

Community of practice for teacher
educators research report

Mentoring teacher- research: challenges and benefits according to Nepali mentors

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#TeachingEnglishInsight

Introduction

Classroom research done by teachers as a means of professional development has been shown to be a powerful process which can have a profound impact on teachers and learners. Indeed, participation in teacher-research has been increasing in various parts of the world, within British Council mentoring schemes in South Asia and Latin America, the TESOL Electronic Village Online initiative 'Classroom-based research for professional development', the International Festival of Teacher-Research in ELT, and the English in Action project in Bangladesh.¹ Arising from these and other projects, there are now quite a few resources on classroom-based research which are easily accessible online to teachers. However, there is a lack of resources on how to *support* teacher research, particularly as a mentor.

To attempt to fill this gap I have myself recently written a book for the British Council – *Mentoring Teachers to Research Their Classrooms: A Practical Handbook* (Smith 2020) – on the basis of my own experiences of training and guiding teacher educators to mentor teacher-research in British Council programmes in Latin America (Champion Teachers Chile) and South Asia (ARMS – in India and Nepal). However, I have become conscious that there is very little – almost no – systematic research basis for such training.

Accordingly, in this small-scale research project, I set out to systematically gather some in-depth qualitative data from a group of 9 mentors with very recent experience of mentoring an average of 10 secondary school teachers each on a nine-month-long (2019–20) British Council action research mentoring programme (ARMS-Nepal). The purpose of this was to identify mentors' perceptions of the main challenges and benefits for mentors in facilitating teacher-research.

Brief background

Investigation into mentoring of teacher-research is a new area of enquiry in the field of education (not only within ELT) but one which has gained in importance in recent years as appropriate forms of teacher-research have been developed for and have begun to take root in teaching contexts in the Global South – specifically, Exploratory Action Research (Smith & Rebolledo 2018), which teachers and teacher educators have been showing an increasing willingness to adopt, both within British Council projects like Champion Teachers (Latin

¹ British Council mentoring schemes in South Asia and Latin America:

<https://www.britishcouncil.in/programmes/english-partnerships/research-policy-dialogues/arms>

<https://www.britishcouncil.pe/en/education/champion-teachers>

International Festival of Teacher-Research in ELT: <https://trfestival.wordpress.com/about/>
TESOL Electronic Village Online 'Classroom-based research for professional development':
<http://classroombasedresearch.weebly.com>

English in Action in Bangladesh: <http://www.camb-ed.com/download/file/127/744/eia-teachers-voices-book2017pdf>

America) or ARMS (South Asia) and independently of these programmes (e.g. via the TESOL Electronic Village Online ‘Classroom-based research for professional development’ initiative). Care has been taken in these schemes to work with an appropriate *kind* of teacher-research that can be promoted on a relatively large-scale with secondary school teachers working in quite difficult circumstances in the Global South, as opposed to the relatively privileged settings of teachers in small-scale pre-existing schemes like those funded by Cambridge Assessment for English UK and English Australia (ELICOS). In the context of the newer, wider schemes, providing appropriate structure and guidance for local mentors has emerged as a pressing need if teacher-research is to be further expanded within both in-service and pre-service teacher education (see Smith, Connelly and Rebolledo 2014 for an early justification of this emphasis on local mentoring expertise).

The concept of mentoring is well established, and mentoring is itself quite a common practice in education systems across the world. It is an open, wide-ranging process which can help improve a teacher’s practice, and there are many guidelines and lists available in relation to the general skills and qualities an effective mentor needs to demonstrate (see Further Bibliography (1) below). However, there is as yet very little specific guidance to enable mentors to play what can be a pivotal role in supporting teacher-research. The most relevant references are listed in the Bibliography at the end of this article (Further Bibliography (2)) Suffice it to say in this short article that, while mentoring and teacher-research have separately generated a lot of literature, there have been very few studies which have put the two together and examined the *specific* skills and attributes which those aiming to facilitate teacher-research need to be aware of.

This is what led me to investigate the perceptions of a particular group of mentors (whom I have myself been responsible for mentoring over the nine-month period from June 2019 to February 2020, within British Council Nepal’s ARMS programme), in relation to challenges and benefits of the teacher-research mentoring experience (see ‘Research questions’ below). I hope that the summary of findings below will be useful for informing future training / mentoring within ARMS and comparable other programmes, as well as in individual cases outside these programmes.

Research questions

- What are the main challenges for (these) new mentors of teacher-research?
- How, if at all, can mentors overcome (i.e. how have these mentors overcome) these challenges?
- What can the benefits of the mentoring experience be (i.e. what have the benefits been) for (these) new mentors?

Participants and methodology

To address the above research questions, a collective case study approach was adopted (Stake, 1995), focusing on mentors involved in the by now well-established British Council Action Research Mentoring Scheme in Nepal (ARMS-Nepal), now at the end of its third year.

To gain in-depth insight into the challenges and benefits of teacher-research mentoring and based on the premise that mentors' experiences are context-specific, research was qualitative, focusing on the nine-month-long experience of nine mentors who have recently been involved in the research-mentoring scheme (the programme ended in February 2020 with presentations by mentors and teachers at a conference in Kathmandu). Each mentor was responsible for 10 (or in one case, 8) teachers they had chosen to work with, not usually in their own school. Mentors themselves were mainly secondary school teachers, though in most cases they had experience of participating in in-service teacher training initiatives, often those organised by the British Council in Nepal. Roughly half of the 88 teachers being mentored were involved in work in rural, sometimes quite 'remote' areas of Nepal, sometimes with poor internet and mobile connections and in geographically dispersed locations.

Two main data sources were used in this study: reflective writing by mentors according to a series of written prompts about challenges and benefits, and a follow-up focus group discussion in Kathmandu in February 2020 which was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Individual reflective writing was adopted to ensure that minority opinions and opinions of less publicly vocal participants were represented. Thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to explore the main teacher-research mentoring challenges and benefits highlighted by the participants in reflective writing and in the focus group discussion. The final list of themes and issues is presented under 'Findings' below.

With regard to challenges and how these have been overcome, there were only one or two areas (as indicated below) which emerged in the focus group discussion but not in prior reflective writing. There were a number of areas of impact, though, which emerged in discussion but not (so strongly) in reflective writing.

Challenges of teacher-research mentoring – and how these have been overcome

Some mentors included general pieces of experience-based advice in their reflective writing, saying, for example, that teacher-research mentoring necessitates being proactive and patient as well as professionally clear, cooperative, open and practical. General attributes of teacher-research mentors could be explored in more depth in future research work. In the present investigation, however, I was more interested in gaining practical insights into specific problems these mentors had faced, and the solutions they had come up with to overcome these problems. The following main categories of challenge (and associated 'solution') emerged from

thematic analysis of reflective writing and the focus-group interview. A brief summary of main concerns and indications of some selected solutions follow each thematic heading.

Logistics

Communication issues

While recognizing the importance of frequent communication, some mentors of teachers in rural areas had not realised how far away teachers would be – in one case, a two to three-hour journey on foot was needed for individual meetings since in rainy months roads could not be used by vehicles. This problem was exacerbated when teachers were in dispersed as well as distant locations. One result was that group meetings could not be held that all could participate in. Some teachers had no or only a slow internet connection, and there were often bad mobile phone connections in rural areas. These problems were amplified by the fact that some teachers were not used to technology.

In response, it seemed important to one mentor to grab phone opportunities when the signal was good, and to use phone in general rather than persisting with internet (though this could be money-consuming). Making a 'Messenger' group was another suggestion. A very common suggestion, based on experience, was that teachers in a mentor group should be selected from the same or a similar, nearby location.

Finally, being clear in advance about how to communicate as well as attempting to have regular meetings and engaging in continual follow-up (including visiting teachers' schools) were commonly recommended.

Time constraints

Teachers are busy, including at weekends at home (for example, some in rural areas are engaged in cultivation activities), so deciding on meeting times for all of the group was difficult. One solution mentioned was to collaboratively decide or be flexible and meet individually. Arranging meetings in advance, sometimes using holidays, was another recommendation offered.

There could be unexpected changes due to teachers' sickness or change of school, for example. Thus, there are strong needs for flexibility and forward-planning. One mentor advised: 'It is better to have discussion about the whole schedule of research tasks in advance so that [mentees] could have a clear picture of their task' (HT, reflective writing).

School issues

Apart from school transfers during the nine-month programme (noted above), a constraint mentioned by several mentors was head teachers not being sufficiently supportive of the teachers carrying out research in their schools. One mentor said that he frequently called the

head teachers involved to engage them and 'keep them on board' in the project (KE, reflective writing).

Selection of mentees

In several cases, mentors themselves selected or were advised by their local authority to select a heterogeneous group of teachers to work with, in different schools, and sometimes teaching different subjects (not only English). However, this often proved to be difficult to manage. Mentees choosing to focus on a wide variety of areas of concern was also mentioned as difficult to manage in the focus group discussion, but only by one of the participants. Several agreed that a more homogeneous group would have been better, partly so that mentees could support one another better. One mentor mentioned that, whereas the selection had been done for him by head teachers in the various schools, in future he would prefer to manage the selection process himself. Finally, there were some suggestions that further criteria for selection should be that teachers have basic ICT skills and sufficient language skills for reading material in English

Mentees' conceptions of research and other expectations

Conceptions of research

Three types of initial conception were described by mentors overall:

- 1) Some have never heard of action research;
- 2) Others start with a particular idea of action research, as a result of prior experience of the officially sanctioned variety in Nepal – these teachers would tend to expect immediate solving of a problem without exploring or expect the process to be a merely formal one. As one mentor wrote, they have a 'preoccupation with concept of classroom research for the sake of formality to submit in offices' (HM), rather than it being a part of authentic professional development.
- 3) Many teachers were at first worried about the demands exploratory action research (EAR) might place on them.

In response, mentors described sharing their own experiences, engaging in clear explanation, providing reassurance that the process would not be time-consuming and suggesting resources that could be helpful. One mentor had teachers sign a promise that they would read the recommended materials. These resources (Rebolledo, Smith & Bullock, 2016; Smith & Rebolledo, 2018) were described as very useful, but some primary teachers or teachers of subjects other than English had poor reading skills in English. In these cases, they relied on mentors' explanations.

As emerged, particularly, in the focus group discussion, teachers gradually changed their minds and became interested in exploring their puzzles. From considering the process difficult,

because of the books, mentors' explanations and the clarity of EAR as an approach, their ideas changed, and teachers 'got convinced by time that EAR wasn't demanding' (focus group).

Expectations of the mentor

Another theme that emerged mainly from the focus group was that of expectations placed on the mentor. It seems that some teachers expected ready-made solutions to be provided by the mentor, and in one case a teacher dropped out when he realised that the process would be more about him reflecting on his own experience and deciding on solutions on that basis. The mentor was upset about this at first but later realised that, in their words, 'it was part of the mentoring process' (CT).

Sustaining mentees' motivation

A major challenge, mentioned by a number of mentors both in reflective writing and the focus group discussion, was that of keeping teachers motivated through the whole project. Some teachers did not want to be asked to work during vacation time, some did not want to read the recommended materials, and some actually dropped out (these were, in general, replaced by others who were willing to put in the work, with the result that all but one mentor succeeded in finishing the project with the same number of mentees as they had started out with).

A main action taken by mentors in relation to this problem was to provide proactive, timely and patient suggestions and scaffolding. As one explained, 'without feeling bored, time and again I guided, told or explained them' (HM). Another solution was to give 'pep-talks', talking about the bright side of EAR for teachers' own professional development, and even discussing the overall situation of teaching in Nepal and commenting on the value of EAR for teachers' own careers. Other important suggestions were to ensure there was an overall structure or framework (timeline) that all could refer to and to ensure an environment where all can learn from one another (indeed, one mentor deliberately set up learning buddy partnerships in pairs of teachers, which proved to be a valuable way that teachers could help one another comprehend and put into action the suggestions in the resource materials).

Overall, a major, experience-based recommendation made by mentors was to get the selection of teachers right at the outset. Important considerations, according to them, are to make sure the teachers chosen are 'open and committed to learn new things and are really interested in research' (CT); are willing to engage in CPD and do not want to participate for financial benefit; and are permanent teachers who will stay in their job and are willing to learn and make changes in their practice. The importance of 'good' selection of teachers was emphasised again and again by mentors during the focus group discussion as well.

Benefits / impacts of teacher-research mentoring

In reflective writing, mentors were asked to focus on the benefits to them of the teacher-research mentoring process, whereas in the focus group discussion there was a focus also on what teachers had gained.

Sense of achievement

In the focus group interview, something that emerged strongly was mentors' strong sense of achievement due to teachers' progress and the benefits they were seen to have gained. This emerged quite strongly in the focus group discussion whereas it had not been identified as a theme from reflective writing. However, it was expressed like this in one teachers' reflective writing: 'I felt a sense of achievement when teachers were presenting their research experiences in the last workshop and they all looked happy. Some of them said the situation was getting better in the area they explored' (CT). The same teacher, who was Kathmandu-based and mentoring teachers in her hometown, at some distance from the capital, expressed a sense of satisfaction in having contributed something important to her hometown. As revealed in the focus group interview, mentors experienced a sense of accomplishment when they saw, especially in teachers' presentations, that teachers had developed much clearer ideas about research – slowly, teachers had started to get interested, from expecting EAR to be challenging, changing their initial conception that research would be very demanding: 'My teachers got clear ideas to solve any classroom problems by exploring the problem. Now they can solve any classroom problems well. They are now confident to their own profession and developed themselves as resource persons' (HT). Mentors found that teachers were excited to share, had become clear about the importance of EAR, had become closer to their students, saw the benefits to students, had improved understanding of students and had increased confidence in identifying and dealing with classroom issues.

Development of mentoring skills and attitudes, and a new identity

In their reflective writing, mentors mentioned that they had acquired new skills, including: feedback skills and 'how to listen to others and help them solve their problems' (HQ). In the focus group interview, other newly-acquired skills and attitudes mentioned were motivating, encouraging and scaffolding, and coming to realize the difference between mentoring and training, and the need to be close to mentees. The importance of having good materials to read about teacher-research mentoring and of themselves having a mentor were also mentioned.

Helpful in enhancing own research knowledge and skills

Mentors had themselves come to appreciate a form of teacher-research which had previously been unfamiliar to them – *exploratory* action research. As some put it: ‘I understood the value of exploratory in research in solid form’ (HQ); and ‘I used to do action research but it was just based on the assumption/hypothesis, so the problem generally was not solved. But [EAR] helps to find the root cause of the problem so that I can solve problem with less effort but more effectively’ (HT). Another mentioned, ‘Eventually I came to realise that it is not an end but a process of change and development’ (QC).

Increased rapport with teachers and awareness of their situations

Some mentors were teacher educators who had deliberately set out to discover more about teaching conditions in schools, while others were teachers who were interested in how teaching went on in schools other than their own. The project did turn out to be a good medium to build relations with the schools the teachers came from. As one put it, ‘Though I was teaching for many years, I found myself untouched with many real classroom issues. Through the mentoring of the ten teachers, I came to be familiar with lots of classroom issues and also got chance to be involved directly on how to tackle to them. Not only this, I also got the ideas about the challenges that a researcher faces while carrying out such research’ (HM).

Teacher educators came to understand teachers better: ‘Being involved with them helped to make me familiar with the different views and perspectives of different people’ (TT).

Own professional development as an ELT professional

Some mentors mentioned the way helping teachers in their topic areas had helped them, in turn, become updated with ‘so many presentations, books and papers and webinars’ (TT). As one said, ‘As a teacher, I can double my efficiency on teaching. I was good but this skill makes me great in teaching in comparison with the past’ (HT).

Transferable skills

Aside from attitudes and skills specifically associated with mentoring or teaching, some mentioned more generalisable skills. For example, ‘it helped me develop my further career in teaching, mentoring, presenting, collaborating, coordinating, decision-making and leading skills’ (QC). One mentioned that he had learned better ‘how to communicate and collaborate among the people’ (HQ).

There was a sense of pride and achievement, also, in relation to organisation of networks that had taken place in the course of the project: for example, ‘I could be able to present the findings of all mentees among 130 academicians, researchers, head teachers and teachers with the

government representatives' (HQ) and 'Moreover, beyond learning I had a wider networking of teachers home and abroad, community people and stakeholders' (HQ) .

Future intentions

Impact of the teacher-research mentoring experience can also be identified within future intentions elicited at the close of the focus group interviews. When asked about these, participants mentioned, variously: continuing with mentoring in another school or other groups; helping to introduce the idea of EAR into an MA programme; and using EAR in the mentor's own teaching.

Conclusion

This small-scale research project explored the challenges and benefits of mentoring teacher-research from nine Nepali mentors' perspectives. With interest increasing globally in teacher-research as a particularly empowering form of CPD for English teachers, it seems important to value and investigate the skills and attitudes needed to *facilitate* or *mentor* teacher research. However, this has, until now, been an almost entirely undocumented area. Further qualitative research involving reflective writing and inquiry into their own practice by teacher-research mentors in other contexts would usefully add to the developing knowledge base in this area. Future research could also involve converting the above perceptions – and other insights gained from similar research in other contexts – into a questionnaire, to see whether the same perceptions are shared more widely. As they stand, however, the above findings can already inform future iterations of the ARMS programme in Nepal, and, more generally, future training for teacher-research mentors elsewhere.

Finally, the research reported above has specifically shown how – despite constraints – it is possible for teachers working in a public education system in the Global South to become engaged in beneficial exploratory action research via effective mentoring. The research reveals some of the challenges involved in mentoring teachers in difficult-to-reach, low-resource contexts, whilst at the same time demonstrating what can be achieved thanks to the commitment and resolve of the mentors involved, who, in turn, have acknowledged how much they themselves learned and developed as a result of working with the teachers concerned.

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