



**PERCEPTIONS OF IN-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS REGARDING THE
FEATURES OF AN EFFECTIVE PEER COACH IN THE PROCESS OF
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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ABSTRACT

Creating a non-threatening, non-evaluative environment for the teachers to improve some aspects of their teaching, peer coaching aims to promote teachers' professional development by contributing to the efficacy of the teachers and teaching process. Despite a great number of studies conducted on the effectiveness or impact of peer coaching in the field of pre-service EFL teacher education or in-service EFL teacher training, the issue of what features the EFL teachers attribute to an effective peer coach has not been dealt with adequately. In this respect, the present study aimed to investigate the key features of an effective peer coach from the perspectives of four EFL teachers via Rep-Grid analysis technique and follow-up interviews. The results suggested different features attributed to an effective peer coach as based upon the teachers' prior experiences.

Key Words: Peer coaching, teacher professional development, repertory grid, EFL teachers

1. Introduction

The changes occurring in the field of language teaching from teaching methods to the new roles of teachers in the classroom have inevitably pushed teachers to maintain learning while teaching to keep up with the changes. Swafford (1998) suggests that many teachers hold the belief that the skills that they developed in the past do not meet their students' diverse needs any longer and therefore teachers are in search of opportunities to develop their knowledge and efficient instructional practices. In this regard, professional development refers to a dynamic, constant and full-scale development process which lays stress on creativity and endurance of teachers' quality (Fan & Wu, 2011). The emphasis in this process is claimed to be mainly concerned with presenting alternatives to language teachers while pursuing their professional development once the formal training period of them is over (Mann, 2005).

Being a significant option for professional development of teachers, peer coaching is simply described as the procedure in which teachers make a collaboration with the aim of helping one or both teachers improve some aspects of their teaching (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Likewise, Vidmar (2006) defines peer coaching as a vehicle that enables teachers an opportunity to engage in meaningful professional dialogue as well as nonthreatening professional relationship. With the

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help of peer coaching, teachers' awareness towards teaching practice can be raised and long term-change can be promoted (Moss, 2009).

In this respect, peer coaching is referred to a practice in which one teacher helps another teacher in terms of improving his/her instructional skills and develop a new teaching practice (Seferoglu, 2001) by observing, sharing knowledge with each other and as a result learning from each other. Within the peer-coaching process, there are two members of partnership and each member has specific roles to play (Richards & Farrell, 2005). One of the members is coach referring to another teacher who observes and talks about teaching as a part of collaboration. On the other hand, the other member is the teacher who collaborates with the coach.

Research on peer coaching has proved that the implementation of peer coaching provides transfer of training, promotes collegiality between teachers and reflection that would contribute to their efficacy (i.e. Goker, 2006; Prince et al., 2010). The issue of peer coaching for professional development of teachers has inspired a number of studies both in the field of pre-service teacher education and in-service teacher development. In this sense, Vacilotto & Cummings (2007) conducted a study on the effectiveness of peer coaching as a professional development tool for pre-service EFL/ESL teachers. The results suggested that peer coaching method was helpful in the exchange of teaching materials and methods, promoted the development of teaching skills, encouraged teachers to rethink personal teaching styles. That study has provided useful implications for the field of pre-service teacher education in that peer coaching could enable teachers an opportunity to share responsibilities with colleagues of the same status as previously stated by Showers & Joyce (1996).

Another study that was carried out in pre-service teacher education aimed to investigate the impact of peer-coaching on self-efficacy and instructional skills in TEFL teacher education. To reach the aims of this study, Goker (2006) benefited from a peer coaching training program after teaching practicum sessions in teaching English as a foreign language. Having an experimental research design in nature, the study compared two groups of student teachers; one having peer coaching training sessions and the other receiving just traditional supervisor visits. The comparisons between two groups indicated that peer coaching had greater impact on self-efficacy of pre-service teachers and improvement of teaching performances.

The practice of peer coaching has been applied with in-service language teachers as well. For example, Bagheridoust & Jajarmi (2009) examined the impact of peer coaching on the professional development of teachers by assessing the self-efficacy that would result from peer coaching practice and attitudes of the participants towards that practice. The participating teachers were observed to claim that peer coaching process provided teachers a low-stress and non-evaluative nature to reflect upon and to improve their teaching. Besides, the study suggests that peer coaching is a useful and strong practice in that it promotes a culture of collaboration and professionalism among teachers as a result of being a mutually reciprocal process.

Whether in the field of pre-service teacher education or in-service teacher development, the matter of peer coaching is observed to be researched merely from the cause-effective perspective. Generally, previous literature seems to focus on the impact of peer coaching on different variables that have the capacity to affect the process of language teaching. However, the perceptions of language teachers regarding how a peer coach should behave or what a peer coach is expected to do has not been studied adequately yet. In the process of professional development, teacher seems to be at the center. Therefore, it seems crucial to pay attention to the beliefs or thoughts of teachers in terms of what they expect from a peer coach in order to enhance the quality and effectiveness of peer coaching practice.

In this regard, the present study probes to investigate the features that an effective peer coach should have or bring to the process of peer coaching from the perspectives of EFL teachers.

2. Methodology

As for the method, the present study has been conducted within a descriptive research design and the details are presented under the subtitles of participants, instruments, procedure and data analysis.

2.1 Participants

Four EFL teachers constituted the participants of the present study. Two participants were male and the other two were female. The teachers were teaching prep-class EFL students at the time of the study. The teachers were selected according to convenience sampling method as there were thirty EFL teachers already teaching to prep-class students.

2.2 . Instruments

The present study benefited from Repertory-Grid technique in order to elicit teachers' views about an effective peer coach. Repertory-grid (rep-grid) is defined by Tan & Hunter (2002) as a cognitive mapping technique which attempts to illustrate how people think about any kind of phenomena in the world. Ilin et al., (2012) suggest that this technique is an effective aid especially for the studies which seek ways to have a deeper understanding of people's thinking systems as neutrally as possible and without any kind of interference by the researcher and the data collection tools (i.e. questionnaires, surveys etc.).

Besides, the participants were interviewed in terms of the constructs that they suggested in their rep-grid forms by the researcher after the rep-grids were analysed.

2.3 . Procedure

At the beginning of the study, the participants were introduced the rep-grid and they were given information about how to fill in. The participants were demanded to identify how they conceptualised an effective peer coach. In this respect, the teachers were encouraged to think about three peer coaches among their peers; one they fancied as effective (E1), one as typical (T1) and lastly an ineffective (I1) one by keeping those peer coaches anonymous. Thereafter, the teachers were asked to write down the constructs regarding the resembling and contrasting features.

The study employed a five-point (1 to 5) rating scale in which 1 represented the closest fit to the similarity pole, 3 represented the mid-point and 5 represented the closest fit to contrast pole. Noting-down constructs, the teachers were asked to assign each teacher a rating with the aim of reflecting the relative position of those teachers to the construct poles. Then, the teachers were asked to rate their current self and ideal as peer coaches on the same constructs. Finally, they were demanded to choose five constructs among the ones provided by them and to rank order them in order of importance from their own perspectives just with the aim of finding their top priority constructs.

The rep-grids completed by the teachers were analysed and following those analyzes, the teachers were interviewed so as to check the constructs and ratings as well as to clarify the reasons that teachers could put forward in terms of the constructs.

2.4 . Data Analysis

The grids were analysed by means of FOCUS Grid analysis (Rep-Grid Manual, 1993). Via Focus Grid analysis, it became available to see matches and links between elicited constructs and elements from teachers.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings reached after the analyzes of rep-grids of each teacher are presented with figures to clarify the constructs that teachers attribute to an effective peer coach. The views that Teacher 1 hold in terms of the features of an effective peer coach is presented in Figure 1. As illustrated in Figure 1, there appears a main cluster in which the feature of “sharing ideas about teaching” associates with “feeling empathy”. However, there are three isolated constructs. On the other hand, the constructs such as “reflective”, “constructive” and “objective” appear to be isolated

together with the construct of “relaxing”. This shows that Teacher 1 has not made up her mind yet regarding these qualities.

Moreover, Teacher 1 holds the belief that an effective peer coach is “reflective” and besides a reflective peer coach is constructive as well since these two constructs are observed to associate at 100 % level. The teacher supports this association in her follow-up interview by stating that a constructive peer coach adds to the process from his/her own experiences without offending the other side. Likewise, it seems that this teacher thinks that the teacher who gives feedback which has a theoretical base in fact gives valuable feedback as these two constructs are associated at around 95 % level by the teacher. The reason behind that association is suggested to result from the fact that that teacher suggested that a peer coach who had been professionally equipped would certainly bring to the process valuable feedback which in turn would improve some aspects of their teaching.

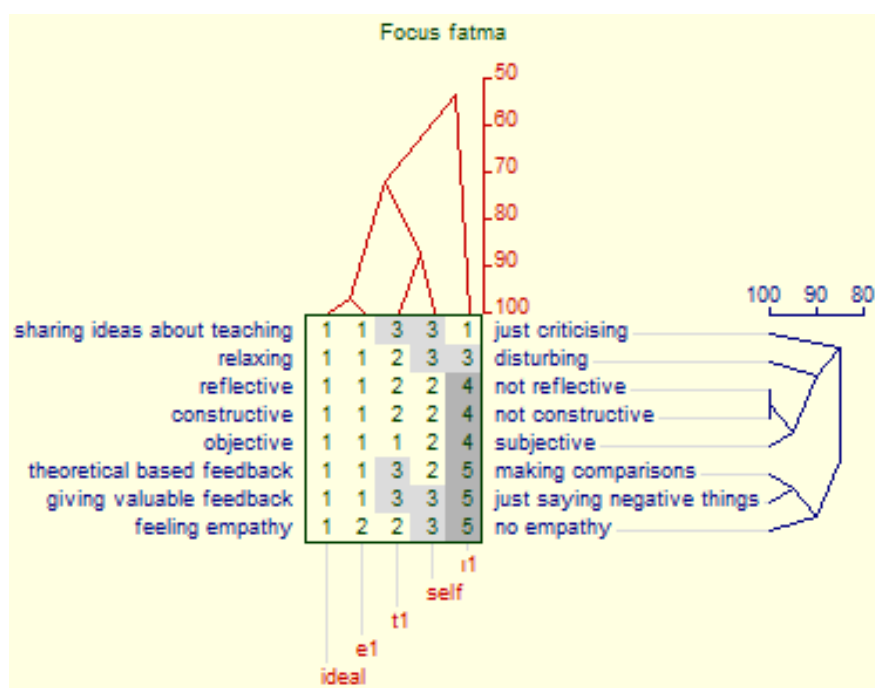


Figure 1. Teacher 1’s FOCUS Analysis

As for the element clusters of FOCUSed grid of Teacher 1, it is observed that Teacher 1 sees herself to be very close to the typical peer coach. In the follow-up interview, teacher was asked why she perceived herself as close to a typical peer coach and she stated that she could not make people feel relaxed in the process of peer coaching and therefore she didn’t see herself capable

enough for an effective peer coaching practice. Besides, she perceives that the effective peer coach in her mind associates with the ideal peer coach. Teacher 1 also seems to have made up her mind regarding the ineffective peer coach as that peer coach has an isolated cluster and low level of matching when compared to others.

Furthermore, the rank order of Teacher 1 has shown that the teacher puts emphasis on being constructive in the process of peer coaching. The reason for putting this construct in the first order was stated by the teacher in follow-up interview as stemming from the fact that she considered being constructive would contribute to the improvement of collegiality and teaching practices in comparison to regarding the process of peer coaching as a merely criticising practice. However, the feature of being objective is put in the last order by the teacher. The teacher asserted in her interview that a peer coach may not behave objectively throughout the process of peer coaching and it is normal to evaluate some situations subjectively, which does not give damage to the process from her perspective.

Similarly, the rep-grid of the second teacher was analysed via FOCUS grid analysis and the results are presented in Figure 2. The results in Figure 2 suggest that the constructs of “listening to others” and “open-minded” has created a cluster with two isolated constructs. Teacher 2 seems to think that a peer coach who is objective is encouraging as well because these two constructs are associated with each other at nearly 95 % level. She supports this association in the interview and states that if a peer coach aims to encourage the other teachers, he/she should behave objectively and evaluate what he/she observed as based upon the implications put forward in the field of ELT. On the other hand, Teacher 2 seems not to form a clear opinion regarding the constructs of “mastery in ELT” and “typical” as those two stand isolated from other constructs. Furthermore, the construct of “friendly” is associated with the construct of “eager to share ideas” at around 90 % level.

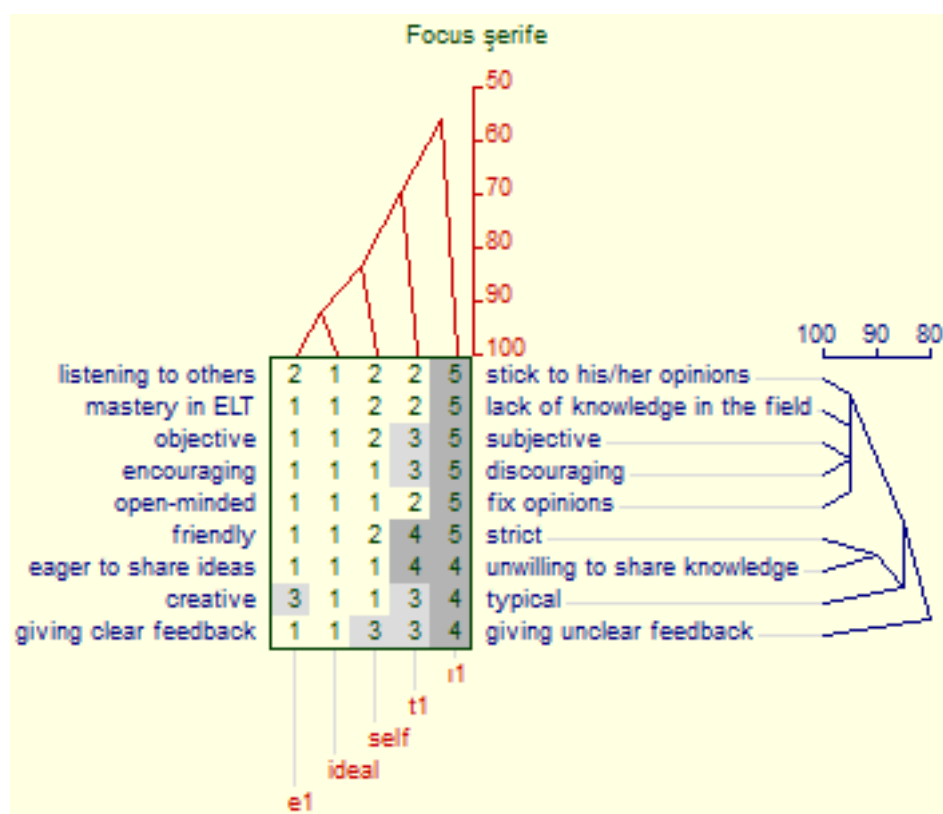


Figure 2. Teacher 2's FOCUS Analysis

When it comes to the perception of effective, typical and ineffective peer coaches, Teacher 2 appears to associate the effective peer coach in her mind with the ideal one as they form a cluster at around 90 % level. Besides, this teacher places herself as a teacher who is close to the effective and ideal peer coaches. She supports this finding about herself by claiming that she has been teaching for more than ten years and has gained experience more or less in terms of peer coaching. However, she appears not to see herself as an exactly effective peer coach as she shares some characteristics with typical one, too. Also, she seems to distinguish the characteristics of an effective, typical and ineffective peer coach.

When the rank order results of Teacher 2 is paid attention, it is observed that the teacher gives importance mostly to being objective in the process of effective peer coaching and the least importance is given to the construct of being eager to share ideas or knowledge. The teacher suggests that objectivity is one of the key features of an effective peer coach as some people perceive peer coaching as a process of just making comparisons between oneself and the teacher observed. Besides, the teacher states that peer coaching is a voluntary action and someone does not have to share his/her ideas with others all the time.

Additionally, the analysis results of Teacher 3 have indicated that the constructs of “listening to others” and “open to share ideas” have formed a main cluster with four isolated constructs as presented in Figure 3. Teacher 3 seems to be of the view that a peer coach who listens to others has the knowledge of SLA/ELT or vice versa as he associated those two constructs at approximately 90 % level. The teacher supports this association in his follow-up interview by stating that becoming an effective peer coach requires you to practice what you have learned in ELT field. In ELT teacher education programs, teachers are educated in terms of giving importance to others’ ideas or opinions rather than being biased towards the others.

As shown in Figure 3, the constructs of “flexible” and “creative” are isolated constructs which suggest that Teacher 3 has not made up his mind yet in terms of those features of an effective peer coach. Besides, this teacher has beliefs that an effective peer coach “accepts others’ opinions” and “gives clear feedbacks” as those two constructs are observed to match at about 90 % level. This matching is explained by the teacher in his interview by claiming that a peer coach who is imposing can not evaluate the situation from a broad perspective and this results from the fact that looking from a broader perspective requires comprehensive linguistic repertoire.

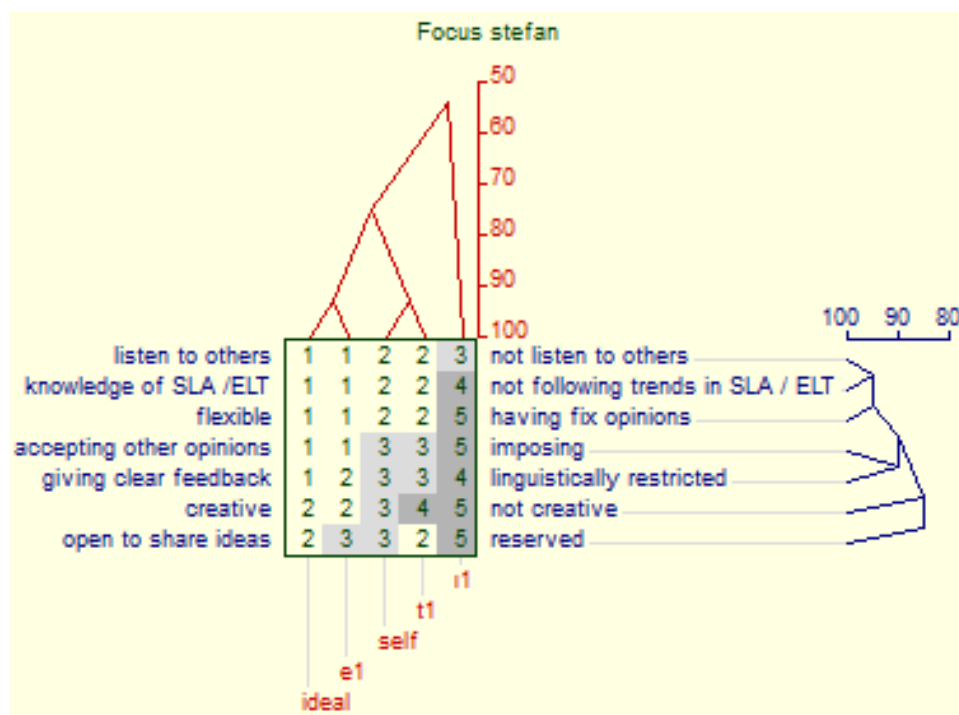


Figure 3. Teacher 3's FOCUS Analysis

As for the perceptions of Teacher 3 regarding the element clusters, Figure 3 shows that this teacher perceives himself as close to the typical peer coach because self and ideal form a cluster associating at around 90 % level. Besides, this teacher matches the effective peer coach in his mind

with the ideal one and distinguishes the ineffective peer coach from others as it stands isolated from the other elements.

Besides, Teacher 3 sees the construct of “flexible” at the top and he suggests that being flexible is an important feature of effective peer coaching. He also supports his preference for this construct in that he thinks that a flexible peer coach does not say what is wrong or what is right. Instead, he/she proposes alternatives based upon real experiences, which contributes to the efficiency of peer coaching process in his opinion. Teacher 3 also puts the construct of “open to share ideas” to the fifth order in the order of importance because he stated in his interview that anyone does not have to share his/her ideas all the time and peer coaching requires someone to respond to the expectations. Besides, he supports this idea by giving the example that a judge does not have to know how to commit a theft, but instead he just evaluates the situation based upon what he observes.

Lastly, the FOCUSed analysis of Teacher 4 is illustrated in Figure 4. Figure 4 suggests that Teacher 4 associates the constructs of “trustworthy”, “open-minded” and “honest” at 100 % level which shows that he has made up his mind on these three constructs of an effective peer coach. Furthermore, he supports that finding by suggesting that in a peer coaching process, the teacher to be observed should trust on the honesty of the coach and the coach should be open to all the possible events happening in the classroom instead of judging in seconds. Besides, he thinks that an effective peer coach who has “mastery in ELT” is “creative” as well because those constructs are matched at 100 % level. The construct of “supportive” is matched to those two constructs, however, the teacher seems not to form an exact opinion regarding this construct.

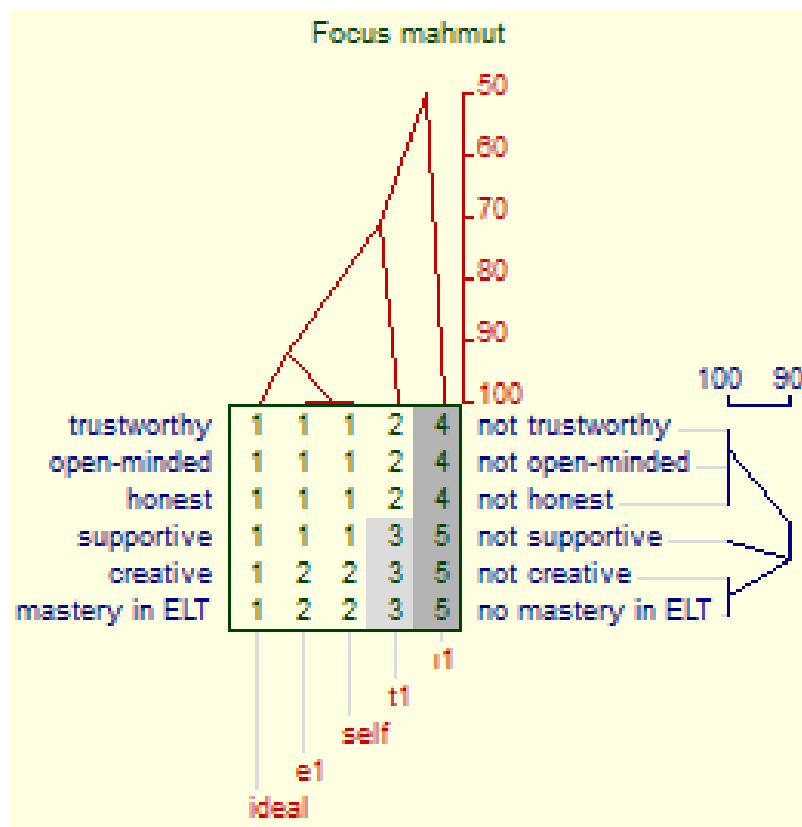


Figure 4. Teacher 4's FOCUS Analysis

Furthermore, according to the analysis of element clusters of Teacher 4, it is observed that this teacher places himself very close to the effective peer coach as these two are linked to each other at 100 % level. He also matches the ideal one with self and effective peer coach but at 90 % level. Additionally, Teacher 4's top construct is observed to be the construct of "trustworthy" while the construct of "supportive" is put in the last order. This situation is explained by the teacher in the interviews by stating that being supportive should not mean agreeing upon all points. The peer coach whether supports or not should firstly gain the teacher's trust.

4. Conclusion

The repertory grid and follow-up interviews provided a network of ideas connected to each other about the features of an effective peer coach and how the EFL teachers perceived themselves as a peer coach and some other teachers that they knew. According to FOCUSed analysis of each participant, three of EFL teachers attending the study perceive themselves as typical in terms of being a peer coach and only one of them places himself as close to an effective peer coach in terms of the constructs provided. This may result from the fact that those teachers may not have experienced peer coaching adequately throughout their teaching practice.

The results also indicated that each teacher had different expectations from a peer coach and seemed to form different associations between constructs that they provided. Those different expectations and associations suggest that each teacher comes to the EFL teaching process from separate backgrounds, with different beliefs, priorities, skills, and values regarding the profession of teaching (Farrell, 2009). The beliefs or personal theories of teachers are shaped by their personal experiences as can be observed in the constructs and element clusters of the teachers. All the findings in fact suggest that it is of great importance to investigate the beliefs of EFL teachers in terms of peer coaching and make them realize how this practice could help them in their actual teaching practice and in their personal/professional development.

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