Supporting Ecuadorian teachers in their classroom research: Reflections on becoming a research mentor

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Abstract
Classroom-based research has flourished in the past 15 years, often introduced institutionally, as part of teachers’ Continuous Professional Development. Supporting teachers in their classroom research requires facilitation and scaffolding. Therefore, teacher trainers are often assigned the tasks of research-mentoring. However, this activity requires special skills and sustained mentoring of the mentors themselves. Mentoring, as an activity, has a rich literature, but mentoring teachers and, more specifically, mentoring language teachers researching their classrooms has not been widely documented as yet. The present self-study constitutes a reflective account of an experienced teacher trainer’s journey into mentoring. By simultaneously taking part in an online mentoring course as well as putting the newly gained knowledge into practice, the author was able to mentor 11 English language teachers and 5 English major students that came together to carry out tasks related to mentoring action research projects and/or accomplish their own classroom research as required by the Ecuadorian state university where they teach or study. The self-study draws on the first three months of the year-long program and presents the process of growing into the mentoring role by using the author’s reflective journal, email exchanges with her lead-mentor, posts on the online EVO Mentoring course and feedback from participants. The author concludes that mentoring teacher-researchers is a two-way activity that benefits both the mentor and the mentee, but the value of mentoring should be acknowledged institutionally, and its practice ought to be extended.

Keywords: teacher research, classroom research, mentoring teacher-researchers

Introduction
Over the past ten years, teacher-research in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been gaining ground internationally, and by now extended networks of classroom practitioners are sharing their accounts, namely, stories of their research activities that are often part of their institutions’
The usefulness of classroom-based research from the point of view of specialist knowledge advancement, namely Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory, is still an issue open for discussion since academics at times question the value of such inquiry by pointing out the limitations of teacher research (Ellis, 2010). Others, for example, Medgyes (2017) claim that applied research is mostly irrelevant for language teachers, and urge the profession “to accord more prominence to the 'teacher-inquirer', who is a professional capable of analysing their work...” (p. 491).

Teacher-researchers these days have a wide range of reports and resources to fall back on (Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016; Burns, Dikilitaş, Smith, & Wyatt, 2017), especially since the publication of Smith and Rebolledo’s innovative volume, *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018), which provides a practical, step-by-step account of this type of inquiry based on British Council projects in, for example, Chile, India, Nepal, and Peru (Békés, 2019).

These projects necessarily required the careful and well-designed mentoring of teachers in order to support them in becoming teacher-researchers, but so far there have been only a few publications (Malderez & Bodóczky, 1999) to demonstrate in what way practical guidance could be provided to those who begin to fulfil a mentoring role by moving from teacher training to teacher mentoring. This gap is now being gradually filled by publications such as Richard Smith’s *Mentoring teachers to research their classrooms: A practical handbook* (2020), and such initiatives as the Electronic Village Online learning community of the TESOL International Association, which ran its first mentoring course in January-February 2020.

There are a fair number of accounts of transitioning from ELT teacher-trainer or practicum supervisor to mentoring (Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018; Eraldemir-Tuyan, 2017), but I am not aware of many that attempt to describe the process and share the results more or less simultaneously, as this requires an almost instantaneous meta-level of reflection (reflecting on the reflection). The self-study report that I provide below on my experience of professional development as an emerging mentor is an attempt to do just that: to document that journey over its initial three-month period. In this sense, my account is both ‘contemporaneous’ and reflective. The experience is multi-layered because while mentoring teacher-researchers and student-researchers, I am also being mentored by a lead-mentor (Kenan Dikilitaş). Similarly, the teacher-researchers involved in the project play a dual role: they are getting ready to conduct their classroom research, but they are also mentoring their own English major students in action research projects that the student teachers have to carry out as part of their pre-service teacher education at the National University of Education, Ecuador (UNAE). The novelty of the approach involves not only that it is multi-layered, but also the fact that the mentoring scheme targets both in-service teachers and pre-service students simultaneously in a collaborative setting.

Below I highlight the most relevant aspects of teacher-research mentoring as discussed in the literature, describe the context of my own mentoring experience, introduce the methodology applied and present the findings based on the data that have accumulated so far. The data include my reflective mentoring journal, the posts that I have written for the EVO mentoring course, email exchanges with my lead-mentor, and feedback received from the teachers and students involved in the project.
Literature review
The mushrooming of action research and the systematic publishing of teacher-research stories signal how curriculum development and changes in pre-service teacher education (Kırkgöz & Yaşar, 2016; Fletcher, 2012), shifting perceptions on bottom-up approaches that are applicable under challenging circumstances (British Council mentoring schemes in South Asia and Latin America), political changes (Malderez, 2018) and systematic inquiry (Edwards & Burns, 2016) can result in an exponential growth of output, which then leads to an emerging field of research, that of research mentoring and, specifically, teacher-research mentoring in ELT.

Mentoring can be defined as a “nurturing process aimed at the personal and professional growth of the mentee” (Halai, 2006, p. 702). Malderez (2018) applies this construct to an educational setting when she says that mentoring is “the one-to-one support by a relatively more experienced teacher for the growth and learning of another” (p. 110). In the context of English Language Teaching, mentoring is often provided as part of teachers’ professional development, and can include supporting them in researching their classrooms. The latter activity can be termed as teacher-research, and is perceived as “practitioner research – usually, classroom-based research – which is initiated and carried out by and for teachers, for their own benefit and that of their students” (Smith, 2020, p. 12 – author’s italics). According to Fletcher (2012), who also believes that mentoring has its own characteristics in educational contexts, it is a “long-term, holistic professional relationship” (p. 69). Still, beyond that, it is also a collaborative undertaking, which she calls ‘co-mentoring’. In this process, mentors and mentees are “sharing a journey for developing values, skills and understanding and co-creating educational knowledge” (p. 69). This definition emphasizes the fact that mentoring is a collaborative exercise, as a result of which both mentors and mentees develop. Mentors often reflect on this aspect of their work: for example, Eraldemir-Tuyan (2017) describes increased “practical and pedagogical content knowledge” and enhanced “self-efficacy beliefs” as some of the results of her research mentoring (p. 48).

Teacher-research mentoring often takes place during the pre-service training of student teachers with the active collaboration of research mentors, university supervisors and school mentors. In a more recent paper, Eraldemir-Tuyan (2019) compares her experiences of mentoring in-service and pre-service teachers. She stresses the fact that her in-service mentees volunteered for the continuous professional development (CPD) activity (Action Research – AR) and this “contributed to the participants’ perseverance to meet various challenges” as well as helped “to retain their enthusiasm to develop professionally through AR” (p. 14).

Action research is often carried out collaboratively, an approach that is encouraged by experts such as Burns (2003), who believes that “action research becomes all the richer when teachers have the opportunity to work collaboratively rather than in isolation” (2015, p. 9). However, Kırkgöz and Yaşar (2016) stress that collaboration may involve a number of challenges. They worked with ten primary school English teachers after the curriculum innovations in ELT took place in Turkey. They found that collaborative AR can be time-consuming and that even though they were mentoring each teacher actively, they were concerned that they could not fully control how the action research cycle would be accomplished. Altogether, however, they believe that “collaboration is an important aspect of action research,” and the latter should be carried out “through partnership and two-way
communication” (p. 55).

Working with pre-service ELT students presents a different set of challenges: according to Doğan (2018), for example, the dilemma that mentors are often practicum directors, who also need to be assessors (Malderez, 2018). However, the three female trainee teachers that Doğan started working with were not her students and were ready to conduct a piece of small-scale research under her mentorship during their school practice. The ‘research women’ (as they called themselves) set up a WhatsApp group and started working as a team, brainstorming and carrying out observation sessions before they decided which puzzle they wanted to explore. The team members “grew as practitioners of learning” (p. 14), and so did their mentor, who felt she was able to help her mentees carry out research that was “practical, small scale and contextualized” (p. 16).

Learning teacher-research mentoring is an under-researched area. Therefore, Dikilitaş and Wyatt’s article (2018) is especially pertinent. They used a qualitative case study approach to describe the development of three Turkish novice teacher-research-mentors. Interviews, the novice mentors’ reflective writing, and the researchers’ field notes provided the data sources. In their discussion, Dikilitaş and Wyatt underline the importance of the fact that all three would-be mentors took on this developmental project after having heard of the empowering effect of teacher research in their country. Furthermore, “they all became very conscious of their roles in providing psychological support” (p. 548). Even though the authors do not wish to generalize their findings, they arrive at a couple of important conclusions stating, for example, that intrinsic motivation on behalf of the teacher-researchers makes mentoring a less unnerving task, but in order to succeed, mentors need to have a positive outlook and a high level of resilience. Finally, the authors emphasize that in order to make research mentoring sustainable, “educational institutions need to take on supportive nurturing roles, facilitating career progression from teacher to mentor to teacher-research-mentor” (p. 551).

Context

Background

The National University of Education, Ecuador (UNAE) requires all its pre-service teachers to carry out action research during the course of their studies, and, as a result, the university’s teacher educators are obliged to act as supervisors for these projects. The carrying out of this task is, therefore, among the responsibilities of the 35 English teachers who work in the English degree course or teach General English to subject matter student teachers. At the end of 2019, the administration decided to provide additional support to its English instructors in order to improve the quality of supervision (mentoring) provided by the teachers to their own students (trainee teachers) in the English major program as well as to encourage teachers to conduct their own classroom research.

It was at this stage that I was asked to undertake mentoring tasks and facilitate the process from the initial stages to its accomplishment, including the write-up phase (Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2016) with the aim of academic publication. I agreed to do this on a voluntary basis for one year, until the end of 2020.
The team
Before the project started, the on-campus research coordinator asked staff members to describe their research experience and what kind of research activity they would like engage in. Out of the 20 respondents, 15 mentioned action research saying that they had some experience in the field, and would like to be part of a new project.

Eventually, 11 teachers signed up (10 from among the respondents and one ‘latecomer’). The teachers also invited some of the students from the English major course, and, as a result, five student-researchers also became part of the group. The profile is varied: teaching experience ranges from minimal (pre-service teachers) to decades, educational levels from pre-BA to PhD. Most of the teachers have already carried out applied/theoretical research, and some have published extensively, too.

At an early stage, the whole group was divided into three smaller groups according to research interest and, without much special effort, well-balanced groups came into being as to experience and gender distribution. It was also decided that, for publishing purposes, the small groups would split into pairs or trios; their compatibility and effectiveness will only transpire over time.

Method
The genre of this article is that of self-study (Fletcher, 2012), namely, I am the sole researcher and the only reflective participant, who is mainly relying on the qualitative data gathered, combined with member-checking and feedback to validate the findings (Barkhuizen, 2018).

Self-study necessarily raises the issue of subjectivity. Fletcher (2012) is very vocal stating that she tends to agree with Peshkin’s view: “I am subjective when I do research – as are we all – because of the affective state of my being; that is, I have values, attitudes and tastes” (as cited in Fletcher, 2012, p. 71). I fully subscribe to this approach. Clearly, this does not imply that we should not be circumspect in our self-study, so I will draw on several data sources to triangulate what I perceive to be the results of my self-reflection so far. I will use entries of my reflective mentoring diary, my email exchanges with my personal mentor (the lead-mentor of the group), my numerous posts in the discussion forum of the Mentoring EVO learning community as well as refer to the wealth of materials created (session plans and notes on post-session reflections, handouts, filled-in questionnaires on AR and mentoring skills, and feedback slips). Most of the information coming from these sources will require an in-depth qualitative analysis at a later stage.

Before providing a mainly qualitative-descriptive account (Barkhuizen, 2018) of how far the project has got since its inception three months ago (beginning of December 2019), I would like to describe the personal journey that brought me to where I am now: on the road to becoming a fully-fledged teacher-researcher mentor.

Mentoring pre-history and perceptions of the role
I have always considered myself to be a mentor over and above being a language teacher. I hold the view that in an ongoing learning/teaching situation, the teacher is also a facilitator, who provides scaffolding and creates opportunities for learning to take place. Over my forty-odd years as a Hungarian-born non-native English speaker teacher, I have always taken my mentoring role seriously, be it by helping new colleagues as an ‘acculturator’
I worked in Ethiopia as a Voluntary Service Overseas volunteer for two and a half years (2006-2009). I ran English Language Improvement Centres at two universities, and part of my work involved mentoring English teachers as well as training my local counterparts, without whom the whole project would have become unsustainable.

I also delivered an Action Research module at Cuenca University for the MA program in English Language and Applied Linguistics (2012). I have been mentoring three of my former MA students ever since. Our informal sessions have included discussing career options, preparing for exams, helping attend conferences, applying for scholarships, arranging for sabbaticals as well as language coaching (usually with a fair amount of proofreading and editing). I mentored an ex-colleague of mine at the above MA course in the writing of a concise volume on non-native speaker English teachers (Békés & Carrasco, 2017). I also mentored the same teacher and one of my former MA students, now a colleague, while we collaboratively wrote an article about an action research type project, which involved writing at an academic level about academic writing leading to publication (Orosz, Carrasco, Jaramillo, & Békés, 2019).

My two interests (action research and mentoring) were bound to come together when A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018) was published. Subsequently, I wrote a review about this freely-downloadable resource for the ELT Journal (Békés, 2019). A few months later I learnt about Richard Smith’s forthcoming book titled Mentoring teachers to research their classrooms: A practical handbook (eventually published by British Council India in spring 2020), with the pre-publication manuscript made available to participants of the EVO 2020 course on Mentoring held in January-February 2020. I joined the course and became an active member of that learning community. I am also a member of the closed Mentoring-TR Facebook group, where I post regularly when I feel I can contribute meaningfully.

In our mentoring Facebook group (Mentoring-TR), we talked about mentoring roles with one member asking the question: “What do you think is an important difference between the term ‘mentor’ and ‘teacher trainer’?” The same person claimed that “Perhaps the term ‘teacher educator’ is more relevant to encompass both the role of mentor and trainer.” To which I replied:

I quite like the term 'mentor'... It is being used in a number of caring and/or creative professions. I feel that the term 'teacher educator' is neutral and addresses another aspect of teachers' professional development. For me, mentoring is positively loaded. It means engaging with prospective teacher-researchers more deeply, providing sustained support, creating opportunities and letting them shine. A most rewarding experience… (post from 17th Jan 2020)

I must have argued reasonably well, because there came the quick reply: “Sold!”

**Mentor roles and emerging practice**

In order to provide a structured account of my development as a mentor, I will look at the mentoring roles as laid out in the writings of Malderez and Bodóczky (1999), Halai (2006)
and Fletcher (2012) and describe, using vignettes and various other data sources, how far I feel I have advanced in the professional development process of each aspect, and what my learning has been.

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<th>Model</th>
<th>Acculturator</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Sponsor</th>
<th>Educator</th>
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<tr>
<td>Malderez &amp; Bodóczky (1999)</td>
<td>Expert coach</td>
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<td>Critical friend</td>
<td>Subject-specialist</td>
<td>Learner</td>
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<td>Halai (2006)</td>
<td>Nurturer and model of specific research skills</td>
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<td>Subject-specialist expert (knowledge about research)</td>
<td>Research mentor (pedagogical content knowledge) Provider of language support</td>
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<td>Fletcher (2012)</td>
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**Model and expert coach**

In the mentoring process of the present project, I aspired to become a role model early on, as encouraged by Smith (2020), who says:

Apart from reflecting…, you should consider researching your own practice as a mentor in order to become more effective, in other words exploring the situation by asking specific questions and gathering data, and maybe carrying out action research of your own. (p. 43 – author’s italics)

Smith adds that beyond being a means of improving one’s own practice, such an effort is likely to lead to an appreciation by the teachers involved, and the findings could prove to be useful for other teacher-research mentors, especially because there are not as yet that many accounts of mentoring (language) teacher-researchers made available (p. 44). However, modelling is an over-arching aspect, and it involves a wide range of issues. In my specific context, I also wanted to show that I was ready to take on challenges and work both collaboratively and pro-actively. In fact, challenges did appear early on.

The mentoring program started at the beginning of December 2019 and coincided with major changes in the management of the university. As a result, a high degree of uncertainty surrounded several appointments at the top level, and the full funding for the academic year of 2020/21 was also called into question. I mentioned this to my mentor, Kenan Dikilitaş, in an email (7th Jan 2020), and then dutifully listed down our latest achievements and my own personal reflection. He replied in his usual, succinct style (8th Jan 2020 – mind the speed of the response). He did not ignore my remarks on the university; on the contrary, he turned the state
of affairs into something positive I could hold onto:

“I am also amazed by the progress in your project despite the worsening situation but please remember that these are also challenges that contribute to the development of ideas and skills. I believe your broad vision will lead you to getting out of this crisis successfully.” (cited with permission)

After the second whole group meeting, around the time that seemed the lowest point in terms of the university’s immediate future, I wrote a long email to my mentor with a passage that said:

_I was worried about the meeting, because we’ve known for a couple of months that the university is going to lose 60% of its present budget in 2020. It’s a near-fatal blow and many wonder if the uni will be able to pull through. The rector held a meeting at 8:30 am this morning and announced that the contracts of 20 teachers would not be renewed at the end of January. This constitutes about 10% of the teaching staff. The people to be laid off will be notified by Friday._ (13 January 2020, email communication)

As it happens, all English teachers have kept their jobs, and there is now a renewed sense of purpose as well as the feeling of ‘we’ll get through this together’ out of professional pride and sheer resilience. I decided early on that this was the way forward, and this attitude is reflected in what I wrote to Kenan (email dated 3 Feb 2020) as I was preparing for the first small group session on 6th February (2020) after a 3-week break:

_Right now, I feel a little stuck, the whole mentoring process started on 2nd December, and then came the changes that have been truly traumatic, and are not finished yet ... Workload is climbing up from 16 hours to 24 contact hours. There is still a lot of uncertainty, money cut back drastically, incoming student numbers doubling. Probably, things will slow down, because teachers will not have the time that was ring-fenced ... for CPD._

... I need to be as well-organised as possible, and also flexible and responsive.

On reflection, I would say I knew that I was in a special position as an external mentor: I was aware of the events taking place at the university, but was not immediately affected (being a volunteer). It didn’t occur to me to ‘resign’ (as many did) and decided to work even harder to support the teachers by practical means and without over-reacting.

_Model for collaborative work_

From the beginning of the project I have been keen on two aspects: a) I wanted to learn mentoring by doing and intended to co-opt a teacher to work with me as a co-mentor; and b) I wanted students to take part and grow into the action research experience. The rationale behind the second consideration is that, over the years, I’ve become convinced that learners can turn into co-researchers starting from a young age (Pinter & Mathew, 2016), and also because I thought that, in our case, the English degree students could gain a better understanding of action research as well as become reflective practitioners, who could then create a ripple effect at their
future schools in their prospective jobs.

I have achieved my goal, because we managed to set up a multi-level, collaborative research mentoring structure, in which co-mentoring has an eminent role.

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<th>Lead-mentor (Kenan Dikilitaş)</th>
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<td>External mentor + teacher co-mentor + student co-mentor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher researchers</td>
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<tr>
<td>(mentoring students and carrying out their own classroom research)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student researchers</td>
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<tr>
<td>taking part in their small group’s work, doing their own AR</td>
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<tr>
<td>(potentially) mentoring their peers</td>
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Altogether, it looks like modelling has been successful so far. The fact that the group is aware of this very article means that they can see me ‘walk the talk’ (Smith, 2020, p. 44) in more ways than one: I seized a publishing opportunity early on, gathered various kinds of data, wrote the article at short notice, but allowed time for comments from both the participants at UNAE and members of the EVO learning community (member-checking).

**Acculturator**

Since I’m an external mentor and my mentees do not need induction into the formal and informal culture of the university, I have been treating my acculturator role as one that helps group members to acculturate to communities of practice beyond the walls of the university. In such cases, it is difficult to separate the role of the acculturator and that of the expert coach or educator, but I promoted and scaffolded the process. I introduced group members to learning communities such as the EVO mentoring course, the EVO course on classroom research, and I also nudged them to join FB groups like Teachers research! and Teacher Voices. Eight of the 11 teachers are now members of the Mentoring-TR Facebook group, both my co-mentors signed up for the mentoring EVO, and the teacher co-mentor has been an enthusiastic follower and contributor.

**Students as researchers and co-mentors**

As an acculturator, I had a unique opportunity to help our student-researchers and our student co-mentor to become part of a research community. The involvement of students was not something I had to push for, the teachers themselves suggested to some of their mature and well-performing students that they should join. I asked all five students about their experiences over the past three months (data gathered via email and passed on to me anonymously by the on-campus research coordinator). Altogether, I received three sets of anonymised and one set of non-anonymised comments:

The questions were:

1. In what way have you been involved (meetings, sharing ideas, reading, observations) so far? What have you gained (if anything) so far?
2. How are you being treated in the whole group and in your own group or the group you co-mentor (in the capacity of a student-researcher or co-mentor)?

3. What interesting / puzzling experiences have you had so far?

4. What did you find surprising and what was it that confirmed your previous assumptions?

5. Anything else that is worthy of mentioning.

Student-researcher 1 has had a positive experience, was involved “in meetings, readings and exchange of ideas”. It seems that collegiality is being extended to him/her by the teachers: “In my group, I feel good, because all my colleagues are nice and helpful; I am not afraid to ask any questions that I do not know”. This respondent has a comment on how s/he feels about the teacher-researchers’ approach: “…sometimes teacher-researchers just follow their assumptions, but do not confirm these assumptions with data”. This remark ties in with what the teacher researchers themselves had said about how they wished to proceed with their research (basically, along applied research lines) and underlines why including an ‘exploratory’ phase in their action research projects could help by providing them a different set of data, including the students’ or learners’ perspective (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018).

Student-researcher 2 emphasizes that s/he appreciates being involved in the initial stages of research: “I have gained knowledge about how to start researching and also information about exploratory research and ideas about what is research related to education.” S/he also touches on something that might be an issue, especially in the early stages of a group working collaboratively (when there is a hierarchy): “As a student, I think it would be interesting to be more involved during some meetings or stages of the research. Maybe we can apply what we learn in our research classes by having specific roles.”

Student-researcher 3 mentions the content knowledge that s/he has learnt: “I have gained a lot [of] information about the differences between applied research and action research which has been useful for me.” Being treated as an equal partner is also mentioned: “All members of the group are kind. They also like listening to the opinions of each participant carefully. In addition, everybody is respectful.”

Student-researcher 4 actually revealed his identity, because he sent me his comments directly. He is the student co-mentor, who has not been as active as his role would have required. His replies are laconic, but he does refer to collegiality: “I have gain[ed] friendships and support that has help[ed] my self-esteem” and appreciates that he has become part of a research group in which his status (that of a student) is irrelevant. However, it became clear that family problems were giving him a hard time and we (the teacher co-mentor and I) decided to offer him the option of “shadowing” us rather than acting as a fully-fledged co-mentor. He seemed much relieved, and we were pleased that he was not dropping out, and neither does he need to feel that he has been ‘demoted’.

**Support**

**Motivational support**

In the EVO Mentoring course, the issue that was raised many times from different corners of the world was: How do we motivate teachers to start (and, more importantly, to finish) their AR projects? In our group, whose members self-selected themselves into this
programme, intrinsic motivation was not an issue, but there was an extrinsic aspect arising from the fact that instructors are required to carry out research (and publish). However, they get time release for research activities, which is probably another extrinsic motivational factor.

Most mentors emphasise the need of providing support to teacher researchers, and often the kind of support required is psychological. A lot of it is related to stepping in the shoes of your mentees, understanding their constraints and making a real effort to sustain motivation, which is needed to see the project through, including the involved process of writing up (Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2016). It also requires “sensitivity, (and) tactfulness” (Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018). Something a budding mentor may not always have.

I remember what I call a critical incident that happened when the three groups were asked to do an ‘elevator pitch’ style, 5-minute presentation on the topic they had chosen. The coordinator of one of the three groups started the presentation looking at his laptop screen and reading out, rather quickly, what must have been a PowerPoint presentation. After about a minute (of the five allocated), I stopped him saying:

“Gabriel*, why are you reading? When you read, you don’t give time to your listeners to process what you are saying, there is a delay of a couple of seconds that the brain needs, and it is even longer in a foreign language. The natural pauses you keep when you’re talking freely, and even the hesitation devices are needed for us to follow what you’re saying…”

For the rest of the presentation, Gabriel carried on without looking at the screen and established eye contact with his colleagues. “You see”, I said, “and you didn’t even resort to hesitation devices…”.

*not his real name

Even though it seemed that Gabriel didn’t mind too much, and my co-mentors, whom I asked later, also agreed that the intervention was justified, I felt unease, because I thought I was abrupt and perhaps displaying superiority. Weeks later, Gabriel came up to me and explained that he had thought they were expected to do a ‘proper’ presentation, and that’s why he set it up that way.

This leads us to the issue of being directive, a topic that we discussed in the EVO course, where someone said that there are situations when a directive approach is welcomed, and she mentioned deadlines as an example. Surely, this is how we felt six hours before the deadline of submitting our proposal for the British Council’s small grant for teacher educators (there was no meeting scheduled with this group before that day):

Putting the grant proposal together. I found it important that it should be in two people’s names (both groups are happy to split the prize money), this time it was Emily and Daniel. Vero and Daniel were putting together the proposal, Emily and I were looking for sources, Emily checked the text, native being praised for native! I felt in charge, re-drafted the text, but made sure Emily was involved at two levels: researcher and native speaker
Sponsor

Experienced mentors are often in a position to be able to ‘sponsor’ their mentees (Malderez, 2018). This role does not imply financial support (even though, in my case, it has never excluded that either), but putting your mentees first (by, for example, mentoring publishing but not wishing to appear among the authors), building up opportunities for your mentees to take part in conferences, professional events, presentations and generally making them shine (Eraldemir-Tuyan, 2017).

Over the short period of the past three months, I have taken each and every opportunity to fulfil the role of sponsor: I helped my teacher-researchers to put in proposals for the British Council’s teacher educator small grant, established contact with the Hornby Trust on how it would be best to submit a proposal on vocabulary research, and I am enthusiastically supporting the organization of the first ELT conference at UNAE, which will offer the opportunity for my mentees to give oral and poster presentations, run workshops as well as present the first draft of the articles on their research projects. Sponsorship in this case also meant getting in touch with outstanding scholars (Charles Browne and his colleagues, who compiled the New General Service List) hoping that we could invite them to the conference to talk about topics related to one of our AR projects.

The educator expert coach

This role is related to sharing specialist knowledge involving both the passing on of research skills and having “the ability to teach teachers how to research” (Fletcher, 2012, p. 71). I have created a large amount of materials, often handouts for brevity, mainly to explain how action research is different from applied research (since the latter is the kind of research activity that my mentees have been engaged in).

Mentoring can involve a process of adaptation, especially when you start using the skills required, because you need to shift the way you share knowledge. In my teaching and volunteering practice, I often found myself trying to be as helpful as possible, solving problems on the spot, and offering quick solutions on a tray. I call this the “all-knower” syndrome. Smith (2020) emphasizes that the mentoring process “involves enhancing teachers’ autonomy to develop for themselves, increasing their ability and willingness to take control of their own learning rather than judging or directly advising them or telling them all the answers” (p. 19). Even though I have made an effort to hold back (‘ask before you question’ has been a policy of mine since my VSO years, mainly on account of the cultural context in Ethiopia), I still tend to come up with ideas rather than waiting for them to come from my mentees.

I recall the meeting with members of the Critical Thinking group, when we were trying to disentangle the threads: how directly are critical thinking skills linked to speaking? Can we assume that someone who has a fair amount of fluency is also thinking critically? It turned out that the teacher trainers had a class where educational and social issues were discussed and the students were keen on making a contribution, but they did not have the linguistic tools in English to do so. The teachers, on occasion, suspended the ‘English only’ policy so that students could share their ideas, but they felt there was a gap that needed to be bridged. Suddenly I
remembered, and had the urge to share what I saw was a great solution: “You know what? I had an amazing Debating Society in Ethiopia! We had two groups of students debating, with an audience, they had to vote for the group with the better arguments…” Two of the most active group members looked at each other and said in unison: “That would be great, we should set up a Debating Club!” The saving grace was, perhaps, that the action research project, at that stage, targeted something else (using murder mysteries to detect critical thinking skills – the student-researcher’s idea), but surely, I came out with a ready-made idea instead of waiting for the mentees to think of one.

There are occasions when feedback from your mentees makes you realise something that you were not aware of. We had three introductory sessions, and right from the outset, I wanted to reiterate the importance of timekeeping. The meetings started at 2 pm, but they were held in the same room where the on-campus research coordinator had her classes – until 2 pm. The changeover always took a couple of minutes. The meeting was supposed to finish at 3 pm, but several teachers had classes starting at 3 pm in another building, so I made sure my sessions finished at 2:50 pm. This meant that the sessions were in fact 20 minutes (1/3) shorter than what would have been ideal. I also wanted to work on an issue (constituting action), which was to present information that helps teacher-researchers to understand how action research is different from applied research.

The feedback form that I asked group members to fill in at the end of the three whole group sessions was structured like this:

1. Something I learnt / understood:
2. Something I can use in my own classroom (idea or activity):
3. Something I would like to have (more of) in the group sessions:
4. Any other comments:

When I looked at the feedback slips, I was pleased to see that 8 of the 12 participants on the day claimed that they now understood better the difference between action research and applied research. However, related to Point 3, they also said: “More discussion and group activities”, “…more practice or applied activities. I learn better by doing things”, “Some minutes to work in groups to discuss about our research”.

“This can’t have been”, I thought to myself, I ALWAYS make my sessions interactive. I went back to the session plans, and suddenly the pattern emerged. Because I was working with a small group under time pressure, most of the activities were assigned as ‘individual’ or ‘whole group’ / ‘plenary’. There was a minimal amount of pair work, and no group work at all! Looking back, it’s easy to see what should have been done: insisting on setting up longer sessions to start with (and not simply introducing group discussions in the straightjacket of 40 minutes). Now that we have started the group sessions, I make sure we have a full hour set aside in the small groups and that whole group meetings can last up to two hours.

What did I learn?

In the next section, I sum up what I think I learnt in the first three months of the mentoring scheme, how I developed as a result of the mentoring system that we have set up, and what conclusions could be made based on these preliminary findings.
The mentoring processes

Being a mentor and being mentored at the same time is a unique experience. Having my mentor gives me support and scaffolding in the same way as I would like to provide a safe place for growth for my own mentees. It is also a complex experience on a steep learning curve: I learn from our lead-mentor, take part in an online mentoring course (EVO, which, apparently, will carry on functioning as a community of practice), I am learning experientially and putting into practice what I have learnt almost immediately. I am also taking on the supporter/educator role in professional learning groups, for example, by posting well-considered comments (in the closed group of the EVO mentoring course), which aim at encouraging participants and provide ‘mentorial’ insights (Malderez, 2018).

Here is an example. One of the participants, Rossana, started mentoring a colleague, who is also the head teacher of the institution where he works. When looking for doable research projects (her emphasis), it turned out that the head teacher only has contact with classroom learners when he does supply teaching as a substitute teacher. To me this looked like the perfect (exploratory) action research project, especially, when the next message described the background and the research questions (all posts cited with permission):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: Working as a substitute teacher with adult learners. (We call it &quot;supply&quot; work in our institution and it refers to teachers taking over lessons whenever the group teacher is absent. This could be for one class or several ones. It is our institution's policy that students must always have their lesson when their teacher is absent.) As a headteacher, my mentee must coordinate 'supply teachers' and do supply work himself.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do ss feel when having a supply teacher?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do they prefer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What can be done to improve their experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(post on 25th Jan 2020)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My reply:
The topic is excellent for several reasons: the headteacher has a dual identity (manager and classroom teacher) and what he finds as a result of his exploration could affect both the way he teaches and the way he manages. The 'automatic' reply would be that students don't like substitute teachers, because 'it's second best', disruptive and feels like a token lesson. But what if students like substitute teachers because it provides variety, a new approach, a new style of communication. In life, students will meet different speakers, so getting used to the idiosyncrasies of one teacher may be limiting …This question: What can be done to improve their experience? would assume that the sessions by supply teachers need to be improved (decode: they are not good enough) and this, in itself, opens up opportunities from creating self-contained sets of materials … to an occasion of genuine communication (since there is an information gap between the supply teacher and the adult group members). Whichever way, I think this is a hit. Sometimes we shy away from exploring topics that appear to be transient or marginal, when they are actually an important (and also talked about but not explored) part of school life. I didn't like giving supply classes, but made an effort to make them interesting and engaging for both sides. It's a bit like teaching unplugged and, on occasion, it can be surprisingly satisfying :-) ... (EVO comment on 26 Jan 2020)

Rossana’s reply:
Thank you very much for your insight! I agree that the topic may unfold in many different directions - and useful and practical ones. Also, you rightly say: This question: What can be done to improve their experience? would assume that the sessions by supply teachers need to be improved (decode: they are not good enough) and you've helped me realize that we should discuss this question further! Perhaps exploring the mentee's perceptions, a bit deeper here. And yes, the outcome of this research project may lead to institutional changes and/or other supply teachers' development. I'm excited. Thanks a lot! :-D (reply on 26th Jan 2020)

And it did not end there. Rossana then reflected on this experience when, by way of evaluating the whole EVO course, she wrote this:

“One of the things that I found most useful in this experience, however, was the possibility of commenting on the experience and receiving feedback, as was the case of Elizabeth, who gave me quite a lot of food for thought, and the discussions in the webinars. Without this, I felt that mentoring only one teacher individually missed something important to me, namely, the collective experience of teacher research.”

(EVO group discussion, 13th Feb 2020). Beyond improving my reflective/reflexive and interpersonal skills (even spilling over into my private life), I have also become more knowledgeable regarding the research topics that my mentees are planning to research and I am becoming better informed about qualitative research methodology.

I am also noticing the range of qualities a good mentor has, and I have a strong desire to emulate them. The lead-mentor for our group, Kenan Dikilitaş, is also my ‘personal’ mentor. Having such ‘super-mentors’ has proved to be a successful approach in many British Council initiated teacher-research mentoring programmes (Peru, Chile, India and Nepal) so I was keen on involving an experienced teacher-researcher mentor, especially, because at the very start I wasn’t sure if we were setting up a feasible action research mentoring scheme.

Without explicitly saying so, Kenan Dikilitaş has demonstrated that a good mentor:

- Is available, responds promptly or as rapidly as required by the issue raised
- Stays in the background when the process is going smoothly
- Asks for your opinion and takes it seriously
- Appreciates your efforts and makes suggestions
- Supports your suggestions with relevant information
- Gives meaningful, to-the-point feedback, especially at crucial stages of the process
- Is calm and collected, reads your long, emotionally-charged emails patiently and carefully (as well as responds laconically)
- Nudges without pressurizing
- Thinks long-term early on
- Selflessly puts mentees first

As to the last point, it has various aspects (for example, providing ample help with publishing without intending to be included as an author), but it is also related to the workload that goes with mentoring. I do this work as a volunteer, but it is quite clear from the EVO course.
discussions that institutions often assume that the mentor (most often a teacher trainer or an experienced colleague) is already there so s/he might as well take on this responsibility, too. This is a misguided and short-sighted approach: mentors would need incentives, such as opportunities for professional advancement, funding to participate in conferences and, most importantly, time release (Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018).

Conclusions
I have only been part of this co-mentoring, collaborative action research project for three months, but I can already see the benefits for my own continuous professional development. I am changing my communication style, for example, asking ‘What do you think?’ more often, and even transferring some of these new skills into my private life. I’ve been energized by the teacher-researchers and student-teachers, learnt a massive amount about the topics they might be working on, joined professional groups of community, and put in a proposal for an oral presentation on mentoring at a conference in Ankara in June 2020. The submission was accepted but, unfortunately, the METUELT conference had to be postponed until 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My professional development as a teacher-research mentor is far from over, but based on the experience of other mentors who have gone through a similar experience, and my own reflections, there are several points that could be considered in order for the process to be both successful and sustainable.

- Institutional networks of support, e.g. IATEFL ReSIG, are crucial, as borne out by the Special Interest Group’s outstanding activity both through its conferences and the publishing output; the mentoring schemes run and funded by the British Council have also had a lasting impact and a massive ripple effect
- New ways of setting up learning communities and communities of practice are an excellent solution in the digital age. A good example of this is the online EVO course on mentoring which was held at the very beginning of 2020 for the first time but is scheduled to continue as a discussion forum
- Facebook groups (Mentoring-TR, Teachers Research! Teacher Voices: Professional Development) create and sustain professional communities
- Research mentoring workload: time release, incentives, such as funded conference attendance need to be awarded as these are essential factors in sustaining the mentors’ motivation
- The results of investigating teacher-research mentoring need to be shared and disseminated: if teacher stories of personal journeys on becoming researchers are a source of inspiration, so should be the stories of mentors who made the transition from teacher trainer / practicum supervisor to becoming mentors
- The importance of psychological support: most reports and accounts emphasise this aspect of working as a mentor, often as a priority over other roles (e.g., educator)

My mentoring journey has only just started, but I am certain there will be more stories coming out from the same community of practice, told not by the external mentor (myself), but the mentees themselves, having become mentoring professionals in their own right. We hope
to see the first results at the Teaching, Training and Research in ELT Education 2020 conference to be held online in September at the National University of Education – of which I’m a proud volunteer.

Acknowledgments
I think that as teachers and mentors we sometimes underestimate the effect we have on our students’ lives. This shouldn’t necessarily be so, because we can all remember teachers and mentors who have made a great impact on us. I can still recall the 3-week British Council Summer School at Exeter University (in 1982) where I first learnt about communicative language teaching. We had a fabulous team of tutors; the lead tutor, John Nuttall, became my MA advisor during a one-year taught course three years later.

Unsurprisingly, I wrote my thesis on Communicative Language Teaching and cross-cultural communication. Apart from wishing to thank our mentor, Kenan Dikilitaş, and my teacher-researchers and student-researchers in the mentoring scheme, I want to acknowledge two people, who were there at the British Council course in 1982: Angi Malderez and Jill Hadfield. I hadn’t seen Angi for 36 years when we met up again at the Research SIG conference in Istanbul, and I met Jill again after 37 years at IATEFL Liverpool in 2019. They both had a profound effect on how I have developed as a teacher and teacher trainer in the past decades and I am only hoping I may have affected some of my students’ and colleagues’ lives the way they did mine.

The author
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References


