Stories of Mentoring Teacher-Research

Edited by
Richard Smith, Seden Eraldemir Tuyan,
Mariana Serra and Erzsébet Ágnes Békés

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MenTRnet

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Published by IATEFL Research Special Interest Group in association with MenTRnet

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Introduction

Richard Smith, Seden Eraldemir Tuyan, Mariana Serra and Erzsébet Ágnes Békés

1. Why teacher-research *mentoring*?

Teacher-research, defined within the IATEFL Research SIG (www.resig.weebly.com) as 'research initiated and carried out by teachers into issues of importance to them in their own work' – has great potential benefits (as evidenced by teacher-researchers' reflections in the SIG's many open-access publications since 2015) but can also appear challenging to embark upon and sustain. In recent years, the value of teacher-research *mentoring* – sharing knowledge, skills and experience to encourage and empower a teacher to carry out their own research (Smith, 2020, p. 14) – has, accordingly, begun to be better recognized.

This book breaks new ground in bringing together 20 separate reflective accounts of mentoring practice by facilitators of classroom inquiry in a wide variety of contexts worldwide, mostly in countries of the Global South. In this, the book both mirrors and draws upon the knowledge generation and sharing which has been occurring within MenTRnet (https://mentrnet.net/), a voluntary international network for teacher-research mentors that has been built up since 2021 (although only formally named in March 2024) and which, at the time we are writing this Introduction (September 2024), numbers 267 mentor or prospective mentor members across the globe. In partnership with IATEFL Research SIG, this book is MenTRnet's first ever publication.

To clarify further the significance of this collection, and why and how it came to be produced, we need to go back ten years and acknowledge the emergence of two phenomena – the approach to professional development through classroom inquiry called Exploratory Action Research, as advocated or engaged in by most of the mentors and teachers in this book, and the expansion of teachers' involvement in this approach via diverse support

initiatives (projects, events, open-access publications, webinars, workshops and the network just mentioned). These two phenomena – and, indeed, this book – have been primarily *practice-oriented* and in many ways *bottom-up* achievements, developed neither for academic purposes nor as compulsory or otherwise imposed forms of work, but arising from localized support for voluntary research '*by* teachers *for* teachers', that is, for teachers' own developmental benefit and that of their students and schools rather than, primarily, for wider dissemination (cf. Smith, 2020, p. 8). The expansion in engagement in teacher-research mentoring which this book illustrates, in contexts ranging from Argentina to Bangladesh, Cameroon, China, India, Iraq, Israel, Lithuania, Pakistan, Thailand, Turkey and Uzbekistan, provides compelling counter-evidence to arguments concerning the rarity or feasibility of teachers voluntarily engaging in research at all and constitutes an important addition to the previous reports which exist of practitioner research in relatively 'privileged' Global North tertiary or language school circumstances.

Exploratory Action Research (referred to often as 'EAR' by authors of stories in this book) was explicitly developed as a way for busy teachers in quite difficult circumstances to address the practical issues confronting them (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). It involves exploring a situation carefully by gathering data in ways that are not too burdensome for the teacher (exploratory research), and on that basis planning an appropriate action and evaluation of that action (action research). Developed first in the context of an innovative British Council project in Chile (2013–2020), it has subsequently been adopted in other projects in Latin America (Peru, Colombia and Mexico), South Asia (India, Nepal), Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia (Georgia, Kazakhstan) Southeast Asia (Thailand) and Ukraine. Production and open-access publication by the British Council of reports ('stories') from several of these projects, along with a supportive *Handbook* for teachers (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018), has served to disseminate the EAR approach further. The spread of EAR has also been facilitated by free professional development events including: (1) IATEFL Research SIG's 'Teachers Research!' conferences in Latin America and online; (2) workshops organized within TESOL CALL Interest Section's Electronic Village Online (EVO); and (3) three year-long International Festivals of (Mentoring) Teacher-Research in ELT (2017, 2021 and 2024). The major reported benefit for teachers appears to be an increased sense

of agency to effect change, while improved classroom relationships and student engagement have also often been reported (Smith and Rebolledo, 2018).

This spread of EAR benefits would not have occurred without the commitment and support of mentors – often local mentors (rather than mentors coming in from outside) who have themselves benefitted from engaging in EAR and wish to promote it further. Indeed, in recent years, increasing attention has been paid to offering support for local mentoring via development of a specific knowledge base for mentoring teacher-research (see Smith, 2020; 2022). In turn, this has led to the growth of MenTRnet, an international community of practice or 'network' which supports educators in mentoring teacher-researchers, particularly in the field of English language teaching, with a particular focus, usually, on EAR. This network has emerged as the outcome of various activities, starting with the EVO Mentoring Teacher-Research workshops in 2020.

This emerging network played an important supporting role during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering monthly online support group meetings from 2021 onwards. Mentors' efforts culminated in events like 'Mentoring Teacher-Research in a Time of COVID-19' and 'Teachers Research! Online 2021', showcasing the work of over 100 mentored teachers. With support from two successive University of Warwick / ESRC(UK) grants, the network has steadily expanded its reach and impact, adopting the name MenTRnet (standing for 'Mentoring Teacher-Research Network') in 2024. MenTRnet continues to host workshops and conferences, and, at the time of writing, is in the midst of hosting an International Festival of Mentoring Teacher-Research (2024–25) to map, showcase and draw lessons from teacher-research mentoring initiatives around the world and, as with this book, to inspire others to engage in teacher-research mentoring of their own.

2. Developing this book

In the support group meetings and at the Teachers Research! conferences, as now in the following pages, participants have shared experiences relating to all sorts of teacher-research mentoring situations: co-mentoring and solo-mentoring; mentoring for pre-service and in-service primary,

secondary, university and adult language school teachers; in-person and distance mentoring; local, national and international mentoring; and mentoring in 'normal' difficult circumstances, but also in the 'super-difficult' circumstances of pandemic, natural disaster and wars.

It was during a monthly mentoring teacher-research support group meeting in December 2022 that the idea emerged of putting together an open-access book to share some of these experiences more widely. The four of us had already been working together on a publication based on our own mentoring experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic (Smith, Eraldemir Tuyan, Békés and Serra, 2021), and we thought that, given the diversity, originality and interest value of the experiences and insights we had been hearing about, making a collection to share mentor narratives would be a worthwhile further project. As we discussed this further, our overall goal became clearer: to compile a book with reader-friendly stories of mentoring experience in order to showcase the achievements of mentors who had worked with teacher-researchers and overcome challenges in often quite difficult circumstances. The main intention would be to inspire others to engage in teacher-research mentoring and to provide practical support for such mentoring via concrete examples.

We next decided to ask IATEFL Research SIG if they could support such a publication, and its coordinator (Ernesto Vargas Gil) and committee readily agreed. We also requested their support in organizing an online event as a basis for gathering and drafting stories, since we believed that providing a stepping-stone in the form of an oral presentation would be useful for relatively inexperienced writers, who could be encouraged to record and transcribe it and then use the transcript as a basis to be filled out for a written version (see Smith, Bullock, Rebolledo and Robles López (2016, pp. 120–121) for more on this idea). Accordingly, we sent out a call for initial expressions of interest in March 2023 to all the mentors whose teachers had presented at the Teachers Research! Online conferences, and to all members of the community of practice that was later to become MenTRnet. Prospective contributors were told that an online mini-conference titled 'Stories of Teacher-Research Mentoring in the Field of ELT/TESOL' would be held on 17 June 2023, with a view to later publication of the stories presented.

Potential authors were given a choice between making a poster and giving a brief presentation at the online event, or just writing a 1,500- to 2,000-word chapter with our guidance, or both making a presentation (as a step towards writing) and later submitting their written story. Almost all colleagues who replied expressed a willingness to both present at the online event and submit their story for the book, while a few decided not to present orally but nevertheless to write their story for consideration. As a mentoring team, we provided individualized support for each contributor from the beginning of their writing journey until completion.

After the online event, we established and shared more detailed guidelines for chapters: stories should be 'reader-friendly' and include information about the physical setting(s) and participants(s), a particular issue or concern that had arisen and the way it had been addressed. Also, reflections on any fears or moments of joy during the mentoring process were requested, along with overall reflections on what the writer(s) had learnt, would continue doing and/or would try to improve in the future. The deadline for the first draft written version of stories was announced: 31 July 2023.

During the following months, we provided feedback on drafts and mentored authors through requested revisions, eventually bringing all 20 potential chapters to a publication-ready state, including providing extensions to those who required them. What we ended up with will be explained further below. First, though …

3. Why 'stories'?

As mentioned above, our aim in producing this book has not been a primarily academic one, our main intention being to 'inspire others to engage in teacher-research mentoring and to provide practical support for such mentoring via concrete examples', in line with our shared belief in the value of teacher-research for teachers themselves and their students and schools. Indeed, our previous work has shown us that enabling experience-sharing as a basis for reflection among peers can be more valuable from a practical perspective than work deliberately attempting to generalize for academic publication. In the same mode as the 'Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research' series of publications produced

from 2016 onwards (starting with Rebolledo, Smith & Bullock, 2016; see Smith & Rebolledo, 2022, for a full list), we therefore characterize this volume as a book of particular 'stories' of experience rather than academic reports, and, from the outset, we have encouraged authors to write in a down-to-earth and engaging way using the structure below as a suggested guide:

- **Where?** What is/are the physical setting(s) in which your story is located?
- **Who?** Who is/are the participant(s) in your story?
- **When?** When did it happen?
- **What?** What was the issue that came up?
- **How?** How was the issue addressed? What did you do as a mentor to help your mentee(s) resolve that issue/concern?

Now, thinking back…

- **What?** What were some of the fears or moments of joy for you in that teacher-research mentoring experience?
- **What?** What did you learn from that experience overall? What would you continue doing or try to improve for next time?

For authors more used to an academic reporting style, we on several occasions found ourselves requesting simplification of language and a reduction in references to relatively inaccessible academic sources, as well as increased attention to personal reflection and encouragement to find a personal 'voice'. For others less used to academic writing, the above structure – combined with writing from a transcript of their oral presentation – seemed to provide an accessible entry point to experience-sharing via writing that would otherwise not have been possible. There are several first-time authors here, and this is consistent with an overall emerging focus within MenTRnet on mentoring members to write for publication (see Chapter 20), as well as on facilitating the expression of previously unheard voices from Global South contexts (the 'stories of success' presented in Smith, Padwad and Bullock (2017) were one model for us in this regard). Not all the mentors here are university- or college-based, by any means; indeed, the book contains some encouraging stories of schoolteachers who have found benefit in doing EAR themselves and

have then 'turned mentor', engaging colleagues or other teachers to join in the experience.

Thus, whether they were academically or more practically inclined, we encouraged all writers to prioritize and reflect on their own experiences as well as to find a personal 'voice' rather than being beholden to academic jargon, report structure and referencing. While this has meant that attempting to come up with generalizations in relation to a pre-existing body of literature has been deemphasized, narrative knowledging of the kind teachers in staff-rooms and at training events tend to favour has been extensively engaged in here. The narrators of the stories in this book emphasize their own emotions and actions, and we have tried to help them configure these into a believable story in a well-described local context. Concurring with Aoki (2012, p. 243), we hope this publication shows that stories can be particularly effective for communicating insights among teachers and mentors, conveying sometimes complex ideas or multiple meanings in an easy-to-understand, resonant and impactful way. Stories in an open-access publication like this one, we aim to show, can represent a compelling alternative to academic reporting, being easily accessible and relatable to a wider audience.

This book is unique, then, in bringing together various combinations of teacher-research mentoring perspectives, emotions, and actions in varied circumstances. Throughout the book, diversity is celebrated, and everyone has contributed something different of their own.

4. The stories themselves

Let us now look at the individual chapters in a little more detail. Rather than providing summaries of all 20 chapters in sequence, it might be helpful to draw out some commonalities, despite their quality of being snapshots of individual experience. Some issues are overarching and surface repeatedly in these stories of teacher-research mentoring.

One characteristic worth reemphasizing is that many of the stories concern work in difficult circumstances in various, mainly Global South regions of the world. However, difficult circumstances can be exacerbated and become super-difficult, as in the case of Mayamin (Chapter 1), who mentored Iraqi colleagues in a post-war situation from her Qatar University base. Working

in a conflict zone brings about unique challenges, but Mayamin, apart from providing emotional support, was also able to show how teacher-research can provide tools to address challenges, deal with rapid changes, and develop resilience among her traumatized teachers. In Chapter 2, Silvia recounts the excitement that she and her colleagues felt when they were able to return to face-to-face classes after COVID-19 subsided in Argentina. However, the pandemic left scars on their students' wellbeing and gaps in their knowledge. Silvia offered to mentor two of her colleagues and supported them in helping their students recover learning and social skills whose loss had only became apparent after the global health crisis ended.

Natural and manmade disasters are a backdrop for several of our teacher-researchers' and their mentors' activities. At the time of writing her story, Nahla (Chapter 14) was working in relative safety with pre-service English teachers in Israel's Arab-speaking educational sector. We can be sure that right now (September 2024) she is experiencing extraordinary challenges in that conflict zone. How relevant it is that one of the topics her mentees wished to research was how collaboration can be enhanced among learners in practicum classes …

Even under ordinary circumstances, it is worth pondering what makes mentors take on the role of impassioned and compassionate facilitators of teacher development using EAR. Most carried out mentoring activities voluntarily, in addition to normal duties rather than as part of their everyday work – often after having identified a need for more effective teacher development (Simona, Chapter 5) or driven by curiosity to see if they could try something new (Maria Marta, Chapter 18). Quite a few stories provide accounts of first steps into mentoring teacher-research, with important lessons for others contemplating mentoring a teacher to research their practice. Simona (Chapter 5), for example, provides a detailed account and a rich reflection on how EAR is not a linear and predictable process.

Novice mentors can, of course, make mistakes even if their project is set up impeccably and is accomplished with great energy and enthusiasm (Chang, Chapter 6). It is only through looking back on a fairly long and intense mentoring process that Chang realized she may have overburdened her two mentees with sources and resources to the extent that they did not have enough time to carry out their research activities autonomously, though they were successful in the end. Meifang (Chapter

7) tells us the story of similar positive outcomes: none of her 11 teachers quit the teacher-research project and three of them managed to publish their findings, with her support, in a reputable international journal. But this is only the back end of her story: halfway through her one-year long Exploratory Practice project, her mentees were drifting away, so she designed a six-point action plan and rescued the situation with ingenuity and firmness.

Many of the stories reflect recurring challenges that teacher-researchers and their mentors, whether novice or more experienced, can face. And the solutions mentors find are of use to others elsewhere. Suchita (Chapter 3) found that not only did she have a huge group to mentor, but many of her mentees seemed to not see the point in the exploratory phase and were determined to jump straight into taking action. She succeeded in strengthening her skills in question-asking to guide her mentees so that they could realize why the issue they had identified would require deeper exploration. In fact, mentors have a whole range of instruments in their toolkit to sustain engagement and motivation, says Vinayadhar in Chapter 8. One of these is to present EAR as a useful and rewarding approach to empowering teachers because the more they understand the microcosm of their classrooms, the more they are able to find solutions to improve not just learning outcomes, but the quality of life in the classroom, as well.

Sometimes, those classrooms are far away, and so are our mentees. On occasion, mentors may work with teacher-researchers in very different time zones and contexts whose culture is distant from ours. Vanita and Gyanu (Chapter 9) came late into a British Council project in Thailand and the insufficient amount of initial interaction meant they could not fully understand their mentees' teaching contexts and cultural backgrounds. At one point, some of the mentees stopped participating and ended all communication. Vanita and Gyanu had to rebuild their relationships with them, realizing that establishing rapport was indispensable.

Geographical distance and the fact that her mentor colleagues were all her seniors seemed to become a serious challenge for Tasnima (Chapter 13) when she decided to launch a teacher-research mentoring project in Bangladesh while she was in the UK. A further issue was the fact that mentees coming from tertiary education seemed initially resistant to the EAR approach as they had become used to other types of research during their careers. Tasnima succeeded in winning over both her mentor colleagues

and her mentees, and six of the latter presented at an international event, namely, the Teachers Research! Online 2023 conference.

Chapter 16 by Fauzia and Richard also addresses the issue of how 'academic' conceptions of research can make it difficult for mentees working at tertiary level to appreciate the usefulness of EAR. Their teacher educator participants, who were training student teachers for Maths, Science and Social Studies, were initially keen on carrying out large-scale surveys or using mainly quantitative methods, and it took some time for them to warm to researching their own practice on a smaller scale. Afaq, Umair and Zenab (Chapter 17) were mentees in Fauzia and Richard's project and have now tried their own hand at mentoring student-teachers of Maths and Social Sciences. Soon they had to realize that conducting EAR at a tertiary education institution is very different from being thrown in at the deep end in Pakistani public schools. They came to perceive teacher-research in a new way as fluid and unpredictable, and thus became better able to support their mentees with understanding and empathy.

Mentoring teacher-researchers whose main subject is not English has already arisen as a theme (Chapters 16 and 17), but Maria Marta (Chapter 18) decided to take a plunge that was twice as deep: mentoring for the first time as well as doing so with colleagues who were teaching nine subjects other than English. And she succeeded on both fronts, namely, conveying the concepts of EAR and overcoming the language barrier by making relevant materials available in Spanish through a massive translation effort.

When faced with challenges in our mentoring practice, we sometimes become harshly self-critical, and this tends to be the case especially after experiencing critical incidents. Imagine the situation where you are expecting three mentors you are working with to deliver an EAR topic to the rest of the group and you find that the mentors have not prepared their presentation, and you have to improvise and deliver the material! This is exactly the situation that Ella (Chapter 12) found herself in – and she decided to explore how her mentor colleagues could have reached this level of lack of interest and laxity. Her honest and straightforward account shows that mentors can find exploration and reflection both healing and formative. Some 'critical incidents' can go back many years but still make a mentor determined to do things differently. Seden (Chapter 15) can still remember how, during her PhD studies, she found it very difficult to connect recommended and 'indisputable' theoretical concepts with her

accumulated experience of the practical aspects of language teaching. Now in charge of mentoring four PhD students, Seden designed a whole new course with her mentees on a different base that is not just practical and reflective but can nurture critical intellectuals.

Innovation tends to be a buzzword and we often think of it as something radically new, even though in human history evolution and not revolution may be the norm. Many of the stories in the volume reflect the patient, continuing and incremental improvement of mentoring practice. Such is Ravi's story (Chapter 4), in which he recounts how he was concerned that, after the exploratory phase of EAR, the majority of his mentees did not seem able to accomplish their action plans when they returned to their schools. In the spirit of an enhancement approach (Smith, Padwad and Bullock, 2017), paying due attention to success as well as problems in teacher-research, Ravi looked at what the key ingredients of success were for those who did manage to finish the second, action phase of EAR. Weighing up the usual factors standing in the way, Ravi decided on a carefully monitored but reduced workload, which led to greater success. Eric's innovation (Chapter 10) seems to have arisen from a challenge that Ravi (with his group of 110 mentees) does not explicitly dwell on: mentoring large groups. Eric was mentoring 72 mentees from Cameroon, Sierra Leone, DR Congo and Mali. He decided to create groups and appoint team coordinators and team rapporteurs who were able to mentor members of their own groups. The set-up led to strong social bonds among team members and also allowed Eric to function in 'guiding' rather than 'telling' mode.

Experimenting with different mentoring structures is also an emerging issue of interest in this volume. This can be led by necessity, as was the case for Eric, or because mentors are keen to reflect on their own mentoring practice. Mariana and Ruben (Chapter 11) set up a multilayered research project in which Mariana acted as an external mentor and Ruben functioned as an internal mentor. Their five mentees were able to take advantage of both co-mentored sessions and individual mentoring by Ruben as well as the mentors' journal, which was made available for the mentees to read, as well.

Dissemination, indeed publication of teacher-researchers' findings can be a strong motivator for participants, and creating conditions for these can form part of an effective mentor's roles. During the writing of these chapters,

an opportunity has arisen for MenTRnet to support the submission of full-length articles to a new journal whose declared mission is to publish classroom research. In Chapter 19, Sidney describes his role as a 'writing mentor' of the manuscripts for this journal. Once again, this publishing project had a multi-layered structure (see also Chapter 20), where Sidney's main aim was to provide both a digital space for the writing effort and offer language, moral and pedagogic support. Finally, Chapter 20 by Eli is an account of how she perceives her mentoring role as that of a 'writing sponsor', namely, someone who creates the conditions for her mentees to shine and experience the extraordinary feeling of seeing their stories resonating with those of others. This is the kind of experience overall that we have attempted to provide for mentor-authors and readers of this volume.

5. Final words and future directions

MenTRnet has coalesced as a network, or 'association', during the time we've been editing the publication, to the extent that it now has its own logo, a new website (http://mentrnet.net), and a 15-member steering committee, along with an active discussion forum which all interested are welcome to join. The different activities we described in section 1. above – introductory workshops, monthly mentor support group meetings and co-organization of the annual Teachers Research! Online conference now all form part of MenTRnet responsibilities, along with a relatively new focus on mentoring members and their mentee teachers towards publication. And MenTRnet has now come together with IATEFL Research SIG to produce this, its first publication.

If you find the book interesting, we recommend that to discover more about practitioner research or mentoring of teacher-research, you could consult some of the further resources available for free on the MenTRnet website: https://mentrnet.net/resources/.

Looking to the future, now that we have brought out this, MenTRnet's first publication, we look forward to hearing how readers experience and use it, whether for dipping into at moments of difficulty, as an inspiration for further mentoring activity or as a resource for the workshops on mentoring teacher-research which MenTRnet will offer in the future, in the service

of spreading the benefits of teacher-research via effective mentoring still further.

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1 The value of teacher-research mentoring in war-torn Iraq

Mayamin Altae

Introduction

In the 21st century, teacher development is crucial if educators are to meet the evolving demands of modern education. With the spread of technology and the need to emphasize 21st-century skills such as the 6C's (Critical thinking, Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Character, and Citizenship), it seems very important to provide mentoring opportunities for teachers. However, in war-torn countries like Iraq, the challenges of teacher development are exacerbated by ongoing conflicts and a lack of support from the Ministry of Education. This story is about my personal experience of working with teachers in Iraq and coming to know more about their daily struggles to address their professional needs.

Impact of wars on teacher development

Iraq has been grappling with the aftermath of multiple wars and conflicts, including the Iranian War, the Gulf War, the War on Iraq of 2003, and the ongoing fight against terrorism. These wars have severely affected the education sector, disrupting teacher training programs and facilities and educational development in general, including the English language curriculum, leading Iraqi teachers to focus on textbook completion and student examination (Altae, 2020). Many schools have been left

in disrepair and teachers often lack the resources and technological tools they need for effective teaching and professional development. There is also an absence of policy documents from the Iraqi Ministry of Education supporting teacher training (Altae, 2022) while, in conflict-ridden areas, the safety and security of teachers often take precedence over professional development, leaving them with limited access to resources and opportunities for growth.

Introducing mentoring of teacher-research

Mentoring can play a pivotal role in nurturing teachers' skills and fostering a positive teaching culture. Unfortunately, formal mentoring programs are often scarce or non-existent in Iraq due to the prevailing turmoil. The absence of such support deprives educators of the opportunity to receive feedback, exchange ideas, and improve their instructional practices, hindering their ability to keep pace with a rapidly changing educational landscape.

As an Iraqi teacher educator at Qatar University, I wanted to help my Iraqi colleagues update their teaching practices. However, in Iraq, the urgency of addressing immediate challenges often overshadows a focus on teaching skills. Without proper guidance and support, teachers may find it difficult to integrate essential skills into their classrooms, thereby limiting their students' readiness for the modern world. While I was looking for ways to help Iraqi teachers with their struggle to develop their practices, I came across *Mentoring teachers to research their classrooms: A practical handbook* by Richard Smith (2020). This handbook brought to my attention that classroom research done by the classroom teacher as a means of professional development is a powerful process that can profoundly impact the teacher and their learners. As a result, I asked a group of Iraqi teachers to work with me as their mentor to research their classroom problems and try to find solutions for their classroom teaching issues. The mentoring started on 1 July 2021 with seven Iraqi teachers. These seven teachers worked hard to avoid missing meetings while operating in difficult circumstances like the regular power cuts in Iraq and the poor internet connection. However, every time I started my Zoom sessions, I was greeted with smiling, eager faces waiting for me to allocate tasks for them. The meetings were conducted via Zoom, but the detailed discussions were done through a WhatsApp group chat. While technology is a powerful tool for enhancing education, the digital

divide in Iraq poses a significant challenge. Many teachers lack access to computers, the internet, and other technological resources, hindering their ability to adapt to digital teaching methods and 21st-century pedagogies. The lack of training in utilizing technology effectively further exacerbates this issue, making it challenging for teachers to stay relevant in an increasingly technology-driven world. Nevertheless, these teachers always did their best to be there and do the work.

One teacher was Haider, who taught in a deprived area in Baghdad. He was a talented teacher who loves to use technology in his classroom, which he provides himself from his teaching salary. At the end of the mentoring process, he said this (translated from Arabic):

> *"Teacher research has opened my eyes to trying different methods of teaching and seeing which one works better in improving my learners' learning outcomes, enabling them to pass the English exam without memorizing the book."*

Another participant was Nawar from Babylon, a very motivated teacher, who would go and look for books and articles to read on how to improve his learners' performance. He said:

> *"Seeing smiles on my student's faces when they are working in group 'team work' and seeing my research come to life puts a smile on my face."*

The rest of my mentees – Hanan, Zainab, Hussain, Jassim, and Younis – were from Mosul. These teachers had bigger challenges than their counterparts in other areas in Iraq. They share the challenge that has affected all Iraqi teachers since 2003 when the Ministry of Education introduced a new school curriculum and teachers had to teach this with no training. However, they have the additional challenge of the ongoing civil war in the City of Mosul that has left the educational sector in chaos due to the control of the city by the so-called 'Islamic State' from 2014 to 2017, which resulted in imposition of a new curriculum when the Directorate General of Education (DGE) was replaced with the 'Islamic State' 'Diwan of Education'. This replaced subjects like literature, history, geography, arts, and music with subjects related to Sharia'a education and military training. The IS curriculum was taught by teachers who were still on the Ministry of Education payroll, which made it difficult for

them to balance the demands of both the Ministry in Baghdad and IS in Mosul; however, those who refused were punished in public squares. After the liberation of Mosul in 2017, the local teacher leaders faced new challenges of restoring an education system that had been detached from the national system for four years, while at the same time catching up on the radical curriculum changes that the rest of Iraq had already adopted in that period (Altae, 2022).

These Mosul teachers were mentally exhausted and needed more support than the rest of my mentees. I started each mentoring session by asking them about their well-being, as I would with all my mentees. Then, we would discuss the teacher-research and the tasks that needed to be completed before our next meeting. For me as a mentor, it was challenging to listen to the teachers as I was not always sure how to address their concerns and struggles. The only way I could support the teachers was by finding ways for them to develop themselves through teacher-research. They were very excited to have someone approach them, *chat* with them, and just ask, *"How was your day in school?"*. Small talk like this helped with achievement of mentoring objectives. We had our ups and downs with the internet in Iraq, but they were finally ready to present the research outcomes in front of their international English-language colleagues at the Teachers Research! Online 2023 conference.

About this conference presentation experience, Hanan commented:

> *"I was so eager to talk to my international colleagues about my struggles and challenges in teaching in overcrowded classrooms."*

Zainab, who teaches in an all-boys school, presented her findings on 'How to motivate boys to learn English' and shared that:

> *"I tried different techniques to motivate my class. The best way was to encourage every one of them to participate in the class discussion."*

Younis said:

> *"Teaching my class how to pronounce words correctly was a challenge, but the help of YouTube and other applications has helped me and my students to read words correctly."*

My approach to mentoring teachers in a conflict zone

The way that I worked with these traumatized teachers involved a few phases. First, I created a safe and trusting relationship with the teachers to encourage them to share their experiences and open up about their emotions. This enabled me to understand more about their trauma and how it was manifested in their behaviour, which consequently helped me in shaping more tailored, individual support. It was also very important to respect boundaries and not push teachers to talk more about their experience if they were not willing to do so. The teachers were already under considerable pressure and it was important to respect their own boundaries regarding the amount of information they wanted to share. It was also helpful to explain to the teachers that the reactions they showed towards their unusual context were normal, as they were operating in an abnormal setting. Another aspect that I found useful was acknowledging progress even if it was small because that helped the teachers to feel motivated and achieve more progress. I found it really helpful to focus on individual experiences and adapt the mentoring process accordingly, which enabled me to provide support and guidance based on individuals' circumstances.

The value of mentoring teachers to do research in a conflict zone

I was cautious in explaining the benefits of research to the teachers in their unusual contexts but I did emphasize the advantages I thought teacher-research could bring to them in their circumstances. I clearly highlighted to the teachers that research would improve their knowledge about their practice and could help them address some of the problems they were facing. My message to teachers was that practice in a war zone brings unique challenges and by implementing research teachers could develop problem-solving skills and research-based techniques to equip themselves with tools for addressing the challenges. While mentoring teachers in these circumstances, I was aware that conditions can change rapidly. I ensured that the teachers knew that my support was to enable them to react to difficult conditions as and when they happen, using research-based practices. A particular value of mentoring teachers to do teacher-research

in a difficult context like this is that it can develop resilience to help them cope with daily mental and emotional difficulties.

Conclusion

In Iraq, the ongoing wars and lack of support from the Ministry of Education pose significant disadvantages for teachers seeking professional growth. Concerted efforts from the government, non-governmental organizations, and the international community are required to provide teachers with adequate resources, training opportunities, and mentoring programs. Throughout my personal work with my fellow Iraqi teachers, it was useful to emphasize the need for the teachers to explore more channels of professional development and support while the official stance on education is being developed and finalized.

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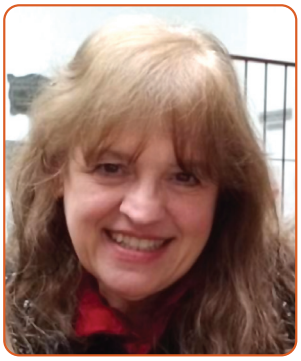
2 All together at long last



Silvia Severino

Background

After the Covid-19 lockdown, going back to school was a gradual process that began with a bubble system during the first half of the year. However, in the second half, full attendance was allowed in compliance with strict sanitary measures, such as wearing facemasks, optimizing ventilation in every classroom, and having breaks in small groups to avoid students coming together at the same time in the schoolyard.

In this context, teachers made a big effort to implement learning recovery strategies but, truth be told, most students had lost their sense of classroom belonging and interaction, learning autonomy, responsibility and even ordinary school habits. The impact of this situation was even more complicated for students of the 1st year, who had started secondary school in March 2021 as they had finished their 7th grade of primary school in 2020, when lessons were delivered entirely online, and promotion to the next year group is taken for granted.

In the state-run technical school in the city of Buenos Aires where my story is located, I listened to my colleagues with great interest in the teachers' room. We felt very excited to meet again and to catch up with our 'traditional' everyday chatter. At the same time, we were genuinely worried about the impact the pandemic might have had on students' learning and well-being. In the case of the English teachers, they were

particularly concerned because students had lost part of their skills of speaking, listening, writing and interacting.

Silvia's school

As a result, I felt a strong desire to help and decided to propose the following 'mini' mentoring project. I described the highlights of teacher-research in very down-to-earth terms and reassured my colleagues that it contributes to enhancing our knowledge and to gaining new perspectives on education. Two young teachers of English in 1st year courses accepted the challenge. They became my mentees and, as a first step, we scheduled fortnightly Zoom meetings.

This mentoring experience took place during the second half of 2021, after the bubbles were dropped and students were *all together at long last*. It's important to mention that mentees met their students (32 in 1ro A and 33 in 1ro B) only once a week, when they had a triple class of 40 minutes each, and that the project lasted for four months, that is, from August, when they came back from the winter recess, until the first week in December, when regular school classes usually end.

Process

During our first virtual gathering, mentees were enthusiastic and intrigued by the challenge they had just embarked on. We discussed the purpose of this project as well as the main features of mentors' and mentees' roles. Next,

I expanded on the concept of classroom action research. Mentees loved the idea of becoming the 'investigators' of their own courses to explore and identify their students' learning needs, Furthermore, I suggested reading *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* by Richard Smith and Paula Rebolledo (2018) to provide mentees with some theoretical background for this first exploration of theirs.

In our second meeting, mentees voiced their doubts about having the extra workload because of the additional reading and writing, and also had questions about how to start their proper research process. Concerning the former, I assured mentees that we would conduct this study as simply as possible because of time constraints and the difficult post-pandemic context, and promised we would stick to a reasonable amount of practice-oriented reading. I also mentioned that the use of the cell phone voice recorder could be a useful tool for alleviating their work burden as they wouldn't have to spend time at home to write up a typical research journal.

In relation to this, I proposed that they could make observations about the strengths and weaknesses of the course, their students' learning needs, or any other issue of concern. These records would foster further reflection on initial perceptions and facilitate the detection of a focus that could be improved or changed. Furthermore, I encouraged mentees to go on reading the handbook and recommended the chart on page 27 about the steps to conduct research.

In our third Zoom session, mentees shared their observations. I tried to understand a little more about both teachers' classroom context by asking for deeper meaning and trying to make them reflect on some issues. Based on my own notes, I recreate here some of our dialogues (letters A and B stand for the mentees, and M for me, their mentor):

A: *My students are too relaxed and find it hard to comply with the classroom routines.*

M: *Why? What do you mean by 'relaxed'?*

A: *When I step into the classroom they continue talking or playing with their cell phones. So I have to wait until they're aware of my presence to start the lesson. They need constant encouragement to work.*

M: *How do you make them aware? How do you start your lesson?*

A: *I say hello, and wait for their hellos. Then I ask what they remember from our previous lesson. Some say 'Nothing', others try to think and a few have a look at their notes. Then I can see that they haven't opened their folders since our last lesson.*

M: *Have you considered other ways of beginning your lesson?*

A: *I'd like to use some warm-ups, but we have very little time because the first period only lasts 15 minutes. It's followed by a long break of 40 minutes due to safety measures related to avoiding staying long in the classroom. I need to devote the next two 40-minute periods to teaching and making students work, as we only meet once a week.*

M: *Yes, that's not the ideal schedule indeed. Nevertheless, warm-ups may 'save' time to begin a lesson as the students will probably stop being distracted. Don't you think that they would engage more easily and get willing to work?*

Mentee B supported this suggestion by telling us about warm-ups her students like, so mentee A said she would try some. This input by mentee B enriched the discussion, gave A food for thought and created an excellent climate of sharing knowledge and experience.

Then it was Mentee B's turn. She complained about her students' low level of L2 knowledge considering that English is taught since pre-school.

M: *Why are you so sure their level is low?*

M: *Could they use some L2 to describe their interests?*

B: *Only a few used 'I love/like something', and the majority said they can't speak English.*

B: *Well, let's see. The first class when students were all together after the bubble system, I asked them to introduce themselves by saying their name, age, and hobbies. Most of them didn't remember how to say 'twelve', or 'thirteen'. One of them even said 'two-ten'. And obviously, they use 'have' instead of 'am' [negative transfer from Spanish to English].*

M: *Perhaps oral performance makes them nervous. What about their written production?*

B: *That's also bad. This class has lost track of the school routines: they don't do homework, and find it hard to participate in class. Two weeks ago I gave them a diagnostic test. Believe it or not, one of these students asked me if he could take it home and bring it for the next class.*

M: *And how did they do?*

B: *Their scores were a disaster! For example, in one of the exercises they had to write vocabulary about food and drinks. In the fruit category one student wrote 'eggs'.*

After our 'sad laugh' moment and agreeing with the comments by Mentee A, we concluded that these accounts had been fruitful given that mentees had identified several topics to explore. Therefore, their task for the next encounter was to select a research focus and try to formulate appropriate research questions. Chapter 4 in the aforementioned handbook turned out to be of invaluable help to learn how to decide on these essential steps in research.

For our fourth Zoom session, mentees had already devised these possible research questions: 'To what extent can warm-ups make a difference in my course to spark my students' interest and encourage participation?' (Mentee A), and "How effective are web resources to ensure my students' engagement and promote L2 vocabulary learning and reading? (Mentee B). We also discussed their doubts about data collection. They agreed that oral surveys and short interviews were practical as they could be carried out during the lesson while the whole class was working. They also said they would administer a questionnaire to learn about their learners' perceptions of the lessons to get more data for analysis, interpretation and triangulation.

In our October and November meetings, I supported my mentees by listening to their concerns with empathy and understanding, asking for further clarification, keeping an open mind, and most importantly, encouraging analysis and critical reflection. My goal of guiding them seemed to be on the right track when mentees commented on the importance of exploration. Mentee A affirmed she felt more empowered to make informed decisions based on her data collection findings, whereas Mentee B realized that her exploration provided her with a thorough picture of the course that helped her to reflect on her own teaching and choose appropriate actions for change.

Finally, during our last meeting in December, mentees expressed their views on their experience. Mentee A thanked me for listening carefully and offering constant support, especially when she had to narrow down her research topic. Mentee B appreciated my 'contagious enthusiasm' for helping them 'survive' in this difficult post-pandemic classroom context and for calming them down when they felt obsessed with deadlines and the workload. They both agreed that despite their initial doubts, such as 'How will I cope with this extra workload?' or 'Will I have time to gather and analyse data?', this mentoring challenge made them feel empowered and more confident in identifying and prioritizing teaching actions in order to make informed decisions for the benefit of their students and, above all, to grow professionally and personally.

Special mentoring moments

Some of my fears in this teacher-research mentoring experience were that mentees would consider our Zoom calls an extra burden over and above their duties, or our discussions a waste of time. Also, there was a stressful moment when there was a confirmed case of Covid-19 in Mentee B's class and they were all isolated at home for some days. I was afraid that she could leave the project because of the few lessons left to finish the school year, but fortunately she did not.

Conversely, there were also moments of joy, for instance, when Mentee A told us she had decided to continue studying for her *licenciatura* (she had dropped out of university when her first baby was born), and Mentee B felt curious to find out more about action research in the classroom. I'd also like to mention the excellent disposition the mentees had for attending our meetings, listening to critical comments and having no problem with looking at a puzzle from a different perspective.

Conclusion and expectations

All in all, I am pleased with this brief mentoring experience which was born spontaneously in the teachers' room. My main gain was helping less experienced colleagues find their own way and giving them direct support, leading to a sense of accomplishment in spite of the difficult post-pandemic context. Working in the same school added extra value to my mentoring as I could learn about my mentees' urgent needs or doubts and even go to

their classrooms to offer some guidance. Therefore, teaching loads became less heavy as we could solve some issues during a break without 'formal' analysis or journal writing.

As regards my expectations, I'd like to continue encouraging other colleagues to overcome difficulties in their classrooms, make them feel less frustrated when something doesn't work and help them learn to appreciate their own efforts regardless of results.

In future, I aim to evolve in my mentoring skills so as to be tuned to the needs of new mentees. I also hope to inspire colleagues to get involved in mentoring, as it means a real professional enhancement opportunity and a valuable source of empowerment.

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About the author

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3 How did I learn to ask better questions?

Suchita Mahorkar

I have been a high school teacher in the public sector for the last 23 years and I have also been fortunate enough to work as a teacher educator for five years. In this role, teachers often approached me looking for solutions to their classroom challenges or wanted me to help them improve their teaching.

In January 2020, I joined the five-week TESOL CALL-IS Electronic Village Online on Mentoring Teacher-research which was led by Dr. Richard Smith with Dr. Seden Tuyan. This provided a very systematic, clear approach to leading teachers to address their classroom challenges.

I gathered my courage and approached teachers with my idea of experimenting and conducting an Exploratory Action Research (EAR) programme. In all, 30 primary teachers across the state of Maharashtra, India, joined me, of whom 25 teachers ended up completing their EAR project.

The first challenge was to show how EAR can be useful overall, and the second, more specific issue was how to question teacher-researchers' perceptions so they see that the exploratory phase can be really beneficial, especially if all stakeholders are consulted.

The start was a rollercoaster ride for me. By the time I had my first individual meetings with them, many mentees had already decided upon action plans, and they told me they would submit their findings in about a month. The exploratory phase of EAR was missing. For example:

Mentee 1: *"I have already started implementing my action plan."*

This teacher was seasoned and was not in the mood to change his plan of action at all. It was Classroom Action Research and not EAR. He had read about action research and hadn't given a thought to the idea that action research could be more effective after exploring the situation deeply first, as in EAR (and he himself admitted the value of this later).

Mentee 2: "I want my students to do their home assignments regularly."

With this teacher, there were queries that came to my mind like, "Why does he want his learners to do home assignments? Why has this become a challenge for him?". It seemed that he was an accomplished teacher and might already have tried a few ways to ensure timely submission, such as rewards, punishment, and so on. So, what was he going to do that would be new for him?

Most of the teachers seemed eager to conduct their research on speaking English, believing this was the most prominent challenge they were facing with their students. For example:

Mentee 3: "How can I develop learners' speaking skills (describing a picture, giving information about someone or something, small conversations)?"

It was difficult for me to make teachers like this mentee realize that they needed to explore their challenges from different stakeholders' viewpoints – including the views of their learners, the expectations of the administration, the experiences of colleagues, and their own reflections on their teaching practice.

I read my notes carefully after my first one-to-one online meetings with mentees. I enjoyed reading these and, as I did so, I started visualizing the classroom and the actions planned by each mentee teacher. This enabled me to understand them better. To make the mentees rethink and reconsider their action plans, I decided to ask more questions: questions that could check their beliefs, their understanding of learners, and the effectiveness

of their action plans; questions that could lead them to re-evaluate their action plans; questions to evaluate and revamp the strategies they had preplanned without much consideration; and questions to check what they wanted their learners to do.

What did I do to ask better questions?

The resources I consulted, especially, *Mentoring Teachers to Research Their Classrooms: A Practical Handbook* (Smith, 2020) and *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (Smith and Rebolledo, 2018) were great, and together with the peer discussions in the mentor support group online sessions, they gave me guidance for asking better questions as well as developing listening skills. In addition, I came up with the following policy for asking questions:

- *Use simple and specific words/vocabulary to ask questions clearly:* My teachers are not experts in English. I didn't want them to feel awkward or shy, so simplicity was the best policy.
- *Prepare for the mentees' topic in advance:* Read a few good resources to understand the subject better and to prepare some good useful questions.
- *Use a wait time strategy:* Sometimes teachers need time to recollect the right information and need time to produce it coherently.
- *Maintain a friendly tone of voice:* Make the teacher feel honored and taken seriously, and to boost their self-esteem with confidence.
- *Note-making/Practice of good listening skills:* Preparing for the next meeting, no information is useless.

For my next one-on-one meetings, I prepared by noting down a few questions for each teacher. For example:

> Mentee 1: *I have already started implementing my action plan.*
>
> Mentor: *What is your action plan? What do you expect to see after a specific time? Have you implemented any similar action plans in the recent past? What happened?*

These questions worked as starters, and the conversation became easier and more fruitful, going on smoothly as follows:

> Mentor: *How successful were you? Why do you think so? If you considered the preferences of your learners more, what changes would you make to your plan?*

For Mentee 2, the questions I prepared were as follows:

> Mentee 2: *I want my students to do their home assignments regularly.*
>
> Mentor: *What type of homework do you assign? Why do you think your students don't complete their home assignments?*

And, for Mentee 3:

> Mentee 3: *How can I develop learners' speaking skills (describing a picture, giving information about someone or something, small conversations)?*
> Mentor: *You've already decided on several methods. How would it be if I asked you to choose the most suitable method for you and your learners? Why do you choose this method?*

Preparing one or two questions in advance turned out to be an effective strategy for breaking the ice, getting each teacher involved in sharing their experiences, and thoughts, and leading them to explore more deeply. It also helped me to:

- gather more details about the teachers, their thoughts and beliefs;
- understand the learners, their teaching practices, and the school environment;
- find out more about the teachers' ideas for their action plan;
- understand what I should read to help teachers chalk out workable, easily manageable action plans;
- lower my talking time and increase teachers' talking time.

What did I learn?

Working on asking questions was something I enjoyed, and it helped me learn a lot. Asking good, proper, timely questions is a high-order thinking skill. Learning to do so sharpened my capacities and developed my overall professional and personal qualities, including my attention and awareness, and my interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Some feedback I received from my mentees on my questioning included:

> Mentee 4: *Suchita Ma'am asked us questions to help us narrow down the topic and to gather details about the topic. As she took us to data collection her questioning skills made our task easier and more specific to reach the expected goal.*

> Mentee 5: *Before Suchita Ma'am's guidance my rough question was:*
> - *How to teach Marathi reading to first-grade students in online mode?*
>
> *When I discussed with her, she helped me to form more focused questions. It helped me to narrow down the topic, and consider the parental help and guidance. I reframed my questions as*
> - *Why can't my first-grade students read the Marathi alphabet through the given materials?*
> - *How can I motivate parents to help students to attend online sessions?*

> Mentee 7: *Questions make me more clear about my subject. I could narrow down my subject and activities.*

In the year 2020, 15 of these teachers presented their findings in an online two-day event we organized, which was called EMAR Maharashtra 2020 ('EMAR' stands for Enhancing Mentoring Action Research). All my

mentees executed their action plans successfully even though some could not present them. They could develop their understanding and could find better and more suitable ways to reach out to students.

Conclusion

I would say that mentoring is "ten times learning". Asking questions is a very powerful tool. The more I thought about the questions I asked, the more I became attentive – attentive about the socio-emotional-educational-experiential background of the teacher. It made me more open-minded. Now I try to choose more simple and specific words to convey my message. Asking questions helped me develop not only as an educator but also as a person, and I am still working on it.

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About the author

Suchita Mahorkar is an experienced high school teacher and teacher educator. She has worked on various projects led by the British Council and the State Institute of English in Maharashtra, playing an integral role in project development as a trainer, monitor, and evaluator. She often co-moderates discussions on educational topics and is keen on using social media, which she perceives as an important tool for learning and sharing.

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4 Promoting action via exploration in mentoring teacher-research

Ravinarayan Chakrakodi

Background

Since 2018, Exploratory Action Research (EAR) has been one of the components included in the month-long Certificate in English Language Teaching (CELT) in-service teacher training programme at the Regional Institute of English South India (RIESI). Every year, four groups of high school teachers and four groups of primary school teachers – around 560 teachers in total – pass through this programme. Nearly 2,800 teachers in total have done exploratory research projects since they were first introduced in December 2018. In this chapter, I focus on a cohort of 110 teachers I was responsible for mentoring, in August 2022, recounting how I addressed constraints on teacher-research and teacher-research mentoring in such a large-scale programme.

Exploratory research – the teachers' and mine

In the 30-day CELT programme, teachers gain practical insights into conducting exploratory action research and gain hands-on experience by researching classroom issues and challenges that concern them. They identify critical incidents, review learning outcomes, frame research questions, collect data from different sources and explore classroom problems. They complete the exploratory research phase at the end of the training programme, prepare posters and make presentations on the findings of their exploratory research study. After the one-month

training programme, teachers go back to their schools and are expected to implement their action plans and conduct action research in their own classrooms.

It is crucial to conduct exploratory research before engaging in action research for the reasons suggested below. Exploring classroom issues helps in:

- gathering evidence that aids in better understanding or solving a problem or puzzle;
- gaining a comprehensive understanding (through clarification, probing and consideration of alternatives) before taking action;
- comparing 'base-line' with 'end-line.'

However, what has been bothering me for a long time as a teacher-research mentor was the fact that many teachers don't implement the action research part, despite the majority expressing a commitment to do so. Following the end of the programme, teachers are given three months' time to complete their action research and submit the action research reports to me by email. As there are 50 to 60 teachers in each cohort (though 110 teachers in this cohort), I cannot mentor them all individually. Also, after the completion of the one-month training, mentoring them formally isn't part of my job, but I still feel it as a responsibility to see what happens in the post-training phase as I am promoting action research as well as exploratory research.

In relation to this issue, I collected some data from previous cohorts to try to understand why teachers struggle to complete the action research part.

Challenges in implementing action plans

Despite the initial enthusiasm expressed by teachers, only a few could complete action research and submit their reports. Here are the positive reasons these teachers gave for having been able to complete the action research study:

- *"Students' support and moral support from my colleagues and their feedback helped me complete my action research successfully."*
- *"I formed a small group of 3 members and discussed the research issue. We planned and executed our work as a group. We could complete the research in time."*
- *"During evenings and weekends, I managed to complete the project."*

- *"Supporting environment of my school and the support received from my team members led me to the successful completion of the work."*
- *"I had to borrow some periods from my colleagues and I got complete support from them."*
- *"Sample research reports and additional readings gave me a proper framework to move ahead in my action research activity."*
- *"It was possible only because of the experience I gained during the training."*

However, many other teachers faced difficulties in implementing their action plans after the training. Reasons cited by these teachers included: time management issues; busy school schedules; health problems; reluctance from school authorities; and being deputed to other schools.

Teachers presenting their exploratory research

Here are a few excerpts from what these teachers said:

- *"Time management was the crucial thing. I tried to balance both my research work as well as my regular academic work. As I'm handling higher secondary classes, I'm in a position to focus only on the results. That's why I couldn't complete my action research in time. I just started my research work. But I know I can't complete it on time as our quarterly examination is approaching."*
- *"As we had First Quarterly exams followed by Onam holidays for ten days, we didn't get students in our classroom. When I started the research, I found some are lacking the interest to read anything in English."*

- *"I couldn't do it on time as I am working as a CPO (Community Police Officer on the SPC project) in my school and I had to attend SPC Camp."*
- *"Have to complete the syllabus at school. I have taken a few days off because of health issues."*
- *"I can't do against the will of my school headmaster; otherwise, I have to face some unknown problems."*

My plan of action

I was a bit worried and concerned about the challenges shared by teachers in trying to conduct action research in their classrooms. As action research is important in providing compelling evidence for change, in enhancing teacher's professional competence and in promoting student learning, I wanted to pursue this issue and find out what best I could do to help teachers complete the research process.

In order to support the teachers in their action research journey, I asked them 'What can/should be done to encourage teachers to complete the action research part [of exploratory action research]?". A few excerpts from what the teachers said are given below:

- *"Make it easy for teachers to engage with research evidence and encourage an evidence-informed culture by making research findings accessible, identifying context-specific evidence for teachers, making it a whole school priority, and using appropriate international and external support."*
- *"During the training itself, teachers can be guided to do action research. This will help them to get clear idea of doing action research. They can even get clarifications for their doubts at the time of the training itself."*
- *"Teachers who complete their action research could be recognised and some extra grades may be awarded."*
- *"Course completion certificate shall be issued to only for those teachers who have submitted their action research on time."*

A few teachers mentioned that the exploratory action research process should be made easier for teachers to do. They also said we could link action research to the course itself – for example, have a split model like 20 days of training where they do exploratory research, and then maybe after

three months, we could call the teachers again for a 10-day programme where they share their action research findings. They felt a split model would help in completing the action research cycle following exploration.

I therefore thought of a different strategy in order to reduce the teachers' workload, improve the timeline given to them and simplify the process. I thought that, instead of calling it 'research', if teachers could be mentored to conduct a few activities from their action plan, analyse the impact of these activities on their students and share their findings, more of them could be motivated to try out the activities and examine how these activities are helping students in improving their learning. Hence, I created a structured template using Google Forms and asked the teachers from this cohort (110 in number) to fill in the template with their research questions, action plan, and the details of any two activities conducted (when they conducted these, time taken, how many students were involved, what they did, what the outcome was, what feedback they received, etc.). Teachers were encouraged to conduct two activities from their action plans, reflect on their experiences, gather feedback from students and colleagues and use the Google form to share their findings.

Impact of action

As I changed my strategy, teachers didn't have to implement the entire action plan for three months. Instead, they had to conduct any two activities planned for the first month. Surprisingly, and gratifyingly, out of 110 teachers who completed the exploratory research part during the one-month CELT training, 89 successfully moved to the next stage, carrying out at least two activities from their action plans and submitting the Google forms with their responses. This was certainly a 'wow moment' in my mentoring teacher research journey. I was delighted with this accomplishment as I could mentor teachers to go a little further, push themselves a little harder and deliver a little bit more.

Here are the responses of a few teachers to some of the questions I asked in the Google form:

Question:

- How useful were these activities? What feedback did you get from the students, colleagues, parents, etc.? What changes/improvement do you see in your students? What are your reflections?

Some responses:

- *"It was very useful. Students are happy. […]. They want these kinds of activities to be conducted more often. Colleagues see a lot of differences in the students' attitude towards the language. They have started using more English words in their speech. I am trying to create an English atmosphere in the school with the help of my colleagues."*
- *"These activities are very useful to create interest among children and to make them to try to speak in English without hesitation and to build confidence among them. Students are happy to learn English by participating in activities themselves and trying to speak English without hesitation. Colleagues are also finding it interesting. Parents too are sharing their opinions that their children are trying to speak simple sentences such as 'Mother, give me food, water, etc.' Students are improving day by day in their pronunciation."*

Question:

- What challenges/difficulties did you face while implementing your action plan? How did you overcome these challenges?

Responses:

- *"The problem that I faced while implementing the action plan was that I already was lagging in completing my portions for the month as I was in the RIE training for a month. So as soon as I went back to school, the whole focus was obviously on starting off my syllabus and covering the portion. So time management was the biggest challenge for me. I was taking some extra classes for the syllabus completion and used some of the craft/leisure periods for these try out activities."*
- *"We have fresh batch for 8th and 9th Kannada Medium every year. So I met those students for the first time and I needed some time for understanding them, their knowledge in English, their ability to speak in English. This was a problem I faced in implementing these activities. However, I used some interesting brainstorming activities like rhymes, songs, some games to create interest in English language and to learn the language. I also conducted 'Introducing oneself and others' activity by giving them proper guidance and some examples along with simple sentence structures."*

Reflections on the mentoring experience

Based on my mentoring experience, I can say that exploratory research offers several advantages, including development of research skills, involvement of primary stakeholders, exploration of alternative possibilities, design of innovative curriculum plans, a deeper understanding of classroom practices, and improved overall quality of life in the language classroom.

However, action research is crucial to complete the teacher-research process as it provides evidence for change, facilitates the development of evidence-based practices, fosters the generation of theories, promotes continuous learning, enhances professional competence, positively influences student learning, and contributes to overall professional development of teachers. Therefore, as a mentor, I am happy that I could play a significant role in making teacher-research easier, more doable and more achievable for teachers. Finding out from teachers what was hindering their action research and trying out / evaluating a new strategy as a kind of exploration of my own practice was a valuable experience for me and the teachers.

Mentoring teacher-research is challenging and demanding and yet a rewarding and fulfilling experience. I am happy that I could avoid burnout and conflict and create a positive and productive mentoring relationship with the teachers, despite the constraints. I could also sustain a long-term and meaningful mentoring connection with these teacher-researchers. By renewing my mentoring practice and perspective, I could understand and address their expectations in a realistic way.

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5 Lessons learned from my first teacher-research mentoring experience

Simona Mačėnaitė

This story is about my very first try to mentor another teacher's research. I hope it resonates with fellow beginning teacher-research mentors as well as with teacher-researchers around the world as I believe that sharing similar sentiments can strengthen the community. I also believe that it is very important to be fair about how this experience unfolded for me in order for it to be relatable. So in the following paragraphs I will describe the context where I come from, give a detailed account of the mentoring process, and share my feelings and reflections about each of the steps, based on the diary entries that I wrote throughout the whole process.

Where I come from

I work as an English and Science teacher at a private primary school in Vilnius, Lithuania. It is a modern school with a focus on technology, science, and English. We work with relatively small classes of around 12–20 pupils. What's particularly important for me is that there is a strong and supportive community of teachers. As the load of work is high on all of us, we are always there for each other: we share materials, experiences, joys, sorrows, good and bad practices, teach each other new skills, invite each other to our classrooms, and so on. However, something I find lacking at the school is attention to effective teacher professional development. Teachers are encouraged to participate in workshops, lectures, and seminars

but there is no time or space for us to collectively and purposefully reflect on what we have learnt.

Community of practice

In order to fill in this gap, I initiated a community of practice at the beginning of the school year 2022–2023. Every week we would meet as a group of teachers and share our good practices as well as reflect on them through English. The goal was to improve our English skills, to bond, and to grow as teachers.

Two of the teachers in the community of practice

Having this small community proved really helpful to get teachers on board for classroom explorations. By the end of February 2023, as I had completed the Mentoring Teacher-Research EVO workshops programme, I was really inspired to try mentoring myself. Thus, I invited my colleagues to find solutions to issues in their classrooms. The fact that

we were already in the habit of meeting every week and they wouldn't have to dedicate additional time made the project sound much more doable to busy teachers.

The teacher

There were around four of us attending weekly community of practice meetings more or less regularly: three other classroom teachers and me. When I made my proposal, two of the other teachers were present and they were both receptive to the idea. However, only one of them sustained the research efforts over time, which is why the following story is about her. This teacher's name is G and she was a fourth-grade classroom teacher as well as a third year BA Early Years Pedagogy student at Vilnius University at the time.

The first meeting

The first mentoring-dedicated meeting was meant for finding an issue. I suggested writing down all the problems that teachers were facing in their classrooms, listing them in order of importance with the most pressing one at the top. G chose "Lack of friendliness among children" as the issue she wanted to deal with the most. She was struggling with children's mean comments and behaviour towards each other, which was sometimes escalating into fights.

I had planned a group discussion as a follow-up to this activity as I hoped that we could all share our thoughts and insights into what the others were struggling with. Instead, I found myself in a dialogue with G, where my role was that of leader of the conversation. This was scary and quite uncomfortable for me. I was doing my very best to not give G any advice but instead to guide her to look deeper into her issue. Eventually, I asked if she thought her learners and her colleagues saw her classroom situation the same as she did. This made G stop and think for a moment before replying that she was not sure. So we ended the discussion by agreeing that G would talk to her learners and other teachers to get their take on the pupils' behaviour, with hopes of pinpointing the actual problem.

After this first session I reflected in my diary on how I had succeeded in asking questions instead of giving my own solutions to my mentee. My conclusion was that I had failed to some extent: "*I tried to ask questions, which wouldn't be suggestions, which would help [the teachers] to get to the bottom of their issues. Still I gave suggestions*". Nevertheless, I felt that I had managed to propose a possible further step in an appropriate way: "*Even though it was my suggestion and she didn't come up with it herself, she said that she felt like she had a chance to reject it had she found it not useful*". Moreover, I was inspired by the fact that G liked my idea: "*I feel incredible that G found it useful*". Overall, despite having given a suggestion to G, I felt that the meeting had been successful ("*it all went smoothly and it was really interesting*") and I found my mentee to be motivated to continue the research ("*G seemed motivated for her homework*").

The second meeting

It took a couple of weeks for us to get together again. During that time, firstly, G had a conversation with her pupils which confirmed that there was a problem – pupils were also aware of the lack of friendliness. Secondly, another teacher suggested that the children weren't merely unfriendly but lacked empathy and emotional intelligence skills. During our meeting G shared her frustration about the situation. She listed all the things that she was already doing to help the learners be more empathetic towards each other, however, it felt like it wasn't enough. She seemed a little helpless and demotivated. For me as a mentor this was once again a challenge: How do I lead this discussion further? What do I say to guide G? Where should I guide her? How can I guide her without suggesting solutions – especially because she seems to have tried it all?

As another teacher was present during this meeting, I prompted G to ask her about the ways she approached emotional intelligence. What followed was a really fruitful discussion among the three of us about our practices, and the part the school and parents play in building skills of empathy, self-regulation, and so on. By the end of the meeting G reported having been relieved: hearing that she did not have to do it all by herself lifted the burden off her shoulders. In this sense the meeting was really useful for her.

However, in my diary I reflected on feeling stuck. I noted that G had been frustrated about her classroom situation and I was feeling very similarly about our meeting: "*I was afraid not knowing what to say so she wouldn't feel like she's at a dead end. I felt unqualified, like I couldn't help her, I myself felt at a dead end*". What helped me steer the meeting further was "*trying to hear her, to understand what's wrong, to help her see the situation from an outsider's point of view*". In spite of having found a way to make the meeting useful for G, I wasn't sure if we would proceed with the research. My mentee needed time to think about what to do next and I made a note to myself saying "*Next time I need to ask whether she wants to continue*".

The third meeting

Almost a month passed until the third meeting. During that time, G took the initiative into her own hands. When we met again she told us that she had asked her pupils to complete a questionnaire made by the Institute of Social and Emotional Development. The questionnaire was designed to show if a class would benefit from a social and emotional development programme. Results revealed that children were indeed lacking some of the abilities constituting emotional intelligence. As a result, G now had evidence to support her initial guess. To find ways to improve the situation, G had made a questionnaire for other teachers asking whether they experienced similar issues and how they dealt with them. In addition, she had decided to research the issue further as one of her university assignments. So she was reading a lot on the development of emotional intelligence, analysing pupils' answers to the questionnaire to find particular aspects they struggled with, and had planned to interview teachers to learn more about their experiences. Basically, G had embarked on a full scale research project on her own and I felt like I had completed my role as a mentor.

G summarised her experience well for me. For her, it wasn't so much about the techniques she had learnt, but about pinning the issue down. She said that after having an idea that it might be the lack of emotional intelligence among her pupils, she felt like it was solved. My mentee still hadn't found the best practices to develop emotional intelligence and the behaviour problems in the class did not disappear. Nevertheless, once she

had learned the reasons for unfriendliness among children, her perspective changed and it stopped being such a pressing issue.

In my diary I reflected on the importance of understanding the issues in our classrooms. To me, it was first and foremost a matter of agency and empowerment: "*Knowledge is power. When you know, no one can take the knowing away from you*". In addition to that, it provides relief to teachers who are facing difficulties: "*[when we know] we can then look for solutions. It's really difficult when you don't know what you're dealing with. The unknown weighs really heavy on you*". Both of these outcomes indicate the significance of classroom-based research for teachers.

What have I learned?

This first mentoring experience did not go the way I had planned at all. I had a five-meeting plan, during which we were supposed to find, explore, and define our issues, brainstorm solutions, try implementing them, and have at least one reflection session on how the solutions worked. Instead, I found my mentee either stuck and me feeling unable to help her, or her advancing from exploring the issue to looking for a solution really swiftly, jumping through at least a few steps in my plan at once. I believe that this happened because my planning was a bit idealistic and too detached from the complex and fast-paced reality of the teachers.

In addition, I had not shared my initial plan with the teachers and I think this was also a mistake. It would have been much more fruitful if I had made my vision of getting them interested in researching their own classrooms clear from the very beginning and had included them into the making of the plan. I believe in this way the research would have been more of a collaborative experience as opposed to now where I felt like an observer and a little excluded, which made me question the purpose of my role as a mentor in general.

On the bright side, I believe that it was a good thing to be flexible with my initial planning. As my mentee seemed to not need me to give her steps to follow, it makes me doubt whether sticking to a firm plan would have improved the experience. G's note on this issue was that I was present during the most important stage of her journey, asked the most important questions, as well as gave her freedom and motivated her. I am happy to

think that I gave my mentee enough space for her to go about her classroom issue the way she felt was the best and I do not regret getting rid of the initial plan very early on to focus on my mentee's needs instead.

In sum, this whole experience, which lasted for about two months, taught me how unpredictable classroom-based research could be for a mentor. I found that it is incredibly difficult to be a guide and to refrain from giving solutions, and that it is hard to find the right things to say in situations where the mentee feels stuck. However, it is really inspiring to watch a teacher becoming an expert on an issue in his/her classroom and gaining self-confidence through this process.

About the author

Simona Mačėnaitė is a DELTA-qualified English language teacher at a primary school in Vilnius, Lithuania. She has also taught English at language schools in Spain and Malta, working with teenagers and adults. Simona's background is in linguistics (MA in General Linguistics, Vilnius University) and language education (MSc in Language Education, Edinburgh University). She has been engaged in practitioner research since 2021, and has presented her work at IATEFL Research SIG conferences.

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6 When less is more: Mentoring Chinese EFL university teachers to do Exploratory Action Research

Chang Liu

In this narrative, I recount my experience as a novice mentor guiding two Chinese in-service female university teachers to do Exploratory Action Research (EAR). Eager to delve into classroom-based research and publication, these two university teachers sought my assistance. The story follows our 15-month journey, spanning from October 2020 to March 2022, during which I took on the role of mentor. During this mentorship, I not only helped them navigate the intricacies of initiating research and publishing but also embarked on a transformative journey as a novice teacher-research mentor myself.

The journey begins

Three years ago, in October 2020, a fascinating chapter began when two in-service female university teachers reached out to me, seeking my guidance as a mentor. Their shared aspiration was to conduct classroom-based research leading to publication as they had to complete the research tasks required by their university. However, they found themselves at a crossroads, uncertain about how to start this journey and navigate procedures entailed in embarking on classroom-based research.

I supported these two teachers in uncovering areas of uncertainty and conducting Exploratory Action Research to address classroom issues they encountered in the shift to online English for Academic Purposes (EAP) sessions during the pandemic.

So, the starting point of this narrative was the numerous difficulties, issues, and concerns they were facing doing online EAP amidst the pandemic. Teacher One raised concerns about several issues that emerged in her online EAP speaking sessions. Specifically, she was troubled by the lack of motivation among students to engage in speaking activities, which led to insufficient levels of active participation. Adding to her concerns was the problem of nurturing both critical thinking skills and speaking prowess among her students during these online sessions.

As for Teacher Two, she shared her reflections that students displayed a reluctance to engage with the task of planning argumentative essays during her EAP writing sessions, which were being conducted remotely due to the pandemic. Additionally, she encountered issues in enhancing students' critical thinking skills within the context of argumentative writing classes. Moreover, she was seeking solutions to improve her students' overall argumentative writing skills during these virtual sessions.

Being a guiding light

Throughout a span of 15 months, ranging from October 2020 to March 2022, I acted as a mentor and guided these two teachers in their journey of conducting EAR, all the while learning valuable lessons as a novice teacher mentor myself.

My mentorship practice involved several key strategies. Firstly, we collaboratively established a framework for regular meetings, set clear timelines, and defined channels of communication. While our primary mode of communication was online through platforms like Zoom and WeChat, out of the 28 sessions we held, 11 were face-to-face, which we conducted at times when we could meet in person in China.

Secondly, as a mentor, I guided the two teachers through a comprehensive process of exploration, refinement, and prioritization of their research topics (Smith, 2020). To facilitate their exploratory journey, I steered them towards selecting pressing and specific issues and formulating pertinent exploratory questions. Collaboratively, we delved into the intricate task of narrowing down their focus, crafting a precise trajectory that culminated in the creation of relevant research questions. My role as a beginning teacher-research mentor came to the fore, as I attempted to facilitate their path in data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

But the journey did not stop there. My mentorship extended to a strategic approach to guiding them to design action plans to address the issues they had identified. Together, we designed these plans, which were a blueprint for tackling their concerns head-on. For Teacher One, the action plans included strategies to increase the students' motivation to speak in the online speaking sessions. Teacher Two's plan centred on improving students' motivation by using pre-writing strategies effectively to plan argumentative writing during the online sessions.

Yet, despite my earnest efforts, a shadow was cast inadvertently. My well-intentioned provision of extensive learning materials – including research articles, handbooks on EAR, and insightful videos – unwittingly created a labyrinth. As a consequence, the mentees found themselves navigating a maze of resources, dedicating excessive time to reading related literature, thus losing precious hours they could have allocated to doing their individual research.

The consequence was clear: the extensive learning and reading materials, while invaluable, ultimately hindered their progress, leaving them with limited time to dedicate to implementing their own research actions. For me, this realization highlighted the importance of a balanced approach to resource-provision, a lesson that underscored the delicate equilibrium that needs to be achieved between guidance and individual exploration and implementation.

A participant-centred approach characterized the third aspect of my mentorship. I offered continuous encouragement, empathy, and actively demonstrated effective listening skills. Both my mentees and I maintained reflective journals throughout the process, facilitating the tracking of progress and fostering meaningful self-assessment. As one of my mentees noted in their journal, "The mentor's guidance and encouragement were instrumental in building my confidence in doing the classroom research". It was my first time being a mentor, and I kept reflecting on what I did well and how I could improve my mentoring practice. Another mentee expressed in her journal, "I appreciated the mentor's commitment to self-improvement; the insightful mentoring dialogues made the experience more enriching". I provided guidance that ranged from unveiling areas of uncertainty, selecting feasible and practical topics, and implementing strategies and actions, to supporting them in planning and evaluating change, as well as assisting them in disseminating and reflecting on their research. As mentioned in one of the journal entries, "The mentor's insights

helped me consider which topic I would like to prioritize and find a specific topic". I offered immediate and sustained feedback, while also assisting them in adapting their approaches based on student responses and input. Through regular meetings and discussions, we shared reflections on progress and made the necessary adjustments. As highlighted in another reflective journal, "The mentor's feedback loop was invaluable in fine-tuning our strategies". I remained a steadfast source of ongoing support and feedback as they navigated the challenges within their online speaking/writing sessions during the pandemic.

In summary, my role as a mentor involved a multi-dimensional approach, intricately weaving together the threads of effective communication, patient guidance, and participant-centred support. This holistic approach aimed to empower my mentees to adeptly navigate and address the issues and concerns inherent in the online speaking and writing sessions during the pandemic, while simultaneously enabling my own growth and learning as a fledgling teacher mentor.

Reflections on teacher-research mentoring experience as a novice mentor

Looking back on my journey as a novice teacher-research mentor, a mosaic of emotions emerges. There were moments of fear and moments of joy. In terms of fear, I often pondered how I could sustain my mentees' motivation over the long course of their research journey. Additionally, the challenge of how to best support teachers in disseminating their findings and getting those published weighed heavily on my mind.

Yet, amid these moments of fear, there were also moments of joy that emanated from multiple sources. First, from the perspective of my mentees' students, observing their heightened motivation and active participation in online speaking activities, as well as their improved use of prewriting strategies to plan argumentative writing during online writing sessions, was truly heartwarming. Second, witnessing the mentees' achievements was likewise rewarding. Teacher One successfully authored an article in an in-house journal, while Teacher Two delivered an impactful oral presentation on her EAR, yielding positive feedback. Furthermore, Teacher Two bravely submitted her paper to a peer-reviewed journal, marking an important step forward. Third, the resilience displayed by my mentees was

a source of pride for me. Their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm for the 15-month EAR journey were palpable.

Looking back on my experience as a novice teacher mentor, I have learned important lessons that I would like to discuss from two perspectives: the aspects where I succeeded and the areas I aim to improve next time around.

Regarding my strengths, I believe I have the ability to attentively listen and show genuine concern for my mentees' feelings. This approach has fostered an environment in which my mentees could feel at ease sharing their thoughts and concerns. Patient listening skills have proven helpful in facilitating their willingness to open up about their issues. Furthermore, I allocated sufficient time to guide the process of identifying a specific research topic. Navigating through the various possibilities and narrowing down the scope takes time and deliberate effort. I recognized that I needed to assertively and directly guide my mentees in this process. For instance, I prompted the teachers by eliciting their responses, recalling previous discussions, and encouraging them to reflect on their assumptions and prioritize a specific and pressing topic. Moreover, I acknowledged the importance of addressing contradictions and inconsistencies in their ideas and highlighted instances where their statements seemed contradictory, which encouraged them to clarify their thoughts and refine their research directions. By creating an open space for constructive dialogue about conflicting viewpoints, we could work collaboratively to ensure a more cohesive and well-defined research focus.

Upon careful reflection, it is evident that there are areas for improvement in my practice. Striking a balance between passive activities such as reading and the more active aspects of research implementation emerges as a crucial consideration. Looking back, it is clear that my emphasis on reading was excessive, leading to an unintended discrepancy between passive components (reading and listening) and active elements (research implementation). In my capacity as a novice mentor, I provided the two teachers with an excessive quantity of learning materials. Consequently, they found themselves overwhelmed by the recommended literature and watching videos, resulting in limited time for their individual research pursuits. This highlights the importance of maintaining a delicate balance between passive and active involvement, with a focus on prioritizing practical stages over extensive literature and handbook study.

It is noteworthy that female teachers in the Chinese context, in particular, possess a strong drive to confirm their ideas by reading widely and making

sure that their points are validated by the literature. This inclination became evident as both of my mentees were motivated to prove themselves and were hesitant to admit when they felt overwhelmed by the excessive amount of reading materials. More importantly, this issue could become a disadvantage when my two university-level mentees pursue publication in the future, as their enthusiasm for reading could overshadow the vital aspect of hands-on research implementation. Therefore, the adjustment I aim for revolves around achieving a more optimal equilibrium between theory and practice, centring on tangible and actionable stages.

In conclusion, my journey as a novice mentor, guiding Chinese EFL in-service university teachers in their engagement with EAR, has been a revealing experience of growth and exploration. This narrative has traced the story of my transformative evolution from an uncertain and inexperienced mentor to a more confident guide fostering meaningful change and innovation. From this, a clear portrait emerges - one of collaborative learning, adaptive mentorship, and the pursuit of balanced exploration. As I reflect upon the multifaceted dimensions of this journey – encompassing challenges, triumphs, and invaluable lessons – I am committed to further refining my mentoring approach and practice. And as I embark on the next stage of my mentoring teacher-research journey, I am guided by an ongoing commitment to nurturing an environment where growth flourishes, challenges inspire innovation, and the beacon of shared success guides the way.

Reference

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About the author

Chang Liu gained her PhD at Newcastle University, UK, focusing on integrating thinking skills into English language teaching. She has a background in EFL teaching at a Chinese university and in work with Edinburgh Napier University. Chang has been active as a graduate teaching assistant, research associate, peer mentor, senior exam invigilator and editor for the journal *ARECLS*, and she is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

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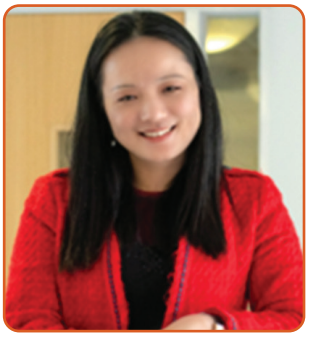
7 How I sustained teachers' motivation and engagement in a long-term teacher-research program



Meifang Zhuo

Context

This story of sustaining teachers' motivation and engagement is situated in a one-year teacher-research program, which is also my PhD project at the University of Warwick in the UK. This project is a combination of three workshops, mentoring sessions and two cycles of teachers' classroom research practice. In each of the three workshops, teachers learned a new form of teacher-research (exploratory practice in Workshop 1, action research in Workshop 2 and exploratory action research in Workshop 3). Teachers attempted exploratory practice after Workshop 1 and action research after Workshop 2 and shared their research practice in Workshop 2 and Workshop 3, respectively, all supported by mentoring sessions. Eleven experienced Chinese high school English teacher participants (labeled as Teacher 1 to Teacher 11 in this writing), with an average of around 18 years of teaching experience, have been involved in this project since August 2022. The teachers showed great enthusiasm in Workshop 1 and there were active discussions daily in our virtual community.

Issue

However, around the time for Workshop 2 (by the end of 2022) when the teachers were supposed to share their classroom research, their enthusiasm for the project seemed to decline and the interactions in our teacher

community were found to be greatly reduced. The teachers seemed to be gradually drifting away and showed less interest and confidence in their teacher-research engagement, which disrupted the original project agenda and required me to reschedule the next items on the project list.

Measures

It was imperative for me to take measures to address this issue, not only for the sake of completing my own research project but also for the better learning result of the participant teachers. Here are the six measures I took to tackle the situation:

First, enhancing ways of communicating with teachers. The higher the quality of communication within our research project is, the more likely teachers' motivation in research engagement is sustained. I examined my ways of communicating as a mentor against the recommended ways of mentoring (Smith, 2020). I found that I had adopted all the proposed approaches, including eliciting, asking for clarification, asking for deeper meaning, paraphrasing, presenting alternatives and structuring/guiding to action but not in a conscious way (Zhuo, 2023). Since this discovery, I have employed these approaches more strategically to offer teachers a better experience in the research project.

Second, sharing opportunities for a sense of achievement. When the issue arose, teachers had finished their first cycle of classroom research and it was time for them to disseminate their research. Concurrently, the annual international Teachers Research! Conference (Göktürk Sağlam et al., 2023) held by IATEFL Research SIG was calling on teachers around the world to share their research. Therefore, this opportunity was introduced to my teachers. Although my teachers had no conference presentation experience, let alone presenting to an international audience in English, they embraced this opportunity enthusiastically.

Third, utilizing the power of positive peer pressure and peer collaboration. I found that teachers chose to keep silent and not to reply to my messages when they were reminded again and again of their overdue project tasks. However, I also found that when teachers learned the progress of their peers and realized that they were left behind, they usually attempted to finish the tasks soon afterwards, as Teacher 1 pointed out in her reflection on the impact of peers on her motivation and action:

> *"My motivation went up every time our team shared the research practice for the reason that listening to what others had achieved activated my action timely."*

Therefore, I utilized the positive impact of peer pressure to sustain teachers' engagement in the project. Additionally, I encouraged teachers to carry out collaborative research if their research topics shared similarities. By such means, teachers in the project came to make more use of peer support and were more likely to keep in line with the project agenda.

Fourth, reiterating the importance of practising reflective teaching. Without constant reflection on what we have learned and why we are learning, it is easy to feel lost during a long-term learning journey. Hence, teachers were advised to keep a reflective teaching journal at the beginning of this project. However, during the mentoring session before Workshop 2, most teachers confessed that they had failed to keep the journal due to a lack of the habit and their busy working schedule. To counteract the problem, I reiterated the significance of being reflective in my following interactions with the teachers but this time I advised them to simply note down one or two points relating to knowledge they were gaining from the research project.

Fifth, encouraging teachers' initiatives within our teacher community. After the Teachers Research! Online 2023 Conference, one of the teachers proposed that they should collect all the conference posters online and put them into one document, for the convenience of studying the posters further in detail offline. I believed that such an initiative would not only improve the teachers' own understanding of teacher-research but also would enable them to see the power of teacher-research during the process. Therefore, I praised this initiative and helped to allocate the tasks among the teachers in the project.

Sixth, adjusting my mentality as a mentor. When teachers seemed to be detached from this project, I tended to question myself and doubt my ability to facilitate such a teacher-research project as well as my role as a teacher-research mentor. Besides, I could not help but question the participants in my mind as well, due to the discrepancy between the goal they desired to achieve and the efforts they were willing to make. Such

a mentality as a mentor in turn not only depressed my own motivation in this project but also prompted me to move towards judge-mentoring. After communicating with my supervisor and other experienced teacher-research mentors and revisiting my own thinking for initiating such a project, I realized that teachers' lack of motivation and engagement was not an uncommon issue in teacher-research projects and my role as a mentor was to provide support in the best way that I could. But the decision to learn or not to learn was totally in the hands of the teachers. Therefore, I adjusted my mentality as a mentor and learned to make peace with myself and my teacher mentees.

Results

As a result of the efforts described above, the level of teachers' motivation and engagement in this one-year research project has been largely sustained. Specifically, at the time of writing (July, 2023), in other words, at the end of the teacher-research project, none of the 11 teachers have quit and the majority of them still remain active participants in this project. Here are two direct quotes as examples of teachers' positive thinking about their engagement in the project despite challenges:

> *"This project to me was like a special journey. Not only did I broaden my horizons, but I also gained valuable research experience and precious friendships. And also, inevitably I came across some challenges in the process. All in all, I felt lucky to join in this project."* (Teacher 2)

> *"I am very happy to participate in this project* [...] *Over the course of a year, I experienced pressure and thought about giving up, but I am glad that I persevered in the end."* (Teacher 4, translated from Chinese)

Additionally, seven teachers have made an attempt to write up their classroom research for publication, two of whom have already published an article on their classroom research in an internationally acknowledged teacher magazine, *Modern English Teacher* (Tang, 2022; Guo, 2023), and one has co-authored and published her classroom research with me in *TESOL Journal* (Zhuo & Huang, 2023).

Regarding the direct results of the measures above, taking them one by one:

First, I have been able to enjoy more purposeful and smoother communication with the teachers by strategically using the recommended ways of communicating to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of each participant teacher;

Second, all the six of the teachers who attended the IATEFL Teachers Research! Online 2023 Conference gave very positive feedback on how this experience has enhanced their confidence in research engagement and deepened their understanding of teaching and teacher-research;

Third, all the teachers have been continuously inspired and encouraged by their peers' progress and have enjoyed the companionship to move forward together;

Fourth, some teachers reported that being reflective in the classroom has enabled them to see the connection between the theories they learned in the project and real classroom issues and thus appreciate the value of the project experience more;

Fifth, the teacher who took the initiative to collect conference posters has realized how challenging it can be to initiate a project among a group of busy teachers and thus came to empathize more with me and be even more cooperative during the project;

Sixth, I have developed a more objective view of teachers' engagement in this research project. Not only do I have more understanding and patience regarding teachers' recurring 'disappearance' and continuous delay in finishing the expected tasks but also I could sincerely empathize with them and respect their decisions.

As a whole, the teachers have gradually come to understand the importance of following a research agenda for their own learning purposes and of taking responsibility for their own growth, although sometimes they also admitted that they still needed the push from me to maintain a habit of continuous effort.

Final reflections

I used to beat myself up often for the teachers' low efficiency or lack of engagement in teacher-research and doubt whether I was a qualified teacher mentor at all. After exploring the issue, I have realized that apparent

lack of engagement is a common issue in almost all teacher-research programs, and nothing can change the reality of teachers' busy working lives. The secret to successful teacher mentoring is multi-faceted and it requires effort from both the mentors and their mentees. A mentor who has a thorough knowledge of popular ways to do teacher-research and has a clear purpose and plans to share and support teachers to research their own classrooms is already welcome, although positive qualities like patience, empathy, and skillful communication make mentoring work more easily for both sides. A mentee should cherish the opportunity and take their own responsibility to learn seriously if professional growth in doing teacher-research or more publications is what they desire, although the busy nature of professional life is indeed an issue. Even though this story indicates that, indeed, there are measures mentors can take to help sustain mentees' motivation and engagement during a long-term teacher-research project, the mentor–mentee relationship can only flourish when the two sides are working on it together. Teachers can benefit the most from a teacher-research project if they are as devoted as their mentor in following the research agenda, as Teacher 3 recommended at the end of this project:

> *"Doing research and reflection is assumed to create depth of knowledge and meaning for both the self and those practiced upon, so actively participate in the project and carry out at least one piece of research will benefit a lot for professional development."*

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8 Empowering educators through mentoring: A journey of transformation

Vinayadhar Raju

As an educator and teacher trainer in Telangana, India, my path to mentoring was marked by a deep desire to make a lasting impact on the lives of fellow teachers and students alike. In 2018, I embarked on a transformative journey as part of a classroom-based action research project during the EVO online course, laying the foundation for a rewarding and enlightening mentoring experience. In this article, I will recount my personal story of mentoring, reflecting on the challenges I faced, the strategies I employed to overcome them, and the profound lessons I learned

Unveiling the setting

I am a teacher and teacher trainer based in Telangana, India. My fellow mentors and teacher-researchers also work in Telangana's government secondary schools, actively participating as resource persons in both state-level and district-level in-service teacher training programs. Our schools serve students from rural backgrounds and economically disadvantaged sections of society. Instruction is primarily carried out in Telugu and English, although in some schools the medium of instruction is exclusively Telugu.

In 2019–20, I took part as a mentor in ARMS (Action Research Mentoring Scheme), a project sponsored by the British Council to encourage teachers to take up classroom-based action research to address classroom problems. Following this, I led a project for ELTA-English Language

Teachers Association-Telangana which was awarded funding by the A.S. Hornby Educational Trust to mentor teachers to take up action research and develop a community of practice. This was initiated in 2020 and successfully completed in 2022. In this chapter I reflect on this three-year period of activity as a mentor.

Genesis of my mentoring journey and the initial recruitment drive

My journey as a mentor began when I realized that many teachers in my region were not prioritizing professional development due to heavy curriculum demands. This presented a unique opportunity to inspire a passion for growth among educators in my community. To kickstart my first mentoring project (2019–20), I decided to involve teachers from my local area. I created a Google form and shared it within a WhatsApp group, inviting educators to share their interests and insights through a questionnaire. Armed with these valuable details, I prepared my application for the ARMS mentoring project in 2019. The moment I received the confirmation email from the British Council team, I knew my vision had been validated.

Challenges and roadblocks

Every journey comes with its share of challenges, and mine was no exception. I faced several hurdles that tested my resolve and creativity as a mentor:

- *Time management:* Balancing teaching responsibilities and project involvement can be a real time management challenge for teachers, even though the enthusiasm generated by the British Council project award inspired them to participate at first.
- *Teacher motivation:* Maintaining teachers' excitement and motivation to participate was an uphill battle. Many agreed to deadlines but struggled to meet them.
- *Understanding Exploratory Action Research:* Some teachers had previous experience with academic research, which led them to dive straight into the action phase. This haste often meant they bypassed the crucial exploratory stage.

- *Belief systems:* Teachers came with preconceived beliefs about teaching and learning, which sometimes hindered their willingness to explore new methodologies.
- *Reflective note submission:* Encouraging teachers to submit reflective notes proved challenging, as writing was a daunting task for many.

The solutions I developed were:

- *Navigating the time constraints:* The challenge of time management demanded innovative solutions. To keep our project on track, I meticulously designed a project timeline, ensuring that every step was well-orchestrated.
- *Keeping the flame of teacher motivation alive:* I was determined to find a solution to motivate teachers, and I found it by organizing regular Zoom check-in sessions for showcasing their progress. These sessions not only maintained their enthusiasm, providing much-needed motivation to these busy teachers, but also nurtured a sense of unity and friendship among the participants.
- *Nurturing an understanding of exploratory action research:* Understanding the importance of the exploratory phase was critical. To counter rushing into the action phase, I engaged in continuous interaction *and guidance to help teacher-researchers appreciate the significance of exploration.*
- *Challenging deep-rooted belief systems:* Teacher belief systems were deeply ingrained and often posed a significant hurdle. Changing these beliefs required patience and time. However, I kept believing that our classroom-based exploratory research could offer a transformative path.
- *Structured reflection:* To address the challenge of reflective note submissions, I introduced structured reflective questions and set deadlines.

What did I learn as a mentor? Reflecting on the overall experience

My mentoring experiences taught me valuable lessons that will guide my future endeavors as a mentor. These lessons extend beyond the immediate

context of teacher-researchers' benefits and focus more on my growth as a mentor.

- *Communication is key:* I learned that effective communication is fundamental to successful mentoring. Using platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom, and Google Forms made communication convenient and accessible, ensuring that mentor–mentee interactions remained productive and supportive.
- *Personal interaction plays a pivotal role:* While some teacher-researchers initially leaped into the action phase, I was able to encourage them to pause and delve deeper into exploration, via one-to-one interaction.
- *Flexibility matters:* It's important to be flexible with project timelines and deadlines when working with busy teachers. Being understanding and making adjustments to their schedules makes mentoring a better experience.
- *Persistence pays off:* Motivating teachers can be a challenging and ongoing process. While some struggled to send reflective notes, providing them with reflective questions and deadlines helped to overcome this hurdle. Persistence in fostering reflection is key.

Participants in the ELTA-Telangana project

Other lessons and outcomes

- *Embracing technology as a catalyst:* The strategic use of technology significantly enhanced our mentoring process. Platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom, Google Meets, Google Forms, and collaborative documents streamlined communication, data collection, and project management, saving time and resources. WhatsApp groups facilitated asynchronous communication, making it easier for participants to engage. Zoom meetings and Google Meets were indispensable for rehearsals and progress presentations, while screen recording allowed for peer feedback, fostering a sense of community and collaboration. Google Forms streamlined data collection and analysis, while collaborative documents and Google Drive served as online repositories for project-related materials.
- *Documenting skills:* Prior to our dissemination event, we organized rehearsal sessions online via Zoom. These sessions significantly boosted the confidence of my Teacher-Researchers (TRs). It's worth noting that many teachers, including myself, were not accustomed to documenting classroom practices. However, this project instilled the habit of thorough documentation and report writing in both me and my TRs. This transformation is expected to shape them into reflective teachers in the future, ultimately helping them evolve into exemplary educators.
- *Changing perceptions:* One of the most profound lessons I learned was the transformative power of exploratory action research. At the outset of the project, teachers expressed frustration about students' behavior and academic performance. They described challenges such as students' inability to read in their mother tongue and disruptive behavior in the classroom. However, they shifted overall from complaining about problems to actively seeking solutions. Their changed perceptions inspired me to remain patient and open-minded as a mentor. A valuable insight gained during our project was the idea that change often lies in our own hands. Initially, teacher-researchers frequently voiced complaints about students, textbooks, and educational systems. They began to actively seek

solutions within their capabilities, shifting from a negative outlook to a more constructive one. As the project progressed, teachers underwent a transformation in their attitudes. They realized the importance of not blaming students and instead focused on self-improvement to understand their learners' challenges better. Teachers also noticed positive changes in students' reading abilities and performance. Exploratory action research played a pivotal role in reshaping our thinking. Teacher-researchers engaged in a process of unlearning and relearning their beliefs, effectively redesigning their thought processes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my mentoring experience was a transformative odyssey, one that enriched me as a mentor and teacher. It provided profound insights into project planning, people management, and the collection of evidence of learning. Most importantly, it underscored the transformative power of exploratory action research as a catalyst for teacher development. Work culture also underwent a significant transformation. Collaboration among colleagues within the same institution initially faced some challenges, with complaints being voiced. By the project's end, participants reported a shift towards collaborative teamwork, highlighting their ability to work together effectively.

The journey itself emerged as more significant than the destination. Even if some teacher-researchers couldn't complete their projects within the set deadlines, they still benefited from exploring their classroom challenges.

Changing perspectives emerged as a solution to many problems. The project led most participants to adopt a new outlook on various aspects of teaching, fostering a positive attitude toward their profession and students. They began approaching problems from diverse angles.

In a world where education serves as the cornerstone of progress, mentoring plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of teaching. The lessons I've learned on this journey will continue to guide me in future mentoring endeavors. As educators, it is our responsibility to empower fellow teachers to explore, innovate, and evolve, ultimately contributing to a brighter future for our students and communities.

As I look back on my mentoring journey, I am grateful for the opportunity to have been part of such a transformative experience. The challenges we faced and the victories we achieved have left an indelible mark on my journey as an educator and mentor. In the end, it is the power of mentoring and the dedication of teachers that drive positive change in education.

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About the author

Vinayadhar Raju, an educator at ZPHS Mudimanikyam in Karimnagar in India, is the General Secretary of ELTA Telangana. He has engaged in various British Council projects and has showcased his teaching expertise globally, including via the Fulbright TEA program. Under the mentorship of Santosh Mahapatra at BITS Hyderabad, he conducted his own exploratory action research and subsequently mentored other teachers in various initiatives. Vinayadhar is dedicated to innovation and teacher development and he aspires to shape language education effectively at ZPHS Mudimanikyam.

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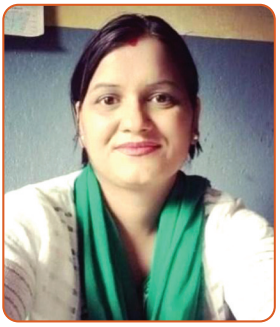
9 Establishing and maintaining rapport while mentoring Exploratory Action Research

Vanita Chopra and Gyanu Dahal



During an exploratory action research (EAR) mentoring scheme supported by British Council Thailand (August 2022–March 2023), we mentored 16 Thai primary and secondary school teachers from both urban and rural settings in two groups of eight teachers each. With the guidance of a senior mentor, our role was to guide these teachers in their journey of conducting EAR in their classrooms. One important aspect of this project was that we were mentoring teachers from cultural and educational contexts that were different from our own. Following on from our mentoring of teachers in the British Council's Action Research and Mentoring Scheme (ARMS) in our home countries of India (Vanita) and Nepal (Gyanu), we were grateful for this new opportunity to enhance our knowledge and skills, move beyond our own contexts and actively engage with a diverse range of pedagogical viewpoints.

We were filled with enthusiasm and anticipation as we were each given the unique opportunity to collaborate with a group of teachers from a different country and culture. The two of us engaged in regular communication with one another and exchanged notes and advice to aid the teachers. Together, we innovated to assist them in assessing their teaching and classroom practices, identifying areas for improvement, and implementing new actions. The mentoring sessions were conducted through several online platforms, such as Zoom, Line, WhatsApp, and Google Docs.

Challenges – and strategies to re-engage the teachers

The British Council provided invaluable project support and we received a detailed project plan and timeline. However, the teachers faced distinct challenges. Some of them struggled to understand what was required at particular stages of exploratory action research, such as data collection, design of research tools and poster creation, while others fought with self-doubt and a noticeable lack of confidence. Here, we highlight the key challenges that we faced as mentors and describe the approaches we adopted to address them.

The most important initial challenge we faced concerned the need to create strong rapport with the teachers. We were aware that building a good understanding with mentee teachers is a crucial aspect of the mentoring process to ensure sustained motivation and address potential cultural differences effectively. However, one difficulty was that we were only included in this online mentoring program after the teachers had already begun to formulate their research questions: that is, were not present in the training sessions designed for the teachers to assist them in refining their research topics and starting to develop their exploratory questions. A second problem was the absence of in-person interactions: due to the physical distance, we had to utilise digital platforms such as Line, WhatsApp, and Zoom, and this posed a significant challenge in establishing rapport and trust.

Another challenge we encountered was insufficient initial interaction between us and the teacher mentees. We were aware that building rapport online is a time-consuming process: as Ersin and Atay (2021) found, establishing rapport between mentors and mentees is a longer process in online mentoring compared to in-person interactions. Developing a strong connection with the mentee teachers at the outset of the project was essential. However, due to time constraints, we were unable to allocate enough time to them. As a result of our delayed arrival in the project, we encountered problems of our own unfamiliarity with teachers' classroom settings, the complex dynamics within them, and the challenges they faced. After two or three discussions, during which we reacquainted teachers with the project goals and the EAR process, a few teachers who had previously been available through Zoom, email, Line, or WhatsApp suddenly stopped

participating in the online meetings and ended all communication. We couldn't help but wonder what could have triggered this abrupt break-off of communication.

A final challenge was the varying progress of those teachers who remained involved in the project – it became evident that some of the teachers were unable to meet the designated deadlines. The challenge seemed to arise not from a lack of effort or dedication but rather from the complex nature of their everyday responsibilities. The teachers, who were at first united in their commitment to guiding and supporting each other, now faced self-doubt and uncertainty about their ability to make a meaningful impact. At this juncture, both of us chose to build up a nurturing and safe environment by demonstrating empathy towards the concerns of these teachers and yet establishing clear expectations. When we encountered issues with mentoring the teachers, we would get together with the senior mentor to discuss and work through these difficulties.

To address the above challenges as they arose, we, as mentors, together determined that increasing our engagement with the mentees was necessary to establish a sense of mutual support and guidance. Initially, a Line app group was established for mentee teachers to facilitate easily accessible and efficient communication. We also engaged in informal conversations with the teachers via Zoom, creating a sense of connection and assuring them that they were not alone in their challenges. This initiated a process of mutual disclosure, the exchanging of private stories and deriving comfort from the understanding and compassion of their peers. Through this newly established connection, the teachers realised that their difficulties were not impossible to overcome. They discovered that through mutual support, they could revive their dwindling motivation. Communication was maintained through messaging, emails, and regular calls.

Nevertheless, there seemed to be a void in the interaction. As mentioned above, we encountered difficulties in conducting our mentoring sessions due to a lack of time to establish initial expectations with our mentees and a limited understanding of their context and background. To address this challenge, we increased our one-to-one and group interactions with the teachers beyond the scope of the assigned project. We adjusted our schedules to accommodate their availability, demonstrated empathy and active listening skills, acknowledged their efforts, and motivated them by discussing their achievements at particular points in time. For the mentee

teachers to hear about other's research experiences, we did pair and group mentoring. The participants acknowledged the value of group meetings, as they found inspiration through the insights shared by their peer researchers.

The *Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (2018) offered valuable insights from other mentors' experiences, serving as a significant source of guidance for both of us. We used the handbook throughout the teacher-research project. Teachers were asked to read chapters that were relevant to their research stage. This was followed by a task and a subsequent discussion. For instance, as these teachers were novices at conducting research, data collection and analysis were entirely new to them. Therefore, the handbook was extremely helpful when we assigned them the task of matching research questions to appropriate data types. In addition, we consulted the handbook to assist teachers in analysing both qualitative and quantitative data. The teachers experienced a strong sense of support and felt comfortable expressing their doubts and asking questions of us.

A group mentoring session that focused on disseminating findings and creating posters was also highly beneficial. We provided examples of posters made by previous mentees from the handbook. The participants showed confidence when providing their suggestions and perspectives on the posters, and they displayed an ability to utilise them as resources for their own creations. Throughout our mentoring conversations with the mentee teachers, we utilised a range of techniques such as elicitation, questioning, paraphrasing, and presenting alternatives. These strategies were employed to enrich our dialogue and enhance our mentoring discussions, ensuring that our primary focus on building and sustaining mutual understanding between mentor and mentee was not neglected.

What were the results of this approach?

Despite all the challenges and difficulties described above, there were also moments of pure joy and an overwhelming sense of achievement. We believe that meeting regularly with these teachers was essential. During these discussions, many teachers shared their classroom 'aha' moments. Their faces lit up as we connected online, excitedly awaiting their chance to speak. One by one, they recounted their experiences, their voices filled with a new-found confidence. The virtual Zoom room buzzed with energy as teachers shared their unique stories. They spoke of those magical moments when a lesson plan came to life, when a student's eyes lit up

with understanding, or when a challenging concept finally clicked. These 'aha' moments were like sparks of inspiration that ignited their passion for teaching. One of the teachers (James) from Vanita's group said:

> *"One-to-one mentoring helped me focus on my regular schoolwork. Vanita helped me organise my time and calendar. She always provided structured and timely feedback. She also gave me innovative pedagogical ideas and emailed me the necessary materials. EAR helped me address my students' issues by presenting me with a fresh perspective on research conducted in the classroom. It taught me how to investigate and address classroom issues with precise information and implement action plans."*

We ourselves gained valuable insights during this project. As we navigated the project's complexities, we realised the importance of effective communication and time management. Effective communication facilitates collaboration and progress by bridging gaps. It also promotes the exchange of ideas, facilitates the resolution of questions, and aids in the resolution of conflicts. In just one further piece of feedback, a teacher from Gyanu's group expressed pride in their EAR project, perceiving it as a significant accomplishment in their career. The teacher added,

> *"I had initial concerns about participating in the project. Your support made things easier and improved collaboration. Your guidance and encouragement kept me on course despite the challenges. I managed timelines and understood EAR-related materials better using your strategy, which fit my busy teaching schedule as well. You've been a great mentor."*

Conclusion

As a result of our experience, we both wish to continue to enhance our mentoring skills and strive towards personal growth, ultimately becoming better versions of ourselves. This project has led to our being invited to be lead mentors in the second year of the mentoring scheme in Thailand. This year (2024), we have witnessed the significant development of six of our Thai mentee teachers, who have effectively transitioned into mentoring roles themselves. These 'mentor trainees' are currently offering guidance and support to teachers in different school settings. Overall, this project

has successfully facilitated the growth and expansion of an exploratory action research community of practice in Thailand.

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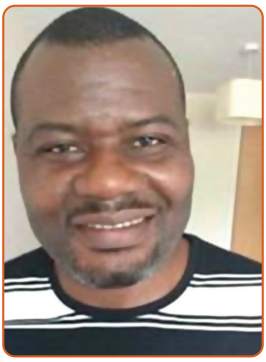
10 Mentoring a large group of teachers in Africa: A journey into myself



Eric Ekembe

Introduction

In this story, I recall my first experience of mentoring teachers in Cameroon and how these teachers' experience became a source of inspiration to a much larger group of other teachers who had no previous knowledge of teacher-research. I explain the challenges I encountered and how I found the solutions to them.

The story started with six teachers I interacted with about their teaching experiences and the issues they were facing in their classrooms. Within this period of interaction, there were no queries about teacher-research from the teachers in question. However, through naturally occurring dialogues, we agreed to explore ways through which they could find solutions to their classroom challenges and this led them to carrying out teacher-research projects. In this story, though, I want to focus not on them but on what happened after they had finished their projects, and how hearing about these projects inspired a much larger group of African teachers.

The context of mentoring

In May 2022, my six mentees – all Cameroonians – were invited to present their teacher-research projects at a hybrid conference supported by IATEFL Research SIG which I organized at my institution, the

Higher Teacher Training College Yaounde. The rationale behind the conference was to increase awareness of teacher-research, given that among African teachers of English this was still only rarely talked about. The conference was equally intended to start dialogues between teacher training institutions and the Research Group of CAMELTA (Cameroon English Language and Literature Teachers' Association) on ways of exploring mutual collaboration, support and feedback. Teachers from Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mali participated online, joining the teachers from Cameroon.

The teacher-research projects shared during the event inspired other conference participants, who decided they would commit themselves to teacher-research by signing up to be mentored to engage in new teacher-research projects. Thus, the mentoring context was to be quite diverse, comprising teachers from three African countries apart from Cameroon.

Dealing with a large group

Over 72 teachers signed up and I created a WhatsApp group for running the group. I found it difficult to close the gates to teachers wishing to join as I thought the more they were, the greater and faster would be the sensitization to teacher-research across Africa. First, I asked the teachers who had signed up for the project to reflect on the presentations at the conference and to share what they had found interesting about the teacher-research projects, in particular. There were many responses in the WhatsApp group and these took me a long time to respond to. Apart from making me wonder how to manage the huge number of responses, I realized from these messages that the majority of the teachers who had taken part in the conference had not clearly understood what teacher-research is. My next idea was to start a further discussion with them, eliciting their classroom issues before designing a mentoring scheme.

In this WhatsApp discussion, I received many questions from teachers seeking further clarification about what teacher-research is about, which was something I hadn't expected – I had not foreseen that I would be dealing with 72 individual problems because I had mistakenly thought

it would be easy for the teachers to understand what they were going to be involved in. After WhatsApp meetings where I interacted with many individual teachers, trying to get them to understand what teacher-research was all about, I decided I might succeed better if I organized webinars, and I settled on designing a series of online encounters. I then shared a schedule, hoping we could all agree on timelines and deliverables. As we gradually moved from my webinar-based reintroduction to teacher-research to discussing classroom challenges and translating the challenges into research topics, many of the participants, especially from Mali, Congo, and Sierra Leone became inactive. I thought that it would be good to let them go, as I was convinced they would come back when they found their fellows successful. Again, I was struggling with numbers and found this a relief. Although this happened, I still found myself running a large group and I had to reflect further on how I would manage it. The solution I hit upon was to structure the larger group into teams.

Structuring the group into teams

My strategies were developed from the circumstances I faced and were not based on any universally established knowledge base. To address the large cohort issue, I decided to restructure the group into five teams, each one with a coordinator and a rapporteur:

No.	Team Name	Team Coordinator	Team rapporteur
1	Classroom Research	Musa (Sierra Leone)	Faustino Ombani (DR Congo)
2	Classroom-Based Research	Teukam Sandra (Cameroon)	Melanie Kirhkishi (Cameroon)
3	Game Changer	Dr Nicole Menoh (Cameroon)	Ernest Nzille (Cameroon)
4	Active Researchers	Lilian Nunyonga (Cameroon)	Elvis Njuwani (Cameroon)
5	Building Better Teacher	Yareh Turay (Sierra Leone)	Brindy Belinga (Cameroon)

While the primary purpose for structuring the group into teams was to avoid having to deal with many questions coming from so many mentees at the same time, the complication that came with this was that I had to ensure each team leader had enough competence to create content and dynamism in their team while, at the same time, continuing to respond appropriately to the entire group's expectations. It was challenging to negotiate ways of equipping the team leaders with the skills necessary to sustain and keep their teams alive. I found myself constantly checking the nature of communication in the various teams and talking one-to-one with team leaders to ensure they were providing appropriate feedback to their respective group members. For content, I used insights from existing literature on mentoring teachers (e.g., Molina, 2021; Xerri, 2022). Through interacting with the team leaders, I realized I had, in a sense, doubled my task although seeing the way some of them developed over time proved to be rewarding. From this, I got insights into the challenges involved in coaching mentees to develop autonomy and be able to take leadership responsibilities.

Overall management of the mentoring

Team leaders played a management function, not a direct mentoring role, which remained my responsibility. They facilitated communication between me and the mentees, helping me manage the overall group size, and reinforced concepts discussed in the webinars. The process of electing team leaders was democratic, and they were given the latitude to invent ways to make their groups more dynamic and active.

I didn't set deadlines because everyone had different challenges and work paces. Instead, I communicated interpersonally and gave encouragement to be flexible. I arranged online conferences where group leaders identified those who were ready to share. Presenting projects and receiving feedback from peers made the exercise appealing. The presentations also enabled other teachers to reflect and perhaps reach the target milestones earlier than otherwise. The group culture seemed to make completing research stages attractive since participants wanted to keep pace with what was going on, and strong social bonds were created among mentees. They showcased aspects of their culture in webinars, reducing tension and strengthening bonds in the whole group.

Guiding vs. 'telling'

In my own mentoring, a serious challenge that I faced was making use of the techniques of scaffolding suggested by Smith (2020). I discovered that, being used to a world of transmission pedagogy in which we were told what was right and good and tended to uncritically consume it, it was challenging to 'scaffold' without necessarily 'telling' mentees what they had to do or providing direct feedback. First, I had to consciously walk myself away from the construct of transmission pedagogy to be able to offer relevant support in appropriate ways. Generally, I think I allowed mentees to translate their classroom challenge into a topic without necessarily telling them, for example, that what they had presented as a topic was not useful or manageable enough. Not all problems could be investigated through questionnaires, though the mentees tended to have a quantitative perspective towards data collection, and so I helped my mentees settle on other means of data elicitation. In these early stages, I made good use of scaffolding to mentor the teachers, but found it challenging to keep this up consistently. My mentees complained about not being told what to do and the process being time-consuming. I found myself reverting to telling them what to do during the data analysis phase.

So, overall, guiding as opposed to 'telling' remained a challenge as the participants were more inclined towards transmission pedagogy and direct instruction rather than extended dialogues. Also, the cultural ecology influenced their perception of the time we had available. Lack of familiarity with reflective practice or other forms of professional development seemed to make it difficult for teachers to allocate specific time for research.

What I learned from the experience and where I go from here

One of the major lessons learnt in this process was that having a manageable number of mentees and creating opportunities to reflect on progress are more effective than attempting to mentor a large group. Beyond that, mentoring team leaders to process tasks and collaborate with their team members can potentially instil confidence and lead to sustainable outputs. Doing so could reduce the need for webinars, especially if internet connectivity is an issue. To create more opportunities in future, I would

like to prepare sessions with leaders and use flipped classroom strategies for mentees to develop their knowledge. This would reduce my influence and create space for self-development.

Secondly, by allowing participants to develop their competencies at a flexible pace and asking specific members to lead sessions, I observed they learned faster and saw teacher-research as not an additional workload. Mentoring via various modes is a necessary component for conceptualizing teacher-research in Cameroon.

Conclusions

In sum, although initially I was fearful about my mentees' ability to collect and analyse data, I had underestimated their potential as well as my own resilience as their mentor. I used successful mentees to inspire others, and through patience and flexibility, I learned to blend personal communication, WhatsApp meetings, and Zoom presentations to mediate group dynamics. Personal communication through WhatsApp helped me connect closely with individual mentees and effectively scaffold their progress, while the team system supported me in the management of the whole process.

Mentoring African teachers to carry out teacher-research can be challenging due to their dependence on mentors and the hierarchical knowledge generation context in which they operate. This shows that we should avoid universal prescriptions about mentoring and fully acknowledge contextual factors in mentoring. In this narrative, I showed how I developed a team-based approach – not as a mentor knowing everything in advance but as a learner questioning myself throughout.

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About the author

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11 Reflecting collaboratively on teacher-research mentoring through a mentors' journal

Ruben Mazzei
and
Mariana Serra

Background

Our story describes a multi-layered research project at the College of Psychology, University of Buenos Aires which ran from July to December 2021. The project involved mentoring of teachers in the English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) and Academic Literacies courses to research their online teaching practices while we examined our own mentoring practices. To start with, we advertised our project by inviting the teachers responsible for these courses to take part. Five teachers responded positively to our invitation to participate voluntarily and they formed two teams of teachers. In one team were Cecilia and Silvia, who were materials designers/ teacher development coordinators (*Jefes de Trabajos Prácticos*), and David, who was a course teacher. In the other team were Carlos and Oscar, who were course teachers teaching online on the university platform. To guide these teachers through the exploratory and action research processes, one of us (Ruben) took on the role of mentor, while Mariana did not mentor directly (apart from as a co-facilitator of workshops) but acted as a kind of peer-coach for Ruben while learning from him more about mentoring in the university ESAP context. Ruben directly mentored the two teams of teachers as he was the coordinator of their courses and, thus, he knew the teachers' professional histories, the approach of the course, the materials, tasks and assessment methods. Mariana, as an external mentor (not being part of the course staff), was eager to learn more about the different aspects

of teachers' explorations/research. She also guided Ruben as his peer-coach by, for example, pointing out details he might have overlooked during his mentoring, and in this sense she was a 'co-mentor'.

The two teams of teachers researched the following: Cecilia, Silvia and David researched online teaching during the pandemic, which created a very rich setting to explore a wealth of written information about classroom interactions between students and between students and teachers, with a focus on the design of assignment instructions as a genre; Carlos and Oscar explored widening the range of exposure of students to the target language by integrating listening comprehension activities in different genres in the ESAP and academic literacies courses.

The beginning of our journey together

We organised an online orientation session at the beginning of July 2021 during which we introduced the project with a tentative timeline and described exploratory action research (EAR) briefly, while the mentees exchanged ideas about possible topics to explore and research after reflecting on their teaching practices.

Following that workshop, we shared the session slides with the participants, together with a Google document on topic selection and research questions, which included a collaborative space for the mentees to write down their topics. During our second online meeting, mentees were given information on the international IATEFL Research SIG *Teachers Research! Online 2021* conference and were invited to work towards making presentations. This motivated them a lot and both teams agreed to share their EAR experiences at that conference.

In embarking on this collaborative journey, our intention was to foster a culture of shared reflection and learning among the seven of us. We believed that collaborative reflection would not only enhance the individual growth of each mentee and of each of us as co-mentors but also contribute to the collective knowledge of the group.

Since we two were geographically dispersed, we decided to engage in collaborative reflection mostly asynchronously: we exchanged our ideas by email and we engaged in collaborative dialogue with each other in a shared Google document (a 'Mentors' Journal'). However, we also held Zoom meetings between us for discussions and for taking key decisions.

Collaborative reflection gave us the possibility of examining our practice as mentors and of transforming or confirming our existing beliefs. For the purposes of our own research, our overall question was as follows: 'How does collaborative reflection on mentoring, specifically using our "Mentors' Journal", help us to become more efficient/effective in our roles?'.

Ongoing reflection

We decided to share our Mentors' Journal Google document with our mentees from the beginning of the journey. We invited them to read our dialogues and to contribute their own reflections or questions if they felt like doing so, in an attempt to build knowledge and to foster innovation and growth through the exchange of information, ideas, insights and experiences. The interactions between the two of us in this journal contributed to the discussions we had later together via Zoom. Even though our mentees did not in fact contribute to our shared document, their access to the journal made all our interactions visible, allowing them to read, learn from and reflect on our collaborative dialogue about different aspects of their research process.

For us, the co-mentors, the journal involved a fluid conversation about our mentees' progress, our roles and our feelings during the process as external and internal mentors. Most important of all, it helped us examine our practices as mentors in detail and, through that awareness, enabled us to reflect collaboratively and discover new strategies to guide mentees to find answers to their research questions. The following are some commented excerpts which show how we interacted dialogically and developed our thinking during the process:

Mariana: *I wonder about your challenges during the implementation of this mentoring programme.*

Ruben: *The main challenge is time. All of us are busy, but if we understand that the research process should be integrated into our practices, then it is not a burden, and we start to enjoy it. [...] Teachers are very motivated, so this is not a challenge.*

The way Ruben thought about the topic of 'time' changed completely during the process of doing the dialoging as he could reflect and realise that 'time' was no longer a constraint for his teacher mentees due to the fact that they were highly motivated during their research project.

Mariana: *How do you feel as the 'internal' mentor?*

Ruben: *I feel enthusiastic about the idea of the classroom-based [research] in the course I coordinate and about the motivation and dispositions teachers have to implement teacher-research in their own classes and from their own motivation. I love the interaction with mentees as they propose, plan, doubt, ask for suggestions, etc, around their topics and research process. I feel great satisfaction that part of the course team is contributing to both their professional development – including research – and to the course and students' learning.*

Mariana: *What about asking your mentees the way they feel as members of this community? That is to say, about their feelings when being supported, guided, and mentored?*

This conversation reveals genuine engagement in the process. Ruben appreciates the positive impact on mentees' professional development and the overall enhancement of the course and students' learning. Mariana suggests that Ruben inquires about his mentees' feelings as members of the community and their experiences of being supported and guided, underscoring the importance of their perspectives and experiences in the mentoring process.

Mariana: *Do you think my role will contribute to the programme? If so, how?*

Ruben: *Definitely. By answering these questions, for example, you are contributing to my thinking as a mentor and also helping me clarify my role as a mentor and my role as a Head of the course. Apart from these questions, you have been asking guiding questions related to mentees' research: some questions or issues I may have overlooked. And the idea of sharing this Mentors' journal is also a great contribution to our roles and our professional development as mentors.*

Mariana: *Do you think my 'external' role may be improved? If so, how?*

Ruben: *I don't think I can answer this now. Maybe there could be aspects to integrate (I wouldn't say "improve"), but this is a key question, especially if we think of sharing our co-mentoring experience with other colleagues.*

Mariana's role contributed significantly to the mentoring programme. Her questions helped the internal mentor by fostering his reflection and clarifying his responsibilities as both a mentor and the Head of the course. Additionally, her guiding questions related to the mentees' research brought valuable perspectives that Ruben might have otherwise overlooked. In order to engage in dialogue with Ruben in their Mentors' Journal, Mariana read the questions, comments and suggestions he had made there in relation to his mentees' studies. Thus, she went through his mentees' research questions, made connections, reflected and made her contributions in the journal again. By going through those stages she was able to interact with Ruben through constructive dialogue which helped her refine her role as a co-mentor. Sharing the Mentors' Journal is seen as a meaningful contribution to their roles and professional development.

Mariana: *Has your mentee met you? If so, have you been able to guide him so he can formulate his exploratory research questions? If not, are you thinking of meeting that mentee? Your mentoring may help him build up his exploratory research questions and join Cecilia and Silvia to start exploring together.*

Ruben: *Thanks Mariana for this reminder. I will write to David to ask him about his research questions. This is key for his future classroom-based research.*

This is an example of how Mariana contributed to guiding the internal mentor by means of questions that Ruben would then ask his mentees.

As co-mentors in this research study, we had the opportunity to analyse our practice to deconstruct our existing beliefs and to generate shared knowledge by means of collaborative reflection as it is shown through our reflections and what both of us learnt, as illustrated in the quotes above.

Findings and reflections

Online collaborative reflection had a positive impact on our professional development as internal and external mentors. Ruben learned that inquiring about his own role as a mentor had a positive impact on mentees' roles in the research process as he could adapt his mentoring strategies to guide the mentees as needed. Therefore, Ruben's role was not static; instead, it adapted during mentoring because of our reflections on what he was doing to guide the mentees and the reasons for doing that, and on the dialogues he had with them and the feedback he got from them. He also found that having a co-mentor / external mentor was key to developing his role as an internal mentor. His external mentor, Mariana, provided assistance by giving him insightful guidance and viewing the mentees' research activities from another perspective, from the viewpoint of someone who was not directly part of the teacher-researcher or mentor's context. Mariana's participation helped Ruben to clarify his role as the leader of the course and to reflect on his own practices as an internal mentor.

As documented in the Mentors' Journal, it became evident to us that the impact of collaborative reflection on the research mentoring process can be very positive. Our exchanges involving collaborative reflection contributed to finding new strategies to guide and empower our mentees in exploring and implementing action in their research studies and to helping them shape their narratives for the online conference they were eager to take part in.

EAR was not a novelty at this university but, rather, an ongoing and integral part of teachers' professional development, and our work highlights useful as well as interesting insights into the effect of collaborative reflection on our development as more effective mentors within a community of learning, a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement. Having confirmed the value of a shared online Mentors' Journal, in our next mentoring initiative we are keen to more strongly encourage intervention by mentees in a shared document in order to enhance the collective knowledge-building of the group as a whole.

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About the authors

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Mariana Serra is a teacher and a licentiate in English working at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. She won an Aptis for Teachers Action Research Award on three occasions. Mariana has moderated the Electronic Village Online (EVO) on Teacher-Research for Professional Development since 2020 and also acted as a moderator for the Mentoring Teacher-Research EVO sessions in 2023 and 2024. She was a member of the team led by Richard Smith that developed the Enhancement mentoring approach (2020–2021), and she is co-founder of the APIBA Teacher-Research SIG in Argentina.

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12 Lessons learned from running a mentorship project in Uzbekistan

Ella Maksakova

The following story describes my experience of running a local mentorship project and delves into the lessons learned from the challenges I faced while functioning as the project lead. The Network of Teacher Researchers of Uzbekistan (NETRUZ), which is a growing community of local teacher-researchers, launched its third round of mentoring local language teachers in Exploratory Action Research (EAR) in March 2023. Since NETRUZ ran similar training courses in previous years, there is now a pool of teacher-researchers who have been offered the opportunity to become mentors and cascade their knowledge of classroom-based research. By the time I volunteered to coordinate the project for this training cycle, NETRUZ had lined up eight mentors, myself included. Some mentors had mentoring experience from before while others were novices to the role but all of them had previously completed classroom research projects. As the project lead for this cohort of teachers, I found myself in the company of like-minded professionals, many of whom had built a good rapport with each other during their mentor–mentee collaboration in previous years.

This time round, I was to perform two roles: mentoring two teacher-researchers and coordinating the work of the other seven mentors. As the project lead, I was responsible for the logistical support of the project, compiling the syllabus, planning training sessions, and setting up and maintaining a learning management system (LMS) in Canvas. Besides, I created two separate Telegram Messenger chat spaces to keep in touch with the mentors and all the mentees in order to be able to offer both groups

timely technical and emotional support, which was especially important at the initial stage of the project. The chats were used to remind them of the upcoming workshops and events, to exchange files, and to motivate them to continue their research journey. To my delight, the mentees' chat remained lively throughout the project and was used long after the project's official completion. The mentors' chat was supposed to become a shared space for all the mentors to exchange their ideas, and to discuss concerns and the progress achieved. Unfortunately, it was only sporadically used by the mentors, primarily to solve some organizational issues, and mainly at the beginning of the project.

Mentoring experience and my role

Since I had mentored teacher-researchers before, this part of the project was not new for me and, overall, I felt quite confident about collaborating with my mentees. At the same time, my second role as the project lead required more considered planning on my side, and I embarked on it with all my enthusiasm and passion. It is important to mention that the seven mentors had different experiences in mentoring. Only three of them had been trained in how to mentor and had actually mentored teachers in EAR before. The other four had not taken part in mentorship training and were about to mentor for the first time. Nevertheless, despite the differences in their mentoring backgrounds, the mentors had much in common. They were all full-time language teachers at local universities, were very active in a number of other projects, and were interested in continuing their professional growth as mentors.

As the project goal was twofold – to support teachers in conducting their research and to help mentors develop their mentoring skills – I suggested co-mentoring, where a more experienced mentor would team up with a novice mentor. It looked like a win-win situation to me, where each teacher-researcher would receive twice as much attention and the mentors would share responsibility. Despite my high hopes, the idea was not taken up by the mentors, and they chose to mentor only individually.

In order to help mentors choose teachers to mentor, they were invited to deliver a workshop on any EAR topic where they could meet teachers and get to know a bit more about their teaching contexts and interests. The mentors were allowed to choose any topic they felt relatively confident to teach. Although the project schedule was quite intensive, and the training

sessions were organized weekly, the dates for the workshops were discussed and agreed upon with all the mentors some time in advance, to enable them to plan their time and their level of involvement for each week. Yet, many of the mentors delayed selecting the date on which they would like to present and the topic they wanted to talk about. I was quite clueless about the possible causes of such procrastination and offered them an option to co-present with other mentors to share the responsibility and back each other up in case of internet connection instability. Despite all my efforts to pave the way, there was a case where three mentors signed up to co-deliver a workshop and had three weeks to prepare. To my astonishment, on the day of the workshop, I found out that they still hadn't planned or discussed their session and none of the three was ready to present. I have faced such situations involving students but was not expecting such laxity from my mentor colleagues. I had no option but to step in and deliver the topic scheduled for that workshop myself.

As time passed, there were clear signs that some mentors had become less motivated to invest their time and effort into assisting their mentees, which inevitably affected the mentees' progress. I started to realize that coordinating the collaboration between mentors and mentees was the most challenging part for me. Evidence of difficulties in this area began to mount …

Some mentors became inactive in the mentors' Telegram chat up to the point that many of my inquiries about their progress and challenges were left either unattended or got only a one-word response. Canvas, as our LMS, was hardly used by the mentors and, regardless of its numerous progress-tracking, discussion, and collaboration tools, its use shrank to a minimum, serving simply as a file storage place.

The issue

One month after the project had started, it was evident to me that something had gone wrong, leaving me baffled with the questions "*How could this happen? How did I get here?*". Clouds had been gathering even before the incident with the presentation. Two of the mentors decided to leave the project due to some personal reasons. One of the two didn't even start mentoring anyone, and the other told me about her joining another project she had applied for before, so she had to withdraw from being a mentor in our project. Moreover, our biweekly mentors' meetings

as planned by the syllabus were visited by a couple of mentors only. So, I was left with five mentors and a growing feeling of getting out of the loop of the project's progress and not managing the team as effectively as I had hoped I would be able to.

All of this signaled to me that it was time to explore the causes that seemed to have such a great impact on my mentors' capacity to be effective, motivated mentors. As the project lead, I wanted to explore what I could do to better support my mentors in their mentoring. In order to find out what had gone wrong, I asked all seven mentors to fill in an anonymous questionnaire distributed online and also talked with some of them later over the phone or via Messenger.

My exploration of the issue

The data collection brought some interesting facts and views to the surface. I discovered that most of the mentors had joined the project having, I would say, somewhat unrealistic expectations for their engagement in mentoring. They hoped to be able to continue developing their research skills and expanding their professional network, neither of which was excluded, but these were not the primary focus of the project. So, when they saw that the teacher-researchers' needs were prioritized, they felt they didn't receive much in return and that their professional interests were not given enough attention. Another aspect that was mentioned by the mentors was the lack of a good mentor role model. Half of the mentors were new to the role and had not been trained in how to mentor others. The only reference point they could rely on was their own experience as mentees in conducting Exploratory Action Research and the book *Mentoring Teachers to Research Their Classrooms* (Smith, 2020).

However, as it turned out, having been mentored does not on its own ensure a smooth transition from being a successful mentee to an effective mentor. The mentors referred to situations where they didn't know how to react to what they thought of as their mentees' pedagogically or methodologically not quite viable suggestions. The mentors shared that, on the one hand, they didn't want to spoon-feed their mentees but, on the other hand, wanted to be honest with them about their suggestions. The issue seemed to be particularly acute for novice mentors, who felt they lacked the practical skills to handle such situations and became disappointed with their own

capacity to mentor others or with the lack of expected response from mentees to their suggestions and recommendations.

My learning

As the active part of the project was coming to an end, all that remained were the lessons to take away. Reflecting on this experience, I believe that the following improvements could be introduced in the course of a similar project.

Firstly, it is important to invest in building a more consolidated local mentors' community that functions not only during the period of active mentoring but will continue offering ongoing support meetings, where mentors can reflect on their own mentoring experiences, share their concerns, and successes, seek assistance and advice from their fellows. The sense of belonging to a wider community where the mentors' efforts and achievements can be appreciated and celebrated is especially important for my local mentors because the status of teacher-research mentor is neither supported nor acknowledged by their educational institutions and is not officially recognized as part of their professional development. As for my personal practice in the future, I would need to take a more proactive role in helping the local mentors join a global community of mentors, seek out publication opportunities for them, and promote them as professionals. NETRUZ as a community of practice might issue certificates of participation indicating the number of hours each mentor invests into the project, so as to give them credit for their contributions.

I also realized that it was too premature to expect that successful teacher-researchers could function autonomously from day one as effective mentors. The idea of co-mentoring deserves a closer look by local mentors. I may not have pursued the idea strongly enough this time round since I assumed it might bear more risks than benefits. The necessity to negotiate and align their plans and decisions regarding their mentees' progress could be quite taxing for the mentors bearing in mind their tight working schedules and the project pace. If I were to run a similar project again, I would promote co-mentoring more persuasively by presenting successful examples and emphasizing that such a form of cooperation does not diminish the individual mentor's flexibility, freedom, and personal achievements. I also believe that encouraging local

mentors to take part in some kind of formal mentor training, similar to that offered annually on the platform of the Electronic Village Online (EVO), could be a possible solution for boosting their confidence and mentoring skills.

Despite the fact that the project did not have any official status and no end-of-the-project evaluation reports were required, it would be worthwhile to get more structured feedback from all the mentors as well as the mentees about the project's organization, their experience, and impressions from the mentor–mentee collaboration. Such data might illuminate various aspects of project management, what kind of support is expected from NETRUZ as a community, the perceptions of the mentors' role, and the project lead's responsibilities.

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About the author

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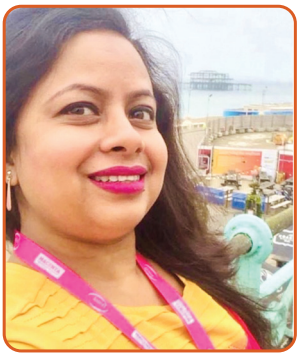
13 Self-regulation and resilience in launching a teacher-research mentoring project in Bangladesh



Tasnima Aktar

Context

In this story, I reflect on my experience of planning and leading the launch of a year-long (September 2022 – August 2023) teacher-research mentoring (TRM) project. The project was run under the auspices of the Research SIG (ReSIG) of TESOL Society of Bangladesh (TESOL-BD) at the time when I was convenor of the SIG. The project was inspired by the SIG's inaugural workshop – 'An invitation to teacher-research' – in 2021, led by Professors Rama Mathew (retired, University of Delhi) and Richard Smith (University of Warwick). The aim of the project was to promote teacher-research for context-specific teacher professional development while also contributing to the development of evidence-based classroom practice through collaborative research by mentees and mentors.

Setting up the launch project

Setting up a launch project while living abroad (in the UK) and coordinating with local mentors who are all my seniors was challenging for me. This posed difficulties in terms of communication due to different time zones and coordination with senior professors. Planning and team formation took several months. Initially, there was hesitation regarding feasibility of the project being carried out online since I was living abroad and some

of the mentees were living outside Dhaka. However, I wanted to give it a try as I really wanted to see a TRM project launched in Bangladesh. After several rounds of discussion about the prospects with local stakeholders, over a period of several months, and even after a meeting with potential mentees, I started to lose motivation, thinking that it might not be feasible for me to set up the project at all.

When I had nearly given up, one fine morning I thought differently and decided to contact Professor Richard Smith and secured a one-on-one meeting with him in July 2022. Richard hugely encouraged me, suggesting I should start on a small-scale, even with just one mentee per mentor, allowing for a manageable start to this initiative. At the same time, he kindly agreed to continue to advise on the project himself. Starting small could allow for a more manageable team, less work, and focused coordination and communication, all of which might provide opportunities for learning and refining the project structure and potentially scaling up in the future. I decided to contact the local stakeholders one final time, and they happily agreed to start small. Thus, my new motivation and positive attitude turned the dream of a TRM project in Bangladesh into reality. I am glad I could self-regulate my emotions and take action for the cause I saw value in. Finally, I drafted and redrafted the syllabus, timeline and scheme of work for both mentors and mentees, and we started up the project in September 2022 with great enthusiasm.

Issues in sustaining motivation

The project launched with four mentors and ten mentees. The mentors were all tertiary English teachers, including the President and the two Vice Presidents of TESOL-BD and me as Convenor of TESOL-BD ReSIG. The mentees were five tertiary English teachers teaching at different private universities in Dhaka and five primary English teachers teaching at different state primary schools outside Dhaka. This mix of mentors and mentees was planned to allow for a diverse range of perspectives and experiences to be brought to the project.

The project was intended to involve workshops and mentoring meetings in two phases of Exploratory Action Research (see Smith & Rebolledo, 2018) – an exploratory phase and an action phase. However, various setbacks emerged in both phases, which seemed to relate primarily to fluctuations in motivation of all parties at different points of the project.

Launch meeting for the project with mentors

The exploratory phase was very intensive: apart from induction meetings, the scheme of work required mentors to meet together every other week to prepare themselves for upcoming mentoring sessions and to meet their respective mentees in the intervening weeks. To lead the project, I followed a routine for all meetings, involving reminders, announcements and materials that I prepared. I sent regular reminders on multiple platforms to keep the mentors and mentees on track, including just before meetings, and I circulated minutes of mentor meetings each time. I even put self-notifications in place to send reminders for the others involved.

Towards the end of the exploratory phase, mentees' motivation, particularly of the tertiary mentees, dropped. Beyond their professional workloads and other commitments, a possible reason could have been tertiary teachers' prior knowledge and experience of research and diverging preferences for research design. They have completed MA dissertations and are now delving into diverse topics in their other, more academic research, using various research designs and methods. They might not have found our proposed exploratory action research interesting or even straightforward, especially when it came to sustaining motivation for two phases.

Nevertheless, within a timeframe which we had to extend beyond the originally planned duration of exploration, all the mentees did manage to complete the exploratory phase. This was due to mentors maintaining communication with mentees (not giving up on them) and due to my own interventions to attempt to get them to complete. Reflecting on this, fostering a good rapport between mentor and mentee is, as Smith (2020) says, crucial in TRM, where both should actively drive the collaboration.

Also, given time constraints and professional commitments, flexibility in the EAR timeline is essential.

The project was less successful overall where moving into the action phase was concerned. We had by now decided that action phase meetings should be less frequent, with more independent work and a flexible timeline. I was hoping for a more self-regulated commitment from all parties; however, communications started to falter and there seemed, in some cases, a reluctance among mentors and mentees to go further forward. This was a bit demotivating for me as I felt more alone as a mentor but I harnessed my resilience to stay committed to the project's continuation and originally planned completion. A self-regulated routine and clear expectations in the collaboration with my own mentee were pivotal in keeping us two on track. Overall, three primary teachers – including the one I was mentoring – did move forward with their projects in the action phase, which my mentee has now completed.

With my own mentee, we are now exploring opportunities for joint publication based on her research findings. The driving force behind our efforts is the shared goal of publishing our collaborative work for the advancement of knowledge and professional growth in ELT. And, as the project came to an end in August 2023, enthusiasm was rekindled, with plans being made for a larger-scale TRM in the second round of the project, involving more mentors and mentees.

Reflections on outcomes

My own management of the project required a lot of self-regulation and resilience, involving quite a lot of stress but also uplifting moments like the following:

- *Mentees meeting Richard Smith.* In an online meeting after two months, mentees shared their research contexts, classroom issues or problems and exploratory research designs and received useful feedback. As I observed, this meeting motivated them hugely to carry out the classroom research.
- *All mentees completing the exploratory phase.* It was great to see that all ten mentees completed their exploratory phase and shared their findings with mentors, even though some might have benefited from further exploration.

- *Mentees sharing their research at a conference.* Six of the mentees felt encouraged to present their exploratory findings at the IATEFL ReSIG Teachers Research! Online 2023 conference (Göktürk Sağlam et. al., 2023). This was confidence-boosting for these mentees, who thereby engaged in a broader teacher-research community.
- *Carrying out the action phase.* The three primary teacher mentees who entered the action phase became evidently more empowered and confident as teachers and researchers, and are looking forward to further classroom research.
- *Publishing own work.* Publishing one's own research can be motivation-boosting to sustain a project like this and enable participants to take pride in their work. My own mentee felt encouraged and excited to publish her EAR findings in a journal, as we are now planning. Having this as a goal can make a TRM project more fulfilling and sustainable.

Lessons learned

Given that relatively few mentees persisted with the action phase, I now realise that I needed to be more prompt and, perhaps, organized in communicating with the other mentors and mentees individually and collectively in this phase. However, I feel empowered that I managed to overcome most setbacks to make the project happen and that I could lead it to completion. I also feel it showed that women leaders, particularly emerging ones, need to continue to persist in their endeavours and serve as role models for other women.

For this, we women need to utilise the psychological strength of resilience, a critical resource desperately needed given the internal barriers (e.g., impostor syndrome, gender role stereotyping, and lack of leadership identity) that we face (Pillay-Naidoo & Nel, 2022). A key tool for resilience in my case was self-regulation, which helped me mitigate these barriers and lead this project to largely successful completion. This ended up encouraging the TESOL-BD leadership to plan for a next round of the project on a larger scale, attracting more mentors and mentees nationwide and thus continuing and building on the TRM project that I set up, as they have seen the value in it.

Finally, I would like to offer some recommendations for future such TRM project initiatives:

1. *Target motivated primary teacher mentees.* Unlike the tertiary teachers, the primary teachers were found to be more motivated and committed. This is a positive sign for the potential impact of the project on this group and the potential for their continued involvement in future projects.
2. *Maintain flexibility in timelines.* Flexibility is crucial in such a voluntary project to accommodate the varying schedules, commitments, and pace of participants.
3. *Draw up clear job descriptions for mentors.* They need to carry out their responsibilities till completion and agree to equip themselves with necessary knowledge and tools of, for example, EAR, and ensure quality and consistency of support. Clear guidelines will also help mentors keep self-regulated and committed.
4. *Focus on building rapport between mentees and mentors.* This is key to working together and can be strengthened by the idea that together they are developing professionally. Such rapport will help motivate participants to continue till completion but also to retain a connection for future endeavours as well.
5. *Provide or access dissemination opportunities via conference and publication.* The opportunity to present at a conference was very inspiring and motivating for the participants, while publication opportunities can lead a TRM project to a new level. Such opportunities can not only provide recognition for participants' work and professional development but also contribute to the broader fields of teacher-research and ELT generally. Together, they can make such a voluntary project more valuable and sustainable.

Here I have reflected on my experiences of dealing with setbacks while setting up and leading this launch project. In this intensive project, major challenges I faced included setting up the project with a local teachers' association while living abroad, coordinating with mentors who are senior to myself, and maintaining mentees' and mentors' motivation to continue as well as my own motivation to sustain and complete the project successfully. Self-regulation and resilience on my part were quite instrumental in this.

Resilience enabled me to overcome the stress sources, threats and challenges, and bounce back after experiencing setbacks, while self-regulation enabled me to regulate my emotions, thoughts and behaviours and to respond in a resilient way to challenges, sustaining my positive affect and self-efficacy in leading this project.

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14 Mentoring preservice English teachers in conducting teacher-research

Nahla Nassar

Introduction

This is a story of mentoring preservice English teachers on an Exploratory Action Research (EAR) journey. I was mentoring a group of twenty-seven preservice educators who participated in my seminar course on the practice of teaching English, in which I introduced the idea of conducting EAR in schools for the enhancement of teaching.

Context

This EAR project took place at a teacher education college in Israel. As part of their training, preservice teachers at the college attend seminar courses, including one focused on the practice of teaching English. In this context, I introduced participants to the concept of teacher-research and encouraged them to conduct research related to their teaching practice. Then I conducted weekly mentoring sessions at the college, each lasting for a duration of one and a half hours. These sessions were designed to provide support, with a focus on guiding students to explore their professional practice by identifying their strengths and weaknesses, setting practical investigation goals, and developing strategies to achieve them.

The mentees were mostly teaching at schools in the Arab sector or undergoing their practicum in such schools. The majority were first-year teachers with two years of prior practicum experience, while others were in

their second year of practicum. Their main focus was on instructing junior high school students in the Arabic-speaking educational sector in Israel.

In this context, my mentees faced a series of challenges as they explored the world of teacher-research. These included finding a balance between their teaching and conducting research, exploring relevant research topics in their teaching contexts, developing research skills through Exploratory Action Research in relation to tasks such as data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of results, and recognizing the need for personalized support in conducting their research.

Exploring research topics

As new teachers with only one to two years of experience, my mentees faced a big challenge in understanding and addressing their students' needs while addressing the demands of the education system and the English curriculum. Therefore, it was important to intentionally address topics related to the English curriculum and teaching to make them aware of the challenges they and their students might be facing. The topics I addressed in the course focused on 21st-century skills and what students need to know and learn. We explored the Framework for 21st Century Learning (Battelle for Kids, 2019), with a specific emphasis on identifying the essential knowledge and skills that students should acquire. This exploration involved a collaborative approach, with group work centered around identifying initial areas of challenge. Working together, the groups planned possible research questions and data collection methods to explore these topics with a focus on challenges. The process included presenting their topic of choice, the challenge they had identified, and possible research questions in front of the class, followed by feedback from both the instructor and peers.

For example, one of the groups identified collaboration in the ELT classroom as a challenging skill for students. To address this issue effectively, the group members first explored potential research questions and ways to gather data to help find solutions to increase collaboration in English lessons. This approach enabled the teachers to explore the topic, possible questions, possible data collection methods and the challenges they might face together. Some students opted for group-generated topics for actual research but even when choosing the same subject they decided on research questions and data collection methods based on the characteristics of

their own classrooms. Meanwhile, other students generated entirely new topics for exploration. In this approach, the initial group projects were foundational, and set the stage for subsequent individual projects.

Balancing teaching and research

The first challenge that these preservice teachers encountered was achieving a balance between teaching and research. In these early stages of their teaching careers, they had to dedicate significant time to lesson planning, classroom management, and meeting their students' needs. However, during their research this balancing act became even more complex in their eyes.

To address this, I focused on improving their time management. We needed a balance, allowing them to allocate time for research without neglecting their teaching responsibilities. I organized our weekly sessions to support them, along with asynchronous activities that served as an online forum for discussion. The platform we used also provided access to relevant articles and books to support their research skill development and exploration of teaching challenges. To help them manage their time efficiently, I introduced the idea of using a Gantt chart as a tool to schedule and plan research and teaching responsibilities effectively. This chart provided a visual representation of their time allocation, allowing them to update it based on their school schedules and availability to conduct research-related activities. It became an essential part of maintaining a balance between their teaching and research.

One important aspect of mentoring my students was ensuring that they understood exploratory action research to be not an additional task but an integral part of their professional practice. They began to understand this as we discussed their challenges and successes in the field with their students. It was crucial for them to recognize that EAR complemented their teaching and was a valuable opportunity for professional development. This understanding influenced their perception and approach to the research.

Building research skills in EAR

When my mentees decided what aspect of their professional practice to explore, I encountered the challenge of their limited experience in conducting EAR. Integrating EAR into the didactics seminar course was a new experience for my students. They had previously conducted research in other classes, but not research specifically related to their own teaching

practices. Simultaneously teaching and engaging in research to improve teaching practices and address student challenges added complexity, as already indicated above, involving balancing teaching with procedures of data collection and analysis and reporting findings.

To equip the teachers with the necessary skills for conducting research, the weekly face-to-face meetings I provided extensive orientation to research methodologies and EAR. I designed these sessions to familiarize the teachers with research, enabling them to gather meaningful data and draw conclusions from it. Moreover, the teachers were encouraged to read articles, books, and resources during six asynchronous weeks to expand their knowledge and deepen their understanding of research procedures.

To equip the preservice teachers with the practical skills needed for their research, I began with the design of data collection tools. I created an online space on Moodle for collaborative learning, where students worked together to refine a sample questionnaire. In addition, I created a Moodle Forum for them to upload their interview questions and receive feedback. This prepared them for their data collection process.

One of the most extensive aspects of the course was data analysis and reporting, as the teachers had limited experience in analyzing and reporting data. To support them in this area, I offered dedicated sessions on data analysis and findings, emphasizing practical application in the computer lab. For instance, in one session, I adapted an activity described in Smith (2020, p. 56) for coding and categorizing data as an introduction to the topic (see Appendix). The teachers worked on coding short sentences and deriving themes. This introductory activity was followed by practice in pairs, where they worked on the analysis of a longer document to identify codes and themes. At the end of the session, they presented their themes. In the subsequent session, the focus shifted to data presentation, as the teachers learned how to report their research findings in writing supported by themes and quotes from the participants.

Supporting individual research journeys

As a mentor, I faced the challenge of responding to numerous weekly emails and questions at the beginning of each face-to-face session, primarily related to individual research challenges. I needed to find a better solution to better support my students' individual research needs and that is when

I started offering one-on-one meetings. While the group sessions played a crucial role in preparing these preservice teachers, it was the one-on-one meetings that held the key to their individual growth. I used these meetings to track the mentees' progress and address any challenges they encountered along the way. My mentees used these meetings to examine classroom procedures and plan activities to enhance their teaching practice in response to the students' challenges. A substantial portion of these meetings was dedicated to data analysis and the research procedure. The value of these one-on-one meetings became evident as one of the participants later wrote in her feedback on my mentoring that they "helped me focus on the main points in my research topic and helped me how to collect data and analyze the data".

Reflections on the journey

My teacher-research mentoring journey at the college spanned around nine months, including three months for students to write a research paper based on their experience. Initially, I was concerned about how to effectively support this large group of student-teachers who teach different levels and classes. However, it turned out to be a truly rewarding experience to support preservice English teachers in exploring their challenges in teaching English, formulating research questions, gathering data, and implementing activities in the field. The combination of whole-group meetings, asynchronous sessions, and one-on-one interactions proved to be highly productive as it enabled the mentees to support one another as a group. During the whole-group meetings, we explored the theoretical and practical aspects of Exploratory Action Research, which provided a good foundation for the individual research projects. As the journey progressed, the value of one-on-one meetings became increasingly evident, and the mentees began requesting additional personalized sessions. Providing personalized guidance at the beginning of mentees' EAR journey played an important role in shaping their research directions, refining their research questions and motivating useful research. Observing the development of each mentee was a satisfying experience. Thanks to the personalized mentoring approach, I was able to gain a better understanding of their teaching contexts and challenges. This allowed me to provide specific support that addressed their individual needs. As a mentor, supporting teacher-research allowed me to gain knowledge about the impact of research on the growth and professional development of teachers.

In future teacher-research journeys, I hope to incorporate more opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration and feedback throughout the process. I would create small groups and transform them into communities of practice. These communities would provide opportunities for peer-to-peer collaboration and feedback, creating a more collaborative and supportive environment for conducting EAR.

Conclusion

In conclusion, mentoring preservice English teachers through their teacher-research journey was a challenging but rewarding experience. Providing personalized guidance at the beginning was important for shaping research questions. As the journey progressed, the value of one-on-one meetings, and the combination of whole-group and asynchronous sessions proved efficient for supporting the mentees. Lessons learned include the importance of personalized support to explore teaching contexts and challenges, the benefit of peer-to-peer collaboration, and the significance of data analysis skills. In future teacher-research courses, I plan to foster a community of practice to increase peer collaboration and ongoing support.

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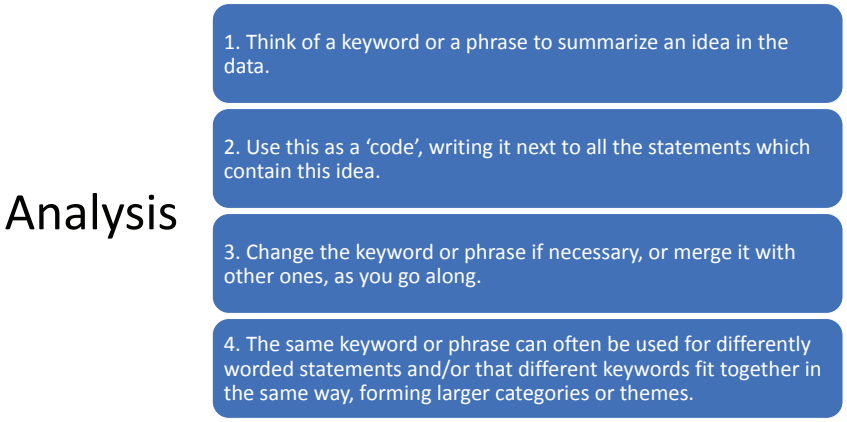
Appendix: PowerPoint slides for data analysis



Practice: Research about concentration in class

a. It is difficult to concentrate when the teacher talks for too long	Teacher lecturing
b. I lose concentration when other students misbehave	Other students' behavior
c. I get sleepy in the afternoons	Afternoon
d. If my teacher doesn't let us ask questions, I can't concentrate	Teacher lecturing
e. After lunch my brain feels quite slow	Afternoon
f. Other students talking too much makes me distracted	Other students' behavior

Research question: When do students say they find it difficult to concentrate?

Answer: Overall, students give three reasons:

1. When the teacher talks too much
2. When other students misbehave
3. In the afternoon

Adapted from "Coding and categorising qualitative data" (Smith, 2020, p. 56)

15 Bridging a chasm: Constructing and mentoring a meaningful teacher education research experience

Seden Eraldemir Tuyan

As an English language teacher educator who advocates teacher-research, mentoring and continuing professional development in English language teaching (ELT), I faced a challenge when I was assigned to teach the Language Teacher Education & Professional Development course for the ELT PhD programme at my university for the first time. My love for teaching and my aim to improve the pedagogy of whatever I teach and whatever the level of my learners led me into the journey I subsequently took together with my four PhD students in the 2022–2023 Fall semester.

Reflecting on my own experience as a PhD student from 2000 to 2003, I realised that there was a chasm between my own very top-down theory-based PhD training and my current teaching philosophy, which has developed to emphasise criticality, autonomy, reflexivity, and the value of implicit and subjective experiential knowledge (tacit knowledge) as well as theory-based explicit knowledge. I had also come to realise that the former can be developed when we reflect on the lessons we have learnt from our practice and that our own valid theories can thereby be generated in relation to teaching and transforming our teaching.

These reflections on my background as a PhD student and subsequent development created a desire in me to run the PhD course differently from what I had experienced and what was perhaps expected and to pursue instead a more meaningful and experientially based transformation in my PhD students. I strongly believe that the opportunity for professional

growth would have been greater in my own PhD program had I been able to use my accumulated experience and knowledge to connect the theoretical concepts I learned with practical aspects of effective language teaching. I still remember questioning some of those theories but feeling guilty about finding them inapplicable or useless in my classes or not being able to fit them into my professional identity as an EFL instructor. Theories seemed untouchable in the face of my criticality, authoritative as they were made to appear – their reputation was like a fortress! As opposed to this, in my current understanding, PhD candidates should be encouraged to be critical thinkers and to reflect on the limits of language teacher education in relation to their contexts. For this, I would need to focus on developing a researcher identity in them which would help them align with needs and wants in their professional context, rather than train them to become experts in knowing, applying and teaching language teaching theories without critical contextual analysis or reflexivity.

In conceiving of a new kind of course, I was strongly influenced by Kumaravadivelu's (2012) three parameters – particularity, practicality and possibility – which he takes as operating principles of post-method pedagogy. These directly informed the goals I set up, which were: to prioritise my PhD students' situational understanding (particularity); to develop practical critical engagement via tasks and exploratory projects (practicality); and to raise sociopolitical consciousness in the service of contextual teaching and learning needs (possibility).

When we started the course, I decided to involve my PhD students as much as possible in planning course content. I also asked them about possible ways of assessment and got them to collaborate with me on the moulding of the course objectives. Our main inspiration was Kumaravadivelu's (*ibid.*) KARDS (Knowing, Analysing, Recognising, Doing and Seeing) Model, which I introduced to them early on. This model, structured to respond to the needs of teaching professionals to re-view, and re-vision language teacher education to help them become transformative intellectuals through strategic thinking and exploratory research, corresponded well with my intentions for the course. I had already decided to plan the course according to KARDS, but I engaged students in considering whether it would suit them. With their agreement that it *would* be suitable, we proceeded to make modifications to the syllabus I had prepared, incorporating their suggestions.

This model is designed to provide a comprehensive framework for language teacher education, ensuring that teachers are well-prepared to address the complexities of language teaching in diverse global contexts. Thus, it emphasises the importance of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, as well as ongoing reflection and adaptation. The model consists of five modules, each corresponding to a different aspect of language teacher education and associated with an exploratory project. Overall, my PhD students and I agreed that completing all the projects, some of which we adapted together, would be a requirement for their assessment, and they would be expected to write narrative reflections to report on their explorations in each module under my mentorship.

For the *Knowing* module project, my PhD students explored language teacher knowledge. They reflected on their own contexts and took a critical look at theoretical understandings of professional, procedural and personal knowledge. They grounded their reflections on lesson observations and a quick discourse analysis of issues like teacher talk structure, question types, wait time, and so on. They also talked with the observed teacher about their perspectives on the classroom culture they created, including the students' roles, finally comparing and contrasting these with their own perspectives.

As part of the *Analysing* module project, my PhD students were expected to improve their understanding of learner needs, motivation, and autonomy. To achieve this, they collected data in their own institution with a small group of colleagues. They analysed the data to determine general goals and specific learning outcomes while exploring the learners' contexts and related issues. They also conducted interviews and questionnaires to gather perspectives from learners, teachers, and administrators in their own settings. Their exploratory research and reflections led to the formulation of general goals and specific learning outcomes for a short-term EFL course designed, with newly informed understanding, for the student population in their institution.

For the *Recognising* module project, my PhD students explored cultural and contextual factors influencing language learning and teaching, including teachers' identities, beliefs, and values. For their explorations, they were expected to choose among topics such as teacher beliefs and their influence on teaching behaviour, respecting and recognising cultural identity expectations of teachers and students, and responding to a moral dilemma to balance care and justice to exercise teacher authority. As the

mentor, I gave them choices based on their professional needs. The research process involved critical analysis of issues, literature review, and reflection on institutional gaps to better meet teaching and learning needs in light of sociopolitical awareness.

The *Doing* module project involved reflection on practical teaching skills. The four PhD students were invited to consider the notion of a thinking / theorising teacher and the difference between applying theory to practice and developing theories out of practice. While two students discussed how to implement a theory in their teaching practice by reflecting on their own experiences, the other two developed personal theories on specific pedagogical practices that promote reflective teaching. As in the *Recognising* module, the PhD mentees shared their findings with each other, and reflected together, expanding their perspectives.

Finally, the *Seeing* module project required my mentees to reflect on the development of observational skills. Teachers can develop reflective and critical perspectives on teaching by observing their own teaching, students' progress, and classroom interactions. So, the project was about 'learning by seeing' to help my mentees express what they think they learned when observing a colleague's lesson or a lesson they teach. To complete the project, they examined their experience as an EFL teacher from the perspectives of learners, teachers, and observers.

The exploratory projects proved useful in nurturing students' reflexivity, when they could relate their theoretical understanding with practice, as one student ('M1') shared in their feedback:

> *"The exploratory projects fostered group discussions among us, discovering and understanding our colleagues and students at school. Doing and seeing results are really different than just KNOWING."*

Students wrote their final reports by analysing their written reflections on the modular explorations of their own contexts. During a course session, they also presented their reports in the form of posters and received valuable feedback on potential action research projects. They also got the opportunity to showcase their posters at the Teachers Research! Online 2023 Conference, organised by IATEFL Research SIG, which they later described as an enriching experience in their career path.

As a mentor, I supported the students with a dialogic research mentoring approach (Eraldemir Tuyan, 2023), facilitating their inquiries via discussions and constructive feedback I gave on the narrative reflections they wrote in relation to their exploratory projects for each module. I prioritised building a caring community, ensuring love, trust, respect, and responsibility for one another and having humility-based dialogue within a hopeful climate of interaction (*ibid.*).

Looking back, I recall that not finding the 'right' books and supportive articles as course content had worried me at the beginning of this journey. I was also concerned about how my PhD students would respond to the weekly critical reflection tasks and whether they would align with the course's pace. I remember lacking confidence about whether I could handle making changes to meet my students' needs and wants if we felt this to be necessary along the way or if I would have a clear conscience about doing my best. The following extracts from feedback that 'M4' gave suggest that I can now feel more efficacious in adopting the modules of the KARDS model:

> *"It was a challenging process because we were busy with weekly tasks, but you heard our voices and included us in your decisions. You were tolerant and flexible in extending our deadlines when we needed to."*

> *"You provided us with alternative plans based on our teaching contexts and encouraged our developmental process."*

I also remember my ineffable joy while reading my students' reflective narratives and seeing the gradual increase in their criticality and depth of insight. Hearing positive feedback like the following about their discoveries in their own contexts and seeing them critically questioning their previous and current experiences to make more informed decisions delighted me as the course instructor:

> *"The course touched the classroom and the school context, so our students and research participants benefitted from the positive outcomes."* (M1)

> *"We could critically question our learner histories and teaching philosophies and make retrospective reflections."* (M3)

> *"We had the chance to return to the dusty shelves of our educational lives. The pieces of the puzzle fit into their places, so the gap between theory and practice narrowed."* (M2)

Mentor (top right) and the four students in a Zoom meeting

My PhD student mentees said they enjoyed making sense of theories of language teacher education to explore their teaching context through project work and further reflection on each step as we progressed through the course. The following quote from M2's feedback also suggests that their productivity as researchers grew while taking this course:

> *"We could produce academic articles on the data we collected during the course process and felt productive."*

All in all, there was a happy resolution to my concern regarding the gap between theory and practice that I had felt during my training as a PhD student. Besides the PhD students' reported advances, teaching this course contributed highly to my own learning and insights about expanding criticality and reflexivity at PhD level. I found that the KARDS model has the potential to be used to promote reflexivity and bridge the gap between theory and practice, probably at undergraduate and Master's levels, too. As the course instructor, I have a clear conscience about having done my best to facilitate my PhD students' learning by scaffolding critical thinking and reflection on learning from their own experiences. They could generate their own theories as well as

be informed by theories related to teacher education and professional development. These students are whole-hearted, open-minded and responsible individuals whose commitment to their jobs I will always appreciate, including their loving kindness and endless respect for my expertise as their course instructor.

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16 Addressing 'academic' conceptions of research among teacher educators

Fauzia Shamim and Richard Smith

This is a story of our co-mentoring of nine teacher educators at the Government Elementary College of Education (GECE), Hussainabad, Karachi. This institution is supported by Durbeen, an NGO working to improve teacher quality in Pakistan, under the government's public–private partnership scheme. A few of the participants were teacher educators for future English teachers but there were also trainers for Maths, Science and Social Studies, along with lecturers in Research Methodology for student-teachers.

As there were two of us as mentors, we'll be telling our story in the form of a conversation between us as mentor-narrators.

Fauzia – I've been working as the Chief Academic Officer at Durbeen since August 2022. Among other things, I'm responsible for research and teacher development in this teacher education college. Soon after I joined, I initiated a capacity-building project to develop a stronger research culture at GECE through institutional support for faculty to undertake quality research and disseminate it at national and international levels. More specifically, the objectives were to:

1. encourage and support faculty to undertake exploratory action research;
2. develop the skills of selected faculty members for mentoring student research projects in semester 8 through experiential learning;

3. provide opportunities and international platforms for faculty to share their research work.

I invited Professor Richard Smith from Warwick University, UK, to serve as an adviser and mentor for this project.

Richard – I've known Fauzia for a number of years and share her passion for supporting teacher development in relatively under-resourced public education systems (we co-founded and, for 10 years, were joint coordinators of TELCnet – the Teaching English in Large Classes research and teacher development network). I was therefore happy to accept Fauzia's invitation to co-mentor a group of nine teacher educators working at the College of Education to do exploratory action research (which we'll call EAR from now on), with Fauzia doing face-to-face mentoring, based in the college, and me interacting with them online, from the UK.

View of the Academic Block, GECE, Hussainabad, Karachi

Fauzia – The project ran from September 2022 to March 2023. It was a pilot project for the college, with a view to extending it later to other teacher educators and to the same teacher educators mentoring student-teachers to do action research during their B.Ed. program, after they had themselves experienced EAR. The project was mandatory for full-time faculty teaching Years 3 and 4 only, and optional for others. There was a lot of institutional support in terms of reduced workload, and participants getting bonus points for research in their annual performance report.

Richard– I introduced EAR to the nine teacher educator participants via three webinars in total, at different points in the process. We shared the *Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* that I co-wrote with Paula Rebolledo (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018) and also uploaded some other teacher-research resources in a shared space online (in Microsoft Teams).

Fauzia – However, it turned out that most of these teacher educators had already completed research projects or theses for their advanced degrees. So, in the face-to-face sessions I had with them, they at first seemed to find it difficult to embrace the EAR model, which they felt was 'very simple' or not rigorous enough for undertaking research. For example, they were often telling me they wanted to do large-scale surveys or use quantitative methods for data collection and analysis, and, later on, they often told me they wanted to use graphs even for very small sets of qualitative data from their focus classrooms.

We did try to address this issue as we went along, even if we couldn't resolve it completely.

Seven of the teacher educator participants in the EAR project

Richard – Yes, in my webinars I stressed that EAR is a practitioner research model and doesn't necessarily follow the norms of the more academic research or more positivistic research that these teacher educators seemed to be more familiar with. I also had one-to-one sessions, together with

Fauzia in Microsoft Teams, where we could discuss with participants what they were planning and here we tried to rein in some of their more ambitious ideas and focus attention on their own questions arising from their practice as teacher educators rather than on generalization in relation to gaps in the literature. I thought these one-to-one sessions were quite successful.

Fauzia – While Richard provided remote mentoring in a relatively structured manner, due to constraints of time difference and everyone's availability, I provided more informal and ongoing needs-based support since I was based in the institution, which the participants also said they found quite helpful.

All nine participants completed their projects and presented them at the Teachers Research! Online 2023 conference organized by IATEFL Research SIG, as well as internally to other colleagues in the college. As can be seen via the above link to presentations at the conference, the topics of their research were varied and interesting, ranging from 'How to develop curiosity and wonder about the natural world?' for science student-teachers to 'How to teach controversial issues to student teachers in a social studies course?' to more language-related issues such as 'Exploring the role of language of instruction in mathematics teacher education' and 'Enhancing integration of language skills in teaching English'.

Richard: In the end-of-project feedback, participants said they felt that there'd been a good balance of structured and more informal support provided to them. Even though they often felt they'd been unable to complete their work on time due to competing institutional priorities, they didn't feel stressed as they could discuss informally with Fauzia when they were ready to do so. So, this 'just-in-time' kind of mentoring support helped them see the value of the EAR approach and by the end they also realized it was a good thing they'd taken on a small-scale project about their own practice rather than attempting a more ambitious project which would have been even more time-consuming. Overall, though, it was from the actual experience of engaging in EAR that their conceptions of research may have changed.

And there were some other particularly fulfilling aspects, for both of us:

Fauzia – Yes, it was a moment of great joy for us as mentors when all participants were able to make good presentations of their work at the Teachers Research! conference; and when they then shared their EAR

projects in a faculty meeting and got recognition for their work from their peers and senior management. Also, it seemed to motivate their colleagues to undertake a similar kind of research, and our participants showed willingness to mentor them.

Richard – It's also encouraging that the institution wants to continue to support EAR projects, and that work has begun with project participants becoming mentors with student-teachers for their EAR projects, as you can read in the story by Afaq Ahmed, Umair Khan and Zenab Moiz which is the next chapter in this book (Chapter 17).

So, in conclusion, what did we personally learn from this experience overall?

Firstly, the experience of mentoring teacher educators in different subject areas, not just English (which is our own area of expertise) seemed very different from mentoring primary or secondary school English teachers. It meant that we had to use our imagination about what it would be like to be a teacher educator in their subject area but also we needed to trust their own subject area expertise and pedagogic knowledge to a large extent. On the other hand, we could also see that there were barriers in their minds to embracing this apparently 'simple' model of EAR due to their earlier, mainly graduate level research experience. This taught us that such participants may need a major shift in their view of 'what is good research' in order to accept teacher-research as a valid undertaking for improving their practice, and more generally for their own professional development and that of their student-teachers.

Fauzia – For example, they were unsure about using their own reflections as valid 'data'. This required very delicate handling to provide them the required direction and support via the resources we made available on EAR and its process (such as the *Handbook for Exploratory Action Research*), while not questioning and in fact through *acknowledging* their strengths as subject area experts and pedagogues. And to be honest, I was also afraid that some of them might not be able to complete their EAR during one term only. In fact, this actually happened as two researchers were only able to complete the exploratory phase of their research in time for the conference. However, their exploration was valuable in itself, and they were very enthusiastic about working on plans of action in the following term.

Richard – For me, it was difficult to provide relevant webinars for input from a distance without knowing the context or the participants at all. On the other hand, the one-to-one discussions Fauzia and I had with them

showed that these teacher educators were willing participants and that they did come, experientially, to see value in EAR.

And what would we do differently or what would it be advisable to do if the experience is repeated with other teacher educators in the same or a similar institution elsewhere? Well, I think we may need to spend even more time at the beginning exploring different conceptions of research and different purposes of research. Also, it could be beneficial to share some relatively 'academic' examples of EAR and more published reports or case studies of teacher educators researching their own practice using EAR.

Fauzia – Yes, now that we have the pilot project experience, it'll be good if the participants can write up their experiences in some form, to help others in the institution understand the benefit of teacher-research and to show how research which is not academic in a conventional sense can be very useful for developing practice, even for relatively academically-minded teachers and teacher educators in higher education settings.

Before we end, let's step back for a moment and reflect on what we personally gained from this co-mentoring experience.

Richard: For myself, I gained a new experience of mentoring teacher educators in a variety of subject areas and always felt our work was valuable because I knew it could have a 'multiplier effect', potentially benefiting many generations of student-teachers and their future pupils. I also realized, though, that mentoring teacher educators can be difficult due to preconceptions about research and existing self-concepts they may have but that with appropriate input and support, and on an experiential basis, they can come to see the benefits of EAR and EAR-mentoring. I admire Fauzia's vision and dynamism in identifying this opportunity and am grateful to Durbeen for having given me the chance to be involved.

Fauzia: The main takeaway for me is that the ideas of EAR and EAR-mentoring, however useful, are not necessarily embraced easily by faculty (in this case teacher educators) working in higher education settings. Nevertheless, following Richard's example in the online meetings, I learnt to use mentoring strategies that were effective in our in-person meetings, asking very specific questions in a non-threatening manner, and being patient while helping participants shape their thoughts and ideas. I am now looking forward to seeing how this initiative can be further embedded within the institution.

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17 Changing conceptions of action research in a teacher education programme in Pakistan



Afaq Ahmed, Umair Khan and Zenab Moiz

The context

We mentored 10 student-teachers enrolled in a four-year Bachelor of Education (Elementary) programme. The student-teachers conducted their Action Research (AR) in the subjects of mathematics and social studies in public schools in Pakistan, as part of their long-term teaching practicum during the final semester of their undergraduate studies. It is important to note that these student-teachers belong to the first cohort of a nascent teacher education program, and as such, they had little prior knowledge of AR and/or experience of conducting AR. This brought a set of challenges both for us as mentors and for student-teachers, some of which will be highlighted below.

In an initiative to introduce AR practices into the college we were trained by two experienced senior mentors to first conduct Exploratory AR within our own courses (see Chapter 16, by Fauzia Shamim and Richard Smith, which describes the mentoring we and other colleagues received in this initiative). The institutional support we received to carry out AR ourselves was instrumental and significantly helped us develop the mentoring skills later required to help student-teachers conduct their own AR in two public schools in Karachi. Nevertheless, as mentors we were not familiar with the context in which student-teachers were

conducting AR. Also, the student-teachers were conducting their AR alongside a teaching practicum. There was therefore some difficulty in mentoring student-teachers for the first time in these circumstances.

Issue

Against this backdrop, we were faced with the challenge of having to support our student-teachers in conducting AR while they struggled with issues such as demotivation, fear of failure, and lack of perseverance in a public school practice-teaching setting in Pakistan. The context in which we had conducted our own action research was significantly different from that in which student-teachers were conducting their research. Our own conception of AR was that it was a relatively simple process with a fixed and narrowly defined research problem and a fairly predictable set of steps for understanding and addressing that problem. We were conducting AR in a very research-conducive environment with significant support from the institution and our own mentors. Our student-teachers, on the other hand, were faced with research problems that kept changing and evolving and the institutional settings in which they operated were not as conducive to conducting AR as ours – indeed, this contributed to a large discrepancy between our own conception of AR and that of our student-teachers. As mentors, we had failed to foresee the myriad challenges that emerged in our student-teachers' experience of conducting AR in a public school setting. They started to describe the AR process with statements such as: 'I am not able to defend the problem statement', 'My intervention was a disaster', 'I have a fear of failure', 'I cannot comprehend and absorb feedback', and so on. The emotional and conceptual challenges reported by our student-teachers led us to reflect on our roles as mentors and our approaches toward mentoring.

Discrepancy between our and student-teachers' understanding of and approach towards AR

Because of our experiences of conducting our own AR with undergraduate students in a higher education setting, as mentors we unwittingly led our student-teachers to believe that AR was mostly about addressing a static problem detached from emerging events, situations, and practices in the field. However, student-teachers found it difficult to respond to emerging changes to their originally identified research problem. They were unable to recognize that the issues emerging in the different

phases of AR were actually rooted within or connected to their original research problem or to realize that the original research problem was only a small part of a larger issue that emerged later. For instance, when one student-teacher discovered that her initial assumptions regarding her students' ability to solve basic algebraic equations were not entirely true, she started questioning her very premise for conducting AR and started to contemplate changing her entire research focus. We, ourselves, had not come across this challenge in our own AR experiences at the college; hence, we were unable to anticipate that our student-teachers' fundamental conception of the AR process would become a hurdle in their carrying out AR. When we came together to reflect on this problem and discussed it with our mentors to understand it in greater depth, we realized that probably we too had some misconceptions about the nature of AR and that we too had thought of the steps of AR as fixed and irreversible. This misconception did not pose any significant problems in our own AR, probably because our assumptions regarding our own students were based on years of interactions with the same kinds of students and because we had a very clear understanding of the problem we were trying to address. Our student-teachers did not have this luxury – they were placed in an unfamiliar classroom for a brief period of six weeks with little to no prior knowledge of the learners they were working with. Additionally, this was their first experience of conducting a formal research study, let alone AR. Because of this discrepancy, we, as mentors, were unable to pre-empt the challenges that resulted from a flawed understanding of the AR process in the conditions students were facing.

How did we address these challenges?

There were two dimensions of the challenges that we faced as mentors: a psychological and emotional dimension and a technical and conceptual one.

Seeing our mentees struggle with conducting AR and becoming demotivated about the entire AR project started to make us anxious and frustrated. This was our first experience as AR mentors, and it was only natural that our first reaction to all emerging problems was to doubt our own capabilities. Before we could provide any emotional support to our mentees, we had to first deal with our own anxiety and our own fear of failure. We had to remind ourselves that as mentors, we should

take a growth mindset-based approach: instead of getting demoralized by the problems that emerged, we had to respond by changing the ways we understood AR and the way we mentored our student-teachers. We started to visit schools and classes in which our student-teachers were conducting their AR to understand their situation better. We read their lesson reflections, conducted debrief sessions with them and observed their teaching, all of which helped us to understand their problems in depth. These strategies allowed us to become insiders of the process rather than be detached from the school environment, and in turn this led us to have an increased belief in our own mentoring abilities. After overcoming our initial fears, we decided to provide emotional support to our student-teachers before initiating any technical interventions. We felt that addressing the on-going frustration and feeling of wanting to give up was more urgent than providing any technical support. One of the ways in which we helped student-teachers feel less overwhelmed was to provide them with a safe space in which they could share their problems and let out their frustrations without any hesitation. We listened closely when they described their challenges, letting them know that they had our support and that their challenges could be overcome, one step at a time. This emotional support helped student-teachers to move gradually forward in AR and understand the purpose by doing it rather than being dominated by challenges.

Now came the stage to address the technical and conceptual dimensions of the problems we faced as mentors. Before we could give any technical feedback to our mentees, we had to reflect on our own understanding of the nature, purposes and process of AR. We came together and sought the help of our own mentors, went back to reading more about *Exploratory* Action Research (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018), and made an active effort to update and refine our conception of AR. This process helped us realize that we needed to help student-teachers broaden their understanding of the AR process so that, instead of seeing AR as a predictable, linear process, they would start viewing it as a non-linear process in which the researcher can always update their problem statement in light of the new understandings that emerge during the conduct of their research. We asked our student-teachers to focus on the data collected in the exploratory phase and move back toward the research problem. We also instructed student-teachers to give more time to the research problem in their initial phase of AR to better understand the nature of this problem. Our goal was to help student-teachers see AR's potential to inform their

teaching practice, a goal which, we believe, we succeeded in achieving in the end to a satisfactory degree. We realized that exploratory AR is embedded in the context in which student-teachers teach and that the problems that emerge in that context are unique. Exploratory AR is not about addressing predetermined issues but problems that come up during instruction.

Final reflections

We realized that collaborative reflection on our own thinking had been absolutely necessary. The experience of mentoring student-teachers challenged our own assumptions about AR and helped us to refine our approach. As mentors, we had become anxious about the issues that arose during our student-teachers' AR journeys, just as students were themselves becoming anxious. We had considered our mentees' struggles a failure on our part. However, collaboration among mentors helped us deal with the issues effectively. We realized that it is important to remove our own fears as well as those of our student-teachers and come to see mentoring as a reflective process that can inform our theoretical understanding and practices. AR is not about viewing research as something very formal, extensive or conducted in strictly controlled conditions. Student-teachers needed to be consistently reminded that "AR is interaction between research on one's own practice and the actual practice, a process that has an impact on both the practice and on the theoretical understanding of it" (Ulvik, 2014, p. 519).

The college-level and student-teacher interventions we have been involved in have helped build our AR competencies as mentors and those of our student-teachers. From now, the challenge will be to address more widely the issue of a lack of established AR culture among K-12 teachers in the public schools of Pakistan.

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18 Mentoring teachers of other subjects in a school in Argentina

María Marta Mora

Setting

This story took place in a public secondary school in the urban neighbourhood of Flores, Buenos Aires, Argentina. The participants in the mentoring experience were my fellow teachers at that school, and my mentoring took place in the context of a series of continuing professional development (CPD) workshops. They were teachers of a variety of subjects: history, physics, ecology, philosophy, citizenship education, Spanish, computer science, art, and economics. But none of them except me was an English teacher, nor could they speak or read English. As for me, this was my first time in the role of mentor, and it was a very particular experience since I was mentoring colleagues who taught subjects different from my own.

This mentoring experience occurred in October and November 2022 and originated from a feeling I had, as a teacher myself, that the CPD opportunities offered to schoolteachers by the local educational authorities did not satisfy classroom needs in real contexts. We worked together during compulsory in-service meetings on a weekly, 80-minute-meeting basis.

Background

Many teachers in public secondary schools in the city of Buenos Aires are assigned a paid, compulsory 80-minute time slot every week during which staff meetings are scheduled, either for planning activities for students

within institutional projects or for professional development. In general, these meetings do not turn out to be very productive, and there is growing dissatisfaction among teachers because they are forced to attend lectures and workshops that are designed by the local ministry of education with almost no relation to real classroom situations or issues.

In this context, I proposed extending Exploratory Action Research (EAR) to my colleagues, although they were not teachers of English. My own journey as a mentee had always been superlative. I started in early 2018 during the Electronic Village Online (EVO) sessions, which were free for all teachers who wished to join. On that occasion, I was mentored for five weeks and could taste what EAR had to offer and what it meant to be accompanied by a team of first-class mentors. It was due to this that the mentoring spark ignited in me, and I began to consider the idea that, one day, I could become a mentor myself and give the EAR opportunity to others, within my own institutional context. However, I felt haunted by the fear of not being given a chance to share my EAR experience by the school authorities. The headmaster was new in his position – he had only been in charge for one month. However, I had many conversations with the pedagogical advisor in the school (who was in charge of educational projects), and she assured me that what I was proposing was serious, aimed at professional development, and would be successfully accepted. Finally, she persuaded me to trust myself. So, I submitted a proposal to the headmaster to take advantage of all of the teachers' compulsory weekly professional development meetings for those who agreed to take part in EAR. At this stage, I felt confident enough because I had been offered tools during my journey into EAR as a mentee, and as a result I considered myself an empowered teacher. Eventually, my proposal was accepted.

Getting to work

I planned to start with a teacher–teacher gathering, where I would introduce the EAR experience and invite participation. Nevertheless, there was a challenge: the language barrier. That would not be an inconvenience, I said to myself. I would translate the materials for the teachers! And so I did.

Since teachers wanted real, practical, local and teacher-generated CPD, I started off by making sure to demystify the preconception that outsider "specialists" could fix their classroom needs (I confirmed that this

preconception was still a reality with a quick mini-survey that I carried out at our first workshop meeting, in August 2022). The idea that "teachers themselves can research their own teaching and learning situations" (Smith and Rebolledo, 2018, p. 15) was what I wanted to convey to my mentees. Through a PowerPoint presentation, I invited my colleagues to get to know what EAR is, and I also shared "relatively clear/simple definitions and examples to show teachers that research is a part of 'normal life' (and can be part of classroom life), not just something that professional researchers do" (Smith, 2020, p. 7).

Programme participants

Seven of the attendees decided to join the programme. Beginning in October, we started to get together weekly in a classroom and began by sharing each of the mentees' current teaching issues. I created a space in Google Drive so that they could have a kind of materials repository – my translations of sections of the *Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018) appeared there – and the participants started to get acquainted with what exploratory tools EAR

could give them. After a few meetings in which we discussed teachers' and students' perceptions, they started to think together about their own exploratory questions. They were exposed to and finally chose from the set of data-collection tools listed in the *Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018), considering which would be most appropriate for their purposes. Little by little, they became aware of how powerful they could be if they investigated their own classroom issues themselves. There were highly productive discussions during the meetings in which the teachers commented on the different data collection tools they planned to use and the information they expected to collect. So, with my translations of the handbook sections as their guide, they gradually exchanged classroom experiences in the shared Google document, where they had the chance to reply to their colleagues' accounts.

In due time and after thinking collaboratively in the meetings, they designed their own tailor-made tools to fit in with classroom activities and the characteristics of the groups they were teaching, making use of classroom tasks, observation, students' assignments, tests, and surveys as data-gathering opportunities.

As a mentor, I was astonished to learn that the situations my mentees were bringing to our discussions were as interesting and suitable for EAR as the issues my ELT colleagues and I had previously been facing in our lessons. I loved gradually becoming aware that EAR was also working with teachers of other subjects.

Mentees' experiences

In the end, amazing results came from the teachers' explorations. Here are some of their reflections (translated from Spanish) after obtaining their exploratory data:

> *"The students told me that whatever I taught them would be better if it was related to their own lives. I would not have realised that if I hadn't asked them for their opinions. Getting to know their impressions and opinions is crucial here."* (Teacher of History)

> *"I was concerned about misbehaviour in my third-year course. To explore the situation, I asked the students to write short reflective*

> *texts like I would for ordinary classroom activities. With no waste of time to do my research, I proved my suspicions right, so I planned to act differently."* (Teacher of Spanish)
>
> *"I was under the impression that my students didn't watch the news, [but] when I collected information from them, they proved me wrong. After that, I discovered that I could count on another source of material for my students: TV."* (Teacher of Citizenship Education)
>
> *"I was concerned about my students' apathy towards the debate proposals in the lessons. After investigating my class, I found other more appealing ways for my students."* (Teacher of Philosophy and Ecology)
>
> *"About misbehaviour during the lessons, my predictions were confirmed by the students' texts: they signalled the disruptive members of the class and suggested changes. I took their ideas into account to plan my next activities."* (Teacher of Computer Technology)

There seems to be a common theme among the mentees' reflections: their new awareness of the possibility of trusting their students, and their positive view of obtaining data from them as a starting-point for improved potential courses of action in the EAR process.

However, the school year came to an end. By this point, the teachers had managed to go through an exploratory research phase and had thought of possible changes that they would implement if we had not run out of time. I had expected to have my mentees going into the 'action research' stage beyond exploration in the EAR process, so I perceive this running out of time as a challenge to overcome in future. For the workshop's next editions, I plan to negotiate more weekly meetings with the school authorities, especially after sharing the results of the 2022 project with the school head and team. After all, we need to become aware that in school life, not everything happens as expected, and timelines do not always depend on our desires!

Fears and moments of joy

Initially, I had feared that the school authorities would not accept my workshop project, no matter how confident I felt with what I was introducing in my proposal. It was, after all, a non-traditional form of professional development since I was bringing in an alternative to the official CPD offering. However,

I felt relieved when my mentees showed understanding of the workshop aims and began to feel at ease with the instructions and responded positively. At the very end of the year, I asked their opinions in a mini-survey. Some of the adjectives they used to describe the EAR process were 'enriching', 'interesting', 'cooperative', 'productive', 'well-organised', 'democratic', 'useful', 'practical' and 'reflective'. We had cooperated and worked as a community of practice and of learning. The teachers had been able to identify their classroom issues, had been allowed to share opinions and feelings in a relaxed atmosphere (quite different from the rigid ministry-led CPD instances), had tried out new ways to understand their problems, and had been able to reflect deeply on their teaching practices.

My objective had been reached, despite some drawbacks that became an inspiration for an improved new experience in the following school year. My initiative had covered a gap between teachers' real needs and the educational authorities' existing options for professional development.

What I learned

The whole journey had not only been productive to my colleagues, but also to me as their mentor. All of us benefited from the experience. I learned a lot from the participants' reflective writing, and their feedback showed me that I had been on the right track during my first "adventure" into mentoring: I had managed to convey an understanding of the EAR approach decently enough, and my mentees had been able to explore their classes, identify what their issues were, and plan further courses of action. Regarding the language barrier and the issue of interdisciplinarity, I discovered that what I had feared so much had not been a pitfall at all, because classroom issues, I now conclude, are universal, though probably not exactly the same in every country, every city, every school or every subject. There are diverse school cultures and diverse school identities. We can notice this, even across disciplines, but diversity is definitely no obstacle to mutual, practice-focused learning.

Conclusion

To conclude, I am ready to affirm, with this mentoring experience, that Exploratory Action Research is definitely an approach that can be adapted

to other fields of education beyond ELT, at least in secondary school contexts. I also came to the broader conclusion that mentoring is a win-win experience. I would dare to say that, while mentees perceive many benefits, it is the mentor that can win the most by gaining experience when playing the mentor's role, and by having an amazing view of the vast array of classroom experiences of other teachers. Another source of learning for me as a mentor was the experience of making mistakes and overcoming them. On the other side, the mentees reached insights into their classes by carrying out their research that they would never have discovered if they had not tried exploratory activities investigating their own practice. In other words, this is a new way of professional development where the real expert, and the main protagonist, is definitely the classroom teacher.

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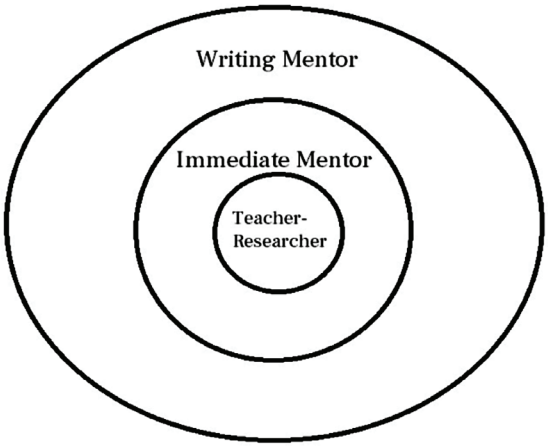
19 How digital tools helped me mentor teachers' writing-up

Sidney Martin

This story is set in the cloud. Right. Online. Where can different teacher-researchers, along with their mentors, meet when they all live in different places around the globe? I think that the cloud will do. My name is Sidney and my role was that of giving support to both teacher-researchers and their mentors in the process of writing up their Exploratory Action Research findings. My role was that of "writing mentor". This was part of a 2023 initiative within MenTRnet which is also featured by Erzsébet Ágnes Békés in the next chapter (Chapter 20). The idea was to support teacher-researchers (and their mentors) to write an article for a new journal, the *ELT Classroom Research Journal* (*ELTCRJ*).

The participants

The people involved in the writing-up process were two teacher-researchers (TR1 and TR2), their immediate mentor (IM) and two writing mentors (WM1 and WM2). By the way, I am WM2. Two different layers of assistance were designed in advance to ensure that teacher-researchers would receive adequate support during the writing process from the immediate mentor and the writing mentors (see the diagram below).



Layers of support for teacher-researchers during the writing-up process

This layered arrangement proved to be very useful in the writing-up process. Teacher-researchers received support from their immediate mentor, who in turn received guidance from the writing mentors. I will later share more details about the experience of participants TR1, IM and WM2 (myself), highlighted in bold in the table below:

Participant	Teaching experience	Number of TR studies completed	Qualifications	Nationality
Teacher researcher 1 (TR1)	6 years	2	Bachelor of Elementary Education. Master's in Education and Master's in English	Indian
Teacher researcher 2 (TR2)	15 years	1	Teaching English as a second language	Thai
Immediate mentor (IM)	More than 17 years	21	PhD (Education)	Indian
Writing mentor 1 (WM1)	27 years	In the process of completing one	MA, MEd, PhD	Indian
Writing mentor 2 (WM2)	more than 20 years	1	PhD (Education & ICT)	Australian/ Spanish

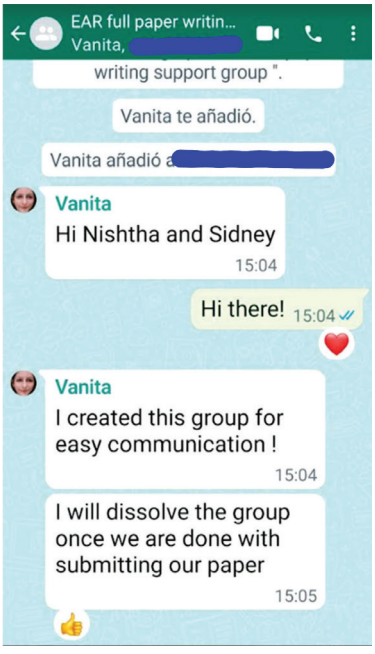
Participants in the writing-up process

How it all began

My mentoring started with a synchronous online meeting where I met with the teacher-researchers and their immediate mentor to give them some suggestions that had been prepared for all writing teams and to plan some deadlines and future meetings.

The session was structured in the following way: brief introduction to the goals of the meeting followed by an introduction of each member. Then, I (as writing mentor) summarized the guidelines for writing up the article. I decided to highlight two elements: the importance of the article having a clear structure and the need to include references to the interaction between the immediate mentor and teacher-researcher. Finally, there was Q&A. The session lasted roughly 30 minutes and it was recorded for future reference.

We agreed to meet again later in September and for TRs and IM to provide a first draft of the paper by then. Perhaps this was a bit too soon, but one of the teacher-researchers said we could give it a shot. In addition, the immediate mentor created a WhatsApp group for solving doubts or emergency situations speedily.



WhatsApp group screenshot

A bridge over troubled waters

However, something was missing in terms of support, and this is what triggered my own exploratory research as a writing mentor. I thought that meeting online would need to be supplemented with some kind of digital support which we could all refer to.

More specifically, this digital support would need to involve some kind of a repository and a summary of everything we were doing around the writing-up of the article. So, I rolled up my sleeves and contacted the immediate mentor of the teacher-researchers to consult with her about the possibility of creating a digital environment to collect all the information being generated. The goal was to help all stakeholders stay on the same page and not get lost "in the cloud", especially when different versions of the research paper were shooting back and forth over the Internet.

This digital environment consisted of already familiar digital tools, among which a Google doc in the form of a diary became an information hub of sorts, with the following information for each session: objectives, summary of the session, reminders, materials, link to the virtual meeting room and something funny such as a comic strip (see below). Apart from summarizing what we did in each session, links to the Google docs on which each of the teacher-researchers would write their drafts were also provided. Google doc was chosen since it is a way to keep a record of the feedback delivery and conversation triggered by it through the use of either comments in the margin or inserted text.

ELTCRJ

Exploratory Action Research

Session 1

Objectives

- to explain the general structure of the article

Summary

1. **Introduction.** Each one of us have introduced themselves. Great team!
2. **General structure of the article.** We have gone through the General guidelines written by Richard Smith and then had Q&A at the end.
3. **Recap and next online meet's date.** Support team (Sidney) will send a message to each of the members of the group with reminders.
4. **Task for next meet:** write a first draft so that we can provide feedback before the draft you are going to send by October 9th

Materials:
Deadlines and Guidelines

Paper 1: Nishtha K. Chopra & Dr Vanita Chopra

Paper 2: Anek Suping & Vanita Chopra

Here's our online meeting room:
~~https://meet.google.com/xog-sdfz-yqa~~

new meeting room:
https://meet.jit.si/sessionear

Take care and here's something for you!
Garfield & Opinions

Screenshot of Google Doc used to collect together all the information generated in the writing-up process

The other digital tools included in the environment to facilitate communication flow and delivery of feedback were:

- a WhatsApp group created by the immediate mentor in order to guarantee swift communication between the participants and to send reminders. E-mails were also used for sending longer reminders with links to other documents or attachments.
- another Google doc for each of the teacher-researchers for them to write their drafts and receive comments from both their immediate mentor and writing mentors.
- a virtual room for online meetings, whose sessions were recorded and shared with both teacher-researchers and mentors.

What I learnt from it all

I wanted to find out the perception of both the immediate mentor and the teacher-researchers about the digital environment designed for the writing-up process. More specifically, I wanted to collect their views on how the digital environment maintained the focus of the article as well as offering language, moral and pedagogic support. I designed a questionnaire in order to collect the participants' views on the digital environment designed for the writing-up process. My rough thematic analysis of the data collected via the questionnaire is presented here:

Maintaining the focus on the article

Both TRs and the IM found the digital environment helpful to focus on the goal of completing the article. TR1 highlighted that all the information and comments generated from the drafts are found in one document, an editable online document shared with TRs and mentors. The comments also triggered a dialogue between mentor and mentee.

Language support

The editing digital tools proved to be very useful for both TRs and the IM, who used them both synchronously and asynchronously.

Moral support (including emotional aspects)

The emotional component in teacher–mentor interaction is key to completion of the task of writing up an article and even more so, when it is carried out online. Since the digital environment allowed for dialogue between mentor and mentee, feedback became not only about transmitting information but also about providing moral support, since both mentee and mentor knew they were on the same page, thus possibly reducing the anxiety levels of mentees.

Pedagogic support

The digital environment facilitated mentor–mentee interaction, through clickable and easily-accessible references to the source of information. In addition, the WhatsApp group created by the immediate mentor proved to be very beneficial in enabling faster communication than when leaving comments on the Google doc.

Feedback relating to all four of these thematic areas emphasized the value of the digital tools in enabling interaction among participants. Indeed, this could be considered another major theme.

Looking back over my shoulder

As a writing mentor, I did not want anybody involved in the process to find themselves lost in the sea of different versions of the paper. There proved to be many joys associated with the process – seeing a full-fledged article grow is an experience that boosts confidence to move forward despite the challenges encountered. It was also interesting to see how feedback played a fundamental role in helping create an emotional bond between those involved in the writing-up process. Feedback delivery and technology seemed to help build trust in each other since they helped provide clearer information that could be more easily taken up by the teacher-researcher to improve their writing further.

Takeaways

The writing-mentoring process has undoubtedly helped me improve my communication and feedback skills. Also, the fact that I perceive feedback as dialogue (Carless & Boud, 2018) has helped me put all my effort into

creating the right conditions for dialogic feedback to flow, while technology has proven to be a great help in this respect.

This is just the beginning of an exciting journey into the interaction of feedback, technology and teacher-research!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Erzsébet Ágnes Békés (Eli) and Richard Smith for all their support during the writing of this story.

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About the author

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20 Mentoring the writing-up and publication of articles in a community of practice

Erzsébet Ágnes Békés

Introduction and context

In late 2019, I was just about to start an Action Research (AR) project at a national teacher education university in one of the countries of the Global South. The participants (teachers and student teachers of English) wanted to learn more about this branch of practitioner research because carrying out AR (or supervising it) constitutes a core element of the university's pedagogical mission. "I'm only here, because I want to publish the findings of my AR project," said one of the participants, and I was glad that they were honest about why they joined. A couple of months later, the country went into full lockdown under COVID-19, and the original AR project disintegrated. Serendipity, as well as mentee and mentor resilience, ultimately led to its resuscitation, and, eventually, we managed to publish five articles on exploring issues related to vocabulary acquisition and retention in reputable open-access ELT journals and specialised blogs.

Ever since that experience, I've been proactively exploring opportunities for the teacher-researchers and teacher-research mentors of MenTRnet – our mentor support community – to share and disseminate the results of their classroom research. This is because I believe that, apart from publications helping when it comes to job applications, annual appraisals and promotions, I also think that they can serve as a powerful tool for

reflection, teacher autonomy and Continuing Professional Development (CPD). As a result, my mentoring activities in the past two years have often been focussed on promoting and facilitating the dissemination of the findings emerging from Exploratory Action Research (EAR) and Action Research (AR).

Angi Malderez (2023) contends that one of a mentor's important roles is to be a sponsor, namely, "using any power you have in the service of your mentee rather than for your own gain" (p. 62), such as interceding or lobbying on behalf of your mentees through employing your knowledge and networks (social capital). Over the past few years, I have learnt that this requires not only putting your mentees in the limelight and letting them shine but also being prepared to work quietly in the background, creating the circumstances under which your mentees can take the stage. To achieve this, I'm constantly on the lookout for publishing opportunities and, as a result, have succeeded in helping members of our community either to publish themselves or to support their own teacher-researcher mentees in doing so.

Writing activities in our community of practice

In this chapter, I would like to reflect on the writing projects, apart from this book, that have either been accomplished or are 'work-in-progress' in our international community of practice. By 'accomplished' I do not necessarily mean 'published', because there is usually a time delay between a submission being accepted and eventually seeing the light of day. However, it remains a fact that most of what we have submitted has either been published or is being considered for publication. One of the reasons for the high acceptance rate is probably that the writing opportunities I have managed to identify have constituted achievable goals: short articles for themed journal issues (e.g., *Modern English Teacher*), book reviews for non-indexed but well-respected journals (e.g., *ELTED Journal*, *AJAL*, *ELT Research*), and submissions to a newly founded teacher-research journal (*ELT Classroom Research Journal*). I would like to treat all these three 'strands' separately.

An example of how authors in themed journal issues have a higher chance of getting published is our experience with the bimonthly magazine, *Modern English Teacher*. In 2022, I spotted that 'classroom research' was

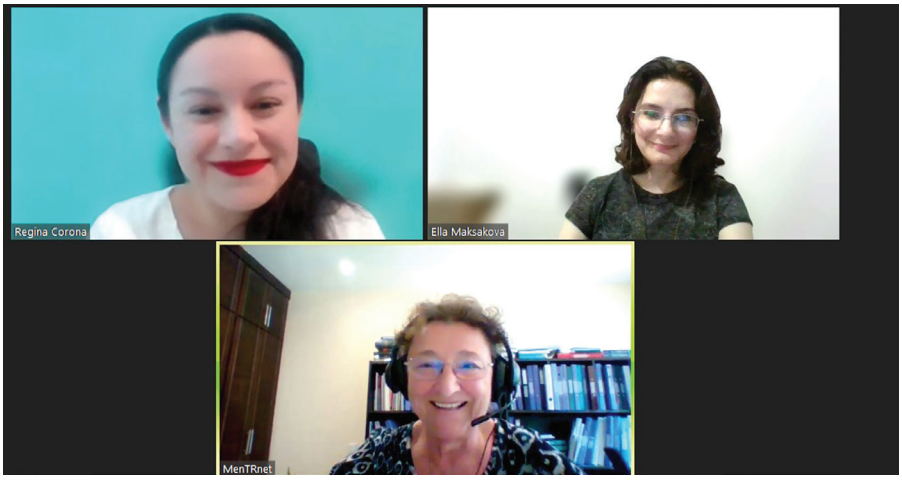
the special theme for the November/December issue. After I drew our mentor support community's attention to this publishing opportunity, one of our members from Mexico, Regina Corona, got in touch with a teacher who runs an online language institute in Brazil. This teacher was ready to write up her classroom research on error correction with adult Business English learners (Suzuki, 2022). Another teacher-research mentor of ours, Meifang Zhuo, encouraged two of her mentees to write about their experience (Guo, 2023; Tang, 2022) and she herself (Zhuo, 2023a; Zhuo, 2023b) has since written two articles (on mentoring and literature circles) for the same journal.

Let us now turn to my hobby horse, namely, book review writing. Even though at tertiary level there is pressure on teacher-researchers to publish in indexed journals, for many of our members this is not an essential requirement. That said, writing a book review for a well-respected journal, even if it is not indexed, can be a very satisfying experience. It's an opportunity for a budding author to try their hand at a genre that, by its nature, does not require the author to conduct their own research, is limited in length (800–2,000 words) and functions as an engaging tool for CPD. This is because the books that we choose to review are mostly related to our teacher-researcher experiences or the learning and teaching process in our classrooms.

Chang Liu's review for *ELTED Journal* (Liu, 2023) is one of several that our members have written about collected volumes of Action Research accounts and reports, while Ella Maksakova and Valeria Chumbi's review on *Teaching Grammar Creatively* for *AJAL* is a good example of looking at a widely-debated issue in ELT through fresh eyes (Maksakova & Chumbi, 2023). At my instigation and stepping out of their comfort zone, Ella and Valeria got in touch with the authors, Scott Thornbury and Herbert Puchta, to let them know about the publication of the review. They both replied saying they appreciated the piece and, in one of his webinars for Latin American audiences, Scott Thornbury actually put a fairly long quote from the review on one of his slides!

Over the past two years, we have developed a kind of 'good practice' related to book review writing. I always make an effort to suggest reviewing open access books and I try to ensure that we get the reviews published in open access journals. I usually approach the journal editors with an offer and, if they accept it, I ask members of MenTRnet to volunteer. I

encourage co-authoring, because it builds an element of peer-reviewing into the process and often leads to transnational collaboration. I also nudge prospective authors to read a couple of book reviews from the target journal. Then comes the task of mentoring drafts and revisions. The submission process is accomplished by the authors and, once they receive feedback and comments, we work on those together. The authors are encouraged to keep in touch with the editors and, if at all possible, establish contact with the author(s) of the book reviewed. All this is very much in line with Malderez's concept of sponsoring your mentees because, when the process is sufficiently scaffolded, they are obtaining not just (academic) writing skills, but networking skills as well, an important aspect of professional development.



Working on a book review with Regina and Ella

MenTRnet members have also been working on submitting fully-fledged articles for a new outlet, *ELT Classroom Research Journal (ELTCRJ)*, whose editor, Robert Dickey, is in the process of compiling the inaugural issue. After clarifying the ground rules with him (such as the type of articles the journal is looking for, the word count limits and deadlines), the coordinators in the mentor support group announced the publishing opportunity and invited prospective teacher-research authors to describe their recent experiences and submit article proposals. We also decided to provide further support in the write-up phase because we thought

that pairing up mentees and their immediate mentors (who had such a crucial role in designing and conducting the original project) with other members in the network to function as *writing mentors* could provide additional support and another layer of sponsorship and facilitation. Five writing mentors (Ana Garcia Stone, Revathi Viswanathan, Sidney Martin Mota, Susan Dawson and I) came forward at short notice to start working based on the abstracts that we received. It was a joy to see how speedily and energetically the teacher-researchers and their immediate mentors got started and began to write their first drafts in small groups with the help of their writing mentors.

It needs to be pointed out that, by the nature of the setup, much of the writing for a prospective issue of *ELTCRJ* was carried out collaboratively, within a *multilayered support structure*, which was built on mutual appreciation and a desire to learn together. The teacher-research mentees and their immediate mentors worked jointly on submitting the initial abstracts (article proposals), and the writing mentors assigned to the pairs or trios made sure that there was early communication and an exchange of ideas to propel the manuscripts forward. I also read the drafts and provided further comments, and, finally, Richard Smith offered a thorough read-through before the actual submission. As usual, the final 'mentoring layer' is to be provided externally by the editor and the peer reviewers of the targeted journal (*ELTCRJ*). This aspect of 'journal editorial mentoring' is often not appreciated enough, even though comments coming from editors and peer reviewers can typically lead to much improved versions or resubmissions. In the end, the 'ELTCRJ experience' proved to be so invigorating that one of the writing mentors, Sidney Martin Mota, decided to 'write up the writing up' for this book (Chapter 19)! And, of course, the overall initiative is what led me to decide to share my own experience here, in this chapter.

Reflections on writing activities in our community

I cannot say that the whole process has been plain sailing, though. Some of us needed to learn the hard way that article or book review writing is not made any easier when co-authors live in very different time zones and/or cannot dedicate the same amount of time or effort to a joint project. We also struggled to keep to deadlines on account of mental health issues and a new wave of COVID-19. We needed to decline further work with

a prospective author who was unable to verify their data, while another group of authors, after careful consideration, decided that their prospective submission in English was too similar to an article already being published in another language.

While writing full-length articles is still quite a challenge for many members of our community, those who have written book reviews before often come back for a 'second helping'. To me, this is a more reliable sign of a satisfying experience than the most eloquent and enthusiastic written feedback. For example, Krishna recently emailed me saying that the way she had been mentored in writing a book review (Upadhayaya, 2024) boosted her confidence and she would like to write reviews for other journals. In the article-writing initiative, all our teacher-researchers and teacher-research mentors (as co-authors) appreciated the support coming from the writing mentors and the 'publication nudger' (myself) as well as from our 'senior internal reviewer', Richard Smith.

Writing is often perceived as a solitary activity but, in our community, it has become a multilayered, collaborative effort. What we have come to understand is that there often needs to be several rounds of drafts that result in ever-improving versions. A recent decision of 'accept with revisions' led to a meaningful, collaborative dialogue between the authors and the journal editor and created a positive environment for supportive rewriting. Ultimately, even a rejection based on well-argued and sympathetically presented comments can pave the way to a submission elsewhere, turning an apparent failure into success. That said, journal rejection often leads us to questioning our professionalism, and this is one of the reasons why I am so keen on commissioned book review writing where the rejection rate is close to zero.

Finally, new opportunities are opening up almost every day. Recently, the *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* invited us to write reviews for the journal, suggesting that we might choose to review any volume from their vast list of books published in the field of theoretical and applied linguistics. A careful look resulted in a surprise find, namely, a volume titled *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching: Historical Perspectives* (R. Smith & T. Giesler (eds.), 2023, Benjamins), with a familiar name as first editor! Ella Maksakova and myself learnt quite a lot while writing the review on this

volume, which provides fascinating insights into innovation in language education over centuries.

Unceasing challenges and resilient teacher-researchers and teacher-research mentors working on disseminating their thoughts and findings. Will you join us?

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About the author

Erzsébet Ágnes Békés (Eli) is a Hungarian English teacher residing in Ecuador. She previously worked for BBC English and the World Service's Hungarian Section. After opting for early retirement, she took up a Voluntary Service Overseas assignment in Ethiopia, where she set up English Language Improvement Centres at two universities. She then did more language teaching volunteer work in the Amazonian region of Ecuador. In recent years, her main interests have been mentoring teacher-research and supporting the publishing efforts of her mentees.

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Stories of Mentoring Teacher-Research

Edited by
Richard Smith, Seden Eraldemir Tuyan, Mariana Serra and Erzsébet Ágnes Békés

Teacher-research – research initiated and carried out by teachers into issues of importance to them in their own work – has great potential benefits but can also appear challenging to embark upon and sustain. In recent years, the value of teacher-research mentoring – sharing knowledge, skills and experience to encourage and empower teachers to carry out their own research – has, accordingly, begun to be better recognized.

This book breaks new ground by bringing together 20 separate reflective accounts of mentoring by facilitators of classroom inquiry in a wide variety of contexts worldwide, mostly in countries of the Global South. In this, the book both mirrors and draws upon the knowledge generation and sharing which has been occurring within MenTRnet (https://mentrnet.net/), an international network for teacher-research mentors that has been built up since 2021, now numbering around 300 mentor or prospective mentor members across the globe. In association with IATEFL Research SIG, this book is MenTRnet's first publication.

Richard Smith (Professor of ELT & Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick) is known for his work supporting teaching and learning in Global South public education contexts, particularly in the context of British Council projects in Latin America and South Asia. Within these, he pioneered the development of Exploratory Action Research and an innovative framework for mentoring teacher-research. He is the founder and chair of the International Festival of Teacher-Research and of MenTRnet.

Seden Eraldemir Tuyan is an experienced educator at Çağ University in Turkey. She has mentored groups of EFL teachers in in-service contexts and practicums. She has been co-moderator of Mentoring Teacher-Research sessions on the Electronic Village Online platform and now for MenTRnet. She has published on the psychological perspectives of ELT, social-emotional learning, and continuing professional development, including teacher-research and research mentoring.

Mariana Serra is a teacher and a licentiate in English working at the University of Buenos Aires. She won the Aptis for Teachers Action Research Award three times. She has co-moderated Electronic Village Online sessions on Teacher-Research for Professional Development since 2020 and the sessions on Mentoring Teacher-Research in 2023 and 2024. She helped to develop the Enhancement Mentoring approach with the other three co-editors, and she is a co-founder of APIBA Teacher-Research SIG.

Erzsébet Ágnes Békés is a Hungarian English teacher residing in Ecuador. She previously worked for BBC English and the World Service's Hungarian Section. She has worked on a Voluntary Service Overseas assignment in Ethiopia, where she set up English Language Improvement Centres. She also taught English in Ecuador's Amazonian region to members of an indigenous tribe. In recent years, her main interests have been mentoring teacher-research and supporting the publishing efforts of her mentees.

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