Mentoring Ecuadorian university teachers and students in the collaborative write-up phase of their Exploratory Action Research

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1. Introduction

Mentoring the writing up process of teacher-researchers who are inexperienced in classroom research is a challenging task because their needs are usually multidimensional. Dikilitaş and Mumford (2016) describe several types of support that may be provided by mentors to novice authors, such as sharing research expertise, supplying feedback on appropriate language use, and setting achievable goals. In our case, the researchers envisaged the dissemination of our findings in conference proceedings. Owing to the unprecedented circumstances that evolved in early 2020 in Ecuador due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we couldn't resort to sharing the results of the research projects in this manner because the university's first ever ELT conference scheduled for July 2020 was cancelled and with it vanished the 'in-house' publishing opportunity. We decided to aim higher.

My mentoring role involved facilitating and scaffolding the development of emerging teacher-researchers / novice research writers, who were going through an 'apprenticeship' (Hyland, 2012, p. 61) experience. I also acted as a co-author of one of the two articles after a teacher- researcher pulled out from the write-up phase. Furthermore, my mentorship included the organizational role (Dikilitaş & Mumford, 2016) of thoroughly exploring the publishing outlets open to novice authors (Renandya, 2014). I had some experience in this regard owing to an academic writing and publishing project (Orosz, Carrasco, Jaramillo, & Békés, 2019), which was perceived a success, because over an 18-month period five of the nine participants eventually published academic-level texts in reputable ELT publications.

The writing up process is inevitably more complex when it is carried out collaboratively. Dikilitaş and Mumford (2016) stress that "collaborative writing implies a sensitivity to others' way of working, and a commitment to sharing work in the face of differences in language skills, research experience, and background" (pp. 379–380). The co-authors, namely, my teacher-researcher mentees, all worked at the same university and had a great deal of sensitivity and commitment but less experience in creating publishable products.

2. The original project and its adaptation under lockdown

The Action Research Mentoring project started in December 2019 at the National University of Education, Ecuador (UNAE). The aim was to support classroom research carried out by the English teacher educators working there and, simultaneously, to enhance these teacher educators' mentoring skills in supporting their own students' action research projects. The programme was open to students as well, so altogether 11 teacher-researchers and five English major student-researchers took part in the initial stages of the project. One of the teachers (the on-campus coordinator) also acted as an emerging co-mentor. The sessions were based on Smith and Rebolledo's *A handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (2018) and Smith's *Mentoring teachers to research their classrooms* (2020).

Back in March 2020, these teacher- and student-researcher mentees were still awaiting the arrival of the new cohort of students in order to start the planned interventions, but owing to the lockdown resulting from the pandemic, the new semester was severely delayed and the teachers also needed to swiftly switch to online instruction. With no incoming students for at least another two months and no face-to-face classes in sight, continuing the action research project in its original form seemed unworkable.

In the initial mentoring project, a group of teacher- and student-researchers intended to examine vocabulary acquisition, namely, the puzzle of why students find remembering and retrieving new words difficult. Thus, when an opportunity to register for an international online vocabulary learning tournament arose at the end of March 2020, four teacher-researchers and three student-researchers (with two teachers and two students from the original group) decided to sign up. The use of an online application called WordEngine was related to the initial work of the vocabulary research group since they were hypothesising that online vocabulary tools might be appealing to their students, who are often described as 'millennial digital natives'. Therefore, the tournament offered an opportunity not just to compete but also to examine more deeply the contestants' own strategies for vocabulary acquisition using an online tool. The data gathered included reflective vocabulary journals, WhatsApp messages exchanged in the team, final reflections and statistics on the number of newly learnt words by each contestant.

The team called UNAE 593 won the competition and was awarded almost 3000 free accounts for all members of the university to use the online application for a whole year. Once the four-week tournament was over, the analysis of the data began and by mid-June 2020 three written submissions were shaping up: an article on vocabulary acquisition strategies for *Asian Journal of English Language Studies* (AJELS), another on cooperative vocabulary learning for *Argentinian Journal of Applied Linguistics* (AJAL), and a guest blog post summarizing the students' experience for IATEFL's Learning Technologies SIG (see Notes for these references).

3. Collaborative research writing under lockdown

The losses that the initial mentoring project suffered as a result of the double blow of the economic and health crisis in Ecuador were considerable: eight of the original 11 teacher-researchers (including my co-mentor) left the project owing to redundancies, salary cuts, teaching overload and the switch to online delivery from one day to another. All release time for research was withdrawn. At this point, I had to judge how much more effort I could expect of my mentees (including those three who joined us for the WordEngine project) in order for them to accomplish the writing up process under the much-worsened circumstances.

It was essential that we used our time and effort effectively. Before we started writing, we needed to take stock of 'what's in the fridge'. This was something I often repeated to my mentees when they suggested reading yet another article or book. "We are not going shopping," was my reply, which took on added poignancy under the lockdown. We started with careful and detailed planning of the articles down to the allocation of the number of words to each section. We brainstormed the ideas, decided who is going to be responsible for which section and started reading. This included perusing sample articles and biodata from the targeted journals.

The feedback I was given after finishing the write-up showed that this structured approach was deemed helpful: *"Eli has guided us so carefully. She has taken the time to prepare the whole distribution of the article. I feel that having everything more organized helps me to control my ideas and to use my time properly."* (T3).

As it happens, we had teachers among the co-authors who had written their theses about related topics (cooperative learning) and we could rely on their previous knowledge. I also approached eminent authors and asked for their opinion on issues that came up (Sarah Mercer and Norbert Schmitt were gracious enough to enlighten us regarding social motivation and a specific vocabulary determination strategy). This was a way to show my mentees that you should aim high, and you will be pleasantly surprised by how obliging more experienced peers often are. The move was not lost on my mentees: *"I learned that I should not be scared of contacting the big authors, attending their online conferences or asking them if I have doubts (like you did with Schmitt)."* (T1).

4. Collaborative research writing and language work

It was important to make sure that the emerging voices of the aspiring non-native speaker teacher- and student-researchers could be retained while acknowledging the need to accommodate the conventions of academic discourse.

Initially, I focused on the contributions that my mentees were able to offer *content-wise*: their meticulous processing of the data, their insights into what those data represented, and the concepts that they formulated when working with each other. Improving academic writing was among the aspirations, but first we wanted to get closer to scholarly writing as "situated practice" (Hyland, 2012, p. 60), i.e., combine the rhetorical structures of the genre (action research report) with the social context in which the texts were generated.

The specific language work consisted of multiple rounds of editing. It involved looking at the drafts for coherence and cohesion as well as fine-tuning the novice authors' academic writing. The application of clear and concise sentence structure as well as the precise use of terminology were encouraged in order to approximate academic publishing standards. The teacher-researchers later stated that my sincere comments and patient guidance supported their learning:

> *"The feedback that you provided had a nice comment, but you were also honest about the kind of information that needed to be modified, changed or improved." (T1)*

> *"I have learned a lot by observing my co-worker's parts and writing style, and especially from Eli that has guided us patiently through this process." (T4)*

We also made a serious effort to involve our student-researchers: three of them were in the competing team, and after the tournament we worked together on writing up their experience. My aim was to guide them in the process of writing to a specific genre (guest blog post). In their case, it was important to narrow the gap between the website manager's content- and style-specific requirements and the A2-B2 level writing skills of the students. Their feedback reflects how they perceived this part of the mentoring process, namely, being encouraged to improve the text rather than the mentor offering ready-made solutions:

> *"Eli as mentor always was telling for us how to write. She was very patient with all of us but the most interesting in her was when she was correcting our writing. She never corrected it herself, but she let us learn from our mistakes." (S3)*

> *"After every feedback we were given for the blog, I could feel that the quality of the blog went up notably." (S2)*

5. Informal external feedback before submission

Before submitting the manuscripts, we asked for informal feedback from corpus analysis expert Charles Browne, ex-AJAL editor Darío Banegas, and our lead mentor Kenan Dikilitaş; their comments led to much-improved new drafts. I felt that modelling how you handle well-justified criticism was crucial for long-term learning. This meant demonstrating to my mentees how to judiciously consider each and every comment and, if required, change course and even re-design the route. Banegas, for example, pointed out that some of the sources that we referred to in the manuscript were not considered to be 'academic enough' and Dikilitaş had concerns about the prominence that we had given to cooperative learning and teamwork with less attention paid to the exploration of vocabulary acquisition strategies.

6. Reflection on my mentoring practice

As an emerging mentor (Békés, 2020), I learnt a lot about several aspects of how the writing up process by novice writers can be facilitated. As co-creators, we aimed at striking the right balance between individual authorship and teamwork. The workload might have been allocated more equitably and the timeline extended so that everyone could 'savour' the experience. One of the teacher-researchers, who spent a lot of time on developing a certain section that was ultimately not included in their article, was clearly dissatisfied:

> *"I feel a little disappointed. We have worked really hard on certain parts of the article; however, I feel that since many things were changed and because of the time we couldn't be involved too much. I still think it is a great article." (T4)*

Altogether, I received written, anonymous feedback from seven of the eight participants: some of them had made notes after each mentoring session, others reflected at the end of the process, after the students' guest blog post on their experience was published on IATEFL's Learning Technology website and the two journal articles were also submitted.

On the whole, the participants were appreciative of the mentoring process, the clearest sign of which is that the student-researchers started working on a new action research project very soon after the one described here was accomplished, and I began mentoring four teacher-researchers in a project that involves writing book reviews for indexed journals.

7. Conclusion

Mentoring student- and teacher-researchers in the writing up process of their action research projects is intense but also highly rewarding. Under the unprecedented conditions of COVID-19, my mentees and I had to swim or sink, and we went for the butterfly stroke. In the absence of face-to-face classes, we harnessed an opportunity to carry on researching and dove deeper into our own vocabulary learning strategies.

Altogether, making a strenuous effort to disseminate the results of our experience by writing them up served many of the purposes that are listed in Smith (2020); first and foremost, it provided "a motivating goal, and a satisfying end" (p. 68). Except it's not the end…

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Notes

The mentees' journal articles and guest blog post have recently been published, and the details of these publications are as follows:

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Biodata

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