
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Use of Written Feedback Strategies to Reduce Tensions in Mentoring Relationships: A Reflective Case Study

Nusrat Gulzar

Doctoral Researcher, Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Corresponding Author: Nusrat Gulzar, **E-mail:** nusrat.gulzar@warwick.ac.uk

| ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author adopts a reflective case study approach to evaluate the management of rapport and power issues in her relationship with her mentee at a postgraduate mentoring programme at a British university. The evaluation focuses on the outcomes of adopting suitable feedback strategies and language constructions for providing verbal and written feedback to her mentee to mitigate tensions in the relationship. The paper also presents insights into the author's reflective evaluation of her mentoring approach, the nature of the tensions encountered and how she addressed those challenges through feedback techniques. Audio recordings from pre- and post-observation meetings and the researcher's written feedback reports were used as data in the study. The analysis's primary focus was identifying distinct language patterns in vocal and written communication and how they might have assisted and constrained the possibility of mentee reflection and rapport. Findings indicate that careful use of language structures, namely, hedged markers, first-person references, conversational registers, and reflective questions, may assist in establishing rapport in mentoring relationships and, consequently, reduce tensions to some extent. The study is helpful for new mentors and teacher educators interested in knowing more about the nature and complexities of near-peer mentoring relations and effective feedback techniques.

| KEYWORDS

Near-peer mentoring, feedback, rapport, mentoring relationships, reflective case study

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Mentoring has been immensely valued and practiced in teacher education for its importance in supporting new teachers who need proper guidance to develop their professional selves (Nguyen, 2017). Mentors guide their trainees by providing constructive feedback at various stages. The mentoring space is where both mentor and mentee learn from dialogic and reflective exchanges. Hence, the outcomes of the mentoring process essentially depend on a positive reciprocal relationship that demands time and effort to form (Gakonga, 2019; Hudson, 2013).

There is a wealth of literature on mentoring and reflective feedback in the field of English language teacher education, however, Allen argues that it is crucial to examine the dynamics of mentoring relationships from the point of view of the mentors from both a theoretical and practical standpoint (2007). Mentoring relationships can be complex, with varying roles and expectations (Allen, 2007; Hudson, 2016). Such experiences can thus be best explained by mentors themselves using self-reporting techniques like reflective narratives. This study, therefore, discusses a case of a near-peer mentoring relationship where the mentor uses various feedback delivery tactics to reduce tensions and power imbalances in her relationship with her mentee, Tahera (pseudonym). Among the numerous issues mentors confront while mentoring new instructors, tensions and power hierarchy commonly affect their relationship (Nguyen, 2017). This occurs when both parties are placed in an 'unequal relationship,' with the mentor typically having the ability to raise questions and comments on mentees' lesson planning, teaching, and other behaviours (Nguyen, 2017). In the context of peer mentoring, there is growing evidence that points to this issue of transitioning from a hierarchical mentoring

relationship to a more balanced, reciprocal one. However, little has been done to promote open, flexible communication and reduce conflict in peer mentoring using written feedback strategies.

The author's experience as a novice mentor is the basis of this case study. For a more in-depth analysis of the outcomes of the feedback techniques, the nature of the author's interpersonal relationship with Tahera has been discussed under the lens of the theory of attachment (Bowlby, 1979; Noe, Greenberger & Wang, 2002). Attachment theory is a broad theoretical framework for understanding feedback in mentoring relationships (Allen, Shockley & Poteat, 2010). It also helps understand how attitudes and constructs such as emotions, judgement, and power influence mentoring relationships (Noe et al., 2002; Gormley, 2008; Kram, 1983). Given the focus of the study, a closer look at the taxonomies of 'secure' 'avoidant' and 'anxious' attachments in mentoring practices will be effective in understanding how mentees receive and react to constructive feedback (Germain, 2011; Wang et al., 2017). Therefore, the following functions as the guiding question for the analysis of the findings in the study:

- What written feedback techniques can novice mentors employ to help minimise tensions and power issues in peer mentoring relationships?

1.1 Context and background of the study

This is a case study conducted on a postgraduate teacher mentoring programme or 'near-peer' mentoring at a public research university in the UK. Professional Practice (PP) is one of the core modules for postgraduate students who choose to specialise in Teacher Education at the postgraduate level. The Teacher development course has two similar yet different professional practice components. One stream is for experienced language teachers, and the other is for student-teachers with little or no teaching experience but aspiring to work as teachers after graduation (Gakonga, 2019).

The near-peer mentoring programme runs parallel with the professional practice in the teacher education module, where student-teachers are allowed to be mentored by their experienced peers. While experienced teachers (mentors) benefit from the programme by extending support to new mentees with their teaching plans, thereby developing their skills as teaching professionals. Regardless of prior mentoring experience, the MA students were encouraged to volunteer as mentors and had a choice to write reflective papers (i.e., as an assignment) on their mentoring experience as part of the module (Gakonga, 2022). The programme was equal for both groups, especially for novice mentors (Gakonga, 2019; Gakonga & Mann, 2022). The following chart best describes the nature of the programme:

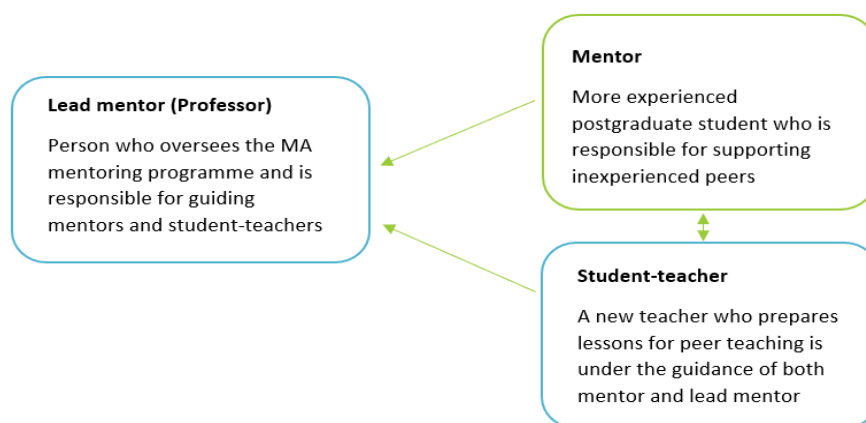


Figure 1: The postgraduate level (preservice teaching) mentoring programme at a UK university. Adapted from Da Silva (2017).

As the programme's key objective is to encourage reciprocal learning through reflective dialogues, the mentees must engage in pre- and post-teaching conferences with their mentors. Mentors must arrange at least two pre- and post-observation meetings with their mentees during the programme. Each mentor gets to interact with one or two student-teachers whom they guide and provide feedback on lesson plans. The step then leads to the class observation of their peer-teaching sessions. The mentees receive verbal and written feedback on their first classroom teaching performance at a post-observation feedback conference and modify and revise their lesson plans for their second peer-teaching session. After the second peer-teaching session, the mentors again meet their mentees in a post-observation conference. This time they watch the recorded video together and initiate reflective conversations on their teaching performance and areas of further development. Mentors deliver written feedback to the mentees

after the second session. The content generally focuses on teaching performance, time-management skills, instructional strategies, classroom interactions, materials, and activities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Near-peer mentoring relationships

Building good interpersonal relationships is paramount in shaping the mentee's teaching conceptions, experiences and thoughts (Nguyen, 2021; Gormley, 2008). The frequent interactions in near-peer mentoring are hoped to be supportive and collaborative. However, due to the complex nature of mentoring relationships, establishing rapport and moving toward a working relationship can often be challenging (Russell & Russell, 2011), especially when mentors are new in this role or have very little preparation (Gakonga and Mann, 2022) to take over the responsibility. They often do not get sufficient time to understand their new roles fully. Communicating insights or suggestions, particularly during feedback delivery, can be difficult for mentors since they simultaneously serve as a confidant and assessor (Ganser, 1996), a job that should be free of any forms of judgement, direct advice, and authoritative attitudes (Hobson & Malderez, 2013; Hobson, 2016). Having difficulty juggling these two responsibilities can also make both groups feel inhibited, which affects how the mentoring process, as a whole, turns out (Gakonga, 2019). Hence, it is vital to look for ways mentors and mentees can adopt to foster positivity in the relationship and gain maximum benefits from their communication (Hudson, 2016).

In such kind of relationships, which is slightly hierarchical, mutually formed dialogues can be beneficial for mentees to exhibit their knowledge and reduce power differences (Wetzel, Taylor & Vlach, 2017). Nguyen (2016) and Wang et al. (2017) emphasise that different modes of interaction (i.e. Zone of Proximal Development) can foster rapport and active involvement in mentoring, and the onus is mainly on the mentor to initiate this process. Moreover, a powerful way of engaging mentees in reflective thinking or sharing would be to adopt questioning, confronting and signposting strategies (Nguyen, 2021). The overall process then tends to function as a safe space for reflective engagement, observation, construction of meaning, feedback and planning changes for further improvement (Nguyen, 2016).

The fundamental dynamics of the author's relationship (i.e. rising tensions and lack of rapport) with Tahera can be seen under the lens of Attachment Theory (AT) (i.e. adult attachment anxiety). AT helps understand the different concerns (e.g. power differentials, anxiety, motivation) regarding mentoring relationships (Gormley, 2008; Germain, 2011). Here, avoidant and anxious behaviours may have different connotations in other settings. For instance, mentees with high levels of attachment anxiety may act indifferently or, sometimes, even negatively towards constructive feedback or opinions from their mentors. They usually prefer independence and positive feedback, even if they require support at certain levels. Similarly, mentors may also have high anxiety levels; in those cases, they 'often find it hard to accept or appreciate mentee autonomy' (Gormley, 2008). A rather obvious consequence of such problematic issues is that the mutual goals are not met while both partners attempt to maintain a friendly, harmless relationship. Kram's (1983) four-phase conceptual framework of mentoring relationships is also relevant to understanding the evolvement of relationships. Transitioning from one phase to the other necessitates good communication, comfortable circumstances and less tension in the relationship (Nguyen, 2016). This transition may apply to all kinds of mentoring relationships, including near-peer mentoring, where very little time is allotted for creating impressions, improvement and sustaining impact on professional development. In such circumstances, as Kram (1983) argued, mentors need to adopt practical and relevant strategies to make the relationship work. Assuming the role of a model in mentoring should not be the prime goal, but the purpose should be to develop a good relationship, which may sustain over time or end positively.

2.2 Role of developmental feedback in mentoring

In any mentoring programme, mentors are expected to facilitate reflective thinking in beginning teachers by initiating effective dialogues, non-judgemental suggestions and non-directive feedback (Orsdimir & Yildirim, 2020; Beek, Zuikar & Zwart, 2018; Da Silva, 2017). Mentor feedback is, in a way, 'imperative' for mentees in their practicum for comprehensive knowledge and skill development (Agudo, 2015). A dialogic space is expected to be co-constructed by the two groups, which can also foster critical reflection (Vasquez, 2004), leading to a working, 'judgement-free' relationship (Roberts, 200; Strong & Baron, 2004). However, successful feedback delivery can only be possible if mentees are interested or willing to be mentored by their mentors (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez and Tomlinson, 2009). For instance, mentees with teaching experiences may not be comfortable with direct, general advice. Instead, they may expect feedback on specific areas of their teaching. Therefore, it is important to formulate feedback strategies by catering to mentees' needs, as the content focus and style of delivery may be different considering their prior teaching experience and their teaching context (Strong and Baron, 2004). Strong and Baron shed light on how mentors take vital decisions in conversations and the ways they influence their mentees' thinking processes and actions. The study investigates more than 200 samples of mentor-novice teacher discourses and presents a corpus that contains useful statements that mentors can use to avoid direct advice. Spear, Lock and McCulloch's (2006) study, similarly emphasise the effectiveness of written feedback or report on mentees' performance and satisfaction. The study highlights salient features of written texts which should be incorporated with a balance of complimentary remarks and constructive comments. They further suggest that while formulating

written feedback, mentors must pay close attention to the overall purpose of the input, the tone and the suggestions they offer or the approach they take to form a correlation between their stance and mentees' expectations and developments.

3. Methodology

This study employs a reflective case study methodology. Reflective case studies are learning narratives generally used to communicate 'lessons learnt' for improvement in practice (Becker & Renger, 2017: 138). They are flexible and offer a combination of researcher insights, reflexivity knowledge and thorough analysis of practical issues in education. While discussing the lessons learned, researchers in such studies present open confessions and assessments of their naivety and flaws and offer practical guidelines (Becker & Renger, 2017). A similar stance has been adopted in this research. The researcher, who has several years of teaching and researching experience in ELT but is a new mentor in the area, made an effort to make sense of the data and came to conclusions from two different viewpoints: a language teacher and a novice mentor.

Examples used in the findings section have been extracted from audio recordings and written feedback data from the first and second rounds of lesson preparation sessions and post-lesson observation conferences with Tahera. It also showcases written feedback data from Tahera's written feedback to her mentor (the author) for an in-depth analysis of the feedback techniques that secured rapport in our ensuing face-to-face conversations.

The key parts of the audio recordings were listened to and re-listened to identify distinct linguistic patterns that reflect tensions in our relationship. Then, the researcher's written feedback notes were analysed to understand the use of a range of language constructions to keep her softer and, therefore, to alleviate tensions and discomfort in their relationship. The transcriptions were then reviewed and compared to the researcher's reflective notes and the mentee's written report.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 *Rising tensions in the relationship*

In the following excerpt from the first mentoring conversation, Tahera attempted to prove her readiness for the class before we could begin any in-depth discussion on her lesson plan:

- 1 **N:** So, yeah, (directed to both mentees) anything else would you like to discuss – your plans in detail and what activities are you planning for the class?
- 2 **T:** Ah (.) I think mine is pretty straight-forward (.) so I just need to type it up for the class.

(Example 1: Lesson planning stage)

The above extract addressed the open question to both of my mentees for them to share their plans, lesson objectives and other teaching modalities. I expected Tahera to respond and share her plan, as she had been mostly silent since the beginning. Despite being fully aware that the session is for lesson planning and sharing ideas, she is seen as reluctant and, perhaps, a little uncomfortable sharing her teaching plans in a group discussion. She reacts promptly, with the expression "I think" (line 2), indicating her strong feelings about the plan, and she may refuse to accept anything contrary. At that point, she does not sound like she needs scaffolding or 'near-peer support'. The only thing left to do is to 'simply' type it up (line 2). Her use of the word 'straight-forward' emphasises that claim and eliminates the possibility of inquiry. She has some teaching experience, and presumably, for this reason, she attempted to demonstrate her competence in lesson design.

Here again, Tahera's response is very straight-forward. This feedback conference occurred two days after the teaching session, so I purposefully began my discussion with a specific question regarding her teaching. The aim was to allow Tahera a scope for recalling her experience:

- 1 **N:** How did you feel after your 20-minute session?
- 2 **T:** Yeah, it was good -it was good.
- 3 **N:** uh. Overall, you mean?
- 4 **T:** Yeah – I mean - I think I was able to achieve what I had in mind.

(Example 2: Post-observation meeting 1)

Questioning is a familiar technique mentors employ to facilitate mentees' reflective thinking skills (Le & Vasquez, 2011). Randall & Thornton also argue that in feedback conferences, mentors need to pay attention to the trainee's "account of how the lesson went" (2001: 91) as opposed to "imposing views" on the mentee (Da Silva, 2017: 68). However, as can be seen from the following extract, engaging in a 'focussed interaction' (Goffman, 2007: 219) or "dialogic, collaborative approach" (Mann & Walsh, 2015: 291) with Tahera was somewhat challenging. Similarly, Tahera's responses in the above extract indicate her self-reliance regarding her preparation for the lesson and reaction after peer-teaching. She uttered the word 'good' (line 2) several times during our talk, exposing her powerful self-esteem and narrowing down the space for mutual decision-making and discussions. Her responses

were brief and direct, meaning she felt uncomfortable or insecure in opening herself up to me. Another possibility could be that she may have lacked reflectiveness. Because, novice teachers may not always undergo the process of reflection because they lack the necessary skills or desire to take it forward (Copland & Mann, 2010). Again, as Gormley (2008) argues, mentees with an anxious attachment tend to avoid in-depth conversations or detailed constructive feedback as they mainly prefer listening to favourable comments 'even when they are false (p. 51). In Tahera's case, both arguments could be true; her insecurity or high anxiety levels affected her reflexivity, and thus, she was quite reluctant to acknowledge the gaps and seek suggestions. Line 4 echoes a similar tone and leaves no chance for me to place any further statement other than a responding 'okay' and simultaneously thinking of another way to take the conversation forward.

4.2 Written feedback: a balance of criticism and appreciation

Given that we had only two face-to-face conferences, I realised my written comments, if delivered in a friendlier and lighter tone, could function as a workable medium for her reflection and thinking (Spear et al., 1997). As it is written, I got plenty of time to plan and prepare my feedback write-up. Considering the outcomes of our previous conversations, this time, I presented a blow-by-blow account of Tahera's teaching, meaning my comments were presented in prose-style language with positive and hedged words and a softer undertone.

As her mentor, I was aware that written commentary could be challenging to provide because, on the one hand, direct criticisms may function as a sledgehammer to her, consequently affecting the teaching confidence she had shown earlier. And on the other hand, since there were some issues in her teaching that required further discussion, too much mitigation or "sugar-coating" (Hyland & Hyland, 2001) may tamper with those indications and may not encourage reflection. Therefore, my written feedback should involve careful phrasing of language with a fair balance of praise, constructive criticism and suggestion (Hyland & Hyland, 2001), yet not too clouded with positivity (Copland, 2008) but functional as an effective tool for reflection (Engin, 2015). It is essential to add that our first two meetings and the outcomes of those exchanges directly influenced me to carefully plan the text-based or written feedback I was entitled to deliver.

Given that "all feedback, including in-text and end comments, have the potential to affect" the receiver powerfully (Hyland & Hyland, 2001:190), I planned to set an affirming tone first. The following instance exhibits my attempt to establish a friendly manner at the outset of the text by describing her way of starting the class:

- 1 *I enjoyed being a student in your class last Wednesday. I particularly appreciate*
- 2 *Your way of beginning the lesson in such a calm and casual manner.*
- 3 *It worked well as an ice-breaker for the students.*

(Example 3: Written feedback for first teaching session)

Integrating positive and informal registers such as 'enjoy', 'calm', 'casual', and 'wonderful' was useful in establishing a friendly opening. I assumed that setting an approving start before adopting the sandwich model of giving feedback would influence Tahera to disregard her insecurity and open herself for careful reflection. I preferred the sandwich approach because it emphasises a fair balance of praise and constructive criticism. The first slice of credit is expected to help mentees build a positive frame of mind before encountering criticisms in the main (middle) segment. Schwarz pointed out that it is generally easier to receive negative responses when they are dusted with positive feedback (2013). Lastly, they again receive a slice of positive statements which help them boost their self-esteem (Robson, 2014). To initiate a 'dialogic' (Copland & Mann, 2010) space, I had to incorporate suitable phrases and expressions to mitigate the criticisms as opposed to a 'transparent strategy' (Schwarz, 2013) which is relatively straightforward and leaves less scope for reflection. Mentors often need to use modal auxiliaries, I-statements, and emotional talk to mitigate such threats (Vasquez, 2004: 36). The text, as a result, may have slightly flouted the maxim of quality but perhaps was effective in terms of its purpose. The following excerpts reflect my attempt to follow a sandwich pattern.

Praise

You have successfully built a good rapport with your students by discussing topics very close to their real lives. You prompted them to speak about their interests and provided input based on their responses.

Criticism and suggestions

...I think at one point in the lesson, students seemed to be struggling a little bit as the aims of the discussion on YouTube, Instagram and followers were unclear. It appeared to be a very casual discussion but without any clear indication...Perhaps, for our next lesson, we can think of how to clarify each activity's purpose and goals before we present it to students.

Ending with a positive note

...I also liked your positive approach toward the materials you had chosen...
However, we should also consider how to balance those real-life tasks with other
 types of input ...

(Example 4: Sandwich pattern: written feedback for first teaching session)

I tried to “transmit positive attitudes” by highlighting her strengths before suggesting possible areas of development (Clifford & Green, 1996: 79). To support my aim, I preferred using active structures using second person (‘we’, ‘us’) pronouns to establish a personalised and empathetic attitude in the text. Although using such pronouns can help build inclusivity, too much use may sound patronising. Besides, the inclusion of ‘words of uncertainty’ or hedging particles indicates that the tentative ideas are still open for further argument or exploration (Pretorius & Westhuizen, 2015: 182). ‘Perhaps’, ‘maybe’, ‘probably’, and ‘possibly’ were some of the ‘words of uncertainty’ or mitigations used to soften the tone and avoid the ‘loss of face’ (Clark, 2002:379).

The second paragraph of example 4 contains some direct expressions, such as “to be struggling a little bit”, “without any clear indication”, and “were not clear”, which might sound as negative impressions. However, I tried to ease the effect in the following sentence, and feed-forward with tentative expressions (i.e., indirect suggestions) (‘perhaps we can think of ...’). This step was necessary because enveloping strong criticisms with hedged particles ‘dissipates’ any ‘anticipated embarrassment’ (Thody, 1993:68) from feedback comments. Nevertheless, I later realised that I could not mitigate the tone effectively. Therefore, for the second round of feedback, I attempted to convert my suggestions into brief questions. The questioning technique was far better than building a letter-like structure to provide the key elements regarding Tahera's teaching.

Indicators of improvement in the relationship

The impact of my written feedback on Tahera was evident in the following encounters. The strategies proved effective since they allowed me to connect with her through my written words. Our interpersonal relationship started improving as the sense of uneasiness gradually faded. Also, a positive change was noticed in Tahera's approach. For example, she openly shared her teaching plans and discussed activities that might resonate with her objectives more appropriately. She was more reserved in the first round of interactions, whereas we were more involved in the following lesson-planning discussion. The following excerpt (example 5) shows the confidence and openness we both developed while discussing the lesson aims and activities.

- 1 **T:** I thought I would work on models, but then, everyone did modals, so I skipped it.
- 2 **N:** something else on grammar can be focused on because advanced learners are unfamiliar with every aspect of grammar...
- 3 **T:** I mean, it does not always need to be grammar, you know, ah, it could
- 4 be about - I don't know - something more linked to academic writing?
- 5 **N:** Hmm, yes...
- 6 **T:** Like presenting students how to use linkers
- 7 **N:** Connectors, you mean?
- 8 **T:** Yeah
- 9 **N:** Yeah
- 10 **T:** although, despite
- 11 **N:** aahh. Do you mean in paragraphs, or essays?
- 12 **T:** Yeah yeah. Kind of a thing –
- 13 **N:** Umm, to build coherence?
- 14 **T:** Yeah
- 15 **N:** Yeah
- 16 **T:** Can also work, yeah, for writing
- 17 **N:** For that, y- you can also think of... you know (.) give them some practice activities for them to do
- 18 **T:** Yeah, yeah
- 19 **N:** or, you know, ask them to identify?
- 20 **T:** Exactly
- 21 **T:** Or maybe just giving them scrambled paragraphs and asking them to rearrange them with words such as, however, in addition
- 22 **N:** yeah. Or fill in the gaps, there are many other ways that you can adopt –
- 23 **T:** Yeah. Exactly. I will think about that.

(Example 5: Lesson planning for second peer teaching session)

This time Tahera was more open than in the past feedback session, where Tahera was 'concerned with self-image and approbation' (Akbari, 2007: 199). Her approach made me more spontaneous in my questioning. I also learned to respect her teaching beliefs and values while trying to introduce other avenues for consideration. This approach leads us toward what Freeman (1982) terms an 'Alternatives' approach as opposed to a 'Supervisory' one where the observer offers a range of alternatives or options for the practical tasks, therefore, helping the teacher to rethink and ultimately further decide on plans based on their discretion. However, Tahera's (line 3) response to my suggestion that we focus on "anything else" about grammar reveals that she is still not fully comfortable with receiving advice from me. Her direct and bold remark in line 3 will be taken as a face-threatening statement by any interlocutor. Also, mentees with anxious attachments tend not to solicit feedback or constructive comments since it makes them feel exposed to negative impressions about themselves and their ego (Bowlby, 1979; Allen, 2010). Hudson (2016) also reports that mentors often expect mentees to be able to reflect on prompts, questions, and constructive criticism. Similarly, in the preceding exchange, I anticipated a more contemplative reaction rather than a definite one. In lines 2 and 3, it is evident that some form of tension still persists in the relationship, and Tahera is not comfortable in either seeking or accepting feedback (Allen, 2010). Her straight-forward response, however, could not overshadow the signals of good change observed in the exchanges (lines 13-23). She was more objective and flexible this time.

4.3 The second round of written feedback

For the second written feedback, I attempted to maintain the same positive and friendly approach to properly acknowledge the remarkable changes I witnessed in her teaching. Hence, the second written feedback included more forward-focused suggestions. It was less challenging to communicate this time because of the rapport we had in our last conversation.

- 1 You have managed to elicit responses from your students and generate discussion,
- 2 which is a reason behind more significant and positive student involvement in your
- 3 class this time. You carefully combined three skills (reading, speaking and writing) in
- 4 your lesson. In addition, you paid conscious attention to each student's responses
- 5 and assisted (scaffolded) them when needed. The warm-up discussion was lively
- 6 and I think students enjoyed discussing chocolates.

(Example 6: Written feedback on second teaching session)

The above extract illustrates my attempt to highlight many positive sides of her teaching session. The intention was to convey a message highlighting my understanding of her teaching based on the minute details of the session. Using specific phrases helped me be more effective in my feedback delivery. Phrasing my language had not been as complicated as it was in the last round because I got an impression that my written comments had a positive impression on my mentee. It is evident that descriptive expressions such as, 'the warm-up session was lively', 'you paid conscious attention, and every other detail gave her that critical space to construct explanations for her teaching strategies. I was reassured to see Tahera was happy with my written feedback. I collected her views on the mentoring she received, to which she responded that the "clear" input with "tiny points" helped "criticise" herself "more objectively". Although she reiterated that she found the written comments to be encouraging and positive, as a new teacher, she has much more than 'tiny points' to improve. Her reaction implies that even though she now has greater confidence in her mentor, she nevertheless maintains a protective attitude. As mentioned in this round, I preferred different forms of questioning to hedged comments to build a space for reflective thinking.

- 1 ...in terms of the length of the text, you used in class, just a quick retrospective
- 2 question, would you think a shorter text would have given you more time to
- 3 concentrate on sharing a few more interesting examples of connectors and their
- 4 functions? My observation says a couple of students initially spent a reasonable amount of
- 5 time understanding the activity and writing down examples of connectors. Did you notice that too?

(Example 7: Written Feedback 2)

Disguising observations or bits of knowledge as thought-provoking questions is a subtle way of providing feedback (Copland & Mann, 2010; Pretorius & Westhuizen, 2015). It is a relatively more polite and indirect form of placing suggestions and criticism simultaneously (Spear et al., 1997). Statements such as 'did you notice that too?' or 'would you think a shorter text...' were carefully phrased to minimise the impact of the criticism. The expression 'shorter text' indicates that she used long, so she should consider the purpose and time-management issues before using such text in her next lesson plan. This can be a forward-focusing suggestion wrapped in a 'question' to introduce an element of critical reflection without any signal of face loss. Presentation of thoughts in this way can efficiently form an understanding of the issues that went wrong in class instead of placing bullet points of passive statements with negative words such as, "poor time-management", "no form of assessment was given", and so forth. Due to the

tendency of mentees to become defensive in response to constructive criticism, the method must have an attitude of openness that would influence them to look back on their teaching performance with critical eyes.

This section analyses the key extracts from the feedback conversations during the pre-and post-teaching conferences with Tahera. The depictions help to understand the tensions and uneasiness in our relationship, which became evident during the first lesson planning session. Despite clearly understanding the roles and responsibilities of mentorship (Orsdimir & Yildirim, 2020), overcoming the discrepancy between experience and power in our confrontations was challenging. Tahera had a year of teaching experience which, presumably, was the reason behind her apparent defensiveness in the interactions, particularly when she was told to elaborate on her teaching plans.

4.4 Author's reflections

In qualitative research studies authors are now expected to include a reflective section on their positionality and the type of lens they employed to frame their study from a practitioner perspective (Becker and Renger, 2017).

Dialogues related to pedagogical knowledge generation can be represented in various forms, for instance, stimulated recall, appraisals, prompts, questions or descriptions (Mena, Henissen & Loughran, 2017). Despite my use of questioning techniques to facilitate reflective thinking skills (Le & Vasquez, 2011) regarding her lesson in extracts 1 and 2, Tahera's one-sided responses gave less room for a 'dialogic talk' (Copland, 2010: 182). Her statements exposed one single perspective, which according to Bakhtin, 'disallows any debate or alternative standpoints, rather it demands acknowledgements' (1981:292). Copland and Mann (2010) point out that it happens when participants, through their responses, challenge certain 'norms', which can be essentially termed as face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, in line four of example 2, Tahera's conclusive response again narrowed down the space for further questioning. It was challenging in two ways; first, I was aware of my position and roles; second, I tried to save my negative face (Vasquez, 2004). Asking a question like, "what did you initially have in mind?" or 'could you tell me what your initial thoughts were?' in response to her statement would again sound straight-forward, interview or even face-threatening because the element of shared knowledge construction is essentially missing in this conversation. Another question would not have helped create a space for reflection, mainly because of Tahera's tendency to close down opportunities for co-constructive talk. Although asking reflective questions or summarising instead of remaining silent or giving direct advice reflects a 'less directive' mentoring role, a key strategy to consider, especially at the initial stage of mentor relationships (Beek et al., 2018: 16). Again, mentors often use modal auxiliaries, I-statements, emotional talk to mitigate such threats (Vasquez, 2004: 36) to adopt strategies that generally show a good level of awareness on the part of the mentor in a context of 'reciprocal professional learning' (Orland-Barak & Rachamin, 2009: 602). But, Tahera's reactions made it challenging to assume such a role, especially for a novice mentor like me who was struggling to establish a mutual space for reflection in face-to-face encounters.

Sometimes, in such cases, it becomes easier to provide written feedback. According to Hyland and Hyland (2001), in delivering written feedback, paying attention to the forms and patterns are equally crucial in establishing rapport and mitigating written comments' tone. Mentors need to be able to distinguish between direct criticism and suggestion. Hyland and Hyland (2001) term the former as "an expression of dissatisfaction", whereas the latter is "an explicit recommendation for remediation" that can also be termed as constructive criticism (p. 186). Based on my understanding of these two factors, I established an open space for Tahera through my written feedback and attempted to deliver my untold message in the observation meetings. The friendly, interactive feature of the writing helped foster positivity in our relationship.

Considering our situation, I was aware that expressing praises and criticisms can be a complex issue; hence, instead of one-way evaluative, distant remarks framed in tables with bullet points or phrases (Strong & Baron, 2004), which is not necessarily inefficient but may be a different approach, I chose a prose writing format. It was hoped that the system might help raise some noticeable issues (such as the selection of lesson content, the purpose of activities, time issues and so forth) about Tahera's first teaching session.

The overall process might have been different if I had handled the written commentaries with a more straight-forward and formal approach. However, Copland warned that "issues can arise if mentors try to balance evaluation with a more developmental discourse" (2011:468). Still, I felt relieved that my comments did not cause any further problems, even though I was not entirely confident in my words until I observed a change in Tahera's approach in the next planning session. I was concerned that the degree of indirection utilised in the language might change the real point I was attempting to communicate. It is often possible that mitigated or hedged speech (i.e., modals, qualifiers etc.) may cause difficulties in interpreting the meaning (Baker & Bricker, 2010). I also anticipated that my comments might 'reveal the assumptions or beliefs' (Zamel, 1984: 79) I hold regarding teaching, which can narrow down the spectrum of her reflection instead of widening it. Thus, it is necessary to be conscious of what we, as mentors, say and how we say it in the feedback since any other interpretation may alter the primary purpose of the discourse (Le & Vasquez, 2011; Gratch, 1998). Randall and Thornton further report that in feedback conferences, mentors need to pay attention to the trainee's "account of how the lesson went" (2001: 91), as opposed to "imposing views" on the mentee" (Da Silva, 2017: 68).

Lastly, the findings from the second lesson planning session indicate that the power dynamics in the relationship have steadily improved over time. Tahera was passionate, open, and positive about our subsequent encounters, and after the programme, we kept linked on social media, exchanging congratulations and birthday messages on our big days. This reciprocal partnership has expanded effectively since then, demonstrating that the feedback mechanisms assisted in overcoming concerns and power dynamics in our relationship.

5. Limitations of the study

It is essential to acknowledge the main limitations of this reflective case study. First, the study focused on a thorough, in-depth critical analysis of a specific case of near-peer mentoring experience; nevertheless, the researcher should have utilised a reflective journaling technique for data triangulation and validation purposes. The field notes, if taken during lesson planning and post-observation conferences, would have helped delineate a more comprehensive picture of both Tahera and myself and how we perceived each other in this mentoring process. As the study emphasised the subtleties of a near-peer mentoring relationship, the conclusions or preoccupations on preserving rapport and power balance in professional mentoring relationships

may differ slightly from other contexts, especially in more professional cases where mentoring involves formal report submissions and real classroom teaching experience. However, the study findings provide a new lens for understanding the scope and impact of mentoring feedback strategies in newly developed mentoring relationships on pre-service mentoring programmes. Lastly, owing to word limitations, it was not possible to discuss the nature of our interactions from an intercultural perspective, even though the interpretation could have generated intriguing insights on maintaining rapport in mentoring through different feedback strategies.

6. Conclusion

This study casts a reflective lens to understand near-peer mentoring interactions and argues in favour of thoughtfully constructed written feedback, which can be a beneficial technique to mitigate tensions and develop rapport in mentoring relationships. The author attempted to define the dynamics of her mutual relationship in terms of attachment theory (Allen, 2010), which has been helpful in understanding Tahera's reactions to soliciting feedback both at the beginning and later stages of the process. The paper also illustrates the author's progress and growth as a novice mentor by emphasising data-driven insights and reflections on her knowledge, actions and overall approach to Tahera and the mentoring process.

While this is a reflective case study analysis carried out at a public higher education institution in the United Kingdom, it takes an interdisciplinary approach, meaning that the nature and outcomes of feedback strategies employed may have practical implications for different mentoring scenarios (e.g. health and business sector). To help develop a broader picture of the fundamentals of giving feedback as well as the nature and complexity of mentoring relationships, more data-led studies, mainly self-reflective narratives, ethnographic studies, and autoethnographic studies on novice teacher mentoring practices focusing on various teacher training contexts should be introduced into the teacher education literature. It would also be interesting to explore mentee teaching perspectives, their identity development and learning experiences and how all these aspects are shaped by their interpersonal relationships with their mentors.

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ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3797-9120>

Author's Bio: Nusrat Gulzar is an Assistant Professor at the department of English, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD at the Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, UK. She completed her Master's in English Language Teaching (with specialism in Teacher Education) as a Hornby Scholar from Warwick University in 2018. Nusrat also has an MA in Applied Linguistics and ELT from the Department of English, Dhaka University. Her research interests include reflective practice and mentoring in language teacher education, digital pedagogy, e-portfolios in teacher professional development, and learning technologies in teaching academic writing skills.

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