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### Feedback in teacher education: mentor discourse and intern perceptions

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## Feedback in teacher education: mentor discourse and intern perceptions

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Giving and receiving feedback are essential activities in student teaching. This paper explores the strategies that mentors adopted in giving post-observation feedback to the interns in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and these teaching interns' perceptions of the feedback they received. The discourse analysis of six post-observation meetings that involved six mentors and five MA student interns shows how the mentors engaged the interns in the interaction and made their feedback more acceptable to these teaching interns. The mentors' strategies include the questioning techniques, as well as patterns in the delivery of compliments, criticisms and suggestions. Analysis of the recorded mentors' feedback and follow-up interviews with the interns reveal that they appreciated many of the mentors' strategies in giving feedback. The paper concludes with conditions which seem to foster constructive post-observation interactions.

**Keywords:** feedback; mentor discourse; mentoring; student teaching; teacher education

Good teacher training with feedback given to trainee teachers is crucial in developing successful teachers and improving the standards and success in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The cooperating teacher's feedback in teacher education is widely acknowledged for its importance (e.g. Baniabdelrahman 2004; Pelletier 2000; Wilkins-Canter 1997) as a major source of knowledge about teaching for the student teachers (Russell 1979) and a guidance for their professional development. However, giving feedback is a challenging professional speech activity (Vásquez 2004) that requires from the cooperating teacher a complex interplay of communication, analytical and interpersonal skills (Fletcher 2000; Gibson 2006). Also, the power imbalance between the cooperating teacher and the student teacher (Shantz and Ward 1990) can make their interaction in the feedback conference undesirable because the cooperating teacher, who generally has more institutional authority and expertise than the intern, may exercise his/her authority by giving the student teacher more directives than encouragement (D. Anderson 2007) while the student teacher tries not to show their disagreement (e.g. Beck and Kosnik 2002). Also, the cooperating teacher's feedback may threaten the public self-image of the student teacher (Vásquez 2004) because it may involve some evaluation of the student teacher's teaching performance which often needs

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improvement. Therefore, it is important to find out what feedback can be well received by the student teachers.

Many studies can be found on the cooperating teacher's feedback in teacher education. While many researchers explored the student teachers' perceptions of the feedback, others examined the nature of the feedback given. Very few researchers examined the actual feedback to point out the features that actually created positive effects on the student teacher's perceptions (Le 2007).

Findings from questionnaires and/or interviews from various previous investigations in various countries have repeatedly showed that the student teachers were not always very happy with the feedback they received as they considered this feedback unhelpful, inflexible, critical or negative (e.g. E. Arnold 2006; Atpthasamy 2005; Beck and Kosnik 2002; Brandt 2008; Vásquez 2004; Vásquez and Reppen 2007). Similar research tools in other studies revealed that the student teachers desired to receive accurate and appropriate feedback (Glenn 2006; McNally, Cope, and Inglis 1997) with a good balance between compliments and criticisms (Abbott and Lyter 1998; Beck and Kosnik 2002; McNally, Cope, and Inglis 1997). The insights provided by these studies implied that the feedback given by the cooperating teachers was not well received by the student teachers partly due to its negative feature. However, these investigations did not examine the actual feedback so there was no evidence to support the student teachers' complaints. By contrast, instead of focusing on the student teachers' perceptions, other researchers (N.A. Anderson 1998; N.A. Anderson and Radencich 2001; Christensen 1988; Feiman-Nemser 2001; O'Neal 1983) examined the nature of the actual oral feedback or certain strategies employed by the cooperating teachers in giving feedback (e.g. N.A. Anderson 1998; N.A. Anderson and Radencich 2001; Feiman-Nemser 2001; Vásquez 2004). In other words, these studies did not explore how the student teachers felt about this feedback or the effects it might have exerted on the recipients.

For the cooperating teachers' feedback to be effective in leading to a change in student teachers' classroom practice, perhaps it should be well received by the teachers at whom it was directed. Therefore, this study attempted to link the features of the actual feedback, especially the strategies that the cooperating teachers considered to make their feedback constructive, with the effects this feedback had on the student teachers' perceptions. In other words, the study aimed to find what features of the actual feedback language could be considered constructive by the student teachers.

In teacher education, *cooperating teachers* (i.e. P. Arnold 2002; Koster, Korthagen, and Wubbels 1998) are teachers who help the student teachers with their teaching practice. They are also referred to as *associate teachers* (i.e. Beck and Kosnik 2002), *supervising teachers* (i.e. Murray-Harvey et al. 2001) or *mentors* (Bullough et al. 2003; Giebelhaus and Bowman 2002). The student teachers can be called *mentees* (Bullough et al. 2003) and these can be novice teachers or trainee teachers during their internship or practicum. Since the participants in this study were called *mentors* and *interns* in their own contexts, these terms were widely adopted in the rest of the article.

### The present study

This study examined the mentors' actual feedback in US contexts and the interns' perceptions of this feedback via three research questions:

- (1) How did the mentors promote the interns' involvement in the interaction?
- (2) How did mentors deliver compliments, criticism, and suggestions to the interns?
- (3) What were the interns' perceptions of the feedback they received?

While Questions 1 and 2 were aimed at finding out the mentors' strategies in delivering the feedback, Question 3 was designed to identify how this feedback was perceived by the interns. The strategies to be examined referred to various ways that the mentors consciously used in their feedback to make the interns feel positive about themselves and their teaching. The concentration was on how the mentors promoted the interns' participation in the feedback interaction (Question 1) and how these mentors increased the interns' self-esteem, confidence and learning via their delivery of compliments, criticisms and suggestions (Question 2). The emphasis on these strategies was rooted in the empirical findings in the studies mentioned above. These suggested two limitations in feedback; firstly, the interns' complaints about the critical or negative feedback and secondly, the limited participation from the intern in the feedback interaction. While the first limitation may have hindered the interns' fruitful learning from the feedback, the second one may have resulted in a lack of mutual understanding and useful cooperation between the interns and the mentors for better teaching practice.

This study was conducted at the English Language Institute (ELI) of a public university in the Southeast USA where academic English programs were provided for international students to satisfy an English language requirement for university admission and this institute also served as the site for teaching internship for MA students in TESOL of the same university with the help of their mentors. For the teaching internship, each MA student intern assumed complete responsibility for one course at the ELI for 14 weeks during which time about six of each intern's lessons were observed by a mentor or by the instructor of the Internship Course, who ultimately assessed the intern's teaching performance as 'Satisfactory' or 'Unsatisfactory'. After each observed lesson, the intern met the mentor (or the instructor) to get the feedback for that lesson.

### ***Participants***

Eleven participants in this study were five TESOL mentors (referred to as M1 to M5), one Internship course instructor (referred to as M6), who also observed and gave feedback to the interns, and five MA student teaching interns (referred to as I1 to I5). One intern (I5) was observed in two different lessons and given feedback by two mentors (M5 and M6) for these sessions (F5 and F6 respectively).

The interns were two males and three females with ages ranging from late 20s to early 50s. Three of them were native English speakers with some prior teaching experience in primary schools of subjects unrelated to TESOL and the other two were non-native English speakers with no teaching experience. When this study began, these interns were in the fifth or sixth week of their teaching internship in the final semester of a TESOL Master's program. The five mentors were full-time instructors with an MA in TESOL and one was pursuing a doctoral degree in language education. All these mentors had taught at ELI for at least two years and had prior mentoring experience. As mentors, they observed the interns' teaching and gave post-observation feedback for the interns' lessons.

### **Data collection tools**

Effective data collection techniques adopted in previous investigations about mentor feedback and intern perceptions were chosen for this study. Specially, the feedback conferences between the mentors and the interns were audio recorded (Christensen 1988; Kahan et al. 2001; Le 2007; O'Neal 1983; Russell 1979; Vásquez and Reppen 2007) to identify the mentors' strategies as realised in their feedback. Interviews were conducted with the mentors and the interns (e.g. E. Arnold 2006; Beck and Kosnik 2002; Le 2007; McNally, Cope, and Inglis 1997; Vásquez 2004) to learn about their perceptions of the feedback delivery. All these interviews were audio recorded for content analysis. In addition, lessons discussed in the feedback conferences were observed by the main researcher and the observation notes served as a tool for understanding the feedback and the interview data, but were not the focus of the data analysis.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Six complete feedback sessions from 16 to 48 minutes (38 minutes on average) were audio recorded after the classroom observations. The researcher set up the audio recorder for the recording, but was not present in the feedback session. Another 12 semi-structured interviews of approximately 20 minutes each with the relevant participants were audio recorded and transcribed for content analysis before these interview data were compared with the oral feedback data.

All the data were transcribed immediately after they were collected and most of the transcripts were checked by participants for accuracy. The feedback sessions were labeled F1 to F6, with the mentors referred to as M1 to M6, and the interns as I1 to I5, respectively.

The transcribed recorded feedback was subjected to a detailed discourse analysis (McCarthy 1991) for structural models of language, with special attention to the talk distribution between the feedback participants, the mentor's use of questions, their responses to the interns, as well as the speech act patterns in the mentor's feedback. In the light of speech act theory (Austin 1962; Leech 1997; Searle 1969), a compliment was defined as a comment that pointed out one positive aspect in the intern's lesson, a suggestion as a specific recommendation to improve a certain part in the lesson and a criticism as a remark pinpointing an undesirable aspect. In identifying the speech act patterns, the mentors' comments were first tabulated before the lexical and syntactic structures of those comments were analyzed for speech act patterns. The mentors' interview responses about the strategies adopted in giving the feedback were used to find out the mentors' intentions in making their feedback constructive and these responses also served as a cross-check with the strategies identified in their actual feedback. The answer to the final question (What were the interns' perceptions of the feedback they received?) came from the interns' interview data.

### **Findings and discussion**

The strategies that the mentors stated to use in giving the feedback coincided with those identified in their actual feedback. These findings were presented in the order of the research questions raised. For Questions 1 and 2, the findings were illustrated first with the mentors' interview data about the strategies that they had used, followed by an analysis of their actual oral feedback data. The data about interns' perceptions of the feedback they received were provided for Question 3.

The mentors' main answer to Question 1 (How did the mentors promote the interns' involvement in the interaction?) was the use of questions and this was evidenced in their actual feedback. As shown in the data, there was substantial talk produced by the interns who contributed, on average, 38% of the talk, while their mentors' talk comprised the other 62% (Table 1). Compared to the findings in previous studies (28% in O'Neal and Edward 1983; 38% in Christensen 1988; and 35% in Vásquez and Reppen 2007), the teaching interns' talk in this study (38%) seemed to indicate that they were quite involved in the feedback interaction. This result might have been closely linked to the mentors' elicitation techniques via the use of questions.

### *Mentors' use of questions*

Most mentors (M1, 2, 3, 5 and 6) mentioned in their interviews that asking questions was a way they used to encourage the interns' participation in the feedback interaction and to promote the interns' thinking skills.

Asking them to analyse their own teaching is the best thing and elicitation questions are always really helpful. (M1)

I try to make the intern do a lot of the talking ... So I usually ask them first 'How was the class? How do you think it went?' (M2)

I started the session by asking him 'How do you feel? Why do you feel that way?' (M3)

I try to elicit the information as much as possible from the intern. (M5)

The value of questioning in giving feedback was further articulated by Mentor 6:

The questions are aimed to help the teacher to link the living experience in the classroom with the conceptual constructs of teaching. They can develop the high-order thinking skills which allow teachers to make more informed decisions in the future classroom. The mentor needs to find out what the intern knows in order to start from where she is and collaboratively work with her.

Ranging in number from 6 to 83 per session (Table 2), questions tended to be far more frequent in some sessions (F1, 3 and 6) than others (F2, 4 and 5), with the

Table 1. Talk distribution between mentors and interns.

Feedback	Talk distribution				Total talk wds
	Mentor		Intern		
	wds	%	wds	%	
1	4246	59	2962	41	7208
2	5297	67	2577	33	7874
3	2556	60	1718	40	4274
4	2131	68	1000	32	3131
5	5102	58	3700	42	8802
6	4459	58	3246	42	7705

highest frequency being one question every half a minute (F6) and the lowest frequency being one question every five minutes (F5).

In analyzing the oral feedback data more closely, it was found that early in the feedback sessions, mentors often asked questions to elicit talk from the teaching interns. At this stage in the meeting, general questions (such as ‘How do you think it went?’) were used as an invitation for the intern to talk about their lesson, as in Extract 1.

1. M: So how do you think it went?
2. I: I think overall it went (pause).ch ch OK but I (pause) kind off my pace because things were kind of in having the conversation leaders coming in
3. M: I know
4. I: and yeah yeah I have to get something for them to do and (pause)
5. M: and it was the first time when they came?
6. I: today was the first day
7. M: uhuhm
8. M: What do you think went really really well as you planned? You thought that it'd work and it worked.
9. I: (pause) uhm (pause) I think that (pause) I think that the vocabulary went well with discussion and I think that they got to understand some of the cultural stuff involved with employment in the US and things like that.

This excerpt illustrates how a general question (turn 1) at the beginning of a meeting could open the floor up to the intern, and allow the intern to select a topic that he felt comfortable in discussing. In Extract 1, the intern started off with a self-critique about the pacing of his lesson and followed that up with plans for his next class meeting. A few turns later, the mentor posed a more specific question (turn 8) by asking the intern about what he felt went well. This question not only helped the intern to focus on another specific issue, but it also gave the intern a chance to focus on a more positive aspect of the lesson. In other cases, especially in the later portions of the post-observation session, mentors tended to ask more specific questions to prompt the interns to think about the purposes of their activities, or to clarify the rationale underlying their actions while teaching. The examples below illustrate this tendency.

What is the oral test going to be on? (M1)

What do you think made the class today better? (M2)

What was happening when all the students were together? (M6)

Table 2. Number of questions posed by the mentor in each feedback session.

Session	Length of session (minutes)	Number of questions	Frequency of questions (minutes)
F1	40	38	1.0
F2	48	18	2.7
F3	29	25	1.2
F4	16	6	2.7
F5	50	9	5.5
F6	47	83	0.6

In the following example, the mentor asked the intern a specific question about why she chose to explain her instructions to individual groups and not to the whole class:

Extract 2: (F1)

1. M: you go from group to group and you were explaining 'you guys will interview each other and you're gonna guess here', What was your rationale behind that?
2. I: behind how I explained it?
3. M: Yeah from group to group.
4. I: uhm well actually I was going to explain it all, pass it out, then explain it again.
5. M: uhm uhm.
6. I: but I just quickly passed it out. Then I thought I can really talk to small groups.
7. M: Uhm uhm.
8. I: to make sure
9. M: Right.
10. I: they really know what they're supposed to do.

The question (turn 1) posed by the mentor seemed to help the intern think about the lesson and articulate her beliefs for her instructional choices. The intern's explanation (i.e. that she was modifying actions in the midst of teaching in an effort to improve the lesson) may have provided the mentor with a glimpse into the intern's ability to reflect on her practice. In this instance, the mentor's question offered an opportunity to the intern to actively contribute to the feedback session, and the intern's response might have enabled the mentor to see that the intern was experimenting with her teaching and decision-making in the classroom. By making use of questions, the mentor tended to contribute to developing the intern's critical and analytical skills, which are vital skills in learning to teach. Also, the mentors' questions may have provided the interns with sufficient opportunities to share their ideas and analysis of their own lessons as expressed by the interns (I2, I3, I4 and I5) in the interviews. For example,

I had enough opportunities to talk and I felt very comfortable when talking to my mentor. (I3)

She encouraged me in giving reflection by asking, 'What d'you think? How d'you feel?' (I4)

However, not all of the mentors' questions were favorably viewed by the interns and Extract 3 is an example. In this extract, the mentor's elicitation question (line 1) was followed by a hesitation from the intern (line 2). The mentor tried again two more times, and her nervous laughter revealed the awkwardness of the situation, in trying to elicit a response which was not forthcoming from the intern.

Extract 3: (F1)

1. M: What's your thought about that? What motivates you to do that and why you do it?
2. I: Uhm ...
3. M: That sounds like sounds like .hhahah a really hard question.



4. I: Uhm
5. M: Hahah why do you really do it? but no . . . What is your rationale?
6. I: I don't know. I like the idea of having something to really focus on like a goal for the week . . .

The intern later expressed that she sometimes felt uncomfortable with the questions which must have been hard for her to answer and she would have preferred for the mentor to understand her motivation, rather than asking her for an explanation.

The mentor needs to know where I was coming from and not just asking 'Why d'you do this? What were you thinking when you did this?' Try to understand and not just ask. (I1)

Similarly, Extract 4 also illustrates another intern's struggle in responding to a series of questions from her mentor about how to encourage students to participate in a class discussion.

Extract 4: (F6)

1. M: How can you take that over to one as a big group? How can you foster the same conditions when all the students are there? Was there anything you can do as a teacher to encourage those conditions?
2. I: I don't know if I hear them speak (pause) to give them the time uhm I don't know.

The interview with this particular intern indicates that she felt frustrated when she didn't know how to respond appropriately to the questions posed by her mentor.

I felt a little uncomfortable sometimes when she asked me, 'How could you make it differently?' I didn't have teaching experience and I had no idea. I don't feel stupid but there was a feeling of... She made me think more than other feedback but I felt frustrated because I can't figure it out. So, I felt frustrated. (I6)

This intern's remarks also suggested that the frustration came from the intern's lack of teaching experience and knowledge so the mentor's questions tended to be quite challenging to the intern. Thus, questions adopted by the mentor in Extracts 2, 3, and 4 might have been perceived both as a guidance and a challenge for the intern involved. While in Extract 2, thanks to the mentor's use of elicitation questions, the intern could articulate her thought process in the midst of teaching, the teaching interns in Extracts 4 and 5 appeared to be unable to provide adequate answers or were perhaps resistant to engage in a dialogue with a substantive response. Therefore, while elicitation questions can represent a useful strategy in giving feedback, it is important that both participants play a key role in determining whether those questions will ultimately be effective.

### ***Mentors' techniques in delivering their comments about the lessons***

In response to Question 2 (How did mentors deliver compliments, criticism, and suggestions to the interns?), the mentors specified various techniques in making their feedback constructive. The data in the extracts were from the actual feedback.

As mentioned earlier, the interviews with the mentors were designed to understand what they did with their feedback to increase the interns' participation in the feedback conferences and how they could make their feedback more acceptable to the interns, especially in dealing with areas that need improvement in the lessons. With a considerable degree of meta-pragmatic awareness (Silverstein 1981), these mentors demonstrated in the interviews the desire to create positive feelings for the interns by starting with something good in the lesson before indicating areas that need changes and suggesting ways to improve these areas. The following interview responses reveal these strategies.

I always try to have a balance, with an emphasis of something that went really well to raise the motivation of new teachers and I tell them in a polite way what would be good to be done in a different way. I usually provide other activities that can be done to make the lesson even more effective. (M3)

I start with something positive and then say, 'One thing that could've been a problem was that some students finished really quickly and didn't have enough to do. So what ideas do you have?' (M2)

Basically I try to praise the intern for coming up with good ideas and then offer different ways that the interns could try the next time. (M4)

The mentors' intentions in arranging their feedback in such a way that it could create positive feelings for the interns on its reception were consistent with the organization identified in their recorded feedback. The most common combination found in their comments was compliments preceding criticisms, followed by one or more suggestions. Extract 5 provides an example of the pattern 'Compliment-Criticism-Suggestion'.

I really like the puzzle analogy and I was thinking it was such a good analogy // but it was so tiny on the printed page. // You've got the overhead projector, why not project that puzzle piece? (F4)

In this extract, the mentor began by complimenting the intern on her use of a puzzle analogy whereby the students were asked to identify different factors constituting a good piece of writing. She then followed this up with a criticism about the small font size of the words written in this puzzle piece, which made the text difficult to read. She finished her turn by suggesting that the computer projector be used to enlarge the puzzle piece so that it could be seen more clearly.

Other common combinations in the feedback are criticisms followed by suggestions, or a compliment followed by a criticism, as in following extract.

They knew what to do and that was good // but (pause) hhahahah you didn't explain to the conversation leaders what they have to do. (F3)

In this extract, by preceding her criticism (i.e. the intern's failure to provide the conversation leader with instructions) with a compliment (i.e. the students knew what to do nevertheless) the mentor softened her criticism of the teacher's action. The delivery of this criticism was further attenuated by the mentor's hesitation and nervous laughter which preceded it. This arrangement was in accordance with the

mentor's explanation that her approach in delivering feedback was to provide a balance of positive feedback along with more critical feedback.

The mentors tended to share the same viewpoints in trying to make their feedback constructive by highlighting the good things in the interns' lessons, identifying only a few important areas that needed improvement and offering suggestions for the interns to improve their lessons in the future. Comments below clarified the mentors' intentions further.

My main aim was to motivate and encourage the intern so I focus mostly on the good sides. (M3)

I believe positive things help people learn and I try to give more suggestions. (M5)

I didn't point out all the problems but I just identify some key issues. (M2)

The mentors' approach to giving feedback coincided with their actual post-observation feedback, which featured not only many more suggestions (233) and compliments (156) than criticisms (63) (Table 3) but also in the discourse which started with compliments preceding complaints and suggestions. This observation was evidenced in the detailed description of the distribution of these speech acts below.

### *Mentors' compliments*

Compliments can show admiration for positive qualities (Ishihara 2003), reinforce solidarity between speakers (Wolfson 1981), and, in supervisory feedback, compliments can also develop interns' confidence (Glenn 2006). In this study, compliments were often given at the beginning of the mentors' feedback, creating a favorable learning environment for the interns right from the start of the conference. For example, Mentor 3 might have made Intern 3 feel good by starting her feedback with a positive remark on his effective teaching of the vocabulary, citing students' interest and involvement as evidence of this success:

Table 3. Distribution of compliments, criticisms and suggestions in mentors' feedback.

Feedback		Compliments	Criticisms	Suggestions
F1	acts	22	13	24
	words	569	450	838
F2	acts	11	12	58
	words	221	283	1796
F3	acts	22	11	17
	words	482	236	498
F4	acts	29	8	25
	words	461	125	517
F5	acts	49	14	64
	words	856	430	1645
F6	acts	23	5	45
	words	345	86	1037
Total	acts	156	63	233
	words	2934	1610	6331

What I think was well done was the vocabulary. The meaning of the vocabulary was clear. It was explained clearly and I think that they got it because they used it, they asked questions . . . They enjoyed their class and they are all active. (F3)

In many compliments, the mentors in this study clarified their compliments by analyzing why certain aspects in the lesson worked. This clarification, reported to be absent in many mentors' comments (Le 2007), was very beneficial to the interns as it helped to explain to these new teachers what made a lesson effective. For example, Mentor 5 complimented the intern on the warm-up activity by pointing out that this activity was useful to the students because it allowed them to actively share the knowledge they gained from the field trip to the local health center and, in this way, the students could effectively practice new vocabulary in the lesson.

I thought the warm up was a very good activity. It was great because it reminded them of making things very relevant. They were so active and remembering all of this vocabulary. (F5)

Extract 8 is a clear illustration of how mentors often increased the positive force of these compliments through the use of intensifiers (e.g. 'very'). Other examples include:

The language you used was absolutely terrific. (F4)

What you said was really good. (F5)

These and other intensifiers were employed at a very high rate in the compliments, i.e. they appeared in two out of three of Mentor 5's compliments or in a third of the compliments provided by Mentors 2, 4 and 6.

### ***Mentors' criticisms***

As explained in their interviews, the mentors were very careful with the language they used to deliver criticisms so that their feedback did not affect the interns' confidence and self-esteem.

I try not to be very direct when I give feedback. I don't say, 'You did this, you did that' but I say, 'I saw this.' (M1)

I tried not to speak about weaknesses in absolute terms. I tried to point out something positive. (M2)

I feel concern about whether my words hurt their feelings. (M3)

I tried to be sensitive to the intern's feelings so if something really wrong I don't make the intern feel awful. (M4).

I'm very careful with how strong my language is. I have to give criticism very respectfully and not harshly but very constructively. (M5)

Mentor 5's comments indicated that she was not only aware of how she used language, but she also actively attended to the qualities of her speech during those moments when she delivered criticisms.

The mentors' intentions in making their feedback more acceptable to the interns were repeatedly evidenced in their criticism delivery as found in the recorded feedback. Mentors tended to be indirect when discussing areas that needed improvement, and they often toned down criticisms with a mitigator, which is language used to soften negative comments (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989). The underlined phrases below are samples of the mentor's (Mentor 2) mild criticisms.

I was thinking maybe the first exercise was a little bit too slow.

One thing I was wondering about is the pace.

I think in the beginning you might have been speaking a little quickly.

Another strategy that the mentors sometimes used in discussing the weaknesses in the lessons was to ask the interns to identify these limitations themselves. In doing this, mentors could shift the responsibility to talk about areas of improvement to the interns. Mentor 2 explained this technique in her interview.

If there's something that I'd totally disagree with in the lesson, I'd maybe throw the question back to them and say, 'How did you think the students enjoyed the activity?' It feels like I'm not giving the criticism but I'm offering help to a situation that needs solutions.

With questions such as 'What would you improve?' or 'What would you've done differently?', mentors were often successful in helping the interns to recognize things that could be improved in the lesson, as in the following extract.

1. M: These things were OK but what would you've done differently?
2. I: Yeah definitely thinking back I would've maybe sped up the pace of vocabulary a little bit. (F3)

In this particular instance, Mentor 3 did not have to criticize the fact that the intern spent over an hour explaining the vocabulary. Instead, by asking the question (line 1), this mentor was successful in making Intern 3 realize this particular limitation in his lesson and even aimed at changes for improvement (line 2). Thus, with her question, Mentor 3 gave the intern an opportunity to demonstrate his ability to think critically about his teaching.

### ***Mentors' suggestions***

Giving suggestions also received adequate attention from the mentors. Interviews revealed that with their feedback, these mentors wanted to make the interns realize that solutions to problems in teaching were very much context dependent, and what might work in one setting might not necessarily work in another. Therefore, the mentors expected that the interns perceived the former's suggestions in teaching as options that the latter might consider and that the interns were the decision-makers and problem-solvers in their own classrooms. The mentors' ideas in giving suggestions to the interns were shown in the following.

I'd say, 'Maybe in the future you can try doing this.' My idea's for the interns to develop their own teaching style or strategies. (M1)

I'm not telling him the perfect way to do something, but rather working with him to find suggestions. (M2)

I often tell them that there's not a recipe all the time for an effective teacher. (M3)

The analysis of the post-observation feedback also showed that mentors' actual suggestions to their interns were in line with the beliefs they expressed in their interviews. The mentors respected the interns' rights to make their own decisions about teaching. For instance, the suggestions made by Mentor 2 showed that this mentor only provided examples of what he would do in similar situations, but that the decisions to change were left for the intern.

What I'd do is to look around and give a warning like 'Two more minutes on this. Try to complete as much as you can.'

If I were you, I'd say y'know 'Here's something extra.'

I don't think that I'd do so many exercises in a row.

Other suggestions that mentors gave in the form of alternative ways to improve the lesson were also delivered in examples such as 'I was thinking maybe you could say, "Why don't you write some questions?" So that's just another idea for you to try.' The consideration that the mentors showed for the interns' feelings was expressed both in their interviews and their feedback conferences.

### ***Mentors' engagement in relational work***

Expressing the empathy for an intern when things in the lesson did not go as well as expected was one means by which mentors engaged in relational work during the feedback sessions. The sympathy that Mentor 2 gave to his intern is a good example of this rapport. In a feedback session, when Intern 2 expressed an anxiety about his non-native accent being a hindrance in the classroom, Mentor 2 tried to decrease this intern's worry by assuring him that it was not a problem. This mentor reported, 'I told him that I thought his accent is very minimal and that I personally wouldn't feel worried about it.' A similar strategy was also adopted by Mentor 4 in her explanation: 'I'm sensitive to the intern's feelings so if something really goes wrong, I don't make the intern feel awful.' The mentor's feedback below also testified to the mentor's rapport with the intern. In this interaction, although Mentor 3 indicated that there were some problems with the lesson, she simultaneously expressed empathy for Intern 3's situation in line 5.

1. M: I noticed that you had that those uhm (pause) what was it one of =
2. I: = those days.
3. M: one of those days right? But and it's because of this it happens
4. I: Uh-huh.
5. M: Everybody has bad days 'one of those days'. (F3)

In another example, the intern admitted that she needed to work on her instructions because they were not clear enough during the lesson observed. In response, the mentor reassured the intern that even she herself had to struggle with instruction-giving and she further encouraged the intern by explaining that becoming adept at giving clear instructions was a skill often acquired with experience. Thus, in her response to the intern's self-critique, the mentor adopted an empathetic and understanding stance, another example of 'relational work' on the part of the mentor.

1. I: I really have to work on that because I realize later on they won't be clear and it's not natural for me.
2. M: That's fine . . . This is something that comes little by little. (F5)

In these two extracts, the mentors showed their understanding of the difficulties that the interns had to face. The mentor's encouragement in these cases may have helped the interns to feel more confident about themselves.

In summary, the mentors seemed to try various ways to make their feedback acceptable to the interns so that they could benefit more from this feedback. The mentors' conscious use of these techniques seemed to result in positive response from the interns (Question 3: What were the interns' perceptions of the feedback they received?) as shown in the individual interviews with these interns.

### *Interns' perceptions*

In their interviews, the interns generally expressed satisfaction with the feedback they received. For example, one intern liked the balance of praise and suggestions for improvement in his mentor's feedback.

I felt positive because she had a lot of positive things to say and she brings to my attention some things that I don't realize. (14)

Other interns appreciated the compliments given not only because these compliments gave them good feelings but also increased their confidence, for example:

Positive things in the feedback made me feel good. (11)

Possibly it was because he liked my teaching...Y'know I got some confidence. (12)

I generally like the feedback and I feel pretty good. (13)

The way she gives feedback is positive. I look forward to the feedback because it's the time for me to learn. (15)

I really enjoyed my mentor's feedback because it's an opportunity to learn what works and what doesn't. (16)

These comments revealed the generally positive response by interns to the feedback regarding the overall tone and the form that feedback took (e.g. 'the way she gives feedback') – as well as the balance of praise and criticism (e.g. 'an opportunity to learn what works and what doesn't') in the feedback they received. Intern

3's comments during the interview suggested that the mentor's combination of speech acts (advice and criticism) was well received.

I generally like the feedback and she usually gives me good advice and hands me a written form of things that need improvement. (I3)

The intern's comment revealed an interesting strategy adopted by his mentor: emphasizing the positive aspects of the lesson and sharing some advice in the oral feedback, but providing critical comments in written form. Perhaps the written comments were aimed to help the intern to refer to and reflect on his own lesson further to make future improvement.

In their interviews, other interns also expressed their appreciation for the criticisms they received, and made explicit reference to the sensitivity with which their mentors delivered any critical feedback.

Even when she gives criticism, she gives constructive feedback. She always says, 'I'd do this but it's up to you.' (I5)

Intern 2 also reported that he appreciated that his mentor's suggestions were presented in the form of alternatives, rather than as directives: 'The suggestions and alternatives were given but not in terms of "should/must".'

Similarly, Intern 4 explained that her mentor often presented suggestions as alternative ways to improve the lessons, rather than imposing her own perspective, so this intern appreciated this non-authoritarian stance, as indicated in her interview: 'She's not pushy and she leaves it up to you. She gives you her likes but she doesn't make you feel that you have to take it.' Additionally, the interns also found the specific, practical and applicable suggestions that the mentors gave to them useful, as pointed out by Intern 4: 'She gives specific examples on how to do better.'

In summary, the teaching interns' comments from their interviews seemed to indicate that they felt pleased with the feedback they received because of the positive nature of the comments, the encouragement expressed, as well as the specific suggestions offered for their teaching performance.

## Conclusion

The findings in this study confirmed a number of strategies considered to be effective in giving intern-friendly or constructive feedback in teacher education contexts, such as the use of questions (Vásquez and Reppen 2007), the delivery of compliments before criticisms or specific suggestions (N.A. Anderson 1998; N.A. Anderson and Radencich 2001; Bowman 2001; Glenn 2006; Murdoch 2000), the production of mild advice and suggestions (Vásquez 2004) and the assistance for the interns to pinpoint their own problems (Feiman-Nemser 2001), in addition to the provision of a comfortable atmosphere for the feedback conferences (McGlenn 2003) and a balance of both positive and negative comments (i.e. Glenn 2006; Murdoch 2000) in feedback delivery.

Furthermore, this study made some main contributions to the extant literature regarding the conditions which seemed to foster constructive feedback interactions. First, unlike the previous studies, the strategies discussed in this study were not only believed to work by the mentors and were evidenced in their actual feedback



but were also confirmed to be effective by their interns. Second, the study specified the various lexical and syntactical features of constructive feedback regarding the mentors' delivery of compliments, criticisms and suggestions. And, this bank of features and strategies could be used by the mentors to enhance the effectiveness of their feedback in teacher training. Third, the study drew the mentors to the use of questions in feedback delivery. Though questions could be very useful in helping the interns to participate in the feedback interaction to share their ideas, as well as to develop their critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities, these questions should be used with some care. Some questions could be too challenging to some trainee teachers owing to their little prior teaching experience, thus these questions might result in some frustration to the interns. Therefore, the mentors should remain sensitive to individual differences among teachers, and be aware that a particular strategy or pattern of interaction that works well for one teacher may not work as well for another (e.g. Vásquez and Reppen 2007). Fourth, and most interesting of all, the mentors in this study also created a supportive atmosphere in the feedback conferences with a remarkable amount of language used to show their sympathy and care to the intern when the lessons went against the interns' expectations. Therefore, it might be highly recommended that mentors pay special attention to affective factors when giving feedback to the interns to create the rapport with the latter and a favorable atmosphere for their learning.

In sum, the findings in this study could inform the mentors about effective practice in giving feedback that can be well received by the interns, whose positive perceptions of the feedback could serve as an important step in enabling them to act on it to better their teaching. The study also confirms the importance of the mentors' communication skills in teacher training and these skills require the mentors to have constant awareness of and practice in strategies to use their language effectively.

However, feedback practice is context specific while this study is only a case study in a US educational institution. Further studies may be necessary to confirm these findings in other contexts. Besides, this study does not, within its scope, demonstrate whether this feedback could result in positive changes in the interns' teaching performance. Therefore, it is beneficial for other studies to examine the impact of this feedback on the interns' actual teaching practice and the link between the interns' perceptions of the feedback and their teaching performance.

### Notes on contributors

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