were selected as participants of the study. The selection of the four ESL novice primary school teachers is based on purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, the criterion of a maximum of three years of teaching experience was adopted.

Creswell (2011) maintained that the researcher must not choose more than four cases so as not to sacrifice depth of interpretation. Therefore, only four participants were selected for this study. In addition, the participants were selected for their ability to reflect critically on their experience and their willingness to participate in this study so that they can provide rich data.

2.2. The research design & data collection techniques

This study uses multiple case study approach within a qualitative interpretive research design. Stake (2000) indicates that the goal of the case study is to offer a deeper awareness about the subject, which may in turn influence practice. Three data collection techniques were employed: 1) semi structured interview; 2) observation; 3) documents analysis. The use of multiple instruments helps to enhance the credibility of the findings and interpretations of this study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All the interviews were conducted face-to-face and audiotaped for transcription purposes. There were two kinds of observations were carried out for this study where the researcher observed the participating novice ESL teacher in their Teacher Professional Development (TPD) workshops as well as the novice teachers’ teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Field notes were recorded during the observations and the researcher played role of a non-participating observer. In addition, the researcher collected documents from the participants in the forms of teaching aids, lesson plans, and hand-outs.

3. Findings

In analysing the influences of the “Native Speaker Programme” on the novice teachers’ professional knowledge construction, the data are analysed in terms of the aspects of knowledge the teachers gain from the programme as well as the role of the programme in enhancing teachers’ professional knowledge.

3.1. Aspects of knowledge gained

Based on the analysed data, it is found that the “Native Speaker Programme” enhances novice teachers’ knowledge in terms of; 1) General Pedagogical Knowledge 2) Knowledge of Context 3) Knowledge of Self 4) Knowledge of Students and, 5) Pedagogic Content Knowledge

3.1.1 General pedagogical knowledge

Based on the responses from the teacher it is found that the “Native Speaker Programme” influences novices’ professional development as it contributes to their general pedagogical knowledge. This is evident when Helmi commented on how he learnt about classroom management and intrinsic motivation for students.

“The classroom management, like how you can handle your class, instructions, rubrics, and things like that, that can really help you to carry out lesson in class.”

Based on the observation, when students finished the task assigned, they take their book to him and he will mark and

stamp their books with words such as “terrific”, “very good”, “well done” and “great” to students with good works. He also dealt with students’ misbehaviour effectively and this implies his knowledge on classroom management.

3.1.2 Knowledge of context

In addition, it is also found that the “Native Speaker Programme” contributes to novice teachers’ professional development by enhancing their knowledge of context. This is evident when Alice commented how she learns to understand about the use of Malaysian English in her context through the programme

“And for the Manglish (Malaysian English) aspect that she (mentor) highlights, she helps me to understand, in the Malaysian context, this is the kind of language you use, but in the Native countries it is different, like for example the use of word ‘outstation’ which means different things in different countries. So that we are aware and understand our society.”

3.1.3. Knowledge of self

Apart from that, the novice ESL teachers are given the platform to enhance their knowledge of self through the “Native Speaker Programme”. This is evident when Zahara commented how she learns to understand her roles as an ESL teacher through her mentor,

“Basically, she teaches you not to be a teacher but to be an educator. Because being a teacher is like you go into the classroom, and teach and go home. On the other hand, being an educator means to make sure that your students understand what you have thought, they use the English language, and you care about things inside and outside the classroom. That’s what she has thought us. And being educator means you have passion, you need to be passionate about students learning.”

3.1.4. Knowledge of students

The “Native Speaker Programme” also provides the novice ESL teachers the opportunity to add their knowledge about their students. Alice for instance, describes how she learns about her students’ ability and preferences through her mentor. Alice explains that her mentor helps her to recognize students’ ability, learning styles and preferences so that she can cater her lesson to suit the students. As for Amina, her mentor encourages her to be empathetic with the students as English Language is not their first language.

“Because the students are using English as a second language, so she said sometimes it is okay to translate to Bahasa (Malay language) but not too much, and she also teaches us how to use gesture and body language to explain meaning of words to students”

3.1.5. Pedagogic content knowledge

Besides, the “Native Speaker Programme” assists novice ESL teachers’ professional development by providing them the platform for better understanding about pedagogic content knowledge. Zahara for instance shares her experience on learning how develop teaching aids during workshops. In addition, she also mentions how her mentor assists her in developing instrument for assessing her students.

As for Helmi, the programme helps him to cope with challenges in teaching young learners who have difficulty in understanding abstract concepts. In one of the observations, Helmi was seen to use gesture to explain meaning of words for his young children.

3.2. The roles of the programme in novice Teachers’ knowledge construction

Based on the data, it is also found that, the roles of the “Native Speaker Programme” in contributing to novice

teachers' professional knowledge construction are; a) bridging the gap between knowledge during pre-service training and the real classroom b) providing the platform for novice teachers to exchange ideas c) instilling motivation for teacher to learn during the programme d) providing an expert as guidance for the novice teachers and, e) providing authentic environment to learn.

3.2.1. Bridging the gap between knowledge during pre-service training and the real classroom

The “Native Speaker Programme” facilitates novice teacher professional knowledge construction by bridging the gap between knowledge gained during pre-service training in university and teacher training college with the real classroom. Helmi shares his view on how he can use the knowledge on classroom management that he gained from his mentor as a hands-on input although he had learnt about it during his undergraduate studies.

“Most of the input given in the programme was already given during my studies, so for me the most valuable input that my mentor gives me is classroom management... because what have been thought during my study in university was more towards theoretical. So what he gave me is practical.”

3.2.2. Providing the platform for novice teachers to exchange ideas

In addition, the “Native Speaker Programme” assists novice teachers' professional construction by providing the platform for novice teachers to exchange ideas. This is evident when Alice talked about sharing and learning knowledge and teaching material with her colleagues from different schools.

“We share things among participating teachers... like teaching methods. So we compile everything in one place and share it using *Dropbox* so everyone can use the materials in their classroom. And they are free. For example, I have Alphabots videoclip so I share with them in the *Dropbox*. Most of the teachers, maybe they do not know where to find the video, so when I share that, they can use it.”

3.2.3. Instilling motivation for teacher to learn during the programme

Furthermore, the “Native Speaker Programme” aids novice teachers' knowledge construction by instilling motivation for teacher to learn during the programme. According to Amina, her mentor will make them “feel that it is fun to go to workshops”. She also said that her mentor “will give presents to motivate, and we (teachers) will be so excited and engaged in the lesson during workshops.” In addition, she asserts that the interesting approach and the fact that her mentor promotes interaction between mentees motivate her to learn during the programme.

3.2.4. Providing an expert as guidance for the novice teachers

The “Native Speaker Programme” also helps novice teachers' in constructing their professional knowledge by providing them the guidance from the experts. Zahara informs that she has an experienced mentor to provide her guidance. According to her, her “mentor has wide experience in ESL since she has been teaching in US, Australia and Canada”. She adds that if she encounters difficulties in teaching she will “just call her and tell her, she will give ideas and effective suggestion.”

As for Alice, she receive guidance from her mentor when her mentor her teaching.

“So she will observe our teaching and sometimes she will give suggestions and me ideas. Sometimes we do not realise that we are using the wrong language, so she will correct my language. From her observation and she will give feedbacks on what I should do and what to improve. She's really an expert you know!”

3.2.5. Providing authentic environment to learn

Furthermore, the “Native Speaker Programme” assists novice teachers' knowledge construction as it provides an authentic environment for teachers to learn and to enhance their teaching skills. This is evident when Amina described how she learnt directly from her mentor based on real situation in her classroom. In addition, she

juxtaposes how learning from her mentor is different from learning from the lecturers in the university because “she (the mentor) will be there (in school), she looks and evaluates the situation and she gives suggestion. Unlike the lecturers in university, they do not see the real classroom; they do not know how your students are.”

4. Conclusion

Based on the analysed responses, it is found that the “Native Speaker Programme” found that the programme assist novice ESL teachers’ professional development by enhancing teachers’ knowledge in several aspects and by playing significant roles that contributes to novice teachers’ professional development. Teacher learning has been defined as an “unstudied problem” since the 1980s in general education (Clark & Peterson, 1986) as well as in language education (Freeman, 1996). In addition, Borko (2004) argues that there is a need for more research that explores the complexities of teacher learning in the professional development contexts. Hence, the examination of teacher learning through their knowledge construction resulting from participation in a professional development programme in this study will contribute to the body of knowledge by bridging gaps in the existing literature.

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