

From In-service to Pre-service: A Comparative Look at my Action Research Mentoring Experience

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Mentoring background

My mentoring history dates back to 2014, when I attended the IATEFL ReSIG Conference in İzmir and met Kenan Dikilitaş who was leading a project focused on creating different *teacher research (TR)* teams across Turkey. Upon his invitation, as a staff developer who was craving some enthusiasm and innovation in-service teacher development, I wanted to involve my university as a partner of the project. Consequently, by creating our own project under my leadership, *teacher research* became a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activity in the School of Foreign Languages (YADYO) at Çukurova University. Here, I had the chance to mentor three groups of EFL instructors during the three years that followed (see [Eraldemir-Tuyan, 2016](#); [Eraldemir-Tuyan, 2017](#); [Eraldemir-Tuyan, 2018](#)).

Following the last of these research mentoring projects, I started to work at a private university located in the neighbouring province, Çağ University, where I was going to be faculty member of the ELT Department. This would, I thought, add a new perspective to my TR mentoring experience since I was going to teach at the pre-service level where research engagement is relatively scarce. It was a new chapter in my career which also brought new responsibilities and experiences as a research mentor.

Changing my context and shifting my role as a TR mentor from in-service to pre-service, required me to retune my TR mentoring model. The need for this adjustment was due to my newly added responsibilities, first, as a tutor while delivering the Action Research (AR) course offered to the undergraduate students by the university, and second, as a supervisor during the practicum process, which required observing the student teachers' in-class teaching experience and giving constructive feedback to help them find their own ways in their future careers after graduation. Hence, this shifting role also made some valuable contributions to my professional growth as a TR mentor, helping me to understand how mentoring in-service teachers is different from pre-service teachers. In this paper, I first describe my TR mentoring process in pre-service, next specify my TR mentoring approach to tutoring pre-service teachers and then have a comparative look at my TR mentoring experience in both contexts, highlighting my gains and final thoughts as a TR mentor at the end.

The TR mentoring process in pre-service

When I started to work at the new university, the AR course had been delivered to the undergraduate students, customarily in the spring semester since 2016, as part of the 'My Story in Practicum (MySIP)' project (see [Şahinkarakaş & Tokoz-Göktepe, 2018](#)) and was based on 'the collaborative practicum model' (p. 41) in which student-teachers, AR mentors, university supervisors and school mentors work collaboratively. I took over the course tutoring and improvised the materials and the mentoring process, which I detail throughout the chapter.

Through the AR course, the students learned the basics of conducting action research, by focusing on their own teaching practice and preparing their action plan regarding an area of their teaching practice they would like to change or improve. Then, as a requirement of the course, they would present their plans to their peers and to the course tutor who also supervised the teaching practice. Only after clarifying their AR cycles, could the students start their implementations and collect their data. Student-teachers were also given critical feedback during their data collection process to help them interpret their collected data and see appropriate solutions regarding the issue they experienced in their teaching practice. As another requirement of the AR course, they were expected to write their reports in the form of assignments to be evaluated for their progress. In 2016, the MySIP project also encouraged the organisation of an in-house conference where students were provided with the opportunity to share their AR studies in the form of poster presentations at the end of the semester.

AR was part of the school culture when I joined the team and it was the third year of the MySIP project. In the 2017-2018 spring semester, the AR course started again with a total of 43 student-teachers who were placed into three different groups as A, B and C. I was tutoring two of these groups which consisted of 30 students, in collaboration with a colleague who was tutoring the other group. In the same term our students started their teaching practice. During this process, as one of their supervisors, I also had the chance to accompany their in-class teaching experience by observing, giving supportive feedback and exchanging ideas.

My TR mentoring approach to tutoring pre-service teachers

Facilitating the process of pre-service teachers' professional development requires understanding of what and how they think about their teaching process. In this respect, they usually need further guidance and assistance to link theory into practice, while also handling the issue they are researching in their practice teaching. Consequently, shifting my role from the previous in-service action research mentoring which included work even with MA and Ph.D. holders to tutoring an action research course for pre-service teachers required thinking about ways to attune to myself to my new context. When I became responsible for tutoring the two-hour AR course in pre-service, my aim was to facilitate this process by helping the students understand the nature of the steps they needed to follow to explore their teaching experiences during practicum. After four weeks of introduction to conducting AR, taking Anne Burns' book (2010) as the major reference, the remaining 10 weeks of the course never felt long enough for feedback sessions. These sessions were given to the student teachers as part of the AR course related to the puzzles/problems they experienced, mainly about the area of their teaching practice which they would like to change or improve within their individual AR plans. The university supervisors' team also collaborated to help student teachers find their way through their AR cycles, which helped a lot regarding the time constraints.

I tried to minimize the negative influence of possible challenges by implementing ideas from Freire's concept of dialogic pedagogy (Freire, 1994). This type of dialogue aimed to include the various elements suggested through this theory; always aiming to ensure trust, commitment, care, humility, hope, humour, critical thinking, faith and silence when required among the student teachers who were conducting their AR studies. In this way, as a teacher educator who was tutoring the AR course, I drew on my three-year TR mentoring experience to better serve the needs of my student-teacher mentees within my new context.

A comparative look at my TR mentoring experience in both contexts

Looking back at my three-year TR mentoring experience in the in-service context and considering my new one-year pre-service experience, I noted some differences. To analyse some of these differences, I made use of a survey which I gave the student-teachers towards the end of the semester (see [Appendix 1](#)).

Keeping the differing contexts of my mentees in mind, my discussion regarding the differences in my TR mentoring experience follows under two separate headings, relating to instructors and pre-service teachers. In this respect, the points I made can be classified into five main categories:

1. Compulsory versus voluntary participation
2. Availability of support
3. Time pressures
4. Professional gains
5. Choice of research topic

The instructors

1. AR as an in-service CPD activity was on voluntary basis. I believe, the voluntary participation contributed to the participants' perseverance to meet the various challenges faced during their individual AR processes as well as helping to retain their enthusiasm to develop professionally through AR.
2. In the in-service situation, there was a lack of financial and administrative support and limited encouragement. Therefore, what happened was that many did not volunteer. However, those who did were highly enthusiastic to participate in conducting research in their classrooms.

3. Instructors found time management a challenge because of their workload. Despite their volunteering attitude, it was almost impossible for me to meet the instructors weekly because of their workloads. As the mentor, I needed to create new spaces to guide them throughout their individual AR experiences, such as forming a WhatsApp group to communicate our progress, giving individual feedback sessions, organising informal coffee gatherings, and making room visits.
4. Related to their professional gains, the minority who participated found AR an effective tool for their professional development in terms of improving awareness of their teaching processes besides increasing their self-efficacy, self-confidence and motivation. They also claimed that they felt protected from burn-out by conducting AR and experienced enjoyment of teaching.
5. In terms of the research topics covered, in-service teachers preferred to study more student-oriented topics. These included teachers' feedback, peer-assessment creative writing, students' active participation, learner autonomy, training EFL students in effective study habits, goal setting, students' happiness, brainstorming techniques, cooperative learning, and peripheral teaching.

The pre-service teachers

1. AR was a compulsory course for the pre-service teachers. This situation made student-teachers feel under pressure as they had concerns about passing the course successfully. However, concerning the meeting times, the compulsory two-hour AR course given in pre-service had the power to bring me together with the student teachers every week as was scheduled in the program.
2. While mentoring student-teachers I was also a teacher educator who needed to enable student-teachers' understanding and learning in a compulsory AR course offered during their practicum. In addition, I was supervising them and giving supportive feedback throughout their personal and professional experiences. The supportive guidance and constructive feedback provided to the pre-service teachers throughout the compulsory AR course increased their motivation to conduct real research and helped them focus on real problems and develop themselves as future teachers.
3. In the practicum process, arranging to conduct AR within a limited time in a borrowed class was a big challenge for the pre-service teachers.
4. Related to the professional gains, pre-service teachers believed they had improved their vision of effective teaching through conducting AR during their practicum processes. They also considered AR an effective tool for their professional development in terms of gaining awareness of the teaching process, and increasing their self-efficacy, self-confidence and motivation along the way.

5. Pre-service teachers chose more teacher-oriented topics as their priority was to improve their teaching strategies. Accordingly, they focused on topics such as classroom dynamics, classroom management, student motivation, teacher motivation, teacher talking time, teacher perfectionism, teacher anxiety, teacher feedback, student engagement, and teaching methods and techniques.

My gains as a TR mentor in both contexts

Considering my experiences in both these contexts, I realized how effective mentoring could be in increasing the potential of a group of mentees. Working with the pre-service teachers strengthened my belief that a good TR mentor should take responsibility for providing trusting, supportive, respectful and safe environments to help mentees feel part of a community. This approach can aid personal and professional development, and lead to more fruitful outcomes. In addition, in both contexts, as an AR mentor I had the chance to develop my problem solving and critical thinking skills. My mentoring skills and knowledge were focused mainly on practical and pedagogical content, and knowledge of how to conduct research. I also practised eliciting, scaffolding, and giving supportive feedback to the participants in a way that was practical. Therefore, my self-efficacy in teacher research mentoring increased. The more I observed myself handling an issue successfully, the better I felt, and satisfactory outcomes made me feel proud. I was able to become more confident about the challenging issues I encountered, which also helped strengthen my resilience and positivity. My understanding of the needs, preferences, working styles and working paces of my mentees improved. As I began to understand my different roles as a mentor better, I realised the importance of giving psychological support to my mentees, whether they were in-service or pre-service teachers. This realisation led me to research and read more about this role, through which I discovered the concept of dialogic pedagogy (Freire, 1994). These ideas relate to teaching as well as to TR mentoring and adopting them in my approach to tutoring the AR course ensured satisfactory outcomes with the pre-service teachers.

Final thoughts...

As an academic and a devoted practitioner, I believe AR is an essential tool for professional development. My four-year experience of TR mentoring further justifies my belief. AR is not only a magical tool that can cure teacher burnout, but also an inspiring door which opens up more dynamic classrooms, achieves more effective learning outcomes and results in happier students. As a CPD activity in an in-service context and as a course during a practicum, AR serves the needs of participants by helping them to gain new perspectives, look for more creative solutions and become more

autonomous, while dealing with challenges to be faced. However, being a TR mentor who provides assistance and supervision to a large group of mentees is not always an easy process. In my experience, in both a pre-service and in-service context, the mentor's dialogue, the development of a positive and nurturing relationship with the mentees, and the establishment of an encouraging, supportive attitude are important for productive outcomes.

References

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Appendix 1

☺ SURVEY FOR EVALUATION ☺

THE EXPLORATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN PRACTICUM AND THE COURSE COORDINATOR

Dear Student,

This survey aims to elicit detailed information about the processes you have gone through both as a senior student in this class and as pre-service teacher researchers in your own practicum classrooms. I would like you to include your experiences concerning your involvement in the AR course and my mentoring to the group as you perceive. As constructive feedback is an indispensable step to improvement and betterment, the information you provide will have an invaluable contribution to the improvement of the course content for the future as well as the construction/reconstruction of my mentorship qualities. Thank you very much for your collaboration ☺

Seden Tuyan

1. Please specify your gains or losses by taking this AR course and conducting exploratory action research in practicum...

My gains:

My losses:

2. How would you describe the course coordinator's role (Seden Tuyan) in supporting your action research process in practicum?
3. To what extent have I been able to address your questions and problems?
4. Could you please list some of the questions and problems that have emerged during the action research process?
5. Do you think my support influences you as a pre-service teacher this AR course? If so, how? Can you give a specific example?
6. At which stage of the project do you think my contribution to the research is more important?
7. What are the ideal characteristics of a research mentor (in our case the AR course coordinator) to you?
8. Considering your answer to Q7 how would you evaluate my characteristics as your research mentor (the course coordinator)? In other words, can you specify my positive and negative characteristics as a research mentor, and clarify why you like/dislike (or any kind of feeling...) them?
9. What can course coordinators do to support teacher research in a positive and practical way in pre-service teacher education during the practicum process?
10. If you have any other suggestions for improvement, please write.