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The Effects of Peer-coaching Strategy on Improving Teaching Skills of Reading Comprehension of Female EFL Pre-service Teachers and Their Attitudes toward Teaching Profession and Reading comprehension of Iranian Female Freshman Students

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Abstract
This study aimed at investigating the effects of peer coaching strategy on improving teaching skills of reading comprehension of the EFL pre-service teachers and the their attitudes toward teaching profession and reading comprehension of Iranian female freshman students. To do so, six female EFL pre-service teachers who studied at Rajaee teacher training university in Tehran and also 50 female freshman students who studied at the same university participated in the study. The teachers, at the time of the study, were teaching General English to female freshman students of the university for the sake of completion their practical teaching methodology course. They taught General English book 1 that consists of 10 reading comprehension texts. They had just one class a week and every session took 2 hours. The data collection instruments were semi-structured interview, observation and also reading comprehension pretest and posttest. The results showed that using peer coaching strategy has a statistically positive significant effect on developing reading comprehension test of the Iranian female freshman students. The results also showed that that all peers benefitted from peer coaching process in various ways. First of all, from the feedback of the peers it can be said that in each pair, both peers had something to say to each other. The criticism they provided were both negative and positive. Secondly, teachers benefited from the positive sides of each other's teaching methods and mentalities; moreover, they get the chance to think about negative sides, try to find out solutions by working collaboratively in a sincere atmosphere.
Key words: Peer coaching, teaching skills, EFL pre-service teachers

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Introduction

Peer coaching is a confidential process via which two or more professional colleagues work together to reflect on current practices; expand, refine, and build new skills; share ideas; teach one another; conduct classroom research; or solve problems in the workplace (Robbinson, 1991). It is mostly agreed that when teachers develop themselves, their practice will develop and their students' success will increase as well (Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen,& Bolhuis 2007) . Richardson and Placier (2001:920) state that "changes in beliefs appear often to precede changes in practices, or that the process of changing beliefs and practices is at least interactive and synergistic". Peer coaching is a form of collaboration known by many names, including peer mentoring, learning-centered supervision, peer supervision, and cognitive coaching (Pellicer & Anderson, 1995). Supporting mentoring by peers, Marshall (2005) recommends that the peer- coaching model could create a valuable instrument for cooperation and for evaluating and developing teacher effectiveness and quality. Costa and Garmston (2002) recommend that cognitive coaching positively impacts the ability of teachers to self-analyze and alter practices, so providing "numerous opportunities to grow and change professionally" (p. 338). Sagor (1997) also mentions the value of self-analysis for teachers, and he warns of problems that may happen when this learning technique is ignored. He says,

"Countless teachers have learned that feedback is the key to helping students develop self- regulating behaviors. Clearly, this is also true for teachers. However, teachers who, for whatever reason, believe that they are powerless to change teaching and learning in meaningful ways will perceive change projects as an investment in inevitable failure". (p. 188-189)

Reading has been considered as one of the most important practices in the field of teaching and learning an L2 because it provides students with opportunities to acquire the L2 more efficiently (Grabe & stoller, 2002). Moreover, the ability to read is a skill necessary for success in today's society. According to Walker (2000), gaining pleasure, collecting information, and memorizing are among the various functions that readers may want to achieve through reading. Other fulfillments that can be achieved through reading include academic goals, career goals, and enjoyable activity (Honig, 2001). Thus, students need to get used to reading L2 texts and extensive reading programs, because of their great features such as being interesting, making students feel confident in dealing with reading, motivating them to read, helping them read in an appropriate rate and fluently, have been introduced as the best methods to fulfill this undertaking (Day & Bamford, 2009).

Therefore, this study aimed at investigating the effects of peer coaching strategy on improving teaching skills of reading comprehension of the EFL pre-service teachers and the their attitudes toward teaching profession.

In this regard, this study aimed at answering the following questions,

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Does peer coaching strategy have any effects on reading comprehension of Iranian female freshman students?
What are the effects of peer coaching strategy on improving teaching skills of reading comprehension of the EFL pre-service teachers?
What are the pre-service teachers' attitudes toward peer coaching strategy in their teaching profession?

Review of the Related Literature

In 1998 Bullard maintained, "The study of how adult professionals grow and develop has…contributed to the change in how teacher evaluations are conducted" (p. 4). In their cognitive coaching model, Costa and Garmston (2002) discussed the stages of development in adults, emphasizing that consideration of adult learning styles is essential in improving an effective coaching model. Cognitive coaching is a model designed to aid adults grow via self-directed acquisition. That model came into existence via the collaboration of Costa and Garmston in 1985. The nature of cognitive coaching is providing collegial relationships among teacher coaches for the purpose of changing teaching practices through self-evaluation.
The California Mentor Teacher Induction Project was also initiated in the 1980s. Although the aim of the project was to develop new teacher retention, the project concentrates on teacher mentoring as a key practice to gain higher retention rates. The first step of the project included matching pre-service teachers with master teachers for several weeks. During the second phase of the project, those same pre-service teachers were coached again, but this time as full-time first-year teachers. Ingersoll and Kralik (2004) examined this mentoring model, concluding that first year teachers who took part in both forms of mentoring tended to remain in the profession longer than novice teachers who were not mentored.

Key Elements of Peer Coaching

A search of the literature reveals that certain key elements are common and integral to most peer coaching programs or studies. Bowman and McCormick (2000) investigated several areas as key to measuring positive field experiences implementing peer coaching. Those areas consisted of establishing a trusting relationship or collegiality with the peer coaching partner, receiving feedback from data collected during observations, analyzing feedback during post-conferences, and applying the data to personal experiences. Similarly, Costa and Garmston (2002) provided a similar pattern for peer coaching. They supported the significance of establishing trusting relationships among peer coaches, conducting initial conferences to establish goals and to determine data to be collected, observing and collecting data, and allowing opportunities for the person who is observed to evaluate the data and to confirm or alter teaching practices. Lam, Kim, and Lam (2002) discussed similar components in their study as

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well. Each of their coaching sessions consisted of a pre-conference, a classroom observation, and a culminating session for analysis. Though each peer coaching experience is unique in some detail considering emphasis and process, certain elements are common to most peer coaching experiences.

Lam et al. (2002) found out that failure to establish a trusting relationship for peer coaches made psychological pressure among participants. In their study involving teachers in Hong Kong schools, researchers assigned peer coaching pairs without consulting the participants. Each measurement of the study (interviews, group discussion, and surveys) showed that participants were fearful that their self-esteem and professional integrity were threatened by the contrived pairing of coaches. As a result, the researchers found it necessary to attune the situations of the study to try to decrease what was negatively understood as "contrived collegiality" (p. 189). In their report, Lam et al. (2002) concluded that, "Without the right culture [school climate], the practice of peer coaching will not generate genuine collaboration" (p. 193). In another study conducted in Hong Kong, Ling Li (2004) faced a school culture that was malleable to using the peer coaching process. Nevertheless, he observed in his report of the study, "Physical proximity did not naturally provoke intellectual collaboration. Teachers need much training and experience in developing such a disposition" (p. 154). These studies affirm the crucial and delicate task of establishing trusting partnerships.

Thus, trusting relationships are the foundation for peer coaching. Establishing collaborative and trusting partnerships allows participants to investigate and improve the remaining key elements associated with peer coaching.

Empirical Studies

One of the researches associated with peer coaching has been carried out by Morgan, Menlove, Salzberg & Hudson (1994). In their study, they tried to find out the effectiveness of a peer coaching strategy that included videotaped feedback, self-evaluation, and coach evaluation in developing the direct instruction teaching practices of low-performing pre-service trainees. The findings indicate that peer coaching developed the effectiveness in the trainees' teaching.

In a similar study by Hasbrouck (1997), peer coaching study was conducted with pre-service teachers, but from a different dimension. The study investigated preliminary implementation of a new approach for training pre-service teachers -a mediated form of peer coaching utilizing an instrument designed to guide peer observation followed by coaching to develop instructional skills. The implementation and amenability of this training approach for new teacher trainees were the focus of that study. The findings show that the pre-service teachers developed their teaching skills such as planning, instruction, organization and classroom management. The

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participants also mentioned that peer coaching developed their teaching skills and increased their self-confidence and sense of professionalism.

Kohut, Burnap &Yon (2007) also investigated peer coaching under the title of peer observation. They compared the views of the observer and the observed teachers regarding the process of peer observation, the reporting of peer observations, and the efficiency of peer observation as an evaluation instrument. The findings indicate that both observer teachers and the observed teachers valued peer observation process and state that their peer observation tools were an effective measure of teaching. Though observers feel more stress about peer observations than the one being observed, both groups experience minimal stress in taking part in observations.

Pollara (2012) investigate the impacts of peer coaching on instructional practice, the use of common planning time collaborative activities and teachers' perceptions of peer coaching, the findings indicate that the frequency of the implementation of common planning time for collaboration was developed. Participants stated that peer coaching improved confidence and decreased isolation an also it was regarded as an useful means of professional development.

Peer coaching was viewed from a various dimensions by Murphy (2012). He tried to investigate the relationship between peer coaching and teaching efficacy at one school. Based on the results, peer coaching program develops the efficacy of teachers to fulfill more, feel less stress, and keep student engagement and teaching motivation.

Zwart, Wubbels, Bolhuis and Bergen (2008) investigate just what and how eight experienced teachers learn during a one-year reciprocal peer coaching circle by assessing their learning practices, their learning results, and the relations between these. The various activity sequences undertaken by the teachers during a reciprocal peer coaching circle were investigated to develop different aspects of their professional development.

Huston and Weaver (2008) investigated the literature of peer coaching as a professional improvement chance for the experienced faculty. Six guidelines retrieved from the literature and the authors' experiences. These consist of goal setting, voluntary participation, confidentiality, assessment, formative evaluation, and institutional support. The researchers stated that similar guidelines have been published for providing peer coaching programs for junior faculty, but the guidelines in their research are adjusted to address senior faculty partnerships.

At last, Goker (2006) compared two groups of student-teachers regarding their self-efficacy, and improvement of instructional skills. One of these groups was instructed implementing a peer coaching training program after teaching practicum sessions in teaching of English as a foreign language, and the other group only received traditional supervisor visits. The results show that there is a statistically significant difference in favor of the

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experimental condition on 7 variables measured. The findings also indicate how peer coaching could be an effective way to improve self-efficacy.

Method

Participants

Six female EFL pre-service teachers who studied at Rajaee teacher training university in Tehran and also 50 female freshman students who studied at the same university participated in the study. The teachers, at the time of the study, were teaching General English to students from different departments of the university for the sake of completion their practical teaching methodology course. The pre-service teachers taught General English book 1 that consists of 10 reading comprehension texts. They had just one class a week and every session took 2 hours.

In order to investigate the effects of peer coaching on reading comprehension of students, one class was selected randomly out of three peer coached classes in order to check their reading comprehension of the students. The class consisted of 60 female freshman students who studied Math at Rajaee teacher training university in Tehran. All of them were female and freshman. Their age ranged between 18-20 years old. It was an intact class.

Data Collection Instruments

Semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview was carried out in order to learn about teachers' experience in their classrooms. Regarding the individual interviews, the researcher had to wait for the participants to finish their peer observation completely. After the teachers finished their peer observation, the researcher approached the individual teachers and asked them when could be a good time for the one-on-one interview. During the study, the researcher was very flexible with the time and place to interview the teachers. The researcher interviewed each participant individually for between about 20 and 30 minutes. Some teachers spent more time on the interview than others. These individual interviews took place at the teachers' break time on different days. Most of the interviews were held in a room in the library, but a few were held in the teachers' room when it was empty. Individual interviews were the major part of data collection in this research. According to Tomal (2010), conducting an interview with one person can be valuable in drawing out true feelings that might not be obtained in a group setting. The research individual interview may generate research-relevant information (Cannell and Kahn, 1968, cited in Cohen et al., 2007, p. 351). Johnson and Christensen (2008) state that qualitative interviews consist of open questions and provide qualitative data and qualitative interviews are also called "depth interviews because they can be used to obtain in-depth information about a

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participant's thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, reasoning, motivations and feelings about a topic" (p. 207).

Observation

Classroom observation was designed to involve the teachers in action research. Participants in this study took part in observing their partner's teaching practice. The purpose of conducting classroom observations was to help the teacher learn about his partner's lesson objectives, watch his partner's teaching practice, and reflect on the performance by providing critical feedback, posing and solving problems, and reciprocal learning and teaching. The suggested feedback sample provided the teachers with possibilities of thinking and rethinking about points and strategies of giving and receiving feedback. In this research, the researcher informed the participants that she was not going to observe their class, and that the peer observation was designed to help them improve their teaching practice but not to judge whether their performance was good or bad.

Reading comprehension pretest and posttest

In order to check the reading comprehension of the students, at the beginning of the treatment a reading comprehension pretest that was selected from TOFEL tests (reading module, 2015) was administered and also at the end of the treatment the same test was administered to check the effects of the treatment on the students' reading comprehension.

Procedure for Qualitative (interview and observation) Data Analysis

There is no single correct way of analyzing qualitative data, but one of the important factors in making effective data analysis is the need to be systematic (Koshy, 2010). This action research study employed a qualitative approach to inquiry and required collecting multiple forms of data in order to allow triangulation. The data analysis approach in this research was based on holistic description and a search for themes that helped the researcher to understand the case. This qualitative action research used Creswell's (2009) framework for qualitative data analysis and interpretation. The "step-by-step approach proposed by Creswell" can provide a very useful guide for practitioners undertaking action research (Koshy, 2010).

Developing categories

The initial data analysis consisted of examining the transcripts for emerging themes. Tentative themes were identified and assigned a code. The transcripts were then re-examined and coded using these themes. Many of the participants' comments could fit into more than one of the themes that were initially identified. As conveying the participants' voice was a priority of this research, it did not seem necessary to restrict passages of text to one theme. Further examination of the research data revealed that some of the

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original themes were not as prevalent as the researcher had originally thought.

Procedure for Quantitative Data Analysis

To answer the first research question mentioned earlier, the collected data were entered into the Statistical Software for Social Sciences (SPSS). The collected data were analyzed using quantitative methods of data analysis. Paired sample t-tests were run in order to find out the differences between pretest and posttest of reading comprehension.

Results

Quantitative results

Normality of the research data

Like any other quantitative research, the first step in data analysis was to check the normality assumption. To determine the normality of the research data, thus, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality was run on the pretest and the posttest scores, the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality for the Pretest and the Posttest Scores

	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pretest	.103	50	.200
Posttest	.093	50	.200

Testing H

The research hypothesis assumed that using peer coaching strategy has statistically significant effect on reading comprehension of Iranian female freshman students. In order to test the hypothesis, a paired-sample t-test was run, since the distribution of the data for both the pretest and the posttest was normal and running a parametric test was allowed. Tables 2 and 3 represent the results of the inferential statistics for testing H_1. The magnitude of the difference (effect size) was also calculated using the following formula:

Eta squared = $t^2 / t^2 + (N - 1)$

The guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988, pp. 284–247) were used for interpreting this value as follows:

.01 = small effect

.06 = moderate effect

.14 = large effect

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Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on the Pretest and Posttest

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	19.68	2.41	.48
Posttest	27.48	3.52	.70

As could be seen in Table 2, mean score and standard deviation on the pretest are 19.68 and 2.41 respectively with .48 standard error of mean. Further, the group's mean score and standard deviation on posttest are 27.48 and 3.52 with a standard error mean of .70. It is predicted that the difference would be significant as it is high. However, the paired-samples t-test proves the prediction.

Table 3: Results of the Paired-Samples T-test Scores on Pretest and Posttest

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pretest – Posttest	7.80	4.49	.89	5.94	9.65	8.68	24	.000

Eta squared = $8.58^2 / 8.68^2 + (25 – 1) = 0.75$

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the effect of peer coaching strategy on students' scores on reading comprehension test. There was a statistically significant increase in the reading comprehension scores from Pretest (M = 19.68, SD = 2.41) to Posttest (M = 27.48, SD = 3.52), t (24) = 6.68, $p < .05$ (two-tailed). The mean increase in the test scores was 7.80 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 5.94 to 9.65. The eta-squared statistic (.75) indicated a large effect size. This confirms the hypothesis that using peer coaching strategy has a statistically positive significant effect on developing reading comprehension test.

Qualitative results

Teachers' Experience in Peer Observations

The teachers were divided into three pairs to undertake peer observation for two weeks. Mina worked with Nahid. Maryam worked with Zahra, and Hadiseh worked with Elham. These six teachers taught General English Programmes to students of the other departments of the university. The main activities for peer observation were: pre-conference (meeting prior to class observation), observation, and post-conference (meeting after class observation).

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Participants reported gaining several benefits from undertaking peer coaching. These benefits included: the increase in critical reflection on teaching practice; the improvement of teaching techniques and methods; and the building of closer relationships between colleagues.

The implementation of peer coaching in this study enabled participants to increase their ability to reflect critically on their teaching practice in terms of the increase in self-reflection and peer reflection. Participants in the individual interviews commented that they began to reflect more on their own teaching and the teaching of their peers. While observing their partners, these teachers reflected on their own teaching practice by asking themselves what they would be doing if they were the one who was teaching this lesson. After the observation, they continued to think how their partner taught the students that lesson, and what kind of things he did during the class. Then these teachers compared the teaching techniques of their peers to the techniques they often used with their students.

With the increase in self-reflection, Zahra, for example, stated that she usually sat at her desk and rarely went around the class to monitor students' work or activities. During her observation, however, Zahra noticed that her colleague walked around the class and looked at what students were doing. After observing her partner's teaching practice, Zahra discovered that monitoring students helped teachers to find out the students' real situation during the task or activity. Here is Zahra's direct statement:

"Talking about monitoring the classroom, the teacher tried to go around and tried to see what the students were doing".

Zahra's reflection related to monitoring students in the classroom. Zahra learned that if she did not walk around the class to monitor students' work or activities, she could not know what students were really doing or if they needed help. Sometimes students do not understand or are not clear about what or how to do the assigned task after the teacher's instruction. So, by monitoring the class like this, teachers can offer help to students who have any problems or difficulty in doing the exercise.

Nahid also pointed out the increase in self-reflection on his practice through the implementation of peer coaching:

"I see the teacher teaching. After that I try to understand which of her techniques involved students and which of mine did not and why or why not."

With the opportunity to peer coach, Nahid began to reflect on her teaching techniques and those of her peer who could engage the students in learning and class activities.

Overall, all teachers indicated that observation of their peers' teaching provided the opportunity for them to learn about their own strengths and weaknesses in their performance as well as the performance of their partner. From peer observation, participants seemed to enhance critical reflection on their teaching practice and the practice of their colleague. So, for these

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participants, peer observation could provide two different lenses for teachers to see and create a bigger picture of teaching practices from various perspectives.

The practice of peer coaching not only brought about an increase in critical reflection on teaching practice but also consequently enabled participants to improve techniques and methods of teaching. The participants demonstrated that they understood their teaching and learning practices better after they shared ideas and experiences with each other over teaching and how to involve students in class activities and self-study discipline. When they observed their partner's teaching and met for feedback, the teachers in this study tended to explore what methods could work well for their class, and why one activity worked for one class but not the other.

Hadiseh, for example, indicated that she learned the way of greeting students from his peer teaching practice:

"Sometimes I forget about that. When I'm going into the class, I just like asking the questions related to the studying immediately without breaking ice with the students. Now, I feel that it's very important to draw their attention by greeting before we go to our lesson".

Usually, chatting with students for several minutes at the beginning of the class may allow them time to be ready for the lesson, and it may also help teachers to know something about students' learning and life stories, and to wait for late comers.

According to the participants, peer coaching was like a mirror, which enabled them to see into themselves and share effective teaching practices with their colleagues. It also provided them with the opportunity to exchange ideas and experience, and to integrate knowledge of teaching techniques and methods via the practical context of peer coaching.

Teachers' Beliefs and Impressions of Peer Coaching

According to the participants in the individual interviews, understanding the reasons for implementing peer observation could invite the teachers' commitment and voice.

Matyam, for instance, explained that some teachers neither knew the concept of peer coaching nor were interested in peer observation. She noticed that the teachers did not care much about peer teaching because they thought their practice did not need to be fixed:

"I think we should talk and explain to teachers the benefits of peer coaching. Some teachers aren't interested in it, and maybe they don't know its importance".

"They just think their teaching is good or ok already, no need to do anything like peer coaching. But in fact they don't understand when someone goes to observe us, they can find out our weak points, and they can tell us to improve it for students' interest".

Additionally, Mina commented that:

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"I would share my experience with other teachers like by telling them about the benefits of peer coaching, what I can learn from my partner, and what I have improved after peer coaching. I think it's a bit helpful when I tell them about the benefits of peer coaching, so they might have some interests in that. I hope they can join next time. Even though they are very busy, they might take some time to gain experience with me and other teachers".

Nahid added that telling other teachers the good points of peer coaching would capture their attention to engage in peer observation; for example, the improvement of teaching techniques, classroom management, and student rapport development. She also discovered that peer observation made her and her colleague feel better, become more confident and feel proud of their teaching achievements:

"The strategy is to tell them that it gives a lot of benefits like techniques of teaching. You can improve the classroom management and the kind of friendship".

These three examples from the individual interviews show that sharing with other teachers the benefits of peer coaching and how peer observation helps improve teaching practice may support the teachers' consideration and implementation of peer coaching. If teachers start to engage in peer observation and gain benefits and experience from it, they may be motivated to implement it again. Overall, teachers may be willing to undertake peer coaching if they are well-informed about its importance and advantages, including aspects of teaching practice that can be improved as a result of peer observation.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reveal that all peers benefitted from peer coaching in various ways. First, regarding the feedback of the peers, it could be concluded that in each pair, both peers had some comments to share to each other. Their criticisms were both negative and positive. Second, pre-service teachers reaped the benefit of the positive sides of each other's teaching methods and mentalities; furthermore, they get the opportunity to reflect on negative sides, try to investigate solutions by cooperation in a sincere atmosphere. These results were in line with Pollara (2012)'s research. In her study, the participants mentioned that they believe peer coaching is a beneficial startegy in terms of classroom management and teachers' instructional practice.

Since both teachers know that this process was designed to help to their classroom instruction skills and underscore the questions in their minds associated with their teaching methods, they were very willing to help to the process. Totally speaking, they believed that through replications of this process they could develop their students' learning; thus it is fruitful for both students and for teachers. Ellis (1996) also mentioned that peer coaching affected teacher collaboration and student achievement. He also stated that

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coached teachers are surer about their instructional activities than non-coached ones.

The present descriptive study has some common results with Kohut, et al. (2007)'s research mentioned in literature section. In both studies, the participants stated that they valued peer observation process. The findings of both researches advocated the view that volunteer coworkers who trust and respect each other could develop each other's teaching profession.

When the findings are generally regarded, it can be concluded that this process is beneficial for the classroom management skills of all participants. These skills consists of lesson design, creating a positive atmosphere, providing the participation of students, time planning.

Furthermore, all the pre-service teachers in this research believe that that peer coaching process can be implemented in the long-term. As the matter of fact, because learning is a lifelong process, teachers can learn more in longer periods. In a long run, they could observe each other more, share their ideas and suggest what worked well, and try to investigate solutions for each other' s problems.

In addition, they mention the significance of post- conference meetings. It has a great value since peer coaching models provide the teachers with reflecting on their teaching activity. Murphy (2012) delineates this by making a relationship with the teacher efficacy and cites as "some professionals are reflective sometimes, but the action of implementing a strong collaborative peer coaching program can encourage professionals to make reflection a part of their daily lives, thus leading to increased teacher efficacy" (p. 21).

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