

The practices of giving and receiving feedback in the practicum: perspectives of 'triad' in the context of English Language teacher education

Abstract

International studies in the field of teacher education have converged, identifying that pre-service teachers, school teachers (mentors) and university supervisors form a critical pedagogical triad in the support of the practicum experience. The study reported here investigated how each member made sense of their distinctive roles within this triad, with a particular emphasis on their perceptions of giving and receiving feedback. Data to support the study were collected through surveys, interviews and work shadowing from participants across Chile. The results reaffirm that giving and receiving feedback is considered a fundamental activity in the practicum by all members of the triad. However, for each member giving and receiving feedback can take different forms—a tutoring opportunity, pedagogical tool for professional development or a space for often much needed emotional support. However, findings reveal that there were limited opportunities for meaningful collaborative exchanges among the members of the triad. This resulted in triad members relying on pre-conceived conceptions of feedback, primarily drawn from their own situated experiences. The study suggests that there is a need to generate more structured opportunities to engage in collaborative work among supervisors, preservice teachers and mentors in order to improve the practicum experience.

Introduction

Educational reforms in initial teacher education in Chile have embraced sequential school based learning experiences in the curricula of university programs. This policy has made acutely visible the challenges to support pre-service teachers effectively during the practicum. These challenges to enhance the value of teaching practice have included: limited shared understanding by the school teacher mentors and university based supervisors of what and how teachers should learn to teach, failed attempts to give life to the formative triad (pre-service teachers, school teachers (mentors) and university supervisors) and a lack of developed systems that supports school-university partnerships (Author, 2015; Hirmas, 2014; Montecinos et al., 2015).

Although there have been some tentative efforts to improve collaboration between schools and universities where teachers from both settings critically reflect on their practices (see González-Weil, Gómez Waring., Ahumada Albalay, Bravo González, Salinas Tapia, Avilés Cisternas, Pérez & Santana Valenzuela, 2014; Vanegas, y Fuentealba, 2014; Montecinos & Cortez, 2015), joint activities between university supervisors and school teachers to support pre-service teachers remain relatively scarce. There is a tendency for schools to not identify themselves as sites of learning where university educators and school teachers can collaborate to enhance professional development of the triad members. Furthermore, as reported by Hirmas (2014), there are often irresolvable epistemological disagreements among the members of the triad, differences that become apparent in assessment practices.

In the case of English language teacher education, recent studies in Chile have not only confirmed this lack of collaboration and misalignment between schools and universities, but demonstrated that EFL pre-service teachers lack support during their practicum from both the university and school (Author, forthcoming). One particular challenge that EFL teacher education programs face is the lack of qualified school teacher mentors and university supervisors who can effectively support pre-service teachers during their practicum (Díaz & Bastías, 2012). Although there have been moves to more

effectively skill teacher educators to support pre-service teachers through mentoring courses, it is still not well understood what mentors and supervisors should actually do in practice to support pre-service teachers' learning effectively. Similarly, it is often unclear what is necessary to support collaborative activities between universities and schools. As a recent study has confirmed (Author, forthcoming), one of the shared activities undertaken by the triad revolves around the assessment of the practicum, including giving and receiving feedback. However, as there is often insufficient shared understandings or common knowledge, giving feedback is understood differently by each member of the triad. This mismatch can be problematic as contradictions emerge and are not resolved, perpetuating the troublesome dichotomy of theory and practice.

In order to understand this issue, the study reported in this paper investigated sites of practicum experiences in order to more effectively understand how each member of this triad understood one of the primary elements of the practicum: the activity of giving and receiving feedback in the context of English language teacher education. The objective of the study was orientated toward identifying the nature of feedback practices engaged in by the different members of the triad during the practicum.

Formative Triad in initial teacher education

Although there is essentially universal recognition for the potential of the school teacher-university teacher-preservice teacher triad can play in initial teacher education and professional development (Guevara; 2016), it is also recognized that roles and functions are often indistinct and poorly articulated. Bullough & Draper (2004) demonstrated the problematic nature of the work of this triad, in which power relationships and control were more prominent than professional engagement among the members of the triad. Another challenge of the work of the triad is related to lack of communication and coordination among university teachers and school mentors (Bullough & Draper, 2004). Yet, this has been largely understood as the result of encounter of two separate worlds, with the inevitable contradictions that arise in problematic tasks such as giving and receiving feedback during the practicum (Akcan & Tatar, 2010).

Giving/receiving feedback practices in the practicum

Giving and receiving feedback has been recognised as one of the key activities part of the mentoring and supervisory activities during the practicum (Akcan & Tatar, 2010). Moreover, it has been observed that giving proper feedback can facilitate reflection and critical thinking among participants (Fetcher, 2010). However, defining and articulating the nature of appropriate feedback is a problematic challenge. Akcan and Tatar (2010) examined the perceptions of feedback held by supervisors, school teachers and preservice teachers. This study revealed that through feedback supervisors encouraged reflection on their teaching practices and enhanced preservice teachers' autonomy. However, somewhat differently school teachers used feedback as a way to call preservice teachers' attention on a specific incident of the lesson and to give advice for overcoming these problematic issues. In this sense, it was also observed that school teachers' feedback was characterised aiming to build empathy with the student teacher. Even though preservice teachers valued both types of feedback, there was a concern about the disagreement among supervisors and school teachers about the feedback given. This suggests that collaborative work and a shared understanding of what feedback should be like could be achieved through heightened dialogic feedback or collaborative engagement.

Dialogic feedback

In teacher education contexts, dialogic feedback has emerged as a conception to support and evaluate teachers' practices (Charteris & Smardon, 2015). Dialogic feedback practices are characterized by conversations in which teachers engage in analysing their own teaching practices, recognising their own learning and the learning of others (Charteris & Smardon, 2015). Studies such as Stopp, (2008), Carless, Salter, Yang & Lam (2011) have suggested that dialogic feedback can form a collaborative coaching practice to support teachers in building leadership capacity as they inquire into practice with colleagues. These dialogic feedback practices reported in the mentioned studies have been positively regarded by preservice teachers and suggested demonstrable improvement in levels of professional collaboration.

Research design

Design: A case study design was adopted to explore the question at the centre of this study. A case study approach enables the possibility of not only capturing peoples' actions, but also understanding individual motives and intersections with the sociocultural demands within which they engage. The study is illuminated by the analysis of a complex data set that included online surveys, interviews, and work shadowing observations. The core research questions for this study were:

1. How does each member of the triad—school-teacher mentors, university-based supervisors, and pre-service teachers—make sense of their roles?
2. What do they understand/make sense of 'giving/receiving feedback during the practicum?
3. What do they do as part of their feedback practices?

Participants in the study included a range of supervisors (n=52) from 30 TEFL programs across regions of Chile, school teachers—mentors (n=40) and pre-service teachers from two programs (n=60). University teacher educators— who traditionally perform the role of practicum supervisors in Chilean EFL teacher education programs and school teachers undertaking the role of mentors —were invited to participate in the study. Initially participants were requested to respond an online survey about their:

- experiences as supervisors and mentors
- everyday activities in the school workplace
- primary goals and guiding expectations.

In addition, a range of in-depth interviews were also conducted with this group, focusing on their views on the most effective activities and their related specific actions related to giving feedback to pre-service teachers.

Following this, two cohorts of final stage pre-service teachers were contacted and interviewed about their experience in the practicum, including the kind of feedback received from their supervisors and school teachers. They were also 'shadowed' at schools during their practicum work. Supervisors from those teacher education programs overseeing professional practicum were also interviewed and similarly 'shadowed' for a week within school practice.

Theoretical background

The study is conceptually framed by a cultural historical activity theory perspective (CHAT) (Edwards, 2010). This theory is founded on the seminal work of Vygotsky (1978) and later developments of Leont'ev (1978) and Engeström (1987), which understands culture as crucial in learning and development (Wells & Claxton, 2002). CHAT provides an understanding that "human development relies on the appropriation of pre-existing cultural tools and that this appropriation occurs through social interchange" (Ellis et al., 2010, p. 4).

In order to examine how the members of the triad made sense of their roles in the practicum and of giving and receiving feedback, a focus of the analysis was on actions in activities in practices. In a CHAT framed study, this meant that people's motives to undertake certain actions were studied as they engaged in everyday social activities. In this study, the examination of supervisors, school teachers and pre-service teachers' actions during the practicum was the core focus of this analysis, with the outcomes reported here largely centred on the practices associated to giving and receiving feedback. In addition, it reports on the assessment of the potentiality of dialogic feedback as a way to promote collaboration among the members of the triad.

Data Analysis

The complex data set outlined earlier were recorded and fully transcribed. The data were first analysed in an open-coded form using the software ATLAS Ti-. It was then refined and further analysed using core CHAT categories (such as goal-oriented activity, actions, object-motive).

Key Findings

The findings of this study are categorized according to roles, expectations and feedback practices. Regarding their roles, the analysis of the data revealed that members of the triad functions overlap each other and are not necessarily clear, nor complementary. Their roles can be summarised within the following broad categorisations:

- **Supervisor:** gatekeeper, judge-mentor, pastoral carer ('mother')

- **Mentor:** guide, judge-mentor, pastoral carer , ('mother'), acculturator
- **Pre-service teacher:** student, novice teacher, fully-formed teacher,

In the case of expectations, supervisors tend to expect pre-service teachers to perform as full-formed teachers (Author,2015). In this sense data demonstrated that supervisors expected preservice teachers to put into practice technical skills related to teaching performance, such as those summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Supervisors and mentors expectations of their preservice teachers

Supervisors	Mentors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to teach English in English • to master a series of strategies in order to engage students • to have a clear lesson structure • to give clear instructions • to support students in their learning taking into consideration their differences • to use well their body language and voice • Not to teach grammar based lessons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to be responsible • to be aware of the school reality • to be able to adapt to this context • to love teaching/vocation • to act/behave as a teacher

In the case of mentors, there was a strong tendency to expect preservice teachers to act as fully formed teacher from an affective perspective rather than a technical view. As previous studies have confirmed, preservice teachers expected to endure and survive the experience of the practicum. It was clearly apparent that preservice teachers focused on techniques that worked in their lessons and confirmed if they were actually able to be teachers during their practicum. Regarding their expectations of mentors and supervisors, they can be broadly characterised as summarised in table 2.

Table 2: Preservice teachers' expectations of mentors and supervisors

Supervisors	Mentors
<p>To provide tools, texts, etc. that could work in the specific context.</p> <p>To support them in making formative professional judgements (technical function)</p>	<p>To provide them a space to develop as teachers,</p> <p>To emotionally and practically support them</p>

Feedback practices

More than 90% of the participants reported that as part of the practicum experience, it was expected to give and receive feedback about teaching performance. Although reflection was recognised as crucial to improve teaching practices, assessment and feedback practices were more prominent in the actions shadowed as part of the observations. Checklists and rubrics appeared to be the most prominent tools when receiving and giving feedback. This suggests that actions of the triad are shaped by accountability purposes rather than professional development

Table 3 below summarises the key elements that reveal the feedback practices observed in this study. This comparative view sheds light on the nature of feedback, its purpose, tools and type of interactions. This comparison reveals that the nature of feedback is not necessarily shared among the participants. Giving and receiving feedback was considered as a tutoring opportunity for transferring different strategies and techniques especially by tutors and some mentors. This tutoring opportunity was characterised by actions leading to assessment or accountability practices. In the case of mentors and preservice teachers, it was observed that giving/receiving feedback took the form of counselling or ‘mothering’. This became apparent as conversations revolved around affective and emotional issues not necessarily related to the teaching role.

An emerging tendency observed in this study was the inclusion of triad meetings as an opportunity for giving/receiving feedback. Two meetings of four triad teams were shadowed. The analysis of these revealed that although there was an intention of undertaking sessions based on dialogic feedback, these ended up being more directive. Some elements of dialogic feedback became as in some cases lesson improvement was considered as a collective task and as a reciprocal activity.

Table 3: Feedback practices

Feedback	Supervisor	Mentor	Pre-service teacher
Aim	To encourage/to incite preservice teachers reflection their practices To assess specific set of techniques or strategies To provide links between theory and practice	To show Empathy Transfer experiences Support preservice teachers emotionally and provide practical tips Sense of solidarity, with new	To ask for and receive tips on how to do/act as a teacher To pass the practicum To find out if what they are doing is right or

		teachers	wrong
Actions	Lesson observations; Post conference sessions; writing performance reports; asking questions; listening to preservice teachers assessing/judging practices using rubrics, checklists	Lesson observations; Post conference sessions, transferring strategies, techniques, establishing strengths and weaknesses, giving tips, sessions, listening to preservice teachers; mothering preservice teachers,	Post conference sessions; Listening; asking for tips
Tools	Rubrics, ethnographic records, questions: Triad meetings (2-3 per semester)	Rubrics, ethnographic records, journal, questions, Triad meetings (2-3 per semester)	Reports, videos, reflection journals
Forms of feedback	Oral, written	Mainly oral	Oral, written
Feelings	Confused, fulfilled, happy to influence, shape teaching and ELT teachers	Never completely sure if what you are doing is right, happy to share experiences	Not sure what it is expected of them,

Conclusions

This study explored how each member of the formative triad made sense of their roles and activities during the practicum with a special focus towards feedback practices. The results revealed that members of the triad did not share the same understanding of the practicum, nor their functions and core activities within this learning experience. However, there was clear evidence that giving and receiving feedback was a shared space in which all members were involved. Yet, feedback took different forms- a tutoring opportunity, pedagogical tool for professional development or a space for often much needed emotional support. An emerging tendency evidenced in the analysis was the introduction of triad meetings which could be a space for dialogic feedback to enhance reflection and development.

The results of this research can have implications for resignifying the role of the triad and assessment and feedback practices during the practicum. It seems relevant that contradictions of current practices are confronted by all members of the triad and answers to the following questions are tackled: Is it possible to assess the practicum using different instruments that serve a formative and summative function? What are the necessary conditions to implement dialogic feedback practices during the practicum?

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