

## *A cross-cultural study on teacher/mentor characteristics*

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### Abstract

The notion of *mentoring* may be described as ancient. The original *Mentor* first appeared in classical literature and was described by Homer as the “wise and trusted counselor” whom Odysseus left in charge of his household during his travels (Grzesiak 2010: 21). In more contemporary times, the concept of mentoring has found its application in practically every sphere of our lives, also in education. However, not every educator either wants to adopt the role of a mentor or has the required characteristics. Furthermore, it may be difficult to come up with a complete list of the mandatory features as they may differ according to the cultural background of the educators. Therefore, the article and the study reported therein attempt to investigate the possible differences in the characteristics of teachers/mentors existing in various cultural contexts.

### 1. Introduction

In present-day education there are many ways of supporting learners who need additional help to maximize their learning outcomes. According to Jucovy and Garringer (2008: 5), mentoring is becoming an increasingly popular way of providing guidance and support to learners in need. One has to bear in mind that typical mentoring develops over an extended period, during which a learner’s needs and

the nature of the relationship tend to undergo transformation. Efficient teachers/mentors will try to be aware of these changes and, if possible, vary the degree and type of attention, help, advice, information, and encouragement that they provide to their learners. Furthermore, the nature of the mentoring relationship varies with the level and activities of both the learner and the mentor. Different learners will require a different amount of time, attention, advice, information, and encouragement. Therefore, a good teacher/mentor should be approachable and available. He or she should spend some time and get to know his/her learners better. It may prove beneficial when providing learners with useful suggestions, advice, and information (Sheorey 2006).

In their discussion of the characteristics of good teachers/mentors, Donaldson and Thornton (2008: 1) argue that an efficient teacher/mentor needs to demonstrate self-confidence and good moral character. Furthermore, a teacher/mentor should have good ego-strength, which means that he or she does not get his other feelings hurt easily and has no problem with saying 'no'. He or she must also remain positive and encouraging, no matter how badly his or her learner fails. A good teacher/mentor must also be emotionally available. He or she must be comfortable with his own feelings and be able to share these with the learners. Finally, teachers/mentors must be able to hear the learners talk about their fears, anger or feelings of inadequacy.

However, as Sheorey (2006: 53-54) points out, "learners and teachers from different cultures have different expectations about the role of learners and teachers in the classroom". Furthermore, as Richards and Lockhart (1994: 107-108) point out, Western education focuses more on individual learner autonomy and creativity, which has its implications for the roles of the teacher, whereas the attitude towards teaching held by teachers and learners from Eastern cultures is viewed as more teacher-controlled.

## 2. The study

### 2.1. Aims and research questions

Taking the above into consideration, the article reports on the characteristics and expectations towards educators who want to adopt the role of a mentor. The study aimed to determine what attributes a foreign language teacher should possess in order to be treated by his or her learners as a *mentor*. Furthermore, the study aimed at finding out if there were any culture-determined differences in the perception of a mentor.

## 2.2. Participants

The study included forty learners from three countries. The first group consisted of twenty Polish learners from the State University of Applied Sciences in Konin, Poland. The second group comprised ten Turkish learners who participated in the Erasmus program and came to Konin to study for the duration of semester. The last study group included ten third-year learners from Boston University who were asked to provide their answers through the Internet.

## 2.3. Instruments and procedures

With the aim of establishing a comprehensive image of a teacher/mentor, all the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire and write a short essay. The questionnaire was the *Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis Learner Teaching Mentor Teacher Survey* (<http://www.indiana.edu/~iupncate/standard1/docs/stmentorteachersurvey>). The respondents had to rate their responses using a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant 'poor', 3 meant 'adequate', and 5 meant 'excellent'. Ten statements focused on such mentor skills as the ability to create meaningful learning experiences as well as instructional opportunities that are adapted to diverse learners. Furthermore, the respondents had to decide if mentors could provide learning opportunities that supported learners' development and if they used a variety of instructional strategies to encourage the development of critical thinking, problem-solving and performance skills. Other characteristics described a mentor's ability to create a learning environment that encouraged positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation, and to use verbal and nonverbal communication techniques as well as planning and assessment skills. The last two characteristics described a mentor as a reflective and professional practitioner and a person who fosters relationships with colleagues, parents, and agencies to support learners' learning and well-being. In order to obtain additional data that would shed more light on the opinions and beliefs presented in the questionnaire, the participants were asked to write a short essay (250-300 words), the topic of which concerned the desirable characteristics of a teacher-mentor. The essays written by the Polish and Turkish learners were written and later collected personally by the researcher whereas the essays written by American learners were obtained via e-mail.

## 2.4. Results

The results obtained from the survey identified a number of reoccurring teacher/mentor characteristics as well as recognized some interesting culture-related

dissimilarities in the respondents' opinions. According to all the groups, the ability to encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation (Statement 5) turned out to be the most valued mentor characteristic (4.50), which was followed by the ability to create learning experiences that make the subject matter meaningful to learners (Statement 1), with the overall average of 4.43. The ability to plan instruction based upon knowledge of subject matter, learners, the community, and curriculum goals (Statement 7) was another, unanimously appreciated, feature of a mentor (4.16). Statement 9, concerning the role of a mentor as a reflective practitioner and Statement 10, describing a mentor as someone who fosters relationships with colleagues, parents, and agencies, also obtained high overall averages, namely 4.23 and 4.13, respectively. However, there were some differences in the results obtained by particular groups of the respondents. The average for Polish and American learners in both statements was higher than 4.0, whereas the average attained by the Turkish group was in both cases lower than 4.0.

In the remaining five statements, the results were more diversified, depending on the nationality of the respondents. In Statement 3, concerning the ability to create instructional opportunities suitable for diverse learners, the highest average was obtained by Polish learners (4.1), followed by respondents for the U.S.A. (3.4) and Turkey (2.5). Similar incongruity in the results was evident in the case of Statement 4, where the use of various instructional strategies in order to encourage learners' development of critical thinking, problem-solving and performance skills proved to be most important for Polish (4.3) and American learners (3.9), while for Turkish learners the average was 3.1. In Statement 6, the respondents had dissimilar opinions about the use of effective verbal, nonverbal, and media communication techniques to foster active inquiry, collaboration, and supportive interaction in the classroom. The highest average was obtained by Polish respondents with the average 4.3. However, for the remaining groups, the average was lower, that is 3.8 for American learners and 3.5 for Turkish learners. When asked about the use of formal and informal assessment strategies (Statement 8), the respondents again expressed divergent opinions. However, this time the highest average was obtained by Turkish learners (4.3). For Polish and American respondents, assessment strategies turned out to be less important teacher/mentor characteristic, with the averages of 3.5 and 3.8, respectively. Statement 2 expected the respondents to express their opinions about the ability to support learners' intellectual, social, and personal development and brought rather an unexpected outcome, as in all the groups the average was lower than 4.0 and ranged from 3.5 (American learners) to 3.2 (Turkish learners). For Polish respondents, the average was 3.3. For a more translucent comparison, detailed results are presented in Table 1.

Statement	Polish Group	American Group	Turkish Group	Overall average
Statement 1	4.8	4.4	4.1	4.43
Statement 2	3.3	3.5	3.2	3.33
Statement 3	4.1	3.4	2.5	3.33
Statement 4	4.3	3.9	3.1	3.76
Statement 5	4.6	4.6	4.3	4.50
Statement 6	4.3	3.8	3.5	3.86
Statement 7	4.3	4.2	4.0	4.16
Statement 8	3.5	3.8	4.3	3.86
Statement 9	4.8	4.4	3.5	4.23
Statement 10	4.4	4.2	3.8	4.13

Table 1: Detailed results for the three groups of respondents.

The analysis of the respondents' opinions presented in the essays provided the researcher with additional valuable information. Looking at the content of the essays, it was evident that there were some noticeable similarities between the representatives of the three cultures. One of the most commonly held belief among all the learners was that the terms *teacher* and *mentor* were not synonymous, and if the teacher wanted to become a mentor, he or she needed a unique set of characteristics, which related to personality, interpersonal skills, as well as professional development and teaching skills.

The respondents from all the groups unanimously claimed that a mentor should have *high moral standards* and should be a *role model* for his or her learners. Furthermore, other mentor characteristics mentioned by all the groups was *open-mindedness* as well as *the ability to inspire and guide learners*. The participants also wrote about the importance of being an *advisor* and a *counselor*. The learners from the American group described a mentor with the word 'trustworthy' and the Turkish respondents used the phrase 'helps learners to grow'. Interpersonal skills required from mentors encompassed an equally extensive set of characteristics, including an opinion expressed by Polish learners, who believed that a mentor should have 'good diplomatic skills'. Additionally, all the groups unanimously pointed to the 'willingness to take part in the dialogue' as well as the 'ability to help and work with learners'. When it comes to the teaching attributes that characterize a mentor, the opinions expressed by the learners included such phrases as: 'conducts lessons firmly', 'motivated', 'enjoys his or her work' (American group), 'has a strong commitment', 'encourages to take risk', 'understands personal needs' (Polish group), 'good lesson planning skills', 'enjoys working', 'passes knowledge', 'helps gaining skills', or 'shows the world' (Turkish group). The last set of characteristics connected with mentor's professional development included two traits, namely 'well-educated' and 'willing to develop more'.

Apart from the features of a mentor described above, the respondents included more private and valuable opinions, most of which were presented by the Polish respondents. Some of them focused on the definition of a mentor. One of the learners wrote: 'Being a mentor is clearly more difficult than being a teacher as it involves a great deal of dedication. A mentor is definitely a teacher, but not every teacher becomes a mentor. What is more, some of the teachers restrict themselves to conducting the lesson without possibility of counseling after class is finished'. Others focused on the difference between a mentor and a teacher: 'The key difference between mentor and the teacher lies in their relationship with the learners and in the way they help them develop'. Others yet pointed to the expectations towards a mentor: 'Mentors do not push their protégées towards life directions. They help find them. I view mentor as someone who helps a person to find their own way rather than following the path of another'. The final comment in one of the essays included a rather pessimistic view of teachers: 'Nowadays, the majority of schools lack competent and passionate teachers'.

### 3. Conclusion

The analysis of the results showed that, according to the participants, there are certain characteristics that a teacher should possess when adopting the role of a mentor. Furthermore, it seems that for many learners, regardless of their nationality, a mentor is more than a role to adopt. It is rather a form of a bond between a motivated and professional educator and his or her learners, which is based on shared trust, respect, partnership and willingness to communicate. This exceptional connection recognizes learners' individuality and uniqueness, and, by doing so, makes learning more meaningful and satisfying. Despite all the technical development and maturity, learners seem to need someone who will guide them and help them not only in their education, but also in their everyday life challenges. This is probably why they expect mentors to be highly professional, devoted teachers with high moral standards. Mentors need to become role models for their learners, which seems to be crucial in times when many young people lack role models in their everyday lives.

The analysis of the data also provided evidence for some minor nationality-determined differences in the perception a mentor. Polish learners seem to be more 'personality-oriented', whereas other groups, especially Turkish learners, seem to be more 'teaching-skills' oriented. For them, mentors plan their lessons carefully and structure them firmly. Furthermore, Polish learners seem to pay more attention to noticing learners' needs, reflectivity, and, as one learner called it, 'the special *it* factor (charisma)'. American learners, on the other hand, seem to appreciate teachers who are continuously developing professionals and

manifest strong commitment to their profession. Despite these minor differences, mentors are highly valued and recognized in every culture and there seems to be a strong demand for teachers to adopt the role of a mentor. Having to face such demanding expectations makes most teachers reluctant to adopt the role of a mentor. What is more, some of them may not have the necessary qualities or they may simply believe that a teacher-learner relationship makes them less important or less professional. However, the present author is strongly convinced that if we are willing to go this 'extra mile', we can find new inspirations and challenges that will only make the teaching profession even more rewarding and simply enjoyable.

This study was highly valuable, as it helped the researcher to heighten his awareness of who he is as a person as well as an educator. He believes that only through continuous reflection can teachers improve themselves and perhaps, with time, transform into genuine mentors. It would surely be beneficial for other educators to find the strength and will for similar self-discovery.

## References

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