

Accelerating Preservice Teachers' Learning in Teaching Practicum through Instructional Coaching

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ABSTRACT

Teacher preparation programs are sometimes reported to have a lack of adequate provision of training transfer from university to school classrooms so that many preservice teachers are not prepared to have their field experience. This paper, thus, reports on the perspectives of EFL preservice teachers regarding the effectiveness of instructional coaching of literacy pedagogy within their practicum program with their university supervisor. Employing a qualitative approach, this study involved three preservice teachers who were placed in a vocational high school in West Java Province, Indonesia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the preservice teachers and reflective journals were also collected with respect to their thoughts and reflection to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the coaching process. The results of the data showed the preservice teachers' voices about the benefits of instructional coaching. They also pointed out the weakness of instructional coaching. This study implies that practicum educators should make concerted efforts to share promising ways of coaching to enhance the effectiveness of supervision.

Keywords: *Instructional coaching, teaching practicum, professional development*

1. INTRODUCTION

Student teaching is an important part of initial teacher education. It is held for preservice teachers who are placed in schools to experience teaching in real contexts to shape their development as novice teachers (Izadinia, 2015). The program, that is commonly called teaching placement, field experience or teaching practicum (Preston, Walker, & Ralph, 2015), allows preservice teachers to gain the necessary expertise of knowledge, attitudes, practical skills, and reflection towards their practices (Bjørndal, 2020). The skills and knowledge they develop are intended to prepare them for entrance into their teaching professionalism (Preston et al., 2015).

While taking part in a real teaching setting, preservice teachers are mentored by a cooperating teacher and university representative or supervisor. The interaction between preservice teachers and cooperating teacher and university supervisor supports preservice teachers to connect the theoretical concepts of teaching learned earlier at the course works in the university to their experience of teaching in real contexts (Mena, Hennissen, & Loughran, 2017; Mukeredzi, 2017). The

ways the mentors interact with preservice teachers more or less affect in shaping the preservice teachers' professional development (Delaney, 2012).

Despite the opportunities and supports from mentors to learn and develop their expertise, teaching is not always perceived positively by preservice teachers. One of the problems that usually occur during teaching practicum is the inconsistent quality of mentoring such as conflicting ideas between cooperating teacher and university supervisor in terms of pedagogical knowledge and university supervisor limited time of guidance provision (Wilson, 2006). A collaboration of the three parties, ideally, is suggested to assist preservice teachers' competence in teaching. Such collaboration can be identified in a supervision model of instructional coaching.

The term coaching has been used in many different ways, but in education it is viewed as a strategy to support teachers to provide high quality teaching to their students (Denton & Hasbrouck, 2009). Instructional coaching is a collaboration between coaches and teachers in ways that they choose and implement research-based techniques to support students' effective learning (Knight, 2007). It includes activities such as

observations, classroom teaching, modeling, and pre- and post-conferences (Gallucci et al., 2010). In addition, it is claimed as aligned with theory and research on effective professional development because it emphasizes sustainability and collaboration to promote teacher learning (Matsumura et al., 2019)

There are two models of coaching, namely supervisory coaching and side-by-side or in vivo coaching (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010). Supervisory coaching is conducted by observing teachers when implementing a newly learned technique. The practice is recorded and discussed in the post conference regarding the strengths and opportunities for improvement. Side-by-side coaching allows the coach to intervene the teaching practice by teachers to provide models and additional opportunities to perform with the same practice.

In initial teacher education instructional coaching can be viewed as a source of support and a resource of learning. Jones and Ringler (2020) mention the opportunities to discuss lessons in the pre-conference with the coach and to gain feedback on their lessons. Preservice teachers also learn to value the feedback and use it to improve their teaching skills and learn to reflect on their lessons, their teaching, and their reactions to feedback.

Instructional coaching in teaching practicum program provides humanistic and technical supports (Gardiner, 2011). Preservice teachers learn how they need “nonevaluative” support to keep them being encouraged to teach. Feedback should be instruction-related and constructive to improve teaching and learning (Becker, Waldis, & Staub, 2019).

There have been numerous studies on instructional coaching with preservice teachers focusing on a variety of issues such as the value of feedback (Anderson & Radencich, 2001) and a specific content area coaching called content-focused coaching (Becker et al., 2019). Instructional coaching does not only involve cooperating teachers and university supervisors, but also principals (Jones & Ringler, 2020). It was also implemented in real time coaching, that is giving feedback at the time of teaching practice (Stahl, Sharplin, & Kehrwald, 2016). In a more qualitative sense, a study pursuing preservice teachers’ perceptions of the instructional coaching cycle was conducted by Gardiner (2012).

Despite the advanced development of research of instructional coaching with preservice teachers, little is known that this kind of supervisory technique has been implemented in Indonesia. The studies on mentoring preservice teachers in their teaching practicum focused more on reflective practice of teaching by preservice teachers (Astika, 2014; Kuswandono, 2014; Ragawanti, 2015) and teaching observation with pre- and post-

conferences (Rohmah, 2018). Thus, this study attempted to enrich the scholarship of instructional coaching in a qualitative report. It aimed at investigating the strengths and weaknesses of instructional coaching as perceived by Indonesian EFL preservice teachers. It is expected that this study promotes the implementation of instructional coaching with preservice teachers in the country, as for the benefits preservice teachers can earn from it.

2. METHODS

2.1. Design

A qualitative approach was used in this study. It concerns with “... subjective opinions, experiences and feelings of individuals and thus the explicit goal is of the research is to explore the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 38). We attempted to explore the participants’ experiences and thoughts about instructional coaching in their practicum program.

2.2. Participants and Setting

Three EFL preservice teachers participated in this study; later they are called PST 1, PST 2, and PST 3. They enrolled in a teaching practicum course held in February-May, 2020, as one of the requirements to achieve their bachelor's degree in a state university in West Java Province, Indonesia. They taught Grade 10 students in a public vocational high school in the province. They were supervised by a cooperating teacher and a university supervisor. The preservice teachers were coached by the university supervisor, while the cooperating teacher participated in all stages of the coaching program.

2.3. Procedure

The study consisted of two stages including the instructional coaching cycle and interview. The instructional coaching cycle in this study included instructive training, modeling, observations, and feedback (after and before teaching), following the framework suggested by Kretlow and Bartholomew (2010).

The instructional coaching started from the preservice teachers’ classes to identify their challenges of teaching. Then, the university supervisor introduced them to literacy pedagogy, and designed the lesson collaboratively. One of the preservice teachers’ collaborated lesson designs was modeled by the university supervisor to show how the lesson should be conducted in the classroom, while the preservice teachers and cooperating teacher observed the lesson.

The preservice teachers, then, performed their own lessons that was observed by the university supervisor and cooperating teacher, a side-by-side model of coaching. Debriefings were carried out before and after the preservice teachers' lessons were conducted. Non-evaluative feedback was delivered in the post-teaching debriefings by the university supervisor, along with the cooperating teacher, that is focusing on stating effective behaviours and strategies, choosing areas that needed improvement, and telling specific ways to reach the improvement (Anderson & Radencich, 2001).

2.4. Data collection and analysis

The data of this study were obtained through interview and reflective journals. The three participants were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview protocol, after the coaching program, which was audio-recorded. Each of them described their experiences within the teaching practicum for about two hours. The data were then transcribed verbatim. The reflective journals were written by the preservice teachers during the coaching program. They contained reflection of the preservice teachers' experiences after observing the university supervisor modeling and teaching two classes using the literacy pedagogy trained by the university supervisor. Some prompt questions were given to the preservice teachers to help them get the ideas of writing journals such as what was experienced and what was learned from the experiences.

The data analysis involved reducing and retrieving a large amount of information as suggested by Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012). The data were coded to identify recurring regularities. The codes were refined iteratively through categorization to develop themes.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data from the interviews and reflective journals reveal some interesting themes relating to the strengths and weaknesses of the instructional coaching experienced by the EFL preservice teachers in this study. The strengths include opportunities that the preservice teachers experienced such as intensive meetings, "real" feedback, support of teaching, and reflection of teaching. The weakness that the preservice teachers encountered in the instructional coaching was the too much time of being observed.

3.1. Strengths of instructional coaching

Teacher learning is the aim of teaching a practicum in which preservice teachers acquire knowledge and skills of teaching in a real context. In order to advance the learning, an effective strategy is needed such as instructional coaching (Gardiner, 2012). In this study the preservice teachers identified several strengths of instructional coaching that they considered helpful to

learn to teach. First is having intensive meetings between the preservice teachers and their cooperating teacher and university supervisor. They had meetings in the school intensively for one coaching cycle in variety of sessions including lesson planning, modeling, observations and conferences. These meetings were important for the preservice teachers to learn about how to do effective teaching. For example, PST 1 said that in the meetings they shared ideas and feedback. The sharing was needed in order to help them decide what activities would be effective in their classes.

PST 1: "... during the teaching practicum we worked together in planning the lessons, discussing the pedagogy. I built a relationship with her in many meetings for sharing ideas and thoughts about instructions, what I should do [in teaching] ..." (Interview-PST 1)

PST 2 voiced the opportunities to ask certain teaching-related issues in the meetings. She did not have to make an appointment first to ask for feedback.

PST 2: "She was around when I had my classes, so I had my opportunities to ask my problems about teaching. I did not make an appointment first, I used the time when I met her." (Interview-PST 2)

Desimone and Pak (2016) emphasize the meaning of duration in instructional coaching to be supporting high quality teaching. In addition, intensive meetings should have interaction between preservice teachers and cooperating teacher and university supervisor to assist preservice teachers to make a connection between theoretical concepts of teaching and teaching in real contexts (Mena et al., 2017; Mukeredzi, 2017).

Second, the preservice teachers identified "real" feedback for their learning of teaching. They defined "real" feedback as feedback that was not just because the university supervisor and cooperating had to give them feedback. Rather, the feedback was delivered focusing on the real issues that the preservice teachers faced in the classrooms. The feedback was focused and directed to find solutions

PST 3 pointed out that the received feedback was what she really needed at that time. The feedback was based on what she had experienced and that to be used for her improvement in the later meeting.

PST 3: "... The feedback was acceptable for me because they were based on what really happened in the classroom. [For example] when something [wrong] happened [in the classroom], this was the suggestion. So, for me the feedback was not made up, for something that did not happen. The feedback

focused on what I experienced, and that I would do.” (Interview-PST 3)

PST 1 stressed that the feedback she gained was mostly the solutions to the problems that she encountered in her classes.

PST 1: “Almost all of her feedback was related to what I had done in the classroom. Her feedback was right because whenever I did something that was not appropriate, she gave me the solutions and suggestions.” (Interview-PST 1)

Data from the reflection show that the feedback was straightforward to what was observed in the classroom. PST 2, for example, thought that as benefits to improve her teaching.

PST 2: “They [the university supervisor and cooperating teacher] gave me great comments right after I finished teaching that definitely will help me perform better next time regarding my concerns. ...” (Reflection 1-PST 2)

Feedback in teaching practicum is an essential part of teacher learning, and feedback from both university supervisor and cooperating teacher is more valuable, compared to feedback from peers (Anderson & Radencich, 2001). Constructive feedback rather than direct advice is also more favourable for preservice teachers (Becker et al., 2019). It is worthwhile for preservice teachers to have regular constructive feedback from the committed supervisors based on their observations.

Another positive influence of instructional coaching experienced by the preservice teachers is the support of teaching. Through modeling and teaching performance observed by the university supervisor and cooperating teacher, the preservice teachers had opportunities to learn from the model and to act it out in their own practices. For example, PST 1 learned how to include students’ participation through teacher’s guidance in her observation of the modeling session.

PST 1: “... she already showed us that students’ participation must be proportional [through] teacher’s guidance. She guided the students but that didn’t mean she had to do everything, ...” (Reflection 2-PST 1)

In the interview, PST 2 noted that her learning of teaching was supported when she observed the modeling. She could identify the aspects of how the model teaching was effective, and that she could apply them in her own classes.

PST 2: “... how the stages of the pedagogy were sequenced. So, I knew how to do the first stage to individual writing. how to point students to read, how to approach students, how to appreciate students.” (Interview-PST 2)

PST 3: “I watched you teach after you observed me. It was good so I knew how to apply the pedagogy for vocational school students. So I was not kind of blind about this pedagogy. You gave us an example to guide me to manage my class.” (Interview-PST 3)

PST 3 said that she was not only observed, but also did the observation on the modeling. She would know how to do effective classroom management for her own classes. Teachers need to see practices in action to be ready to enact them on their own. And both foster the teacher’s learning of teaching (Knight & van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). In addition, both modeling and teaching practices enacted the collaborated lesson plans. Collaboration is a typical characteristic of instructional coaching (Knight, 2007).

The last strength that could be identified in the collected data is the reflection sessions. They were provided to do reflection in written and face-to-face conferences. PST 1 stated that the reflections made her recognize her weaknesses to be improved in her later practices.

PST 1: “I was encouraged to write self-reflection in each meeting [of teaching]. The purpose was to reflect on what I had done. It was for me to know my weaknesses of teaching, what went wrong. What my weaknesses were, and that helped me a lot [to improve].” (Interview-PST 1)

PST 2: “[The reflection] benefited me so I could do better in the future. For example, in the first week [of teaching] I could recognize my weaknesses [of teaching], what I should improve to give effective instructions for the students. Therefore, I could improve my teaching in the next performance.” (Interview-PST 2)

PST 3: “Actually the reflection helped to review [what had been done]. So, I knew what to improve for my teaching. I could give better approach for the students to learn.” (Interview-PST 3)

PST 2 and PST 3 similarly stated that they were made aware of what they had done in the classes and thought about it whether the actions were effective for their students’ learning. Jones and Ringler (2020) indeed argue that preservice teachers are benefitted from

reflection about their lessons and their teaching so that they could develop their early teaching competence.

3.2. Weakness of instructional coaching

The weakness of the instructional coaching that is identified in the study does not refer to how limited the instructional coaching was. Rather, the weakness was on the demand of the instructional coaching toward the preservice teachers. The preservice teachers experienced the demand of having intensive meetings with the university supervisor and cooperating teacher. They had meetings in a variety of activities especially in the classrooms. The observations were conducted consecutively. They were observed to identify their improvement of teaching, and that sometimes made them weary. They also said that they needed time for their own teaching without having observed. They would appreciate if they had time of their own teaching and practice the reflection on their own.

It is relatively similar to the findings from the study conducted by Matsumura et al. (2019) that show that despite having the precious benefits of instructional coaching, teachers also felt it as burdensome. The teachers in the study found that it was not easy to devote their time to the program.

It might be true that preservice teachers need authority to make decisions and to do a reflection on their own space. Coaching should give gradual release when preservice teachers are prepared for their own time of planning and teaching after being guided and coached in an intensive moment.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reported the strengths and weaknesses of instructional coaching of literacy pedagogy experienced by three EFL preservice teachers with their university supervisor and cooperating teacher. The preservice teachers highlighted several aspects of instructional coaching that they found supportive to accelerate their learning as teachers at school. These aspects may foster their development as professionals that are needed in their future career as teachers. However, when they pointed out the weaknesses, they did not mention them as negative aspects. Rather, they did not expect that the instructional coaching that they underwent was something that put them in business such as preparing lessons, observing the modeling session, and practicing their own lessons while being observed several times by the university supervisor and cooperating teacher. In a literal sense, they did not find the weakness of instructional coaching in terms of the activities and benefits that they earned.

This study cannot be generalized because of several limitations. It only relied on interviews and reflective

journals. The data source needed to be more various so that there would be more aspects that could be explored. It included one side of participants, that is preservice teachers. Other parties such as university supervisors and cooperating teachers could also be gathered as participants.

In spite of the limitations, this study is expected to enrich the scholarship of instructional coaching especially in the Indonesian context in which such study is still limited, if not none. The activities enacted in instructional coaching and the exploration of the discussions in them have shown benefits for preservice teachers. In the teaching practicum, they are in the process of learning to be teachers in the future. They develop their skills of teaching by enacting their knowledge they earn in the course works. Guidance and mentoring are important support for them, but structured support such as in instructional coaching is more relevant to accelerate their learning. Instructional coaching allows the preservice teachers to collaborate with the university supervisor and cooperating teacher so that issues in a teaching practicum, such as conflicting ideas and inequality of supervision, that are often faced by preservice teachers could be minimized.

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