Exploring the School Improvement Specialist Coaches' Experience in Coaching English Language Teachers

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Abstract
Having School Improvement Specialist Coach to support English language teachers is one of the most recent efforts taken by Malaysian government to improve the standard of English in the country. This paper aims to provide insights into the coaching process as perceived by the coaches. In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with two coaches where they were asked to share their coaching experience. Specifically, this paper addresses the coaches' perceptions on the professional and personal qualities required in order to be a good coach; their challenging and successful experiences; and their overall views of the effectiveness of the coaching programme. Data analysis reveals that coaching, as part of a professional development programme, is perceived by the coaches to have a significant impact on the enhancement of overall teaching practices. This paper offers valuable insights into the coaching process which are hoped to be beneficial to SISC+, teachers and other stakeholders in education sector.
Keywords: Coach, English language teachers, Malaysia; SISC+, teacher professional development

Introduction

Education has always been one of the highest priorities in Malaysia as it strives to attain the status of a developed nation (Jamil, Razak, Raju, & Mohamed, 2014). It is seen as the basis in producing high quality human capital towards achieving the nation's vision. In order to produce excellent human resources, comprehensive and practical strategies are needed. Tackling and strengthening the education system of a nation will later produce well equipped students who can contribute to the development of the nation by working productively. In the dynamic context of the Malaysian education system, our policies on education are changing rapidly and seminally to cater for the salient national need of producing not only good but quality citizens (Albury & Aye, 2016). The educational goal, as in the economic-philosophical sense, is that in years to come, our young generation will no longer hunt for jobs instead they should be able to create jobs for the country. In such relentless effort, the changing in the education policies have been happening for decades in order to improve the quality of education, teachers, and student learning.

Literature Review

SISC+ programme

School Improvement Specialist Coach (SISC+) programme was introduced in year 2012 to support teachers in translating written curriculum into classroom teaching. The roles of SISC+ encompass the responsibilities of taking new curricula and assessments to the classroom, coaching teachers on pedagogical skills, and monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation (Ministry of Education, 2012). The introduction of the SISC+ is hoped to reduce the number of tiers involved in curriculum and assessment delivery and provide on-the-ground training to teachers. The coaching is hoped to tailor to the teachers' needs as SISC+ observes teachers in classrooms and provides instant feedback. It is expected that more than 60% of the SISC+'s time is spent on coaching activities (Ministry of Education, 2012) as teachers' quality is one of the most significant factors in student learning (DuFour & Mattos, 2013).

Teachers are required to deliver the existing syllabus in a manner that emphasizes skills and competencies critical for the 21st century (Ministry of Education, 2012). Pedagogical skills are boosted to improve student-centred teaching. The focus of SISC+'s coaching sessions are on the mastery of key pedagogical skills in developing higher-order thinking skills, teaching children of different abilities, and assessing students effectively. Therefore, SISC+ does not have direct contact with students in the classroom as SISC+'s clients are teachers.

Coaching versus mentoring

The terms coaching and mentoring tend to be used interchangeably in a great deal of literature and it is very difficult to be conclusive about the differences as writers proposed many different views or ignore the issue of definition altogether. However, in general, mentoring is conceived as a long term relationship which focuses not just on setting and achieving goals, but also on developing the whole person. Law, Ireland and Hussain (2007) describes it this way:

> Mentors are regarded as trusted guides who understand the theory of personal
> development and are experienced in translating it into practice. Mentors do not
> simply provide mentees with a road map and travel tips, but also walk some of
> the journey with them. The collaboration (co-journeying) enables mentors and

mentees to develop and experience a new journey that is full of surprises (p. 13).

Rogers (2008) and Weiss and Kolberg (2003) agree with this view when they point out that mentoring and coaching are very similar activities, which use very much the same skills and competencies. The only real difference suggested, is that, the coach focuses on building mentee's ability to accomplish specific tasks, whereas the mentor has a wider perspective. The mentor generally has a longer-term relationship with the mentee, and focuses on a broader range of issues at any given time (Rogers, 2008).

A mentor can play an important additional role, which in business is sometimes described as sponsorship mentoring. This is when the mentor acts as an advocate or sponsor for the mentee within the organization (Weiss & Kolberg, 2003). In this situation, a mentor goes beyond merely suggesting ideas for development but actively opens doors for the mentee, for example, suggesting his/her name when important opportunities arise (Rogers, 2008). In summarizing the differences between mentoring and coaching, Rogers (2008) suggests that, in practice, mentoring does have overtones of implying that the older and wiser mentors will pass on their advice.

What clearly emerges in educational literature is that the term coaching is a metaphor used to describe a supportive, working relationship between two (or more) people for the purposes of creating changes in practice through the development of individual capacities (Robertson and Murrihy, 2005). Robertson and Murrihy (2005) define coaching in the following way: "Coaching, as presented in this book, is a special, sometimes reciprocal relationship between (at least) two people who work together to set professional goals and achieve them" (p. 24).

Though coaching can be a one way process with one person always being the coach and another person is always the one being coached, Robertson and Murrihy (2005) argue that:

> the term coaching depicts a learning relationship, where participants are open to new learning, engage together as professionals equally committed to facilitating each other's leadership learning development and wellbeing (both cognitive and affective), and gain a greater understanding of professionalism and the work of professionals (p. 24).

In Robertson and Murrihy's (2005) coaching model, it is assumed that the two partners will gain equal, though perhaps different, benefits "from working with each other as they develop and implement their professional and personal goals" (p. 30). Robertson and Murrihy (2005) promote a peer coaching model in which, at different times, one partner is the coach and another one is being coached and vice versa. This model proposes that there is mutual recognition of their need to grow and develop as leaders and educators as well as the recognition that they can assist each other in this process.

Sociocultural theory

Sociocultural theory is a theory of the development of higher mental practices which regards social interaction as the core of communication and learning process. It is derived from

the sociological and economic writings of Marx and Engels in eighteenth-and nineteenth century. The theory emerged from the work of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978), Leont'ev (1981), and Wertsch (1985).

One of the outstanding features of sociocultural theory is considering learning as social in nature where meaning is derived through language use within the social context. Contrary to the followers of cognitive theories who believe in mediation between stimulus and the response, Vygotsky's (1978) investigates the context of the behaviour or the social situation where the action occurs. The basic assumption in Vygotsky's theory is the idea that psychological structures do not exist in the individual's mind; rather, they are formed as a result of interaction with the social context. In other words, the emergence of mental functions depends on social interaction.

According to Mitchell and Myles (2004), sociocultural theory views learners as active constructs of their own learning environment. Confirming Mitchell and Myle's (2004) viewpoint, Guoxing (2004) states that learners in this sense are responsible for their own learning environment and the environment can nurture and scaffold them. Accordingly, teachers are seen as active constructors of their own teaching environment. Whatever teachers think of learners' language learning will definitely affect their constructions of teaching environment, though learners are the main focus of the teaching activities. Teachers will reconstruct their perceptions of L2 through practice and progress in language learning and teaching.

Sociocultural perspective of learning
The main focus of the sociocultural of learning is not on the individual but on the individual's surroundings. Claiming that learning is a social activity, sociocultural experts, such as Cole and Engeström (1993), Van Lier (2000), and Lantolf (2000) made a shift in their attention from individual cognition into mental activity of members of the same social community. Wertsch (1991), for example, emphasizes that sociocultural point of view should be distinguished from the other perspectives (e.g., constructivism) based on the context or surrounding of the learners. Learning is considered as the product of shared activity and the traditional teacher-student relationship should be changed to one that leads to collaborative learning (Zhang, Fanyu, & Du 2013). In this sense, solutions to learners' problems are gained through the involved participants' or members' behaviours in a shared context.

The 'expert' member or knowledgeable other assists other members who need help in the learning process. This guidance is stopped when the members who need help can act independently. This problem-solving process is accomplished by two learners who possess different levels of knowledge and experiences. In other words, as a result of this guidance, a novice gradually becomes the effective member of that community. While Vygotsky's (1978) research was derived from working with and observing children, the important idea of the interrelationship of the outside and the inside, the social and cognitive processes, remains valid in adult learning. Without social and cultural interaction, meaning of context and content would not exist.

As Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) state, "successful learning involves shifting control within activities from the social to the individual, from the external to within self" (p. 232). This is evident in Vygotsky's (1981) description of cultural development, that:

> any function in the child's development appears twice or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category (p. 163).

Expressed differently, the most significant contribution of sociocultural perspective to learning and consequently decreasing learners' problems is providing a supportive environment for cognitive development. Thus, for any learner to be successful in language learning, during social interaction within a classroom, it is necessary to change his/her learning status from first dependent other-regulation to subsequent independent self-regulation.

Teacher support and professional development

A number of education systems around the world are engaging in serious and promising educational reforms. One of the key elements in most of these education reforms is the professional development of teachers (Rashid, Rahman, & Rahman, 2016). It has been widely accepted that teachers are only one of the variables that need to be developed in order to improve their education systems, but they are also the most important change agents in these reforms (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Villegas-Reimers (2003) points out that there are many hard-working teachers and educators who need professional development opportunities, not only because they promote the recognition of their work as professionals, but also because of new opportunities for growth, exploration, learning, and development. This double role of teachers in educational reforms – being both subjects and objects of change – makes the field of teacher professional development a growing and challenging area, and one that has received major attention during the past few years (Rashid, 2016).

The professional development of teachers is a broad area which "includes any activity or process intent on improving dexterity, attitudes, understanding or involvement in current or future roles" (Fullan, 1990, p. 3). It also refers to "the professional growth the teacher acquires as a result of his/her experience and systematic analysis of his/her own practice" (Villegas-Reimers, 2003, p.88). Glatthorn (1995) defines teacher professional development as the professional growth a teacher accomplishes as a result of gaining increased experience and examining teaching systematically. Other researchers, such as Heideman (1990) emphasizes that the professional development of teachers goes beyond a merely instructive stage. Heideman (1990) asserts that teacher professional development implies "adaptation to change with a view to changing teaching and learning activities, altering teacher attitudes and improving the academic results of students" (p.4). Day (1999) puts forth a similar perspective that:

> it is the process by which teachers, whether alone or accompanied, review, renew and further their commitment as agents of change, with moral teaching aims. Moreover, they acquire and develop knowledge, competencies and emotional intelligence that are essential to professional thinking, planning and practice students throughout each stage of their teaching lives (p. 4).

The term continuing professional development (CPD) has been widely used to refer to the ongoing education and training for the professions (Blandford, 2000). Teacher development, staff development and professional development are associated concepts related to continuing professional development. Day (1999) clarifies the distinction between these terms and continuing professional development. He states that most definitions of professional development stress the acquisition of subject or content knowledge and teaching skills as the main purpose. He argues that the emphasis should be on the nature of CPD as a continuing process for improvement in addition to the knowledge and skills gained. This ongoing process can be of any kind; education, training, learning or supportive activities engaged in by teachers alone or with others. In short, CPD focuses on fostering individual competence to enhance practice and to facilitate dynamic changes in education (Blandford, 2000).

Methodology

Semi-structured interview

A qualitative research method is chosen for this study in order to gain insights into the personal views of the coaches. This research is not aimed for proving anything or comparing one thing with another to determine the best possible findings. It is meant to explore the views of the coaches on their roles in coaching English language teachers. A total of two School Improvement Specialist Coaches took part in this study. They were chosen based on purposive sampling. Purposive sampling refers to using personal judgment to select a sample who is knowledgeable in providing data for the study (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2009). For this study, the participants were experienced coaches from two different states in Malaysia.

The two coaches were interviewed face-to-face by the researcher. A recording device was used with prior consent obtained from the participants. While these two interviews varied in length, they were generally forty to fifty minutes in duration. Additionally, it should be noted that given the potential sensitivity of the study, pseudonyms have been allocated to the coaches in an effort to ensure their privacy and to preserve their anonymity. They are referred to as SISC+ A and SISC+ B in this paper. Upon completion of the data collection, the data were arranged according to plausible denominations which allowed for easier management.

Analysis and Discussion

The interview data were examined to gain insights into the coaches' views on their roles in coaching English language teachers.
The coaches reflected on the following points:

  i. The professional and personal qualities of a coach
  ii. Challenging and successful experiences.
  iii. Overall views on the effectiveness of the programme.

The professional and personal qualities of a coach

In order to become a good coach, SISC+ A and SISC+ B agreed that the coach must possess certain qualities. Excerpts 1 and 2 present their views on the qualities of a good coach.

Excerpt 1:

> For me, a good coach must be understanding, non-judgemental, and a very good listener. Besides, a coach also needs to be knowledgeable and experienced. The coach should also never give up even though the teachers hardly show any improvement. These are the qualities that I think every coach must have in order to become a good coach.
>
> <div align="right">(SISC+ A)</div>

From SISC+ A's point of view, the coach needs to let teachers know that he/she understands their efforts and struggles. This is consistent with the literature on coaching. For instance, Knight (2005) points out that coaches who are positive, understanding and non-judgmental is essential in building teachers' trust. This is also supported by McLymont and da Costa (1998) who suggests that acting "non-judgmentally is the grounding for trust in the network of relationships" (p. 34). Knight (2005) argues that coaches need to have an "infectious personality" along with content knowledge in order to inspire and motivate teachers to change their classroom practice. Coaches who have teaching experience at school will be perceived as credible by the teachers. If teachers feel that coaches have little or no classroom experience, they are less likely to believe what the coaches tell them.

Previous research suggests that district and school administrators need to carefully select coaches who demonstrate strong pedagogical knowledge, content expertise, and the interpersonal skills to carry out their responsibilities (Knight, 2005; Steiner and Kowal, 2007). Coaches need to be experienced teachers who have shown success in the classroom. Successful coaches understand how children and adults learn and what instructional strategies can best address the individual needs of students. Coaches also need to be able to develop and implement strategies that can help teachers with their instructional approach and classroom management. SISC+ B put forth other characteristics of a good coach:

Excerpt 2:

> In order to become a good coach, the coach needs to have high energy level, sense of humour, honest, and the most important thing is being professional. These are the qualities that I personally practise in becoming a good coach.
>
> <div align="right">(SISC+ B)</div>

SISC+ B emphasizes that a coach needs to always be on her toes. If teachers feel that the coach is just sitting back relaxing, she may do the same. As pointed out by Knight (2005), the personal qualities of a coach are as important as their expertise in instructional techniques. SISC+ B also maintains that the coach should possess a high-level of energy and a positive outlook. Apart from that, the coach also should not take herself too seriously that she needs to be able to laugh at herself and her mistakes. A sense of humor will often diffuse a tense situation (Rashid, 2016). A coach must be someone with "a little bit of humor" so that teachers "feel relaxed" when they are being observed. This helps teachers to be more genuine and less likely to be "putting on a show" for the coaches.

Lastly, the coach also needs to be ethical and honest in what he/she says and does; anything less will lose the teacher's respect. If the coach is not professional, teachers will not

follow his/her suggestions and will disregard what he/she says. The personal and professional qualities of the coaches have a significant impact on how they approach their jobs, how seriously they took their roles, and how effective they are in helping teachers to make changes in their classroom practice.

Neufeld and Roper (2003) argue that a coach should not only be knowledgeable in the content area, but also of: school district reform goals, achievement standards, and adult learning. In order to meet these expectations, coaches must have strong communication and interpersonal skills. They must be able to offer consistent support to the teachers, and be willing to listen and learn. Their professional and personal skills have a significant impact on: i) how they go about interacting with teachers and the principal to establish trust; ii) in setting the tone for what the professional development and coaching would entail; iii) in the type of feedback they give to teachers and how they facilitate the feedback teachers give to one another; iv) in creating a supportive and nurturing environment; and v) in motivating teachers.

Challenges and successful experiences
SISC+ A and SISC+ B view their roles as challenging in coaching the teachers. This can be seen in Excerpt 3 below.

Excerpt 3:
> Ermm, teachers started to feel anxious when they know someone is coming to their classroom. They seemed to believe that I was there to judge them tormented me. But I couldn't blame them. In every human relationship, there's always at one point we could get comfortable with each other.
>
> (SISC+ A)

SISC+ A pointed out that teachers are often not prepared to be coached and they feel that there are 'eyes' looking at them at the back of the classroom. Thus, they need to think of the solutions to the problems that arise during the coaching session. Excerpt 4 presents the SISC+ A's view on ways to tackle the problem:

Excerpt 4:
> Communication plays a vital role here. Rather than positioning myself higher by labelling myself like "I'm here to judge you", I take another way by approaching the teacher in a friendlier way. The feedback and suggestion given are also in a presentable way - using the right intonation, and proper sentences without letting the teachers feel inferior. In spite of using "… you should do...", "… you must …" I decided to hear what they prefer to do on their own first, only then I give my suggestion. In this way, I believe the teachers would feel comfortable and hence the teaching could be improved.
>
> (SISC+ A)

SISC+ A highlighted the importance of establishing trust in order to change teacher practice. Trust is the key in overcoming resistance. McLymont and da Costa (1998) assert that establishing trust will allow people to take risks. In order to establish trust, it is important to establish credibility. The coaches need to provide some background information about their professional experiences in order to establish credibility in the beginning and to gain the trust

from the teachers. Coaching, in many cases, is about trust and building relationships. Several studies have shown the importance of trust in the coaching relationship (e.g. Kowel & Steiner, 2007; Brady, 2007; Neufeld & Roper, 2003; Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). For instance, Brady (2007, p.47) states that coaches have to learn to communicate with teachers in a way that is "non-threatening or offending" when they are providing feedback; and they have to be able to establish and maintain the trust and respect of everyone involved at the school. Teachers have to be able to work with their coach "without fear of punitive reporting to the principal" (Brady, 2007, p. 47). Hargreaves and Dawe (1990) describe coaching as a form of training with an "intensive relationship" between the coach and teacher that has a "high practical focus, is intensive and enduring in application, and depends on the development of strong and trusting collegial relationships" (p. 230).

Excerpt 5 below presents one of the challenging experiences faced by SISC+B.
Excerpt 5:

> Sometimes there are teachers who have a "negative attitude" when it comes to change. Some teachers feel that they know what is best for their students, regardless of scientific based research or other evidence that the 'change' is going to improve student performance. Also, some teachers want to teach the way they were taught. These teachers have the mindset that "if it worked for me, it should work for everyone". We need to consider how coaches can inspire teachers to try something new. What factors are going to influence change or be a part of that change? What are the barriers in creating change?
>
> (SISC+ B)

SISC+B's experience resonates with Louis and Marks (1998) who point out that there could be "subtle resistance by teachers when another adult comes in, because classrooms are typically very isolated" (p. 539). Despite this challenging experience, there are also successful experiences that give the greatest moments of satisfaction for the coaches, as shown in Excerpt 6.

Excerpt 6:

> Well, I think most Malaysian school are well known of using chalk and talk method in previous years. As I was observing the teachers, I could see there were few teachers who started to show improvement on their teachings. The teaching and learning process were more interactive as the teachers involve group work, discussion in the classroom. Even their lesson deliveries were improved with the integration of ICT. This is one of my greatest successes as a coach.
>
> (SISC+ A)

> There was a teacher who was so used to the old style, one way interaction. After a close guidance, she started to use both teacher's and pupils' centred teaching approach and thus able to address the problems that her pupils faced in the lesson. As a coach, I need to make them aware that they need to be creative in catering the different styles of learning among the pupils thus need to integrate the 21st century learning style in the classroom.
>
> (SISC+ B)

SISC+ A and SISC+ B managed to make the teachers apply the newly transmitted knowledge in the classroom. This is a meaningful success as Kruse (1996) highlights that teachers who extend themselves professionally to improve their practice will become more effective teachers. Working together in professional communities to improve instruction and share expertise through collaboration increases teachers' sense of affiliation with each other and with the school (Louis, 1992). This is where the coach plays the vital role in improving teacher professional development. Teachers are valuable resources in education, and high quality performance in teaching is an essential ingredient to educational improvement or reform. Studies have shown that teachers' success in changing their practice often mirrors the work of the coaches (e.g. Neufeld & Roper, 2003). To assist the teachers, it is necessary to support their performance in the classroom. Support in the form of well-designed coaching programmes can be pivotal in enhancing teacher professional development.

Overall views on the effectiveness of the programme
Excerpts 7 and 8 present the coaches' overall views in describing the effectiveness of the coaching programme.

Excerpt 7:

> I could say it is effective and a very good programme as the teacher has someone to refer to regarding their teaching practices. This effectiveness can only be achieved when there is a mutual agreement between the teachers and me. When the teachers are ready to change and willing to follow my opinions, that's when I will offer suitable guidance to the teachers.
>
> (SISC+ A)

SISC+ A felt that the coaching programme had made significant and positive impacts on teachers. Similar to Guskey (2003), SISC+ A held the opinion that, to be effective, any coaching program needs to be developed in a way that takes into account the complexity, process and function of the programmes. SISC+ B agrees with SISC+ A that the program is effective. However, SISC+ B highlighted some problems with the implementation of this programme, as shown in Excerpt 8:

Excerpt 8:

> The programme is really good as it aims to strengthen our education system by improving teachers' classroom practices. However, in every programme, there are always drawbacks. I was a little bit upset with the budget that was cut down this year by the government in enhancing this programme. Consequently, there are several issues regarding the claim of the travel cost by SISC+. I haven't received my travelling claim for a few months already. Nevertheless, it's not a really big issue as I am ready to sacrifice and I am sincere in doing my job.
>
> (SISC+ B)

Despite not getting his travelling expenses, SISC+ B reported that he did not feel discourage from coaching the teachers. This suggests that the success of this program so far does not only rely on the mutual understanding between the coaches and the teachers being coached, but also the high level of tolerance possessed by the coach in the coaching process.

Conclusion

        This paper examines the views of School Improvement Specialist Coach (SISC+) on their roles in coaching English language teachers in Malaysian primary school. Overall, the findings of this study show that coaching, as part of a professional development programme, is perceived by the coaches to have a significant impact on teaching practices and teacher professional development. The changes that have taken place could not have happened without the support from the coaches who are experienced and committed in supporting the teachers.

        While this study puts forth the perspectives of the coaches involved in SISC+ programme and contributes to the body of knowledge about the coaching of English language teachers, there are still many questions which merit further exploration. It is recommended that future research examines the views of the teachers who are being coached so that their views can be compared with the coaches' views. It is hoped that the findings of this study will add to the body of knowledge besides providing useful insights into the needs of the coaches and the English language teachers involved in the coaching programme. The views shared by the coaches are also hoped to be useful for policy makers in designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating SISC+ programme to enhance the professional development of English language teachers in the country.

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