

Investigating mentoring in a teacher development programme from a corpus-based hermeneutic-phenomenological perspective

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1. Introduction

This paper is the result of a doctoral research project which aimed at describing and interpreting the phenomenon of mentoring from a hermeneutic-phenomenological corpus-based approach. More specifically, the research explored what it meant to be a mentor as well as what was involved in experiencing mentoring in a teacher development programme for teachers of English as a foreign language through the analysis of a large corpus of the records of the interaction among the participants in the mentoring. The participants were twenty mentors and three hundred and thirty-five mentees working as English as a Foreign Language teachers in twenty-five branches of a language institute in southern Brazil.

There has been extensive research that have investigated mentoring in various contexts such as business (Carruthers 1993; Mullen 1999; Garvey 2006; Lane 2004; Eby, Rhodes and Allen 2007), science (Jasper 2003; Dean 2009) and education (Scherer 1999; Cullingford 2006; Jones 2006; GEUDER, LANGE and SCAFIDI 2011; Kane and Russell, 2005). In previous research, the concept of mentoring has generally been associated with novice professionals that took part in (instructional) coaching schemes (Clutterbuck and Lane 2006; Grant 2006; Pask and Joy 2007; Law, Ireland and Hussain 2007; Parsloe and Leedham 2009; Nogueira 2011; Cunha 2014) whereby experienced mentors were assigned a novice protégé to guide and counsel in their early years of apprenticeship. In contrast, the present study examines the mentoring process of reasonably experienced teaching professionals instead of focusing on the mentoring process of novice teachers. In addition, in the current study, the focus is on mentees developing their level of awareness and reflection towards their teaching practices and becoming more autonomous professionals.

As such, in this investigation, mentors "help the mentee develop his or her own wisdom [instead of] giving the protégé the benefit of his or her wisdom" (Meggison et al. 2006:17). In the context of this study, mentoring is understood as a developmental process leading to deep professional transformation or changes, instead of being a programme aimed at providing prescriptive models of tutorials aimed at improvement of pre-determined technical competences of novice teachers.

2. Theoretical framework

Four are the theoretical pillars on which this study is based: reflection in/on action (Schön 1983, 1998/2000), the KASA teaching decision-making model (Freeman 1989), the experiential learning model (Kolb 1984), and the model of awareness used to describe communication process in human interactions (Johari Window by Luft 1969). As well as taking part of a 60-hour induction course where they were not only informed of the objectives of the mentoring programme of the institution, but they also took part in input sessions involving topics considered relevant for the mentoring work, such as lesson planning, teaching different proficiency levels, monitoring and giving feedback, dealing with conflict, etc, these mentors also participated actively in 16 meetings held every other fortnight, throughout the year. These meetings served the purpose of building genuine "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger, Mcdermott and Snyder 2002) amongst the mentors and created a space of mutual trust where they could share their expectations, anxieties, interests, as well as exchange experiences and talk about their needs, worries and frustrations. The mentoring work was based on collaborative cycles of work (Fullan and Hargreaves 2000; John-Steiner 2000) between mentors and mentees which revolved around the planning, the execution, the observation, the reflection and new action plans based on lessons given by the mentees.

3. Method

In order to carry out this research investigation, a mixed-methods approach was adopted that combined both quantitative and qualitative frameworks. The corpus used in this investigation consisted of all of the written communication produced by the participants during 2012 as part of the program. The 979 texts were classified into two types: institutional and spontaneously-generated texts. The institutional texts consist of 920 lesson observation reports written by mentors after the observation of their mentees' lessons. The spontaneous texts were produced by the several different participants in the program on a voluntary basis. These texts ranged from twenty-seven email exchanges between mentors and the researcher, feedback reports written by seventeen school managers on the mentors' performance, feedback reports written by six mentees on their mentors' performance, six case studies written by mentors, to three needs analysis reports written by mentors on two different occasions, in the beginning of the programme and before it ended. The corpus was manually tagged by (i) type of document, (ii) participant, (iii) period of time, and (iv) place. After the manual tagging process of all the texts in the corpus, these texts were then subdivided into smaller units of texts based on the assigned tags through a computer script. A factor analysis was run which enabled us to group the whole corpus into specific factors. The factor analysis yielded five strong dimensions related to the phenomenon of mentoring and that of being a mentor: (i) teacher

roles and functions, (ii) students' perception of progress and learning, (iii) lessons and classroom management, (iv) awareness of changes and (v) teaching procedures. This initial computational analysis was then complemented by a hermeneutic-phenomenological analysis called thematization (van Manen 1990; M. Freire 2010) which involved a manual and systematic analysis of the corpus in search of 'units of meaning' which would lead to the identification of possible themes through which the phenomenon of mentoring and that of being a mentor could be better understood.

The corpus was then submitted to a lexical multi-dimensional analysis (MD; Berber Sardinha, in press), which is a derivation of the functional MD analysis method developed by Biber (1988). The goal of a lexical MD analysis is to detect the correlated groups of lexical items in a corpus, which in turn signal the underlying 'dimensions' of lexical variation. These dimensions in turn indicate the semantic preferences associated with the texts in the corpus. The lexical MD analysis was carried out through a computer program especially designed for this investigation that tagged the corpus for part-of-speech, retained content words (nouns, adjectives, main verbs), normed the counts of each word lemma across the corpus to a rate per 1,000,000 words, then selected the most frequent lemmata in each corpus section (lesson observation reports, email messages, branch managers' reports, mentees' reports, case studies and needs analysis reports). These counts were then entered in an initial factor analysis, the eigenvalues of which were plotted in a scree plot that suggested the existence of five factors. A second, rotated factor analysis (using Promax) was run on the data, and the major loadings (greater than 0.2) were selected. Each factor was interpreted as a dimension of lexical variation, which were used as signposts for the manual identification of the phenomena underlying the mentoring program. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first use of MD analysis in conjunction in a Hermeneutic-Phenomenological (HP) research design. In a mainstream HP project, the data are fully analyzed manually, but in such studies the data are restricted to a few texts. In this project, however, given the multitude of texts, a full manual analysis would not be reliable, and therefore a computer-based analysis was carried out as a first pass on the data to extract the major lexical configurations, which were then further elaborated on through an extensive hand-and-eye analysis. As a result, the dimensions were reinterpreted into four major HP themes.

4. Results

On the basis of the four HP themes identified, this study revealed that being a mentor as well as what is involved in experiencing mentoring in a teacher development programme can be best understood as being structured around four major themes: transformations, relationships, roles and reflection - which are then subdivided into subthemes. Theme one, transformations, showed that both mentors and their mentees have experienced two types of changes:

improvement of their technical competences and development which led to deep changes in their teaching/mentoring practices; theme two, relationships, involved three subthemes: cooperation, resistance, intervention. Being a mentor meant working in a collaborative mode while being also aware of and prepared to work with resistant professionals, this also led to more direct interventions from the part of the mentor in changing their mentees' working practices. Theme three, roles, showed some of the most typical attributes and functions performed by mentors in this mentoring programme, and finally, theme four, reflection, confirmed that in any practice aiming at changes, it is a sine qua non condition to have professionals with a good level of awareness and critical reflection on their practices.

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