Demystifying the Impact of EFL Teacher Educators` Group Conversation Mentoring on Pre-service Teachers' Professional Development

Zohreh Mohajer[1*]

[1*]PhD student of Teaching English, Tehran University Iran, IELTS Instructor, Iran Australia Supervisor Teacher Trainer Keynote Speaker

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Along with the technological advancement in the modern world, teacher education in different fields of study has been taken into account for the last two decades. This qualitative study examined the impact of EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring on Iranian EFL pre-service teachers' professional development. To this aim, based on the convenience sampling, 20 Iranian pre-service undergraduate female student teachers were selected from Farhangiyan, university. The data were gathered via interview and observation. The participants attended a 10-session EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring. The researcher encouraged the mentors of the program to prompt their mentees to ask questions, and provide them with guidance to facilitate discussions, and covered a wide range of topics. At the end of the mentoring program, the participants were interviewed. The results revealed that pre-service teachers perceived that EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring had a positively significant effect on Iranian EFL pre-service teachers' professional development. In addition, the findings showed the benefits and challenges of conducting mentoring course in Iranian EFL teacher education. Finally, the theoretical and empirical implications of the study are provided. ***Keywords:*** EFL Teachers, Group Conversation Mentoring, Mentoring, Pre-service Teachers' Professional Development**,** Teacher Education

Introduction

In the past decades, mentoring has emerged as a widely accepted mechanism to acculturate and help new teachers with adaptation to the work environment (Goldrick et al. 2019). Studies on mentoring have grown, and covered a wide range of research streams, mostly focusing on features and characteristics of mentoring (e.g., DiRenzo et a. 2018; DuBois & Karcher, 2020; Panopoulos & Sarri, 2018; Shpigelman, Weiss & Reiter, 2021), mentoring relationships (Blinn-Pike, & Larose, 2019; Ligadua & Anthony, 2018; Zimmerman et al. 2008), academic mentoring (e.g., Johnson, 2019), mentoring and career development (Ragins & Cotton, 2021; Turban & Dougherty, 2021), attitudes and perceptions toward mentoring (e.g., Hunt et al. 2013; Norziani, Hasmawati, & Hanafi, 2011; Reese, 2016), teacher education (e.g. Cipollone et al. 2018; Hong & Matsko, 2019; Martinez, 2004; Moonro et al. 2014; Quintana & Zambrano, 2018), and professional development (e.g. Haug & Mork, 2021; Sancar, et al. 2021; Yan, 2021).

To enhance the quality of teaching different educational systems around the world devoted large amounts of time and budget to enhancing pre-service teachers' pedagogical effectiveness and quality by involving them in professional development (PD) programs (DeMonte, 2018; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; McChesney & Aldridge, 2018; Sancar et al., 2021). Obviously, the constant need for pre-service teachers to improve their instructional expertise highlighted a shift in PD programs, which have long been transmission-focused interventions prescribed by school administrators to bridge the gaps in teachers' knowledge and skills by some activities (McChesney & Aldridge, 2018). This deficit paradigm for teacher professional development (TPD) is now replaced by teacher-led PD that stresses the agency and active role of pre-service teachers in their own development (Lieberman & Miller, 2014). PD is no longer something done to teachers, but with teachers to cause pedagogical growth and academic success (Avalos, 2011; Timperley et al., 2007; Youngs & Lane, 2014). After the crystallization of the concept of PD, its features, and activities, many courses and programs worldwide

were proposed to improve novice and experienced pre-service teachers' pedagogy and skills (Barrera-Pedemonte, 2016; Evans, 2014; King, 2014; McChesney & Aldridge, 2018).

Mentoring can be aimed at serving different objectives (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ganser, 2002), such as familiarizing new teachers with policies and procedures at school, helping development of instructions, and providing social-emotional supports. One of the key elements of the introduction process is to assign new teachers to work with coaches or experienced teachers and offer structure, supporting and learning how to teach new teachers (i.e., formal mentoring) (Moir et al. 2009). As far as the mentoring in the form of group conversation and pre-service teachers' professional development are concerned, the problem is, although mentoring and its related topics have grabbed the researchers' attention in last years, there is not much done on the effects of mentoring on-service teachers' professional development. In Iran, there have been some studies (e.g., Jafari, 2017; Karimi & Norouzi, 2019; Sadighfar, 2021) investigating the effects of mentoring on novice teachers' effectiveness, self-efficacy beliefs, teaching reflection, performance, and others. However, to the best the researchers' knowledge, there is no study examining the effect of Iranian EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring on pre-service teachers' professional development. Thus, the current study was an attempt to fill such a gap in literature by proposing the following research questions:

1. Does EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring have a statistically significant effect on pre-service EFL teachers' professional development?
2. What benefits and challenges do pre-service EFL pre-service teachers believe e EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring have for their professional development?

Theoretical Background

The theoretical framework for this study was inspired by the work of Vygotsky (1978) known as sociocultural theory. This theory explains how higher mental processes are stimulated and sustained by direct interaction between a student and an adult or more capable peer. Vygotsky repeatedly wrote about how learning occurs through this mediated interaction between learners and a more capable partner when instruction is focused on the student's zone of proximal development or region of sensitivity to instruction. However, in order for this interaction to be successful the mentor must both understand the needs of the less capable student and be able to adjust their interaction to meet these needs (Sierra, 2020). Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Figure 1) allows individuals to reach a higher level of competence by moving from skills that they do not presently have mystery on (Ryan & Cooper, 1972; Vygotsky, 1987). The zone begins with items that a learner (pre-service teacher) cannot do on their own, occurring during the first two years of teaching. The zone then continues with items that the learner can do with help. This includes being paired with an experienced mentor to support the teacher's development as they become proficient in the classroom (Lozinak, 2016). For Vygotsky, mentoring emphasizes dialogic learning and inherently learner-centered focus on real world problems and issues, and an emphasis on student reflection and awareness raising.

Figure 1 *Vygotsky's Theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (Adapted from Clarke, 2024, p. 43)*
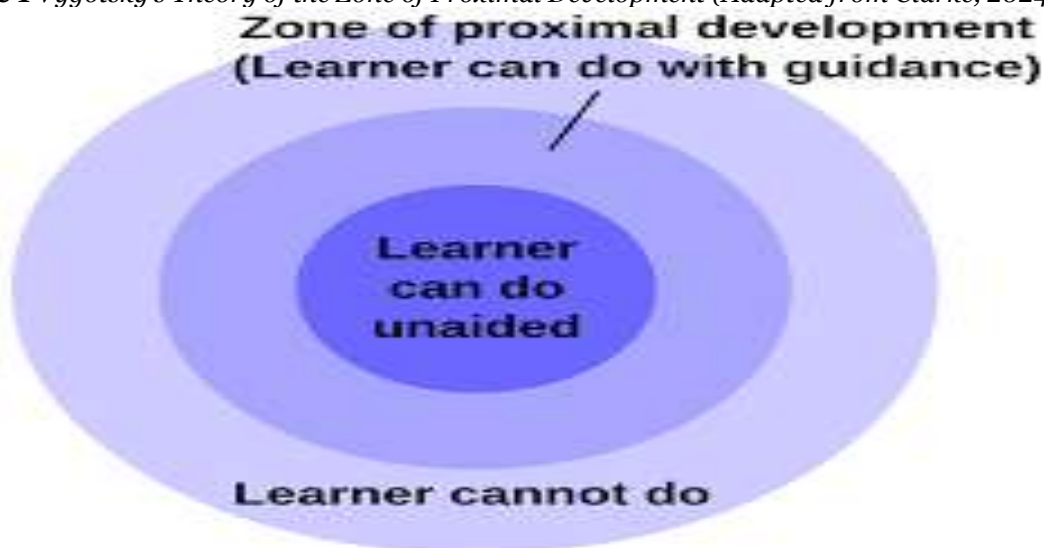
Empirical Background

Bortolotti and Loviglio (2023) studied the impact of a personalized mentoring program on university enrollment choices and academic outcomes. Conducting a randomized controlled trial among 337 high school students, the authors showed that the program significantly influences students' decisions, increasing the likelihood of choosing a field aligned with their mentor's by 22 percentage points, representing a 45% increase

from the baseline. These findings underscored the mentorship's potential to guide students towards more informed and beneficial educational choices.

In another study, El Deen (2023) investigated the role of educational initiatives in improving language teacher professional growth from supervisors' perspectives. He focused on engaging a group of high school EFL teachers in Egypt in a set of educational initiative activities with their mentors, and then asking the mentors to evaluate the teachers' PD objectives, pedagogical practice gains, and attitudes. The study found differences in the mentors' perceived ratings of the teachers' professional interests, growth, and attitudes. Discrepancies were also noted within the observed aspects in the same dimension. The author discusses these results and provides some practical recommendations and suggestions for future research.

In Iranian teacher education context, Komeili (2019) examined the effect of e-mentoring trough e-portfolio assessment on their professional identity. To collect the required data for this mixed methods design study, a teacher e-mentoring course was designed using an educational blog. In addition, pre and follow up, semi-structured interviews were run with eight pre-service EFL teachers to investigate the participants' perceptions toward e-mentoring through e-portfolio assessment. The results demonstrated that the participants of the study showed significant improvement in professional identity total and subscales scores. Moreover, the interview data revealed a number of positive themes, which showed the participants' perceptions of e-mentoring and e-portfolio assessment mostly changed positively.

Craig (2021) explored the impact of mentoring on new teachers' self-efficacy. In addition, this study investigated the effects of other independent variables such as mentor gender, content area, years of experience, and training on new teacher self-efficacy. Self-efficacy was measured using the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES), developed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001). The results showed statistically significant differences in self-efficacy between new teachers with mentors who had the same content area compared to those who did not. There were no statistically significant differences in average self-efficacy found among groups based on mentor gender, years of experience, and training. Finally, while the overall regression model was significant, the results indicated that none of the individual variables were significant predictors of new teacher self-efficacy.

In another research, Khojah and Asif (2020) carried out to evaluate the experiences of faculty members who participated in a formal mentoring program. In this mixed-method study, a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data in order to respond to questions connected to the effectiveness of the mentoring program for mentors and mentees. The study concluded that mentoring could assist in constructing capability in two ways: featured and standardized mentoring of trainee teachers through overt mentoring practices, and demonstrating and deconstructing teaching methods and practices for mentors' pedagogical progression.

In another study, Schwan et al. (2020) explored the impact of mentor and new teacher pairings on the self-reported benefits of a statewide mentoring program for new teachers. Participants included new teachers and mentors. Results indicated that the most similar pairings, i.e. same district and same position, reported the most positive mentoring experience. Several themes were identified by the mentors and new teachers as being benefits of the experience. Major themes identified by mentor teachers included reflection, positive interactions, collaboration, improved instruction, and improvement. Major themes identified by new teachers included improved instruction, collaboration, positive interaction, improvement, direction, and sense of community.

In a case study by Ditter (2019), the researcher investigated the role and impact of mentor teachers on pre-service world language teachers' identity development. This is to a good extend close to the purpose of researcher in this study. Only we took a technological lens here to see the specific effects of electronica platform and cover the existing gap in the literature. Ditter (2019) used situated learning theory and symbolic interactionism as complementary theoretical framework. To collect the data, pre-service and mentor teachers were interviewed and observing classrooms and coaching sessions between pre-service world language teachers and their mentors. The results showed that the pre-service teachers had the chance to improve and adopt a world language teacher perspective during student teaching. In addition, their assumption improved their negotiation and formation of their identities as teaching professionals. Additionally, and consistent with studies on the identity development of pre-service teachers, the study also showed that the negotiation of their identity-shaping experiences gave them a chance to develop their confidence and grow into respected authority figures in the classroom.

Bang (2009) explored the potential of peer-coaching for EFL teachers' professional development. For this study, 12 college teachers in Korea participated in a 10-week program. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. From the findings, two significant categories of peer-coaching were identified: positive and negative responses to peer-coaching experience. However, the overriding themes that emerged from the data were the benefits of peer coaching. The participants were almost unanimous in their acknowledgement of the advantages of peer-coaching, such as reflective support through other's eyes, improved working environments, greater teaching strategies, higher professional self-esteem, and awareness of self-directed learning. Negative responses also appeared, mostly in regard to the working principles of implementation; the major issues of difficulties were time management, complexities of implementation procedure, stress and personal vulnerability, and relative lack of reflection and feedback skills

Method

In this study, in pursuit of the research questions posed, a qualitative research design seemed an appropriate approach for collection and analysis of the data. Qualitative research design is appropriate for the process of gathering and examining non-numerical data, such as language. From among different qualitative data research instruments, the interviews and observations were chosen as the instrument for eliciting and gathering data.

Participants

This study was conducted with the help of 20 Iranian pre-service undergraduate female student teachers were selected through convenience sampling. They studied ELT at Farhangiyan, university, Tehran, Iran and were to teach English at junior high school. Their age ranged from 32 to 36 years old. All of them were Persian native speakers. They were selected because of their availability to the researcher (convenience sampling method) based on their having more than seven years of teaching experience.

Data Collection Instruments

In order to collect the necessary data for this study, two instruments were utilized as Observation and Interview.

In order to explore the concept of teachers' professional development, the researcher attended mentoring sessions, and observed the classes every week. The researcher acted as an observer as participant, as defined by Ary et al (2009). She took notice of what the mentors and pre-service teachers did in the classrooms. The researcher passively observed the sessions, and took field notes for further analysis. The other complementary data collection instrument was interview through an interview protocol, designed and developed by the researcher in the form of the semi-structured interview with 10 items. The interview was recorded, and analyzed by the researcher, and then reviewed by three language experts. The results of the interview were reported in the form of qualitative findings and were analyzed along with the findings from the observation results.

Data Collection Procedure

After taking the necessary permissions, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the selected teachers, and set a time for attending their classes. The participants attended a 10-session EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring in Farhangiyan, university, Tehran. The researcher encouraged the mentors of the program to prompt their mentees to ask questions, and provide them with guidance to facilitate discussions, and covered a wide range of topics. Meetings were scheduled via a dedicated platform, where mentors could indicate their availability and mentees could book meetings. The researcher was present in all sessions. In addition, the sessions were observed carefully. Finally, the participants were conducted in person. Each interview lasted 15 minutes. It should be noted here that the study used triangulation in order to check the trustworthiness of the research. According to Cohen (2005), triangulation refers to the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of human behavior. The data were analyzed qualitatively through the method of content analysis.

Results

The first research question investigated the effect of EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring on Iranian pre-service EFL teachers' professional development. In response to the interviews, most of the pre-service interviewees argued that most of them confirmed the efficacy of EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring on Iranian pre-service EFL teachers' professional development. As one of them maintained:

(1)

I believe that EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring has a dynamic feature. I mean, from one year to another there are many technical terms which becomes prevalent in different fields of knowledge. I think being a successful EFL teacher needs a professional traning courses such as EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring. One should be open to embrace new experiences and learn new skills. Moreover, such courses will change one's overall career as a teacher.

Other participants mentioned the effect of the interactions between the mentors and the pre-service teachers. One of the pre-service teachers argued that: (2)

When I teach English, my office time with my colleagues was spent talking about everyday issues. After taking up EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring course, I felt that I should take advantage of the experience of my mentors and colleagues and facilitate the process of taking this new role through gaining what is known as vicarious experience. I developed relationships with other instructors who taught EFL courses, because I believed every conversation with teachers can be a chance to learn from them and eventually develop my profession.

Concerning the affective activities and materials in the programs, the pre-service teachers pointed out some key affective exercises.(3)

With regard to the preparation of course materials, EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring usually needs much more effort. First, it is because of the nature of the course. Second, the mentor feels responsible for making pre-service teachers aware of the paramount importance of mentoring, which I think is neglected. Sometimes, in order to make pre-service teachers more interested in their professional development, I search ELT articles or interesting news on the internet. Such materials include the specific ESL/EFL terminologies. By doing so, the mentor tries to show them the importance of mentor in developing teachers' profession. As we know, many of these articles are not ever translated into teachers' L1. Therefore, the learners would know about the vast areas of knowledge, which teacher educators' group conversation mentoring opens up to them.

Other interviewees highlighted their precious experience of taking the mentoring program. According to one of the pre-service teachers: (4)

Before being accepted as an EFL instructor, I didn't have any experience of teaching. First, because before that I was doing my major, and had not enough time to teach as an English teacher. I was aware that I had lost an opportunity, which could make me prepared for teaching as an English instructor. So, when I took up this courses, I tried to develop my skills as a teacher. Before that, I was stuck in the world of academic theories. Being an English instructor helped me to put into practice what I had studied for years. After three years of teaching, I took up mentoring courses. This course provided me with an invaluable experience. After years of teaching, I consider myself as a competent teacher. I am ready to take up other courses with different contents.

Finally, the interview results of the first research question showed that mentor courses impacted their ability to deliver information.   (5)

I think that when one is more knowledgeable, he or she could deliver knowledge in a more effective way. EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring has provided me with more knowledge. A part of this knowledge is related to my studies at home, which I can call it passive knowledge. It has been in EFL mentoring course, and in the presence of my students where I have found the opportunity to make my knowledge active. In this process, I become more sure about the knowledge I have received and as a consequence I become more confident to deliver it.

The second research question examined the benefits and challenges of Iranian pre-service EFL pre-service teacher educators' group conversation mentoring regarding their professional development. To answer this question, the participants proposed that in the mentoring course, they had the opportunity to interact in the class activities, and to keep them interested. It is obvious that in such course there are more room for making the subject matter less boring. Other participants showed that EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring provided corrective feedback for pre-service teachers. One of them said:(6)

I think that feedback giving and receiving in this course was multi-layered. In EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring the pre-service teachers take the role of feedback givers not only for their classmates, but also for the instructor. On the other hand, in theses classes, the feedback was always directed towards the students whether having mentor as the feedback giver or the classmates.

Concerning the challenges of Iranian pre-service EFL pre-service teacher educators' group conversation mentoring, the participants enumerated some challenges and difficulty of such course to their professional development. One of them maintained: (7)

In such course, the pre-service teachers vary much regarding their proficiency level. Some of them were good at English, while there are others who possessed lower levels of proficiency. As a pre-service teacher, I always have been concerned with all the participants who attended the course. So, one of my challenges was making a balance in the course materials and class activities, so that everyone in the class felt as being an active participant, and not a passive observer. In this course, the challenge for me was an internal challenge. I should always be careful about updating my knowledge of ELT fields. I should keep myself motivated in the practice of learning.

In addition, other participants argued that the infrastructure of designing pre-service workshops for professional development in Iranian EFL teacher education is challenging. The results of the observation also supported the interview findings. In fact, the designing materials in mentoring course helped pre-service teachers for drawing the attention to the new ELT advances. However, it was observed that some ready-made materials in mentoring course were old, since in the realm of ELT every year great advances are made. Moreover, the mentors were knowledgeable in the ELT field; they were able to clarify some issues for the pre-service teachers to enhance their professional development.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the study revealed although EFL teacher educators' group conversation mentoring had a positively effect on Iranian EFL pre-service teachers' professional development, there were some challenges associated with mentoring courses such as low quality of mentoring infrastructure for pre-service teachers.

Moreover, pre-service teachers' professional development via mentor assumes that teaching is a constantly evolving process of growth and change. In fact, it is a process of expanding instructional skills and self-understanding of the pre-service teachers, one in which the teacher is responsible for the entire process, in much the same way their students are in learning a language. Effective mentor programs and courses call for sufficient support structures and opportunities for them to select, plan, carry out, and evaluate the professional development activities in which they participate. When pre-service teachers participate collaboratively in mentoring courses, they develop ownership over the learning process, and their learning is more likely to promote student success. According to Bieler (2019, p. 32), pre-service teachers may have a different disposition toward collaboration, and that they are looking for collaboration. This collaboration is different from the more traditional face-to-face approach. Many of pre-service teachers described collaboration in various ways such as brain-storming ideas, bouncing ideas around, and talking problems out with another teacher. They also described positive interactions as an important element in their professional development. As noted by Hobson et al. (2009), one of the most commonly identified advantages of the mentor course for pre-service teachers was the positive interactions between during the mentoring experiences, in which the provision of emotional and psychological support are shown to be helpful in boosting the confidence of pre-service teachers, enabling them to put difficult experiences into perspective, and enhancing their morale and job satisfactions.

The results are also supported by Mathur et al. (2022), who concluded that pre-service teachers involved in mentoring programs improved decision-making ability. An unexpected by-product of improved decision-making abilities is the connection to higher job satisfaction among them. Due to the mentoring course, pre-service teachers identified a sense of community as another effective element in boosting their professional development. They spend their early career challenges in professional isolation. Colleague relationships can be formed and strengthened through mentoring programs. As Varghese et al. (2018, p. 43) maintain "in order to understand language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers' the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them".

This study, like any other studies, suffered from some limitations. Professional development is almost a complex term and can be affected by different factors which most of them may be characterized by various features and variables of teachers as age, L1, differences in their personality, considering all of these variables in one study was impossible. Therefore, the interference of the factors mentioned above could not be eliminated thoroughly, but it could just be controlled and decreased as much as possible. The study was conducted with limited number of Iranian pre-service teachers, so the results of the study would not be generalized to other groups. The participants under study were all adults. Regarding the fact that different age groups have different identities, and personality features the finding of this study would not apply to other age groups. As the delimitations of the current study, the participants were deliberately selected from teachers who were in Farhangiyan, university, Iran. In addition, the scope of the study was delimited to the professional development and other variables such as identity, motivation and personality characteristics were not taken into consideration.

The current study has several important implications. The first implication addressed to ELT researchers. Definitely, this would be a support for authentic inquiry studies in the field of professional development. Professional development is effectively shown in the process of collaborative knowledge building among teachers in which such important new identities are valued. This research may also provide an opportunity to advance the understanding of the teachers' professional development, in order to see the key phrase frames. This study may also offer an insight for EFL/ESL teachers to improve their professional practice. The results of this study also might be of great help to course materials, and materials developers can also use results to develop materials that make researchers sensitive.

Future studies can be conducted by employing a different research approach (e.g. ethnographic research) and a different instrument (e.g. questionnaire) because of the complexity nature of the professional development. Second, the differences between professional development of pre-service teachers' male and female in mentoring courses can be investigated. Third, the differences between university, school, and English language institute teachers' professional development can be examined as the other subject. Fourth, the differences between experienced and novice EFL teachers' professional development can be researched as another subject. Fifth, as Iran is a multi-ethnic country with different ethnicities, such as Kurd, Lor, Turk, Fars, Arab, etc. the ethnic differences of teachers' professional development can be investigated for further research.

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