

Mentoring Ecuadorian classroom practitioners in Action Research under COVID-19: Facilitating enhanced performance in super-difficult circumstances

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Supporting practitioners in classroom research requires special mentoring skills. The present narrative account is based on the experiences of an emerging research mentor whose reflections describe how an Action Research (AR) mentoring scheme at an Ecuadorian public university was resurrected despite a funding emergency and the COVID-19 health crisis. The redesigned Action Research project made it possible for a cohort of five student- and six teacher-mentees to explore their vocabulary learning strategies and publish their findings in indexed, open-access journals. The account focuses on the teacher-research mentor's specific skills and roles performed under the super-difficult circumstances created by the pandemic and explores the factors contributing to the effective accomplishment of the restructured mentoring scheme. The author concludes that 'relentless flexibility' combined with proactivity and enhanced teacher-research mentoring skills as well as the mentees' resilient attitude were some of the main factors behind the success of a mentoring scheme whose outcomes might inform other teacher-research mentors and mentees working under 'super-difficult' circumstances.

1. Introduction

1.1. Rapid response to the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed the educational landscape of language teaching and learning. It has affected the working conditions and psychological wellbeing of millions of language teachers in unprecedented ways (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). About three months into the pandemic (in June 2020), as facilitators and group members of TESOL's Electronic Village Online Mentoring 2020, Richard Smith, Seden Eraldemir Tuyan, Mariana Serra and the author of the present article came together to look for a rapid response to alleviate the super-difficult circumstances (Phyak, 2015) language teachers found themselves in.

Within six weeks, the four of us collaboratively developed an innovative way of mentoring teacher-research, which we termed Enhancement Mentoring for Teacher-Research (EMTR) (Smith et al., 2021). This approach aimed at providing a means for teachers to focus on their *achievements* and other positive experiences during the crisis brought about by the pandemic. We intended to support teachers by helping them identify a way forward through recognizing and building on the resourcefulness and resilience of their pedagogic responses, which often led to unexpected positive

outcomes, providing opportunities for experience sharing and exploratory teacher-research projects in the future.

Therefore, what follows here is both a narrative account of my experience as a volunteer teacher-research mentor under COVID-19 and a contribution to a less studied element of Exploratory Action Research (EAR), namely, exploring *success* (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, p. 32). This is because even though Exploratory Practice (EP) encourages practitioners to explore *why* things seem to work well (Allwright, 2003), beginning teacher-researchers routinely tend to focus on problems or puzzles (Hanks, 2017). However, as a *beginning teacher-research mentor*, what I am recounting here is the story of a successful mentoring process and the exploration of some of the reasons for its positive outcomes, including my mentees' dedication and perseverance.

Under the particularly difficult circumstances that evolved as a result of COVID-19, we in the EMTR core group felt that there was a need to identify and highlight success stories, and explore how they can be built on and extended. The trialling of the EMTR approach in the summer of 2020, which involved collaborating with eighteen international teacher educators and teacher-research mentors (Smith et al., 2021), helped conceptualize and consolidate my own experience, namely, the successful accomplishment of an Action Research mentoring scheme at an Ecuadorian university, one which needed to be entirely overhauled owing to the pandemic (as well as the local and country-specific crises in Ecuador).

Consequently, the present article aims to look at the interplay between the development of my teacher-research mentoring roles and skills and the way my mentees were able to cope with and, to some extent, thrive on the challenges posed by the global health crisis. In the account that follows, I briefly describe the events *before* COVID-19 as Phase 1, while the developments *after* the lockdown in Ecuador (17th April 2020) belong to the 9-month period of Phase 2 (see Appendix Table 1 for the original and the modified project plan).

1.2. Antecedents

On Friday, 13th March 2020, the first COVID-19 patient died in Ecuador and four days later the country went into full lockdown. As an emerging teacher-research mentor, I had already been struggling to sustain an AR mentoring scheme that I began on a voluntary basis for 11 teachers and five student teachers in December 2019. Only days after the original mentoring scheme began (at the very start of Phase 1), the university's budget for 2020 was cut by more than half, and the well-liked rector was forced to resign, which led to massive student demonstrations. The new management announced that redundancies were unavoidable, while pay cuts and part-time contracts would have to be accepted by those who wished to keep their jobs.

"I need to find ways of energizing the team and stay in touch with its members," I wrote in my mentoring journal on the day the lockdown started, thinking that perhaps we could carry on with small-group mentoring sessions in my apartment without creating any health risks. By the time the lockdown was announced, the student- and teacher-researchers had already been working on piloting their AR projects and analysing the initial findings. However, right after the announcement of the lockdown, it transpired that all teachers would need to switch to emergency remote teaching within days. Furthermore, the arrival of the second semester students, who would have participated in the improved versions of the exploratory projects, was to be severely delayed. Moreover, within a couple of weeks, all teachers were forced to sign part-time contracts with essentially the same amount of work as before but half the salary, and were not allowed to teach English classes with *fewer* than 40 students online. It came as no surprise that seven of the teacher-researchers requested to be immediately released from the mentoring scheme and the other four asked to postpone their projects until September 2020. The student teachers also withdrew since the research groups in which they had worked were dissolved.

The scheme lay in ruins.

In this article, I would like to present an account of how, through the extraordinary resilience and collaborative effort of my mentees, facilitated by my support as a teacher-research mentor, we

managed to carry on with the mentoring scheme despite the dire situation that had evolved at three levels: local (steep budget cuts at the university), national (economic crisis) and international (COVID-19).

Before describing the context of the Action Research mentoring scheme in Phase 1 and then providing a more detailed account of Phase 2, I would like to offer an overview of the relevant literature that guided me in my volunteer assignment as an emerging teacher-research mentor and helped me gain confidence as well as achieve a fair degree of autonomy (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017) as the mentoring process evolved over the period between December 2019 and December 2020.

2. Literature Review

In this section I approach the issue of teacher-research mentoring by discussing some recent developments in this field, and focus on the views related to the mentoring support that teacher-researchers may commonly need when carrying out practitioner research in their classrooms. I refer to the experiences of teacher educators who transitioned into *teacher-research mentoring*, and the kind of support such teacher-research mentors would need (and may or may not receive) via *teacher-research mentor mentoring*.

2.1. Teacher-research mentoring as an emerging practice

Even though there is a relative lack of literature on how language teachers can be most effectively supported in their classroom research, mentoring schemes (often based on Action Research and Exploratory Action Research practices) have expanded exponentially in the past decade and are already delivering insights. The specificity of these initiatives is that they are fairly large scale, focus on developing and coaching local mentors, and employ a bottom-up approach. They are often run by the British Council (e.g., the Champion Teachers programme in Latin America and the Action Research Mentoring Scheme (ARMS) in South Asia), but the movement is spreading to Africa as well, such as the teacher-research initiative included in the Secondary Education Improvement Programme in Sierra Leone (Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 2021). There are numerous mentor- or peer-mentor-supported Action Research projects arising in local contexts, facilitated by dedicated teacher educators and teacher-research mentors (Dikilitaş & Bostancıoğlu, 2019; Hanks, 2019).

2.2. Changing concepts of teacher mentoring

The mentoring of teachers that are new to the profession or transition to a new job is usually assigned to one of the more experienced colleagues in order to help the settling in / induction process. Perceptions about mentoring in educational contexts have changed over time. Roberts' definition appears to describe a classic – master-apprentice – mentoring relationship (often held in such cultural contexts as Japan or India):

...a more knowledgeable and experienced person actuates a supportive role of overseeing and encouraging reflection and learning with another less experienced and knowledgeable person so as to facilitate that person's career and personal development. (Roberts, 2000, p. 162).

Malderez (2018) applies a less formal definition when she says in an interview that “mentoring ... in a nutshell is the one-to-one support by a relatively more experienced teacher for the growth and learning of another” (p. 110). Smith, for his part, (2020) formulates mentoring in a way that emphasises that the support provided would need to lead to higher levels of autonomy and empowerment:

Mentoring can be defined simply as sharing knowledge, skills and experience in order to encourage and empower another person. In contexts of teacher development, this 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. 14)

Judging or *judgementoring* (Hobson & Malderez, 2013) may arise from the fact that mentors are often obliged to perform both a developmental and an assessing (judgemental) role (Kullman, 1998). However, moving away from this approach can lead to collaborative relationships and result in co-mentoring, such as in the case of Kochan and Trimble (2000), where it was the mentee (Susan Trimble) who pro-actively sought out a mentor, just as I was keen on doing when faced with a research design dilemma in Phase 1.¹ Fletcher (2005) calls this "learning through co-inquiry" (p. 177) explaining that it is a process in which "both mentor and mentee are seeking to improve their work-based practice" (p. 179). Nevertheless, the term 'co-mentoring' is generally understood as a way of "mentoring a group of teachers together with another person (a 'co-mentor')" (Smith, 2020, p. 16), and this is how I am using it in the present account unless otherwise specified.

2.3. What kind of support do teacher-researchers need?

Language teachers' engagement in research requires support (Renandya & Floris, 2018), both as regards institutional mechanisms which allow teachers to carry out research and the creation of spaces for professional development where they can acquire the necessary research skills. Hanks (2018) emphasises that teachers (as reflective practitioners) possess many of the skills required for research, such as critical thinking and the ability to systematically "observe, analyse, record and interpret the progress of [their] students" (p. 54). In her view, supporting teacher-researchers should not be confined to allowing release time and funding their continuing professional development (of which classroom research is a powerful tool). What is needed is "respect and encouragement [...] and enough autonomy and empowerment for teachers to undertake research that is deeply relevant to learning and teaching" (pp. 53–54). Likewise, Dikilitaş and Griffiths (2017) firmly believe that Action Research is eminently capable of developing teacher autonomy, because AR projects can lead to practical and pedagogical considerations resulting in improved instructional practices. This is related to teacher autonomy, since "rather than teaching with the results of professional researchers' recipes or top-down curriculum decisions, or coursebooks, teachers can enjoy taking control of their own learning and teaching process" (p. 166).

Overall, there appears to be a consensus that teacher-researchers can benefit from guidance and facilitation when they go through the stages of AR or EAR type classroom research (Smith, 2018). Beyond managerial backing (Burns, 2018) and material resources, classroom practitioners "need intellectual and affective support, which may effectively come from a combination of outsider mentors, like trained researchers, and insider supporters, like experienced peers" (Padwad, 2018, p. 46). In fact, our mentoring scheme did have a similar support system set up: we had access to a *mentor-advisor*, I acted as a *non-campus-based volunteer research mentor* and the *on-campus research coordinator* of the AR mentoring scheme provided peer support.

2.4. Teacher-research mentor mentoring

Even though to date there is a dearth of accounts written by teacher-research mentors on their practice, the freely downloadable volumes published by IATEFL's Research Special Interest Group (<http://resig.weebly.com/books.html>) contain several articles written by teacher educators on their mentoring experiences involving systematic inquiry and reflection (see, for example, Doğan, 2018; Eraldemir-Tuyan, 2019; Rakicioğlu-Söylemez, 2018).

Teacher-research mentors also need support and facilitation, and this can come from more experienced research-mentor mentors. From the point of view of the present reflective account, Dikilitaş and Wyatt's qualitative case study (2018) is especially meaningful because it recounts the journey of three novice research mentors, and describes the systematic and ongoing support that was

provided by the first author to the emerging mentors. One of the authors' conclusions is that it is not only teacher-researchers that need managerial support, but their mentors, too. The recommendation, therefore, is that "educational institutions need to take on supportive nurturing roles, facilitating career progression from teacher to mentor to teacher-research-mentor" (p. 551). Such career moves can then provide sustainability to teacher-research mentoring schemes, which seem to work best when carried out jointly by the ever-growing and highly motivated cohorts of experienced and 'near-peer' mentors (Padwad, 2018; Smith, 2018).

3. Context

The present narrative account can be perceived as a continuation of a previous article that I wrote as my mentees and I were coming up to the end of Phase 1 of the AR mentoring scheme (Békés, 2020). In that article, I described how the AR projects of my mentees were shaping up and how we were getting ready for the next stage, which would have started with piloting the projects with the incoming students of the second semester (2019/2020).

My experience as an emerging mentor in the first three months was based on four interrelated and synchronous elements:

- running regular mentoring sessions;
- setting up a co-mentoring group;
- being mentored by our mentor-advisor (see Appendix Table 2 for the mentoring structure);
- taking part in TESOL's first online mentoring course (EVO Mentoring) in January-February 2020.

This meant full immersion in mentoring practice and theory. In the article I also provided a detailed account of what I had learnt about teacher-research mentoring and included some of the incidents when I felt that I had made a blunder. Mentored by Kenan Dikilitaş, I was carefully observing and reflecting on the way he mentored me and aimed at emulating the mentoring skills that he exhibited. However, two weeks after that buoyant and optimistic article was published, the whole AR mentoring scheme disintegrated.

3.1. From Ground Zero to redesigning the project

In the immediate days after the full lockdown was introduced in Ecuador (17th March 2020), it seemed that the mentoring scheme was beyond salvage. Nevertheless, I carried on looking for various options as to how I could still support my student- and teacher-research mentees in a meaningful way. On 29th March 2020, I spotted an invitation via *EFL Magazine* to sign up to a free online vocabulary tournament. It offered a chance to compete in groups of minimum 8 contestants. The organisers explained that the WordEngine application to be used for competing adjusts to the vocabulary ability of the team members and, therefore, "all that matters is team spirit and player effort" (*EFL Magazine*, email communication, March 29, 2020).

WordEngine is a subscription-based online flashcard application, so the prize the organisers were offering – free licences for a whole year to every member of the winners' educational institution – was exceptionally enticing, particularly because owing to the online mode of delivery, fewer than the usual number of students were receiving English tuition and this caused concern among students and teachers alike. The deadline to join was only two days away. Re-energised, I asked the organisers of the tournament if students and teachers were allowed to compete in one and the same team. The answer was yes.

An eight-member team was hastily put together by Ivy (not her real name)², a stalwart member of the research group which had intended to do AR on vocabulary learning and was specifically interested in gamified online applications. Since we were in between semesters and under the restrictions of COVID-19, there were few students and teachers available, so Ivy (in her capacity as prospective Team Leader) invited three other teachers (one from the original AR mentoring scheme

and two teachers new to it). Our student co-mentor, a student-researcher, and a student new to the mentoring scheme were also asked to join the group, and I offered to take part, too. This setup necessarily meant that the participants of Phase 1 and Phase 2 did not fully overlap. However, in the dissemination and publication phase several student- and teacher-researchers from Phase 1 were successfully re-engaged (see the student- and teacher-researchers' detailed profile and status in Appendix Tables 3a and 3b).

3.2. Research design and data gathering

My thinking as a teacher-research mentor was as follows. We could turn this authentic, real-time Vocabulary Challenge tournament into the first cycle of an AR project that aimed at *exploring* vocabulary acquisition and retention if:

- we all took the WordEngine vocabulary test to establish our vocabulary size (benchmark);
- learned vocabulary items intensively for four weeks by using the WordEngine online flashcard application for vocabulary acquisition and retention (intervention);
- wrote vocabulary learning diaries on our experience and the vocabulary learning strategies we applied (reflection);
- took another vocabulary test at the end of the tournament (to measure improvement);
- analysed our quantitative and qualitative data (in self-study genre);
- reflected on the whole learning experience and how we would wish to improve the teaching and learning of vocabulary;
- disseminated the results.

And so, less than two weeks after the lockdown was declared, the AR mentoring scheme was revitalized by exploiting an opportunity to participate in an international online vocabulary contest and by designing a piece of exploratory research around it.

4. Outcomes

On Monday, May 4th 2020, the final results of the WordEngine Team Challenge were announced. We were declared the best team and won the first prize: 3000 free licences for the online flashcard application for a whole year for each and every member of the Ecuadorian public university, including not just the students and the teachers, but all members of the administrative staff as well.

Furthermore, between the beginning of May and the end of June 2020, we wrote up two full-length academic articles on our experience, which were published in indexed, open access journals (Cherres Fajardo et al., 2020; Herrera Caldas et al., 2020). The student team members also published their first-ever piece in English by writing a guest blogpost for IATEFL's Learning Technologies SIG (Calle et al., 2020), and I wrote an article on supporting student- and teacher-researchers in the collaborative write-up phase (Békés, 2021). It seemed that under the super-difficult circumstances we overperformed.

5. Research questions

1. How do I perceive my contribution as a teacher-research mentor to what has eventually evolved?
2. What made it possible to resuscitate the moribund AR mentoring scheme?

6. Insights

6.1. Teacher-research mentoring roles and effectiveness

It is impossible to establish how effective my teacher-research mentoring skills would have been if we had kept to the timeline and the activities contained in the original AR mentoring scheme (see Appendix Table 1 for the original and the modified project plan). Switching from a regular mentoring scheme to what could be called an opportunistic design required flexibility and resourcefulness. The *ad hoc* team of contestants became the *sample* whose members studied their own vocabulary learning and retention strategies to explore an Action Research question (“Why do my students find it difficult to remember words?”) with the ultimate aim of improving the learning and teaching of vocabulary. The student-researchers were able to supply data from their own perspective, while the teacher-researchers could explore their own approaches to *vocabulary learning*, hoping that the resulting insights would offer an opportunity to reflect on their *vocabulary teaching* strategies.

How was I able to support the transition from Phase 1 to Phase 2, and switch to a different mix of roles and add new skills to it? In what follows, I look at the mentoring roles that I fulfilled initially (Phase 1) and how these roles changed over time as a result of the redesigned mentoring project (Phase 2), whose focus and timeline were different from the original. For the description of mentoring roles, I follow Malderez and Bodóczy (1999) and Halaí (2006), but I am also adding the mentoring skills/roles that Fletcher (2012) describes as pertaining specifically to *research mentoring*.

Table 1. Roles in mentoring teachers and teacher-researchers

Malderez and Bodóczy (1999)	Model	Acculturator	Support	Sponsor	Educator
Halaí (2006)	Expert-coach	Learner	Critical friend		Subject specialist
Fletcher (2012)	Nurturer and model of specific research skills				Subject specialist expert (knowledge about research)
					Research mentor (knowledge about how to teach teachers to research)

These mentoring roles are not as clear-cut as Table 1 would suggest. After all, mentors can *model* each role; for example, they can model how to *acculturate* beginning teacher-researchers into a community of practice or how to *sponsor* their mentees by using their “knowledge [...] and connections with powerful people in the service of the mentees” (Malderez, 2018, p. 111). In our case, the construct was even more complex, because my teacher-research *mentees* were also AR *mentors* in their own right since their job involves mentoring the AR projects of their students in the English teacher major programme. As a result, they needed support in their own classroom research projects while also wishing to learn more about research mentoring.

In Phase 1 of the project, I fulfilled several of the roles described above:

- as suggested by Smith (2020, p. 43) I acted as role model by carrying out research on my own mentoring practice and disseminating the findings (Békés, 2020);
- acculturated my mentees by nudging them to sign up to and participate in AR and mentoring-related professional development activities, for example, EVO 2020 Classroom Research, EVO 2020 Mentoring and FB groups (Teachers research!, Teacher Voices, Mentoring-TR);
- provided psychological support when redundancies were announced and two English teachers were sent back to their original jobs in secondary schools with their salaries cut by half;

- sponsored my mentees by drawing their attention to and helping to put together a proposal for the British Council's small grant for teacher educators;
- shared subject specialist knowledge on research by supplying information and giving a presentation on the differences between academic research (namely, Applied Linguistics / Second Language Acquisition studies) and Action Research.

The dynamics of my mentoring experience changed profoundly when it came to redesigning the project for Phase 2. As opposed to Phase 1, when the university's management was, to some extent, aware of my existence and activities, starting from the lockdown in March 2020, institutional support ceased to exist: the Research Department was shut down indefinitely and teachers' time release for research activities was withdrawn. Unlike in the case of the mentoring schemes run by the British Council cited above, for me there were no applicable rules of engagement anymore, and this (as well as my volunteer status) gave me a measure of freedom and autonomy (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017).

I made a special effort to model the kinds of mentoring behaviour that had become more prominent owing to the 'treble trouble' we experienced at local, national and international level (see Antecedents section above). *Proactivity, relentless flexibility* and *organisational skills* were required right at the beginning of the project in Phase 2, which was identified as an opportunity (*sponsor* role - Malderez & Bodóczyk, 1999) at a time when the original mentoring scheme seemed impossible to continue. *Leadership* was required to initiate our participation in the vocabulary tournament, and *skills in delegation* were necessary when it came to setting up and running the competition. The role of *nurturer* (Fletcher, 2012) became more pronounced as I withdrew and stayed in the background providing sustained *support* (Malderez & Bodóczyk, 1999) at a level that would not stifle my mentees' initiatives and creativity. For example, it was one of our student contestants who came up with our slogan for the vocabulary challenge: TEAM = Together Everyone Achieves More.

The skills associated specifically with teacher-research mentoring became more explicit in Phase 2. Alongside supporting and enthusing the team throughout the vocabulary competition, I needed to act as an *educator* related to the issues of research design, research questions, data gathering, data analysis and I also provided *language support* in the write-up phase. By having to carry out a series of logistical tasks (liaising with the organisers of the tournament, creating a project timeline for the write-up phase and managing the rounds of re-writes), I took on *project manager* responsibilities as well. Altogether, except for the weeks when the vocabulary tournament was actually taking place, and I could gently melt into the background as an 'ordinary' team member, I had taken on a more directive role for a short, intense period, especially during the collaborative write-up phase. Even though this 'forceful' approach (Ponte, 2002, p. 420) may have been justified by the circumstances, it could be perceived as problematic since the approach, to some extent, curtailed my mentees' autonomy.

Modelling specific research skills (Fletcher, 2012) was important when I designed the new project in such a way that it led to data gathering 'in situ' and with little extra effort (the writing of vocabulary learning diaries). Beyond the general skills as an *educator* (Malderez & Bodóczyk, 1999), which helped me provide information on vocabulary learning and become a *subject specialist* (Halai, 2006) in this field of applied linguistics, I quickly grew into an active *learner* (Halai, 2006) acquiring the subject matter knowledge (namely, a large amount of less frequently used vocabulary in English) required for the competition.

6.2. Resuscitating the moribund AR Mentoring Scheme: the role of language teacher resilience

During our Enhancement Mentoring sessions in the summer of 2020 (Smith et al., 2021), one of the tasks the core group (Richard, Seden, Mariana and myself) set for ourselves was to reflect on whether there had been factors in our previous experience that made it possible for us to turn the dire situation created by the global health crisis into a success. Most of us were able to recall instances in our lives as educators when we displayed a high level of *resilience*, a concept that I found useful in order to interpret the attitude and conduct of my mentees.

Hiver (2018) defines a resilient practitioner “as a teacher using all the resources available to maintain personal well-being alongside professional productivity in the face of adversity and detrimental conditions” (p. 235). He also describes how “teacher resilience is part of the shift towards models of success and perseverance” (p. 234). Next, I will look at how resilience manifested itself in the course of our project. The subheadings are direct quotes from Hiver (2018, p. 236).

6.3. “Resilient teachers approach their practice with higher self-efficacy”

Our Team Leader, Ivy, put the WordEngine Team together in less than 24 hours, and managed the tournament with the precision of an aerospace engineer and the diplomatic skills of a UN goodwill ambassador, discreetly warning contestants if they were falling behind and encouraging others if they appeared downhearted. Members of the team communicated on WhatsApp and exchanged 574 messages during the 4-week tournament. A large proportion (261) constituted interactions among the contestants, but 223 were related to organisation and logistics coming from the Team Leader (Cherres Fajardo et al., 2020).

6.4. “[They] draw more on active coping strategies”

The way both the student and teacher participants approached the task of competing was based on the omnipresent characteristic of humans: playfulness, as described by Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1949). Under the conditions of COVID-19, the tournament became a welcome distraction as well as a coping strategy: “[it] was fun ... in the middle of the pandemic... We started not competing only with the rest of the world and the rest of the teams but we started competing each other inside of the group,” said Mathew and Ivy concurred, “I really enjoyed it because I learned so much. For me, during this quarantine, the experience was amazing.”

6.5. “They possess the meta-cognition and self-regulation skills needed to be autonomous”

Vocabulary learning requires meta-cognitive skills, for example, memory strategies (Schmitt, 1997). Another one is looking for patterns and relationships. During the tournament, Catalina was on the lookout for cognates (words that have a common origin) when trying to guess the meaning of English words and score points, because “...academic Spanish has a lot of Latin words and that’s why I could relate words from English to Spanish”. This is, in fact, a useful strategy because in English “a high percentage of general academic vocabulary words are Latin-based cognates” (Lubliner & Hiebert, 2011, p. 2).

As for self-regulation skills, all contestants displayed a high level of discipline, often having to fight boredom from spending many hours in front of the screen performing monotonous vocabulary-related tasks. In fact, one might say that, as a mentor, I was unable to shield my mentees from severe fatigue. They were so driven by intrinsic motivation (wishing to expand their vocabulary) and extrinsic motivation (gaining free licenses for the application for themselves) as well as social motivation (winning thousands of licenses for everyone at the university) that there was no way of holding them back in order to find a ‘normal abnormal’ state. As Teacher Mathew said in the interview that I conducted with him:

I started working in the middle of the day and night and the morning and the afternoon all the time. It was in the benefit of everybody... first, to get the first prize of the competition and then, second, to get the licenses for the whole university... Inside the group there was a lot of motivation because we shared the WhatsApp group and everybody was pushing each other ... and try to find ways to help each other.

The desire to win, on occasion, led to what could be termed reckless behaviour, such as when our student co-mentor made an attempt to overcome connectivity challenges – an everyday occurrence

in countries of the Global South. In the third week of the tournament, Joe did not have internet service at home, so he ventured out in his car to look for free internet in the city centre. His problem was that on that day, because of the lockdown restrictions, only even number licence plate cars were allowed to be driven around. Joe's licence plate ends in an odd number. He was caught by the police, and warned to go straight home: "I felt happy when the police told me to go... [they said] if they see me, I was going to be arrested."

6.6. Student resilience

Hiver (2018) cites authors who claim that "students cannot be expected to develop resilience if their teachers do not exhibit this ability themselves" (p. 238). All three student contestants could see the extraordinary efforts of the teacher participants and the steely determination to not let anyone fall behind. Our Team Leader, Ivy, exhibited this trait when she calmly but firmly insisted that one of the student contestants should not give up and should stay in the competition.

Right from the beginning, Aiden spent about six hours or more per day trying to score points. He had an A1 level of proficiency when he started, and he often listed down more than 100 new words to learn every day. At the end of the first week, he was on the verge of giving up (the teams had the right to replace underperforming contestants by new ones):

I saw that all my teammates' scores were very far from mine. ... I asked Teacher Ivy if she wanted to put another person instead of me because I wasn't getting a good ranking. She said, "No, Aiden, you can do it."

Aiden was No 150 when he started and he finished in 6th place – between Teacher Catalina and Teacher Maribel. On the last day of the tournament, all eight contestants were among the first 13 in the ranking list that usually contains thousands of players (see Appendix Table 4).

6.7. "[Resilient teachers] seek out friends and partners who are supportive"

The contestants' families were particularly caring during the tournament. For example, Maribel could rely on her husband's help when she realised that the only time she could set aside to play and score points was late at night:

I was always thinking about when is the perfect time, and I started doing it at night. That was my strategy because that was a perfect time. My husband was really supportive, he was like 'How is the competition?', he was playing video games next to me so that I wouldn't fall asleep.

6.8. Collaborative student/teacher resilience

Hiver (2018) mentions "building positive relationships with competent and nurturing colleagues" alongside "seeking out supportive friends and partners" (p. 236). These characteristics were prominent in our practice, both in the competition and the write-up phase. An overarching term might be *collaboration* in the broadest sense. Collaborative teamwork was the essence of the mentoring scheme that I had set up (urging, for example, that student-researchers should be involved and given meaningful tasks) and became rich and multi-layered in the vocabulary contest phase. Members of the team included students and teachers as well as myself as the teacher-research mentor, but only in the capacity of an ordinary member. This led to an exceptionally high level of non-hierarchical cooperation, a democratic way of working (with each pulling their weight according to their vocabulary level) spiced with a healthy level of competitiveness, leading to camaraderie and mutual appreciation.

6.9. Teacher-research mentor's resilience

Hiver's (2018) point on how students cannot develop resilience unless they can see their teachers displaying this capacity can be extended to our practice, namely, teacher-research mentors need to be as resilient as their student/teacher-researchers. I was adamant to set an example even before COVID-19 (Békés, 2020) and my efforts doubled after the pandemic hit Ecuador.

I agree with Hiver (2018) that resilience "can develop and change continuously with emerging conditions or contexts" (p. 236). I worked in Ethiopia as a volunteer English teacher for Voluntary Service Overseas on an assignment lasting almost three years setting up English Language Improvement Centres. The two Ethiopian universities at which I volunteered constituted singularly challenging environments where I learnt the rule that "you ask before you question" (cultural accommodation), and I was also able to hone my skills of being relentlessly flexible.

Finally, a comment on Hiver's (2018) observation that resilient practitioners exhibit greater than average *altruism*. My mentees were aware of and appreciated my volunteering past and present. I often gave them relevant examples of my work in Ethiopia and the Amazonian jungle demonstrating self-efficacy, resilience and resourcefulness, and they knew that I had undertaken the mentoring project as another volunteer assignment. The fact that I did not opt out when the scheme was on the brink of collapse proved to be an inspiration to all.

7. Reflections on the lessons learnt

7.1. How do I perceive my contribution as a teacher-research mentor to what has eventually evolved?

The successful accomplishment of Phase 2 of the Action Research mentoring scheme required proactivity, adaptability, leadership and organisational skills over and above the roles and skills that are understood as being part of mentoring teacher-researchers. At the height of Phase 2, proactivity may have bordered on being over-directive but this mode of operation was counteracted by working non-hierarchically as an ordinary team member during the Word Challenge tournament. My *volunteer* status allowed me to explore unusual opportunities for my mentees to shine and succeed. As a result of the process, my research mentoring skills have become more refined and more wide-ranging. The process brought about a 'co-mentoring' situation in Fletcher's understanding (2012), whereby my mentees mentored me in becoming a better research mentor as the dynamics of our collaboration pushed me to overcome the challenges of a time-limited project and the pressures of publication while working to a tight deadline.³

7.2. What made it possible to resuscitate the moribund AR Mentoring Scheme?

The setting up and accomplishing of Phase 2 required all the mentoring skills that have been described, but they would have been useless without the approach and attitude of my mentees. They displayed all the characteristics of resilient practitioners; their resoluteness as well as their level of commitment (heightened by social motivation) brought about exceptional results both as regards the outcome of the Word Challenge tournament and the employment of the experience for their Action Research project on vocabulary acquisition and, soon afterwards, the dissemination of its results.

7.3. Achieving 'more' under super-difficult circumstances

The mentoring scheme hit rock bottom on 17th March 2020 when Ecuador went into lockdown. It would have been easy to walk away from the project and it is almost certain that had I been a paid ELT consultant, the university would have terminated my contract treating the pandemic as "an act of God". Carrying on with my work as a volunteer teacher-research mentor (under the radar, as it were) and resuscitating the project was probably more than what could have been expected under ordinary

circumstances. Likewise, the attitude and behaviour of the three students and four teachers who decided to participate in the Word Challenge experience (at very short notice) exhibited extraordinary resilience and grit. Such dedication (see Appendix Table 4 on the number of hours spent on scoring points) would not have been expected in the original AR mentoring scheme envisaged to run over 12 months (from December 2019 to December 2020).

Looking at some of the more tangible outcomes, it is the following aspects that are worth highlighting:

- The contestants increased their vocabulary size considerably (see Appendix Table 5). According to the data provided by the organizers (Lexxica), seven participants moved up one level in CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) terms, one participant moved up two levels. This would not have been achieved if the student- and teacher-researchers had carried out a standard Action Research study.
- The teacher-researchers had an opportunity to explore their own vocabulary learning strategies in an authentic (competitive) situation. It is quite possible that the teacher-researchers would have reflected on their own vocabulary acquisition strategies (as students of an L2 at school), but in our case the process was simultaneous (learning words and reflecting on how they are learnt in order to guide *vocabulary teaching*). This led two of the teacher-researchers to introduce the *systematic recycling* (spaced repetition) element for vocabulary learning even before the vocabulary competition was over (Herrera Caldas et al., 2020), so Phase 2 brought about changes in teaching and learning faster than it may have happened in the original mentoring scheme.
- The WordEngine Challenge constituted an interface between an ordinary classroom and the “real world”. There were a series of activities that were specific to the tournament and led to the enhancement of collaborative skills in a team that was explicitly non-hierarchical. This is not a usual setup when practitioners explore their classrooms.
- As a result of winning the tournament, all students, teachers and administrative staff at the university were awarded licences to use the WordEngine application for a whole year. Almost 3000 licences were made available.
- An effort was made to “repair the damage” caused by COVID-19 and re-engage student- and teacher-researchers from the original project (Phase 1) as well as recruit new participants. Altogether, five student-researchers and seven teacher-researchers (including the teacher-research mentor) took part in Phase 2 rising from the ruins of Phase 1.
- Disseminating the results and getting published within 5-6 months after the vocabulary learning experience is an aspect where the participants definitely “overperformed”. In the original project, participants were expected to present their data at an ELT conference (in 2020), which was cancelled. Had it been held, the preliminary data would have been presented in small-group sessions and the presentations would have been published in the conference proceedings. The initial plan in the AR mentoring scheme did contain the idea of submitting articles, but the fact that the two full-length articles on the experience were not just written up but they were submitted, accepted and published within 6 months appears to be a true feat. Moreover, the student contestants published a guest blog post on their experience and I also wrote an article on mentoring collaborative academic writing under COVID-19. Altogether, four pieces of writing emerged, three of them in reputable open-access journals (Békés, 2021; Calle et al., 2020; Cherres Fajardo et al., 2020; Herrera Caldas et al., 2020).

Resourcefulness and resilience need to be in the armoury of dedicated classroom practitioners who may wish to reflect on and improve their practice. Alongside investigating problems and puzzles, the exploration of the ingredients of success can help recognise and build on achievements (Smith et al., 2021), which are often the result of a proactive attitude combined with persistence and perseverance as well as creativity and an optimistic outlook on life (Hiver, 2018).

The research mentor's volunteering experience, of which problem-solving and troubleshooting had been an integral part when she worked in under-resourced contexts (Ethiopia and the Amazonian jungle) and which she perceived as problematic in the first phase of the mentoring scheme, were put to good use in the second phase. Her resilient search for alternatives created an opening, which was then fully exploited by her mentees during a contest that gave rise to both collaboration and competitiveness among members of the group driven not just by intrinsic/extrinsic, but also social motivation.

In sum, the exceptional state of affairs that was the result of a local, national and international crisis pushed the research mentor and her mentees up a steep learning curve. They were forced to adapt to an evolving emergency and, as a result, they advanced at a higher speed and went further.

8. Limitations and recommendations

The narrative account provided in this article is necessarily limited in its scope, owing to the far from ordinary circumstances under which the AR mentoring scheme needed to be redesigned and then accomplished at an Ecuadorian public university. However, about 80% of English language teachers work in the Global South and the challenges they face in their large and often under-resourced classrooms create circumstances ranging from difficult to super-difficult. A possible takeaway from the experience described above, as well as the stories recounted by teachers in Smith et al. (2021), is that resilience combined with context-sensitive scaffolding by teacher-research mentors can lead to unexpected positive results.

Suggestions for ongoing research include further exploration of research mentoring skills, especially the concept of linking classroom researchers with academic researchers by research mentors acting as intermediaries, what Fletcher (2005) calls 'the missing link'. Research concerning how research mentors can support the efforts to disseminate the findings of classroom practitioners is another area worth pursuing, since language support (Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018) can be crucial for teacher-researchers whose first language is not English, and for whom the conventions of academic writing constitute an additional challenge. Narratives of emerging research mentors and the support that they receive via mentor mentoring is another field of inquiry. In addition, language skills for the 21st century should include resilient learning strategies and these can only be learnt from resilient teachers and resilient teacher-research mentors. Therefore, exploring the interplay of (collaborative) teacher resilience and research mentor resilience, namely, the modelling of this aspect of mentorship behaviour (Malderez, 2018) could result in findings that might enhance the mentoring experience and lead to co-inquiry and co-mentoring (Fletcher, 2005), a beneficial experience to all those involved.

9. Conclusion

In this article, I have made an attempt to provide an account of how a redesigned Action Research mentoring scheme was successfully accomplished at an Ecuadorian public university during the global health crisis. Even though initially it seemed that the original mentoring scheme could not be continued owing to COVID-19, collaborative resilience exhibited by the mentees and carefully administered teacher-research support provided by the volunteer mentor made it possible for the student- and teacher-researchers to carry out a piece of Exploratory Action Research whose findings were then disseminated in acknowledged academic journals. The outcomes of the mentoring scheme suggest that resilient student- and teacher-researchers can overcome the challenges created by super-difficult circumstances when, along with their own persistence, they can rely on the support and careful scaffolding of their research mentor.

Notes

A general note:

In our case, the term “classroom practitioners” (as referred to in the title) has been extended to the student teachers that participated in the scheme because, as future English teachers, they had already done micro-teaching sessions and all of them were keenly interested in exploratory classroom research.

[1] Kenan Dikilitaş kindly offered to act as a mentor-advisor in the scheme and provided wide-ranging guidance as well as to-the-point feedback throughout Phase 1 and Phase 2 both to me and my mentees.

[2] All names have been changed to protect the identities of the participants.

[3] For example, in the course of the mentoring scheme, I got in touch with and had meaningful email exchanges with Sarah Mercer, Norbert Schmitt and Charles Browne – all highly acknowledged experts in their respective fields. If I were not a research mentor, I doubt I would have contacted them, but I needed to prove to my mentees that they should aim high and that the biggest names in ELT will be surprisingly responsive and accommodating. One of my mentees made a mention of this ‘lesson’ in Békés (2021, p. 99).

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I wish to thank all my mentees (students and teachers) for their resilience and the resulting achievements. Our mentor-advisor, Kenan Dikilitaş, has been a wise and enthusiastic supporter of our project and kept me on an even keel, for which I am especially grateful. It was a privilege to work with Seden Tuyan, Mariana Serra and Richard Smith on the Enhancement Mentoring for Teacher-Research project and the resulting publication.

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Appendix

Table 1. The original and the modified project plan

Phase 1			
Timeline	Original plan	Major events	Modified plan and outcomes
January – February 2020	Designing Exploratory Action Research projects for piloting Co-mentoring to start	First redundancies at the University	Designing Exploratory Action Research projects for piloting Co-mentoring started Research mentor's article on initial months of mentoring published in ELTAR-J
March 2020	Starting Exploratory Action Research projects with students arriving for Spring Semester	Ecuador goes into lockdown on 17 th March 2020 2 nd semester delayed Redundancies, part-time contracts for remaining staff, release time for research withdrawn 7 teachers of the original 11 dropping out; 4 teachers asking for deferral; 5 students dropping out Research Department shut down indefinitely	Starting Exploratory Action Research projects with students arriving for Spring Semester: cancelled Co-mentoring group: dissolved
Phase 2			
Timeline	Original plan	Major events	Modified plan and outcomes
April 2020	Action Research intervention carried out	Signing up for an international vocabulary learning tournament: 5 teachers and 3 students as one single team	Exploring the vocabulary acquisition and cooperative teamwork strategies of the team during the 4-week competition Gathering data on the experience

May 2020	Action Research intervention accomplished	Winning the competition, university gains 3000 free licenses to use the web-based online application for vocabulary learning	Authentic 'intervention' by taking part in a live, international competition Expanding vocabulary size for students and teachers in the team Reflecting on the experience
June 2020	Writing up the AR reports and preparing presentations for the University's first ELT conference in July 2020	ELT conference postponed until spring 2021	Writing up articles about vocabulary learning strategies and teamwork for indexed journals
July 2020	Presenting projects at ELT conference organised by the university Publishing findings in conference proceedings		Students' guest blog post published Submitting two articles: AJELS AJAL
August 2020	Writing up findings for publication in indexed journals		Revising peer-reviewed article for AJELS
September 2020	Submitting articles to indexed journals		Revised AJELS article accepted for publication
October 2020	Article revision	Full-time contracts reinstated Research release time reintroduced Research-mentor invited to carry on with 'work in progress' and facilitate future projects On-campus research coordinator stepping in as new research-mentor	Revising peer-reviewed article for AJAL Revised article for AJAL accepted for publication AJELS article published online
November 2020	Article revision		AJAL article published
December 2020	Follow-up of submissions, closing the project		AJELS article published

New phase, mentoring offered on an *ad hoc* basis

February 2021			Research mentor's article on supporting collaborative write-up is published in ELT Research
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Table 2. The mentoring structure

Mentor-advisor Kenan Dikilitaş
Non-campus-based research-mentor volunteer Erzsébet Ágnes Békés
On-campus research coordinator Julia Sevy Biloon
Teacher-research mentees
Student-research mentees

Note: Table 2 suggests a hierarchical structure but, in fact, the scheme was by far not hierarchical, especially in Phase 2, when teacher-researchers, student-researchers and the research-mentor volunteer were collaborating (and competing) in the same team. The co-mentors' group (research-mentor volunteer, on-campus research coordinator and one of the student-researchers) ceased to exist when the rest of the mentees opted out of or asked for the deferral of their projects.

Table 3a. Student-researchers in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the AR Mentoring Scheme (Source: Author's own elaboration)

Participants' name (pseudonyms)	Took part in Phase 1	Opted out of Phase 1	Joined Phase 2 after opting out of Phase 1	Newly recruited for Phase 2	Re-engaged from Phase 1 for the write-up in Phase 2	Notes
Aiden	No	N/A	N/A	Yes	N/A	One of the 3 student authors
Alexander	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	One of the 3 student authors
Carlos	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	
Joe	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Acted as student co-mentor One of the 3 student authors
Silvia	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	
Samuel	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Left the AR Mentoring Scheme before it started in earnest

Table 3b. Teacher-researchers in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the AR Mentoring Scheme (Source: Author's own elaboration)

Participants' name (pseudonyms)	Took part in Phase 1	Opted out of Phase 1	Joined Phase 2 after opting out of Phase 1	Newly recruited for Phase 2	Re-engaged from Phase 1 for the write-up only in Phase 2	Notes
Catalina	No	N/A	N/A	Yes	N/A	One of the 5 teacher authors*
Deborah	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	
Elisa	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	
Isabel	Yes	No	Yes	N/A	N/A	Mentor of the AR Mentoring Scheme

Ivy	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	One of the 5 teacher authors
Jennifer	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	On-campus research coordinator Acted as teacher co-mentor in Phase 1
Katty	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	One of the 5 teacher authors
Leticia	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Joined another research group early on
Maribel	No	N/A	N/A	Yes	N/A	One of the 5 teacher authors
Mathew	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Opted out of the write-up phase
Talia	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	
Teresa	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	No	
Umberto	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	Opted out before lockdown on account of being promoted
Valentina	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	One of the 5 teacher authors

*The 6th author was the research mentor herself. She joined the teacher-researchers writing up one of the two full-length articles when Mathew opted out of the write-up phase.

Appendix Table 4. Number of hours team members spent practising (Source: VAdmin data (WordEngine) in Cherres et al. [2020, p. 26])

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Total number of hours	Correct Responses (CRs)	Rank on last day (3 rd May 2020)
Teachers:							
Catalina	02:34:33	06:03:12	04:03:23	11:57:11	24:38:19	13 255	5
Isabel	04:36:56	05:39:28	03:48:59	02:33:42	16:39:05	10 010	12
Ivy	06:19:10	09:08:59	05:52:08	10:43:08	32:03:25	16 865	3
Maribel	05:40:31	05:49:06	04:58:02	05:46:52	22:14:31	12 544	7
Mathew	04:24:15	06:56:25	03:56:51	07:01:47	22:19:18	11 393	10
Students:							
Aiden	03:09:02	07:12:15	06:25:33	11:12:43	27:59:33	12 705	6
Alexander	12:07:28	07:28:15	07:37:25	14:39:06	41:52:14	17 900	2
Joe	07:19:05	07:35:18	00:32:43	07:40:10	23:07:16	9 841	13
Total	46:11:00	55:52:58	37:15:04	71:34:39	210:59:41	104 513	

Table 5. Team members' vocabulary gains (Source: VAdmin data (WordEngine) in Cherres et al. [2020, p. 27])

	Vocab size at start	CEFR	IELTS	Vocab size at end	CEFR	IELTS
Teachers:						
Catalina	8,615	B1	5.7	13,073	C1	7.0
Isabel	11,379	B2	6.8	14,208	C1	7.0
Ivy	6,453	B1	4.9	11,061	B2	6.3
Maribel	8,548	B1	5.7	12,274	B2	6.8
Mathew	4,216	A2	4.2	7,955	B1	5.3
Students:						
Aiden	1,094	A1	3.4	4,101	A2	4.0
Alexander	5,509	A2	4.6	9,950	B1	7.0
Joe	7,065	B1	5.2	9,675	B2	6.1