

MENTORS

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THE STRUCTURE OF THE INSTRUMENTS AND THE RATIONALE

In this chapter the data concerning mentors comes from a questionnaire to the mentors, mentors' responses at meetings to discuss the Language Assistant Scheme, a survey of views of the Baseline Study Team members (only those who were mentors), the Classroom Observation Schedule focusing on language teachers and language assistants and from official documentation.

The Questionnaire to Mentors

The instrument was not compiled especially for the purposes of the Baseline Study. It was designed in 1998 in order to evaluate the usefulness of the induction courses and meetings organised for mentors and assistants. It was given to and filled in by 16 mentors who attended the meeting of mentors, which was held in Ljubljana, in February 1999. The rationale for using this instrument was that it already existed and dealt with questions, which we were interested in knowing the answers to (see *Appendix 9*).

Mentors' Responses at Meetings

Mentors have held regular meetings where they discuss their views on the Language Assistant Scheme. Their views were transcribed and summarised in reports. The rationale for this instrument was that the information already existed and that the way in which the data had been collected meant that the mentors had given their views on the programme and shared their experiences.

A Survey of Views of the Baseline Study Team Members (Only Those Who Were Mentors)

During the Baseline Study those members of the team who were mentors were asked to write down their own professional and personal experiences with the language assistant. The rationale was that whilst working on the study they would be reminded of their experiences, both positive and negative, concerning the programme.

The Classroom Observation Schedule of Language Teachers and Language Assistants

This instrument was designed especially for the Baseline Study. We observed 34 lessons in different languages, as described in earlier chapters. The rationale was that we would be able to see for ourselves how language assistants and teachers performed together in the classroom (see *Appendices 1,2*).

The Official Documentation

This data consists of the contracts of employment between the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia¹ and the assistant for the years 1994 to 1996, then from 1996 to 2000, between the school and the assistant, and between the Ministry, and the school. The rationale for using these documents was that they would include descriptions of the mentors' responsibilities for the assistant.

THE NATURE OF THE SAMPLE

All mentors in the Language Assistant Scheme were invited to attend the meetings, but at different meetings there were different numbers of participants. However, all mentors were consulted to express their opinions about the Scheme, at some time or another and in various ways.

EXPECTATIONS AND RESULTS

Induction Courses

We were interested in the mentors' views of the success of previous induction courses. Therefore, in the questionnaire we asked them what they had found most useful from the 1998 induction course.

We expected that the mentors would mention the practical guidelines on how to work with the language assistants in the classroom. As seen in *Table 8.1*, this was in fact the case. It is worrying that six mentors did not attend the Induction Course in 1998, although it was meant to be compulsory. However, we assume that they were not obtaining assistants for the first time.

Table 8.1 The part of the Induction Course, 1998, the mentors found most useful

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Practical guidelines for language assistants in the classroom</i>	6
<i>Sharing the assistants' and mentors' expectations</i>	2
<i>The panel of 'old' assistants</i>	1
<i>All parts of the seminar were of the same quality</i>	1
<i>I did not attend the seminar</i>	6

Mentors were also asked to comment on what was missing from the induction course and the majority said that nothing was missing. However, some said that they needed more detailed information about assistants' work and life in Slovenia and three wrote that they would have liked even more practical guidelines on how to work with the language assistants.

¹ From now in this chapter The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia will be referred to as the Ministry.

Observation Period

Nearly all of the mentors said that they had made it possible for the language assistants to observe classes in the first two weeks at the school. When asked to what extent they thought the observation period had been necessary, five answered *a lot*, five answered *to some extent*, three *a little* and three *not at all*. The three who said *not at all*, gave the following reasons: *it was the assistant's second year, instead of observing the classes the assistant introduced himself to the students, and the assistant was a qualified teacher*.

Time Spent with the Language Assistant on the Part of the Mentor

We were interested to know how much time the mentor spent with the assistant, firstly, during the first two weeks and secondly, during the school year (weekly). The results are shown in *Tables 8.2.1* and *8.2.2*. Although it is encouraging that in the first two weeks half of the mentors spent 11 to 20 hours with the assistant, it is also worrying that one mentor spent no time at all. As would be expected the amount of time decreased during the school year and most mentors said that they spent one to three hours a week with the assistant and four mentors spent three or more hours with them.

Table 8.2.1 Number of hours spent with the language assistant during the first two weeks

	<i>No.</i>
<i>0 hours</i>	1
<i>1 to 10 hours</i>	7
<i>11 to 20 hours</i>	8

Table 8.2.2 Number of hours spent with the language assistant weekly

	<i>No.</i>
<i>1 to 3 hours</i>	12
<i>More than 3 hours</i>	4

The Mentors' Views on the Role of the Assistant

The data comes from a workshop held for the mentors in March 2000, in Ljubljana.

The mentors thought that the assistants should:

- complement the teacher
- contribute to the subject and culture
- set up a national network to exchange ideas between assistants
- be flexible, self-starting and enthusiastic
- be involved in extra-curricular activities such as
 - language courses
 - clubs
 - school newspapers

- creative writing
- proof-reading
- language camps
- international exchange programmes
- sports
- trips and excursions.

Mentors' Views on the Independence of the Language Assistant

We wanted to find out whether the mentors thought that the assistants would be able to work without their help. It was not surprising that the majority did not think that it would be possible to do without them. The reasons that they gave for their negative response are given in *Table 8.3.1*. However, there were three mentors who believed that the language assistants would be able to work without the mentor's help. The reasons are enumerated in *Table 8.3.2*.

Table 8.3.1 Reasons for assistants not being able to work without the mentor's help

	<i>No.</i>
<i>The assistant is unfamiliar with the curriculum, school rules</i>	6
<i>The assistant lacks teaching skills, such as appropriate methodologies, classroom strategies, etc.</i>	5
<i>The assistant is unfamiliar with the life and culture in Slovenia</i>	2

Table 8.3.2 Reasons for assistants being able to work without the mentor's help

	<i>No.</i>
<i>After the induction time the assistant is capable of doing the work independently</i>	1
<i>The assistant has experience with teaching non-native speakers</i>	1
<i>The assistant is a qualified teacher</i>	1

Type of Teaching

When we observed the lessons with language assistants we noticed that there was a difference between mentors and other language teachers when considering the type of teaching used.

We expected more team teaching with mentors as they had had training in this area whereas the other language teachers had had none. The results show that the percentage of mentors involved in team teaching was only marginally higher than that of other language teachers. The complete results are given in *Table 8.4*.

Table 8.4 Team teaching or solo teaching on the part of mentors and on the part of teachers

	Mentor teachers		Other language teachers	
	No.	%	No.	%
<i>Solo teaching</i>	5	35.7	9	45.0
<i>Team teaching</i>	9	64.3	11	55.0
<i>Total</i>	14	100	20	100

Most solo teaching took place in grammar schools. This might be due to the fact that the assistants wished to work on their own because the students' command of language was high or because there were more grammar school classes. The high percentage of team teaching in vocational and mixed and primary schools might be the result of greater involvement on the part of the teacher who agreed to have a language assistant because the number of language assistants allocated to these schools was smaller. Team teaching might also be the result of disciplinary problems.

The Mentors' Views on The Co-operation between Language Assistants and Students

We were interested in how the mentors perceived the relationship between the language assistant and the students. The majority found it to be *good* or even *excellent*. Only one mentor thought it was *poor*. The results can be seen in Table 8.5.

Table 8.5 The relationship between the assistant and the students

	No.
<i>Excellent</i>	5
<i>Good</i>	7
<i>Average</i>	3
<i>Poor</i>	1

We also wanted to discover the mentors' perceptions of the students' motivation during the hours with the language assistant. As we expected the majority of mentors thought that the students were motivated during those hours.

We were also interested to know whether the assistants had any disciplinary problems, which were noticed by the mentors. Six responded that there were disciplinary problems and gave the solutions which can be found in Table 8.6.

Table 8.6 Solutions to disciplinary problems

	<i>No.</i>
<i>The presence of the teacher in the classroom usually solves the disciplinary problems.</i>	4
<i>The students have been split into two groups.</i>	2

The Mentors' Views on the Relationship between the Language Assistant and Other Language Teachers

We assumed that the mentor would be able to judge the feeling of the other teachers towards the language assistant. We also expected that this would be positive. This was in fact the case as is shown in *Table 8.7*.

Table 8.7 The relationship between the assistant and other language teachers

	<i>No.</i>
<i>Excellent</i>	9
<i>Good</i>	4
<i>Average</i>	3
<i>Poor</i>	0

Official Role of the Mentor

We expected to find some information on the role of the mentor in the contracts. However, there was not much data concerning the mentors. In the contract between the school and the assistant, the fact that the mentors were required to help the assistant with certain administrative and other issues concerning their living and working in Slovenia was mentioned.

In the contract, for the year 2000, between the Ministry and the school the following teaching models were suggested for the mentor and the assistant:

- the mentor/teacher leads the class and the assistant works with a smaller group in another room
- the mentor/teacher leads the class and the assistant is responsible for a part of it
- the mentor/teacher and the assistant prepare the class together which is then led by the assistant; the mentor/teacher is present in the classroom.

Mentors' Attitude Towards the Language Assistant Scheme

We asked the mentors for their opinions on the advantages of a school having a language assistant. As expected the mentors gave more than one answer. Nearly all stated that having a language assistant meant having a resource of authentic language and culture. This and other perceived advantages can be found in *Table 8.8*.

Table 8.8 Advantages of having a language assistant as mentioned by mentors

	No.
<i>As a source of authentic language and culture</i>	14
<i>Raising students' motivation and self-confidence</i>	11
<i>Professional help to teachers</i>	9
<i>Students have to communicate in a foreign language</i>	8

Mentors' Understanding of Their Role

The mentors perceived their role to be as follows:

- find out the assistant's strengths
- help and guide the assistant
- work with the assistant co-operatively
- support the assistant in discipline matters
- keep the assistant informed about rules, changes and events
- show respect for the assistant's cultural background
- enable the assistant to work in a team
- allow the assistant to be independent
- consider and possibly accept the assistant's ideas
- give enough observation time
- give sincere feedback after the lesson
- co-operate with the assistant in designing lessons
- meet with the assistant socially.

What Existing Mentors Said That They Had Done for Their Language Assistants

I contacted the assistant by phone and letter before his arrival.

I collected the assistant from Ljubljana and took him to his flat.

I drove him from the airport and helped him to settle in.

I acted as a translator many times.

I gave information about the area.

I organised the paperwork going from one place to the next.

I wrote official letters for him.

I drove to Trieste for visas for two assistants.

I accompanied him to get the official documents.

I accompanied him to his medical examination.

I adapted the timetable.

I coordinated the work of the assistant.

I organised a debate club for the teachers.

I advised the staff to invite the assistant to their homes or on the excursions.

I always took the assistant on excursions and sports days. If I could not go I asked my colleagues to take him.

I helped him solve problems at work and in the flat.

When the agreement with the landlady fell through I looked for and found another apartment.

I met him many times outside school, for example excursions, walks, trips to the theatre, and concerts.

I invited the assistant to my home several times a year.

I invited him for lunch and dinner many times.

When the assistant returned home I visited him in New York and was also taken to Boston. I believe that although we are not officially recognised or rewarded we can still benefit in other ways.

CONCLUSIONS

- Mentors find the practical guidelines on how to work with language assistants most useful.
- There was a poor attendance by mentors at induction courses.
- The majority of mentors present at induction courses appreciated the content and topics dealt with.
- Most mentors believed that the observation period was necessary.
- In the first two weeks the amount of time mentors spent with their assistant was ten hours on average and during the school year one to three hours.
- Mentors saw the role of language assistants as being both outside as well as inside the classroom.
- Language assistants, according to mentors' opinions, should contribute to the language classes and culture and complement the teacher.
- Mentors believed that language assistants could not do without their help.
- The percentage of mentors involved in team teaching was marginally higher than that of other language teachers.
- Most solo teaching took place in grammar schools.
- Most team teaching took place in vocational, mixed and primary schools.
- Mentors needed guidelines and training on how to work with language assistants.
- Mentors thought there should be an exchange of assistants among schools.

- Mentors found the relationship between assistants and students very positive.
- Mentors assumed that the feeling of the other teachers towards the language assistant was positive.
- There was no job description for mentors.
- Having a language assistant meant having a source of authentic language and culture, according to mentors.
- Mentors saw their role as giving support, working co-operatively with language assistants inside and outside the classroom and school.
- There was a wide variety of things mentors did for the language assistant.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ Mentors should be provided with a job description.
- ❖ Mentors should be trained on how to work with language assistants, especially team teaching, training in observation, intercultural studies, debating and giving feedback.
- ❖ Mentor should be trained on how to advise other language teachers how to work with the language assistant.
- ❖ Mentors should be officially recognised and remunerated due to the workload.
- ❖ Induction courses should be compulsory for all mentors.
- ❖ Induction courses should continue with topics that have been dealt with so far.
- ❖ Practical guidelines should be given to mentors at the induction courses on how to work with language assistants.
- ❖ Language assistants should continue with the observation period.
- ❖ Language assistants should continue to be involved in extra-curricular activities as well as classroom activities.
- ❖ Language assistants' main contribution should be in teaching cultural issues.
- ❖ Language assistants should be predominantly exploited in the fields of (authentic) language and culture.
- ❖ There should be an exchange of assistants between schools on the grounds that the assistants have different cultural backgrounds and interests.
- ❖ The contract between the school and the assistant should be for two years.