

Mentoring English language teachers to use action research in teaching writing

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1. Introduction

The teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) offers a plethora of possibilities for intellectually curious teachers who are on the lookout for new resources and opportunities for growth that can contribute to improving their practices in the classroom. The conference Teachers Research! held in Chile in 2016 allowed us to meet for the first time and realize that we were working in similar teaching contexts: one of us in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, and the other one in Rojas, a rural city in the province of Buenos Aires. Therefore, on returning to Argentina, we started to design a mentoring programme to help secondary school teachers implement action research (AR) in their classrooms.

2. Mentoring teachers to do teacher-research

The subject matter of this AR project arose from the compulsory public school meetings each of us attended in our cities, during which most teachers of English complained about the bad scores for the writing assignments their secondary state school learners got. We both took the opportunity to comment on AR and our intention to mentor colleagues in order to empower them so that they could help students overcome their weaknesses related to certain aspects of L2 learning. A group of teachers showed interest in our proposal. Fortunately, four of those teachers accepted our invitation and became our mentees (two in Rojas and two in Buenos Aires).

Our mentoring process began with our first scheduled virtual meeting soon after that school encounter. Mentees answered a questionnaire to let us know about their experience of AR and their expectations related to this study. Some of them mentioned they had some previous knowledge about the approach and that professional development was their main reason for taking part in this project. After completing the survey, we asked mentees about the problematic situations they had identified in their classrooms. They were also required to keep journals for our data collection purposes. All our meetings were recorded as well.

As regards our roles, we would be collaborators and distance learning (DL) mentors cooperating and providing meaningful support during our face-to-face meetings and virtual encounters once or twice a month, which had the objective of making mentees gain confidence to conduct research to solve their real site-based problems in their classrooms. They became aware of the importance of AR and of the fact that every teacher involved "becomes an 'investigator' or 'explorer' of his or her personal teaching context, while at the same time being one of the participants in it" (Burns, 2010:2). This kind of investigation harks back to the renowned model put forward by Kemmis and McTaggart (as cited in Burns, 2010) which encapsulates the four main phases of AR: plan, action, observation and reflection and may be applied to the necessities of any particular course.

By taking inspiration from that model, we designed our own framework for mentoring purposes, which we implemented during our mentoring sessions. It consisted of four stages, which were virtually viable: listening, questioning, helping mentees reflect and raise awareness, and encouraging. First, we listened attentively to our mentees' concern about their classes. Then, by asking them guiding questions, we helped mentees to self-reflect upon that problematic situation in their teaching practices, so that they became aware of the need for change or improvement. Finally, we encouraged them to try the course of action they felt was more suitable to their own teaching contexts. As a result, the mentees collaboratively decided

to act upon their concern in the same way, and we assured them we would be at their disposal to offer any help they might need.

3. Paving the way for AR

With the purpose of framing our mentees' thinking and making them realize that they would be able to carry out AR in their classrooms, in our first virtual encounter we proposed that they conducted an easy experiment from Parrott (1996) called Red Ink for two weeks. The purpose was that with this 'exercise' mentees discovered their students' reactions when they used red ink for correction given that that colour is associated with rude and threatening connotations. Therefore, in the following virtual meeting mentees described their students' reactions after they had used red ink for correction.

Surprisingly and contrary to common belief, Mr. Parrott's students liked red because it was much easier to find their teacher's corrections. In the case of our mentees, they obtained similar results as one of them shared with us this comment:

I remember when I was at secondary school my teachers checked homework using red ink and I didn't like it, so now I use different colourful pens. However, what I did with one of my courses was to check their exercises with a black pen for a week. Some of my students, the girls especially, gave me a colourful pen immediately I checked the first part of their exercises. One of girls said to me "No teacher con una de color mejor, es más linda" ["No, teacher. A coloured pen is better, it's prettier"].

This simple experience gave mentees confidence and enthusiasm to investigate their own classroom contexts.

4. Research study implemented by mentees in their classrooms

In the following virtual encounter mentees discussed the writing weaknesses of their students and agreed on designing and implementing together an AR project which each of them would carry out in a course of their own. Due to time constraints, they decided they would take samples of only five learners in each of those courses which they thoroughly inspected for the purpose of this study. It is important to point out that the level of the students was A2 according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference).

The project consisted of three stages: before (March), during (April and May) and after (June to November) the implementation of the plan of action. During those stages, the learners were given a questionnaire to explore their ideas about writing and their reactions to the teacher's feedback.

During the before stage, each learner designed a sales leaflet for a mobile phone individually which was marked later by each mentee according to a set of descriptors. Throughout the during stage, learners worked in class and at home writing and rewriting sales leaflets and completing individual journals, till obtaining the final versions of the leaflets which were shared with students from other classes for them to read and write comments. In the after stage, each learner was asked to design a sales leaflet individually at home and to hand it in. Those leaflets were checked by the mentees who gave a mark using the same set of descriptors implemented at the beginning of their study.

As described above, mentees used several data gathering tools during their AR study: pre-, while- and post- writing samples of different tasks, journal writing and a questionnaire.

4.1. Mentors' roles

We constructed our roles as mentors considering the needs we identified when we implemented our previous individual projects as teacher researchers. Tonna, Bjerkholt and Holland (2017: 211) have offered several interesting definitions about those roles, as follows:

The role of the mentor is to provide support, and a key purpose of feedback is to stimulate the mentee's reflection on practice (Lai Ha, 2014; Schön, 1987). It is thus necessary for the mentor to be methodical and bring about critical reflection on practice (Harrison et al., 2005) and to encourage self-direction, creativity, autonomy and praxis within her/his mentees (Galbraith, 2003). The mentor can enable reflective practice through astute questioning and particularly probing questions that allow the mentee to deconstruct and reconstruct pedagogical practices (Bjerkholt et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2005). Through such approaches, the mentor can give rise to effective practices and help mentees evaluate existing practices in schools.

We believed that empowering mentees to feel confident enough to solve the problematic situations in their classrooms would trigger further exploration of future challenges, with the goal of improving their teaching practices and of enhancing their knowledge.

4.2. Data collection by mentors

Several data gathering tools were used, as follows:

- Questionnaires given to mentees at the beginning and at the end of this study,
- On-line journals where the mentees wrote about their experiences (e.g. the one about Red Ink previously mentioned), impressions, reflections and reported their progress throughout the project,
- Recorded video conferencing: virtual meetings held once or twice a month, which were carried out in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, where we as mentors could facilitate the development of the steps previously described.
- Mentors' journals, where we registered comments obtained in face-to-face and virtual encounters and later shared during our mentors' meetings to co-construct further steps of action.

5. Results

The great challenge of becoming mentors implied playing several roles, such as to 'provide emotional support and guidance to the mentees who are novices and in need of just such support. From these roles certain relationships accrue such as nurturing relationship based on mutual trust and a sense of respect for the mentee' (Halai, 2006:702).

During the implementation of this study, we became attentive listeners and felt that we had started to develop the mentoring skills mentioned by Eraldemir Tuyan (2017: 48) as regards 'eliciting, scaffolding, and giving supportive feedback.' Therefore, an interesting debate took place when a mentee expressed her doubts about the effectiveness of using a set of fixed descriptors suggested for marking students' writing assignments which in her opinion seemed 'impractical, time-consuming and somewhat unclear for students'. Such a situation and others allowed us, as mentors, to help them reach consensus after showing different perspectives from our subject-specialists' view.

There were several instances like the one described above which, undoubtedly, let us build up genuine relationships with our mentees, become reengaged professionally and practise our mentoring skills in order to become more effective mentors.

6. Conclusion

This being our first time as DL trainers, it is important to highlight that the informal mentoring relationship we created was based entirely on our curiosity and will to gain knowledge and help others. We created a mentee-centered environment and developed a

participant-support structure reassuring our mentees that support, reinforcement and assessment were readily available. In our role as e-learning facilitators-as-instructors we designed interaction that maximized collaboration between mentees by providing feedback to them on the results of their collaboration. Supporting our DL mentees was work-intensive but a key factor to maintain a high level of motivation among them, taking into account the few hours they had available to spend on professional development.

Mentoring the four teachers was highly rewarding. If we had the occasion to mentor other colleagues, we would look forward to improving our face-to-face encounters and our e-learning facilitator skills. We are well aware that the focus on their specific concerns and needs will help them overcome difficulties, gain self-confidence as potential researchers and make AR a more common practice.

The impact of this mentoring experience on us has undoubtedly promoted our professional development, challenged our creativity and given us key insights into the practical aspects of the collaborative teaching and learning process. We hope that colleagues all over the world who read this project feel inspired to adapt or adopt it in their own particular and unique contexts.

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Biodata

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