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Supervisory Feedback: The Weight of Compliments, Criticisms and Suggestions Revisited

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ABSTRACT

Though not a novel topic, supervision and its contribution to teachers' professional development has been given renewed attention in recent years. The constructive/destructive role supervision might play in teachers' instructional path has been addressed by a plethora of investigations, and the frequency and effect of different kinds of comments and feedback on teachers' conduct has also been explored in previous research. However, the findings of research on supervisory feedback and their effect still seem to be blurred. Informed by this need for further research into the issue, the researchers in the current study strived to investigate the proportion of comments given by supervisors to language teachers. In so doing, the researchers analyzed an existing corpus of supervisory report on 30 EFL supervisees, at a Language school in Gonbad-e-Kavoos, Iran. The sample was composed of 16 males and 14 females. The results gained through *Kruskal-Wallis test* revealed no significant differences among the groups of supervised teachers concerning the frequency of criticisms and suggestions; however, the frequency of compliments offered to the teachers with different levels of experience differed from one another. In fact, the frequency of criticisms, suggestions and compliments correlated with the years of teachers' experience. The implications of the findings are discussed throughout the paper.

Keywords: *Compliments, Criticisms, Supervisee, Supervisory Feedback, Suggestions*

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1. Introduction

Although teacher development and professionalism can be achieved through non-supervisory approaches including coaching (Bailey, 2009), mentoring (Bailey, 2009; Malderez 2009), reflective practice (Burton, 2009), and action research (Bailey, 2009; Burns, 2009), still language teacher supervision with classroom observation as its fundamental part plays a key role in teacher education and development and is a career path worth pursuing.

Supervision, according to Hinchey (2010), "is used to gain information that can help teachers, even teachers who are already proficient, to improve or expand their abilities" (p. 6). It, in fact, serves two important purposes: (a) gathering data on teacher's current performance, and (b) relating that data to teacher's professional development in the future (Green, 2010; Zepeda, 2007).

Despite the key role supervision plays in teachers' professional development, seldom do supervisors receive any formal training to fulfill their responsibilities (Bailey, 2009). The assumption here apparently, as Goldsberry (1988, pp. 4-5) put it, is "that anyone who can teach can also supervise." It is, however, far from true. This way, language teacher supervisors might simply supervise teachers the way they have been supervised themselves. This is because they, as teachers having been observed and supervised themselves, will develop their own supervisory beliefs on what effective supervision might look like.

This idea itself comes from Lortie's (1975) apprentice of observation, according to which, student teachers spend thousands of hours developing perceptions of teaching and teachers and thus harbor deeply-ingrained notions of what the nature of effective teaching might be. Even if these



supervising teachers get professional courses on language teacher supervision, their new jobs as language teacher supervisors might be still affected by the entrenched supervisory beliefs developed during their career as teachers. This will, in fact, perpetuate traditions at the expense of reflective and informed decisions.

Besides, supervision has unfortunately come to be associated with evaluation (Richards & Farrell, 2005; Stoelinga, 2011) which, according to Bailey (2009, p. 5) has given it colorful nicknames including 'the reluctant profession' (Mosher & Purpel, 1972), and 'a private cold war' (Blumberg, 1980). All these terms imply some degree of tension and pressure between supervisors and supervisees. Thus, while teacher supervision intends to promote teacher professional growth (Nolan & Hoover, 2011), most teachers are not convinced of its benefits, and as a result, do not want to be supervised (Acheson & Gall, 2011).

Though there is barely a consensus among the researchers as to what characterizes successful and constructive supervision, Murdoch's (1998) taxonomy of effective supervision which encompasses ten key characteristics might prove illuminating in this regard. Among the key features of efficacious supervision, Murdoch refers to issues like providing encouragement for the supervisee, collecting data from the lesson to be analyzed by both supervisor and supervisee, restraining feedback to only some certain agreed upon areas of focus, creating linkages between classroom teaching and ELT at large, limiting criticisms and suggestions prior to supervision, taking into account the unique atmosphere and features of the class being observed, tailoring the depth and level of feedback to supervisee's experience and capability, strengthening decent practices by giving positive feedback, using the lesson as a groundwork for establishing proper relationship and negotiation with the supervisee, analyzing the data in a collaborative way to instill confidence and reflective practice in the observed teacher.

Despite its importance and complexity, language teacher supervision in Iran remains one of the mostly underexplored research areas. To the best of the present researchers' knowledge, few investigations, if any, have embarked on the current supervision model and its characteristics and determining factors in the

Iranian EFL context. Needless to say, to be able to practice effective supervision, we urgently need to investigate and compare the teachers and supervisors' perceptions of the supervision models currently being used and make modifications accordingly. One of the most complicated and challenging issues in language teacher supervision in Iran is the type of comments given by supervisors in terms of compliments, criticisms and suggestions in the current supervision practices in the country and to what extent supervisors make a balance between these areas not to discourage teachers by increasing the critical load of the comments. In fact, it seems that the supervision process does not affect the teaching process effectively. The outcomes of supervision should be at the service of teaching, and this truncates the continuum which starts from supervision and ends in teaching.

Thus, informed by this need for further research into different kinds of supervisory feedback and their ramifications, the researchers in the current study embarked on pinpointing the proportion of different kinds of feedback in written comments provided by the supervisors in the context of language institutes in Iran. In so doing, the potential role of experience was also explored to see whether years of teaching experience has anything to do with the kinds of comments received by teachers.

2. Literature Review

Teacher supervision has seen many different models and approaches from prescriptive and directive ones to more collaborative and reflective ones. However, the literature on this fledgling field of teacher supervision indicates a trend from evaluative and directive supervisory styles towards more developmental and reflective ones as it is evident from the many taxonomies of and approaches to supervision practices.

The present study mainly draws on Goldsberry's (1988) framework which is one of the earliest supervision models. Goldsberry (1988) introduced three models of educational supervision. The *nominal supervision* is intended to maintain "a façade that supervision is being practiced" (p. 2). This model is just to maintain the status quo, protect insiders, meet the official prerequisites, keep in touch with authorities, and appear accountable. Goldsberry calls this model of supervision a "void posing as supervision" and "lip-service supervision"

(p. 4). He adds “when there is inadequate time to do the job, when the supervisor lacks the preparation or skill to do it well, nominal supervision is preferred to trying to do too much in too little time and thus doing it badly” (p. 5). Then, he concludes “until supervisors are provided with adequate preparation and time to do the job, nominal supervision is all the organization can expect” (p. 5).

The *prescriptive model*, on the other hand, rests upon the contention that “the supervisor needs to correct deficiencies in teaching and has a primary purpose of surfacing these flaws and correcting them” (Goldsberry, 1988, p. 2). Its main objectives include promoting unvarying practices, improving advantages of expertise, identifying weaknesses and deficiencies, checking for standard practices, and prescribing needed changes. This model of supervision has heavily affected the language teaching profession (Freeman, 1982, 1989; Gebhard, 1984; Wallace, 1991). Goldsberry believes this model might be used to serve three purposes of creating uniformity, orienting and guiding the less experienced teachers, and ameliorating poor practice of teaching.

The *reflective model*, which is unfortunately used less often than the previous two models, assumes that “teachers need skilled support to refine their own efforts” (Goldsberry, 1988, p. 2). Its main purpose, as argued by Goldsberry, is “the stimulation of guided reflection based upon disciplined inquiry into the ends and means of teaching” (p. 7). According to Goldsberry, prescriptive approaches present the standards which strengthen the common points among teaching practices, while a reflective approach concentrates on values, goals, learners, skills and settings which identify the practices of good teachers from each other.

According to Wallace (1991), the existing supervisory approaches in education range from classic prescriptive to classic collaborative approaches. According to Bailey (2009), the general trend in the language teacher supervision is away from prescriptive approaches towards more collaborative ones. According to Bailey (2009), “there are many ways to realize the language teacher supervisor’s role” (p. 17).

Having adopted their favorite model of teacher supervision, language teacher supervisors will need to collect information on teachers’ performance. Although supervisors can read teachers’ journals,

dairies, self-reports, and portfolios, get feedback from students, parents and colleagues, or even discuss unseen and unobserved lessons, still their observing the teachers’ lessons live in the classroom is obviously a fundamental part of fair language teacher supervision.

As probe into supervision is still in its infancy, the few studies reported here epitomize the current orientation of research which is mainly after exploring the attitudes of supervisees regarding the efficacy of supervision or the role supervision might play in teachers’ professional development. In their attempt targeted toward finding the proportion of different kinds of comments provided in supervisory feedback, Moradi, Sepehrifar and Parhizkar Khadiv (2014) analyzed EFL teachers’ perspectives. To conduct the study, the attitudes of 34 teachers were gathered through questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The findings altogether revealed an adverse outlook toward the process of supervision, judging supervision as ineffective and aimed at providing criticisms rather than constructive suggestions. Furthermore, the participants believed that teachers typically wear masks on observation sessions and try to please the supervisor by playing the role of a hard-working teacher.

In another study on teachers’ attitudes toward supervision, Kahyalar and Yazıcı (2016) tapped into teachers and supervisors’ perspectives garnered via recordings and interview. At the culmination of research, they came up with a discrepancy between the teaching areas mentioned by the trainee teachers and the ones mentioned by the supervisor in her feedback about the observed lesson, and concluded that there are mismatches between the way teachers and supervisors see observation and its efficacy.

In much the same way, Aldaihani (2017) compared teachers’ perspectives concerning the efficacy and importance of supervision to those voiced by departmental heads. In accordance with the results obtained through structured interview, it was found that even though supervision was positively approached by participants, a gap was encountered between the actual and ideal supervisory practices.

Striving to explore the possible contribution of supervision sessions conducted by school managers to teachers’ development and growth, Yousaf, Usman and Islam (2018) conducted surveys with both school principals and teachers in



Pakistan. The findings revealed that supervision by principals led to improved performance and further development of teachers.

Furthermore, in an attempt which greatly resembled the current study in terms of objectives, Amini and Gholami (2018) investigated the effect of rotatory teacher supervision by experienced teachers on their colleagues' professional development. Like the present study, they adopted the tripartite classification of compliments, criticisms and suggestions as the leading framework for their analysis. The findings of their research pointed toward the higher rate of compliments as opposed to criticisms and suggestions.

Moreover, in another recent study conducted by Brandon, Hollweck, Donlevy and Whalen (2018) the principal challenges facing teaching supervision in the Canadian educational system were explored. To collect data, they made use of interviews, focus groups, observations and field notes. The main challenges pinpointed were related to management, complexity and learning issues. In addition, some recommendations were offered by the participants to foster supervision career, including the use of shared and collective approaches to supervision, adopting multiple pathways for effective supervision, and casting a broader look at the process of supervision.

The concise body of literature on teacher supervision presented here further reveals the dire need for more in-depth research into the concept. Though a deep-seated concept in teacher education studies, teacher supervision seems not to have received the attention it deserves. The insufficient heed paid to the issue might be evident in claims made by researchers like Alfonso, Firth, and Neville (cited in Bailey, 2009) who are of the view that literature on language teacher supervision is rather 'thin'. Furthermore, research findings concerning the essential characteristics of successful supervision as well as role of supervision in teachers' professional development appear to be inconclusive and at times contradictory. In this regard, Daresh (2001, p. 3), for instance, maintains that so far "no real consensus has ever been reached concerning what supervision should be or what educational supervisors should do." Because of this thin theoretical basis, the supervision profession has not been able to define the skills necessary for the job and most of the skills used by supervisors are

acquired during their work rather than through professional preparation and internship.

In view of the paucity of research on supervision, in general, and different components of supervisors' feedback and their effect, in particular, the researchers in the current study opted for analyzing the distribution of different types of comments, i.e. compliments, criticisms and suggestions in the supervisors' written feedback. In line with the objectives of the current study, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What are the proportions of compliments, criticisms and suggestions given by supervisors in their written feedback?

RQ2: Is there a significant difference in the amount of different kinds of feedback with regard to teachers' experience?

3. Method

3.1 Design

Being part of a larger-scale study, the current probe followed a mixed methods design of research. However, the phase of research reported here relied mainly on the existing corpus on supervisors' comments on language teachers' performance. This research corpus came from one of the most renowned language schools in Gonbad-e-Kavoos, Iran. The teaching staff included 30 full-time ELT instructors holding BA, MA and PhD with both TEFL and non-TEFL educational backgrounds.

3.2 Participants

The study sample was composed of 30 EFL teachers (both males and females). The participants were selected from among the cohort of EFL teachers at a language school in Gonbad-e-Kavoos, Iran. The participants held different degrees ranging from BA to PhD and included both TEFL and non-TEFL teachers in terms of academic background. To conduct the study, the existing record of these teachers' supervisory feedback was used as the corpus based on which the analyses were conducted. In order to probe the possible effects of the teachers' years of experience on the proportion of different kinds of comments and feedback, the participants were selected from among those teachers with below three (N = 10), over five (N = 10) and over 10 years of teaching experience (N = 10). Table 1 below demonstrates the entire demographic information about the participants.

Table 1: Supervised Teachers' Demographic Information

| Teaching experience | Gender | Field of study | Degree |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| < 3 years | 4 Males & 6 females | 5 TEFL & 2 Translation & 3 Literature | 7 BA 3 MA |
| < 5 years | 5 Males & 5 females | 6 TEFL & 2 Translation & 2 Literature | 4 BA 4 MA 1 PhD |
| < 10 years | 7 Males & 3 females | 5 TEFL & 3 Translation & 2 Literature | 5 BA 3 MA 2 PhD |

3.3 Instrumentation

In order to investigate the proportion of supervisors' comments on teachers' performance in language classes, the existing corpus of the supervision forms was consulted. The supervisions had been conducted by the same supervisor within the time period of 2015-2018. The supervision forms filled by the supervisors were investigated and the gathered data were tabulated.

3.4 Procedure

Pajares (1992) believed that "teachers' verbal expressions, predispositions to action, and teaching behaviors must all be included in assessments of beliefs in order to make richer and more accurate inferences" (p. 327). Furthermore, Borg (2006) referred to some common techniques to investigate beliefs, such as self-reports, semi-structured interviews, observations and stimulated recall. However, in line with the objectives of the current study, the existing corpus on language teachers' performance was utilized. In doing the research, the proportions of compliments, criticisms and suggestions given by the supervisors in their written feedback were analyzed.

3.5 Data Analysis

In order to investigate the proportions of compliments, criticisms and suggestions given by the supervisors in their written feedback, the frequency of such comments was tallied, and they were compared based on the supervisees' years of teaching experience. The gathered data on the proportion of the comments given by the supervisors were checked for normality through *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* test, and since the data were not normally distributed, the non-parametric equivalent of one-way ANOVA (*Kruskal-Wallis test*) was run on the data.

4. Findings

The preset study aimed to find out the proportions of compliments, criticisms and suggestions given by supervisors in their written feedback. In so doing, the existing

corpus of teacher supervision forms were employed and the findings were tabulated and presented in terms of compliments, criticisms and suggestions.

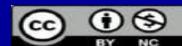
Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Different Types of Comments by Supervisors

| Experience | 3 years of Experience | | Over 5 years | | Over 10 years | |
|-------------|-----------------------|-------|--------------|-------|---------------|-------|
| | F | P | F | P | F | P |
| Criticisms | 40 | 8.7% | 36 | 7.9% | 34 | 5.9% |
| Compliments | 371 | 80.6% | 418 | 82.6% | 508 | 88.5% |
| Suggestions | 49 | 10.7% | 48 | 9.5% | 32 | 5.6% |

F = frequency, P = percentage

According to the results presented in Table 2, for language teachers enjoying an experience below three years, the supervisors criticized with a percentage of 8.7% of the whole comments. Suggestions were the second frequent type of comment with a percentage of 10.7% and compliments were the most frequent type of comment with a percentage of 80.6%. As with language teachers with a teaching experience of five to 10 years, 9.5% of the comments were allocated to suggestions followed by criticisms with a frequency of 7.9%. Furthermore, the most frequent type of comments for this group of teachers was devoted to compliments with a frequency of 82.6%. In supervision of language teachers with a teaching experience of more than 10 years, the least frequent type of comments was devoted to suggestions with a percentage of 5.6% and similar to the other two groups of teachers, the highest frequent type of comments was compliments with a percentage of 88.5%. In addition, the criticisms received only 5.9% of the comments. In order to compare whether there were significant differences among the three groups of teachers, in terms of the type of comments given about their teaching, *Kruskal-Wallis tests* were run on the gathered data. Tables 3 and 4 illustrate the mean ranks obtained for different comment types and *Kruskal Wallis* test results, respectively.

Table 3: The Mean Rank of Different Types of Comments for the Supervised Teachers



| | Supervised teachers | N | Mean Rank |
|------------|-----------------------|----|-----------|
| Criticism | 3 years of experience | 10 | 15.95 |
| | more than 5 years | 10 | 15.45 |
| | more than 10 years | 10 | 15.10 |
| | Total | 30 | |
| Compliment | 3 years of experience | 10 | 11.00 |
| | more than 5 years | 10 | 14.05 |
| | more than 10 years | 10 | 21.45 |
| | Total | 30 | |
| Suggestion | 3 years of experience | 10 | 18.85 |
| | more than 5 years | 10 | 16.05 |
| | more than 10 years | 10 | 11.60 |
| | Total | 30 | |

As mentioned before, we drew on *Kruskal-Wallis* test to analyze the data collected on different types of comments about various groups of teachers. According to the figures presented in Table 3, the mean rank of the criticisms made regarding teachers with three years of experience (15.95) exceeded that of the other two groups, and the lowest mean rank belonged to teachers with more than ten years of teaching experience (15.10). As regards compliments, the mean rank of the teachers with over ten years of experience was the highest (21.45), and the one for teachers with less than three years of experience was the lowest (11). Considering the frequency of suggestions given to three groups of teachers, as shown in Table 3, teachers with three years of teaching experience were offered the highest number of suggestions with a mean rank of 18.85, and the ones enjoying more than ten years of teaching experience were offered the least frequent number of suggestions with a mean rank of 11.60. However, we cannot decide on the significance of the results, without taking a look at Table 4.

Table 4: Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test for Different Types of Comments for the Supervised Teachers

| | Criticism | Compliment | Suggestions |
|-------------|-----------|------------|-------------|
| Chi-Square | .048 | 7.472 | 3.564 |
| df | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Asymp. Sig. | .976 | .024 | .168 |

Based on the high value of Chi-square (7.47) and the low amount of p value (.02, $p < .05$), the *Kruskal-Wallis test* indicates that only considering the frequency of compliments offered to the supervised

teachers, the differences are significant and the null hypothesis can be rejected. However, no significant difference was found among the groups considering the frequency of criticisms and suggestions.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study intended to investigate the proportion of the comments given by supervisors to language teachers. In so doing, the existing corpus on 30 EFL teachers teaching in a language school in Iran was employed. The results indicated no significant difference among the three groups of the supervised teachers considering the frequency of criticisms and suggestions; however, the frequency of the compliments offered to the teachers with different levels of experience differed from one another. Another finding obtained was the go-togetherness between the frequency of criticisms, suggestions and compliments and the years of teachers' experience. The lower the teaching experience, the more the criticisms and suggestions. On the other hand, the more the years of teaching experience, the more the given compliments. The reason for such a finding can be attributed to the fact that when the teachers gain more experience, the rate of their mistakes in class reduces; therefore, they may receive less criticism, and this leads to fewer suggestions.

The results of the present study as regards the frequency of criticisms contradict with those of Moradi, et al. (2014). These researchers investigated EFL teachers' perceptions about being observed during teaching by a supervisor and indicated that teachers sometimes believe that many observers look for things to criticize and this affects the teachers' confidence negatively. In the present study, however, it was found that supervisors, in addition to criticism, complimented teachers' performance in language classes.

The findings, however, corroborate the ones obtained in Amini and Gholami's (2018) study, which indicated the higher rate of compliments vis-à-vis criticisms and suggestions. However, it's worth reiterating that their focus was mainly on rotatory teacher supervision by senior teachers rather than supervisors. Thus, it is thought that senior teachers who perform supervision as a sort of assistance for novice teachers rather than as a profession, are less inclined toward raising criticisms, because their main purpose is helping their less experienced

colleagues with handy tips for professional development.

Along with changes to English language teaching, language teacher supervision in Iran has experienced changes during the last decades. In many English language schools, announced observations and postobservation briefing sessions have replaced unplanned observations and inspections. With the appearance of report forms, evaluation criteria and checklists, more transparency in the observation and evaluation process is seen. In addition, in order to encourage teachers' reflection and collaboration, peer observations are also implemented. The role of teacher leader can be introduced to provide the opportunity for teachers to develop observation skills.

In light of the findings of the present research, the following pedagogical implications can be derived. First, professional learning groups can be developed in which teachers of different experience levels can share the main instructional practices and lesson plans. Such groups can be handled by a teacher supervisor or by different members on a weekly basis, allowing for more exchange of ideas among teachers. Furthermore, volunteer teachers can be asked to video-record their own lessons for review and analysis, and they can be asked to share these videos with peers, and score their videos based on the observation rubric to videos. In fact, when observation jeopardizes the teachers, video-mediated observation can be a substitution in teachers' professional development. In addition, gaining a better understanding of the complicated act of teacher supervision requires the supervisors to be familiar with the context in which supervision takes place. More importantly, the supervisor must know that s/he must respect the teachers.

Exploring teacher supervision in the future can include the following lines of research. First of all, as some of the participants in the present research claimed, there was not a well-developed communication between the supervisors and the teachers; therefore, future studies can investigate how the mutual communication between supervisors and teachers can be enriched. Second, future studies can investigate what support supervisors need in order to be able to supervise teachers across different subjects. Third, further studies can investigate the opportunities which can be provided for teachers to experiment and reflect on their experiences. Fourth, further

research is needed, both in Iran and other countries, to enrich the empirical background required for decision-making about suitable methods of organizing language teacher supervision. After all, it is hoped that through the current research some contribution has been made to the existing literature on the issue. Nevertheless, coming up with more conclusive findings necessitates more in-depth research into the concept with larger number of teachers, supervisors and other stakeholders.

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