

ELT



Ireland bulletin

IN THIS EDITION

Real(ly useful) News

by Richy Neylon (Page 6)

The Benefits of Using Extended Tasks

by Ian Brangan (Page 8)

Study Skills in the EFL Classroom

by Roisin Keane (Page 10)

Irlen Syndrome: How to lift the hidden barrier to learning

by Marianne Jordan (Page 13)

Tailor your feedback

by Roomana Khan (Page 16)

Feel the fear but do it anyway

by Anna Morris (page 18)

Mentoring: Moving from Trainee to Teacher

by Chris Farrell (Page 18)

7 things I learned about my teaching from the Cambridge Delta

by Aileen Donegan (Page 23)

Developing a personal learning network can ensure ongoing professional development: My journey

by Laura O'Grady (Page 25)

Modality: Less Can, more Can Do

by Gerard O'Hanlon (Page 28)

Using the Lexical Approach to outline & develop areas of pronunciation

by Brian Duignan (Page 29)

Business English as the language of leadership

by Ben Dobbs (Page 31)

No. 4

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ELT Ireland features (Pages 2-5)

Welcome to our Fourth Bulletin

by Dr. Lou McLaughlin

Keeping you up to Date by Ben Dobbs

ELTChinwag by Jane Seely

Letter from the Editor by Laura O'Grady

IATEFL Report by Tom Le Seilleur

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Mentoring: Moving from Trainee to Teacher

by **Chris Farrell** (Head of Teacher Development, Centre of English Studies)



In the ELT industry in Ireland, the entry-level requirement for employment consists of a degree from a 3rd level institution and a pass in one of the primary ELT preparatory courses, namely the CELT, the Cambridge Celta, or the Trinity CertTESOL. Broadly speaking, these courses all follow a fairly similar structure, with about a month's worth of training required in order to become a teacher.

Without wishing to delve into the merits and limitations of each course, it should be quite obvious to even the most passive of observers that such a short course cannot prepare you to be able to deal with the massive challenge of planning lessons, teaching content, creating effective assessment, promoting a positive classroom environment or any more of the multitude of skills which are required to effectively teach. The reality is that these courses should offer you the opportunity to understand the foundations of teaching, indeed to prepare you to become a teacher, rather than turn you into a teacher.

Therefore, in my opinion, it is incumbent upon any school hiring teachers who have recently completed their preparatory training to have a mentoring system in place. The scope and actualities involved in such a scheme will provide the content for this article.

Meet your mentor:

Having someone show the way makes the difference

Pic from google image labelled for reuse

Mentoring

The first question we must address is an attempt to clarify the meaning of the word 'mentoring' and how it applies to the ELT sector. For a large number of us, our basic understanding of the word may lead us to the image of further training, collegial support, observation and feedback, and these must be considered to be a part of it.

Smith and Lewis (2015) claim that mentoring focuses on leading "toward the facilitative end of the continuum and specifically to catalytic interventions that encourage self-reflection and autonomous learning" (pp 140). This is key to the role of the mentor: that he/she should act as a guide through the initial milestones in teacher development until the point where he/she is no longer necessary. The focus on encouraging self-reflection and autonomous learning is crucial, and it, for me, is the bridging point between effective teacher training and effective teacher development.

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In terms of practicalities, mentoring itself can take many different forms. The most common mentoring relationships involve the mentee and the academic manager, or the mentee and a senior teacher. There are benefits and drawbacks to both, for example:

Original image

Richard Rossner (2017) favours the use of experienced teachers or trainers who help "less experienced, or more recently appointed colleagues with their development through observation, feedback, co-planning, and being available to provide help" (pp 123).

Rossner goes on to explain that, ideally, there would be a time limit to the 'mentorship period' with a timeline and an agreed set of success criteria provided. In my experience, a period of three months should be sufficient to help a teacher develop the necessary tools in order to be able to sustainably continue their own development.

The Mentor

Obviously, there is a power relationship between the mentor and the mentee with the mentor usually being more experienced in the areas in which he or she is mentoring (Sargeant 2000). This is an interesting consideration in terms of the expectations of the mentor, and the demands upon the mentee. The mentoring process would be one of achievable criteria and sustainable development and, as such, the mentor must have both the temperament and the skillset necessary to effectively fulfil their role.

The task of creating and defining the functions of an effective mentoring scheme is one which is often approached with a lack of clarity and consistency at an institutional level, frequently to the detriment of the quality of teaching in the institution as a whole. An effective mentoring programme can help to provide a solid foundation for a

comprehensive and successful teacher development programme within an institution. It is necessary in most cases to attempt to bridge the gap between the needs of a novice teacher who has recently completed a preparatory training course and the requirements of the institution in terms of academic quality.

The Process of Mentoring

What does mentoring look like? Well, in essence, mentoring looks like a blend between teacher training and teacher development with the main idea being more of the former in the initial stages and more of the latter towards the end of the 'mentorship period'.

Mentoring actions can range from a quick chat in the staffroom, to a weekly 'check-in' and some scheduled help planning, to some workshops, to the formal observation process. An ideal mentor scheme will include all of these actions at some point and to some extent.

Focus

There are a number of bridging areas which require immediate focus if a mentor scheme is to have a reasonable degree of long-term efficacy. These are:

Promoting Critical Reflection

Adding variety in Language Presentation

Developing competency in Classroom Management

Training mentees to effectively develop the learners' receptive and productive skills

Giving the mentees some confidence in 'Gamifying' their classroom tasks.

Promoting Critical Reflection

The skill of being able to analyse the strengths and weaknesses in your actions is one that is the very backbone of all aspects of autonomous professional development. It is something which is so often presumed to be an innate faculty that is often neglected as a skill that needs to be learned, and constantly honed. A key ingredient of success in a large number of fields is the ability to analyse performance, notice areas for improvement, and correct as appropriate. Initial preparatory courses do not give you sufficient skills to be able to do this on a consistent basis and in a successful manner. This is something that needs to be highlighted to the mentee and practiced repetitively.

The main vehicle for the development of the skill of being able to critically reflect on classroom performance is observation. This is made even more effective if it is possible to video the observation and allow the mentee to compare their reflections with the reality of the video. The observation should follow the same structure as any other observation, with an agreed set of success criterion and some time given at the end for the teacher to reflect based upon those criterion. This process will be done again and again until the teacher is able to begin to see the lesson through the eyes of each learner and gauge how effective the decisions they made in the classroom were.

Adding variety in Language Presentation

The limited timeframe and the teachers perceived lack of basic teaching skills during the preparatory course phase often limits the variety of language presentation types they will be exposed to and trained in. Frequently novice teachers are only familiar and comfortable with the PPP (Present, Practice, Produce) and while this approach is quite often effective, alternatives are necessary. So a mentor programme should seek to train the teacher in alternative approaches to presenting language in order to allow them to develop a teaching style which best suits them. This applies to presenting lexis as well, where the novice teacher will need to develop an ability to present and recycle appropriate language in context in order to best aid long-term memory for their particular learners.

Developing competency in Classroom Management

This is a crucial area in the teacher development. Gaining the confidence to take control of the classroom space and begin to create the type of classroom that you feel confidence in is a big step. Classroom confidence can include such things as maintaining discipline within the group, motivating a class, dealing with emerging issues, diagnosing issues on the spot, and many other 'teaching skills'. This is an area where effective reflection and self-evaluation skills are crucial, and the novice teacher must be made aware of success criteria, and be provided with models of best practice in some of the areas of reflection. This can be done in several ways, for example through peer observation, video observation, workshop with scope for demonstration.

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Training mentees to effectively develop the learners' receptive and productive skills

This area requires a certain amount of teaching and training by the mentor in the realm of second language acquisition and common skill development techniques. It is crucial that the mentor enables the mentee to effectively select classroom material appropriate to the lesson aims, and to be able to assess the development of said skills. These areas will require the development of processes for effectively diagnosing and assessing classroom learning, and the mentee will need to be guided along in this process.

Giving the mentees some confidence in 'Gamifying' their classroom tasks.

In CES, we have found that a lot of novice teachers have benefited in the development by the inclusion of workshops in our mentoring process which are aimed at 'gamifying' some of the classroom tasks. In the interests of keeping things brief, I define 'gamifying' here as simply the creation of game-like exercises/tasks which can be used as a learning aids. This can be done in a number of different ways, depending on the time and topic constraints involved. As long as the foundations have been laid in the training process in the previous four areas then some extra training in the tools and techniques required to 'gamify' some of classroom content can be quite beneficial.

Conclusion

The primary issue is that preparatory teacher training courses are, by their very nature, intended to provide initial preparation for teaching and should not be viewed as the end of training, merely the end of the beginning of training. Mentoring novice teachers is often seen as an 'add on' in the teacher development process, something which would be done if there was more time. However, I would argue that it is one of the most crucial areas in order to ensure that your teaching staff are provided with adequate support to be able to engage with their own development effectively.

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