Enhancement mentoring for teacher-research: A positive approach in a crisis

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The benefits of teacher-research are these days widely recognised, and teacher-research mentoring has emerged as an important area of development. Various resources for practitioner research are now easily accessible online to teachers, but there continues to be relatively little guidance available on how to support teacher-research as a mentor. In this article, we describe the development of an innovative approach to mentoring for teacher-research, termed 'enhancement mentoring', which builds on teachers' existing achievements and can help to fill this gap. Starting in the early days of the international Covid-19 crisis, we collaboratively developed the enhancement mentoring approach online and then further tried it out with an international group of mentors and, via them, with teachers and student-teachers of English in various settings worldwide. Contextualised within a self-study account of these three cycles of development of enhancement mentoring, we introduce here the practical set of questions and the peer-mentoring/peer-coaching procedure we formulated and trialled, presenting these as ways for others to help teachers derive value from and chart a path through and beyond experiences of crisis and other difficult circumstances.

Introduction

Teacher-research – that is, research carried out by teachers into professional issues that concern them – has been associated with both local and broader benefits for teachers of English (see Edwards (2021) for a recent overview of such benefits). However, for teachers to become researchers, having access to appropriate mentoring can be a crucial factor (Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018). Indeed, investigating teacher-research mentor development and how this can be improved has recently begun to emerge as a focus of research, in particular in relation to practice in Turkey and British Council projects in Latin America ('Champion Teachers', 2013–present) and South Asia ('ARMS' [Action Research Mentoring Scheme], 2017–2020). In pioneering work, both Smith (2014) and Dikilitaş and Wyatt (2018) provide insights into the planning decisions and development of teacher-research mentors in Turkish tertiary institutions. In relation to the Champion Teachers programme in Chile, Smith, Connelly and Rebolledo (2014) highlight the importance of mentors having undergone experiences similar to those of the teachers they are supporting, while Bustos Moraga (2017) looks into some of the difficulties mentors have faced at a later point in the same scheme. In the context of ARMS,

Smith (2020a) investigates challenges and benefits of teacher-research mentoring from the perspectives of Nepali mentors, while 2020 saw the publication of the first practical guide to facilitating teacher-research in ELT (Smith, 2020b). Overall, however, there continues to be a relative lack of both research and practical guidance in this area.

In this joint narrative, we describe the development of an innovative approach to mentoring for teacher-research which we term 'enhancement mentoring', and we provide information about one way such an approach can be introduced to teacher-research mentors. We collaboratively developed the enhancement mentoring approach as a means of self-help and as a way to support teachers amid the challenges of the first, 2020 phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, and we therefore term it a 'crisis' response or approach. We also characterise it as a 'positive' approach because, rather than focusing added attention on the *problems* teachers were facing – with attendant dangers of exacerbating perceptions of difficulty – we wished to explore how teachers could be supported to identify and explore further the pedagogic successes they had already resourcefully achieved, as a basis for charting pathways forward. Whereas teacher-research tends to begin with a problem or

puzzle, we felt that the idea of instigating research to better understand *success* deserved to be developed further for the sake of teachers' wellbeing. The approach is now presented here for consideration by others – mentors of teacher-research, teacher educators, leaders of teacher associations and school leaders – as a possible way to help teachers derive value from and chart a path through and beyond crisis experience or other difficult circumstances.

Background

Teacher-research has been a central area of interest for all four authors in recent years, both in relation to our own practice (see, Békés, 2020; Eraldemir Tuyan, 2017; Serra & Grisolía, 2020; Smith, 2003), and as something we have been promoting with other teachers. We have all been particularly drawn to Exploratory Action Research (see Smith, 2015; Smith & Rebolledo, 2018) – henceforth, EAR – an approach which has been developed and spread via the Champion Teachers and ARMS programmes and, each year in January–February since 2017, via workshops on classroom-based research within the TESOL International Association's free-to-join Electronic Village Online (EVO) (see http://evosessions.org and http://classroombasedresearch.weebly.com).

The immediate starting point for our work together was that, in January–February 2020, the first two authors of this article – Richard Smith and Seden Eraldemir Tuyan – had organised a new set of five online workshops on 'Mentoring Teacher-Research' within the overall EVO (see http://mentoring-tr.weebly.com/evo2020). The purpose of this was to help improve participants' mentoring skills, and to begin to develop an international community of mentors of teacher-research. In total, 22 teachers from all over the world registered fully for the 2020 Mentoring Teacher-Research EVO sessions (henceforth, MTR-EVO), and 19 of them completed the activities for the full five weeks and were issued with a certificate. At this point, Richard and Seden expressed their hope that the international community of mentors of teacher-research could be developed further, and promised to organise a catch-up session a few months later to see how participants' plans for mentoring activity, formulated during the MTR-EVO, were progressing. However, in March, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of schools and a lockdown situation in most countries in the world, and plans for a projected follow-up meeting were put on hold: MTR-EVO leaders and participants alike were busy coping with the new situation of

emergency remote teaching and dealing with other new conditions arising from the pandemic.

A second relevant background aspect was activity within the TELCnet group – an established online research and development network for teaching in difficult circumstances, in particular in countries of the Global South (see http://telcnet.weebly.com/). In the relatively early days of lockdown, in April–May 2020, Richard and his successors as network coordinators, Harry Kuchah Kuchah and Prem Phyak, had taken the initiative to organise a series of online discussions among teachers and teacher educators from Latin America, Africa and South Asia. These discussions were set up using the online video-conferencing platform Zoom simply to encourage teachers to share, better understand and gain mutual support for issues they were facing in the new 'super-difficult' circumstances that had been brought about by the pandemic (see http://telcnet.weebly.com/networking.html for records of these discussions and Phyak (2015) for further discussion of the notion of super-difficult circumstances, that is, situations which – having already been 'difficult' in the kind of sense defined by West (1960) – specifically, large-class, low-resource classrooms in public education systems of the Global South – become doubly disadvantaged at a time of natural disaster like an earthquake or, in this case, a pandemic).

The extent of teachers' resourcefulness in the time of the pandemic, for example in overcoming situations where students lacked good access to the internet, soon became very clear. There was a sense in which teachers were proactively developing new capabilities and innovative solutions without guidance from outside authorities, as has subsequently been more widely recognised and documented (e.g., Cherres, Chumbi, & Morales, 2020; Gao & Zhang, 2020; Jelińska & Paradowski, 2021; Thornburg, Ceglie & Abernathy, 2021). The discussions had seemed to be a useful forum and lifeline in the early stages of the pandemic, but they also seemed to lack a clear sense of direction beyond serving this function and the organisers decided to discontinue them after May.

Why 'enhancement mentoring'?

In June 2020, Richard approached Seden, along with Erzsébet (Eli) Békés – a particularly active participant in the MTR-EVO who had also participated in the TELCnet discussions (see above) – and Mariana Serra, who had led the EVO2020 sessions on Classroom-Based Research for Professional Development, to ask if they would be willing to discuss how to help teachers build on

the successes they had been achieving in the pandemic and to consider with him the value that teacher-research – and mentoring teacher-research – might or might not have in this crisis situation. Specifically, he was interested in exploring the value that Exploratory Action Research (EAR) might still have, given that this had been explicitly designed with the needs of teachers in difficult circumstances in mind (see Smith & Rebolledo 2018, p. 4). However, his additional perception at this time was that it might still be too early to stress-test the EAR approach for the super-difficult circumstances teachers were now facing. There might, though, be value in encouraging teachers to base some research on their achievements, as opposed to problems, as a way of making the best of the pandemic situation. At their first online meeting together, on 19 June, Seden, Eli and Mariana concurred with Richard's reluctance to engage teachers in additional tasks at this time of crisis. As committed teacher educators, we all seemed to share a desire to volunteer to support teachers in their further development in facing the crisis but were not completely sure how to do so. Despite our interest in promoting teacher-research mentoring, we were conscious of potential threats to teachers' emotional wellbeing and agreed that we did not wish to increase their workload at this time or exploit their situation in pursuit of our interests. Conversely, we all saw possible advantages for teachers' welfare in an approach to teacher-research which would begin from achievements not problems.

In this connection, we noted that helping teachers explore existing success further is already one option in EAR (see Smith & Rebolledo, 2018: 29; Smith 2020b: 39). However, in our common experience, teachers and mentors do not usually choose this option but instead tend to decide on a *problem* as the point of departure for their teacher-research projects, as is evident in all the collections of teacher-research reports which have adopted an EAR approach so far (e.g. Rebolledo, Smith, & Bullock, 2016 and other reports from the Champion Teachers project). Exploring possibilities of starting with success would also take forward some of the insights in Smith, Padwad and Bullock (2017) regarding the potential benefit of an overall 'enhancement approach' to CPD for teaching in difficult circumstances. Smith et al. (*ibid.*) state the following (pp. 3–4) to characterise and highlight the value of an enhancement as opposed to a deficit approach to teacher development in such circumstances. This involves:

> setting out to look for positives to build on from within the experiences and from the perspectives of those who know low-resource settings the best – that is, teachers in such settings. This is diametrically opposed to the prevalent 'deficit model' of training which is based on preconceptions relating to relatively privileged kinds of classroom; which assumes that practices in small, well-resourced classrooms represent a kind of 'norm' that needs to be followed; and which can result in additional, inappropriate pressures and burdens on teachers. [...] The defining feature of an enhancement approach, then, is to see what works in teachers' own experience, from their own perspectives, and to build from there, on that basis.

Based on our awareness that many teachers had by this point (June 2020) already resourcefully developed new skills and abilities, we felt it could be useful for them to report and take stock of their achievements (as in the May–June TELCnet discussions mentioned above) but also build on these further, or at least see how they could be built on, into the future. In our initial discussion, we established, in short, that our focus would be on possibilities of developing an *enhancement* mentoring process for teacher-research, focusing on one potential aspect of EAR – that is, starting the research design process with a positive experience rather than a problem or puzzle.

How did enhancement mentoring develop?

The process of development of the approach took place between June and December 2020. As Figure 1 shows, the overall process was as follows: first, we jointly formulated and tried out with one another a series of mentoring questions ('Cycle 1') before inviting a wider international group to take part in the process of development by trialling and giving feedback on these questions ('Cycle 2'). Then, having become aware of the value of the approach in relation to their own teaching, several members of this group took it forward, in turn, with further participants ('Cycle 3'). We narrate each of these three cycles below, combining this narrative with our rationales for the questions and the peer-mentoring and reflection procedure we developed, and overlaying this with an ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of the approach according to feedback received. In this manner, we adopt aspects of 'self-study' (Kitchen et al., 2020), which we understand as 'systematic research and reflection on […] teacher educators' own practices, leading to both an improvement of these practices and a contribution to the general knowledge base of teacher education' (Lunenberg, Korthagen, &

Zwart, 2011, p. 407). Hence, we put into practice the ethical precept that mentors of teacher-research like ourselves and the participants in Cycle 2 of our

enquiry need to critically reflect on and, ideally, *research* their practice if they are to encourage teachers to do the same (Smith, 2020b: Chapter 6).
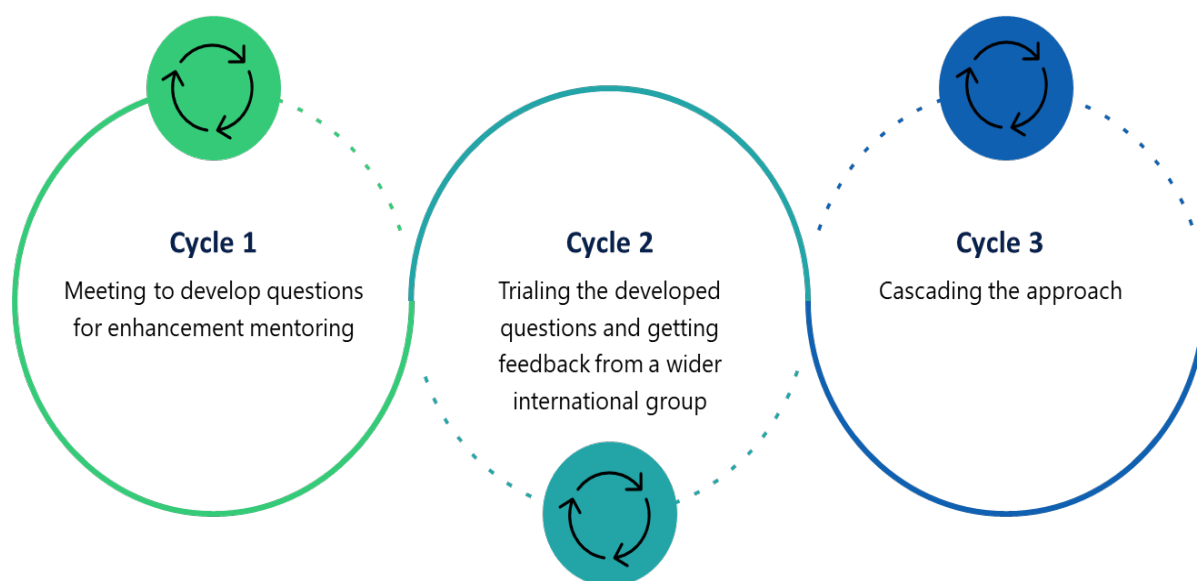

Figure 1: The three cycles of development of enhancement mentoring

Planning and process of Cycle 1 (June–July 2020): Developing mentoring questions

As a small group of four, meeting online once a week for a period of six weeks from 19 June until 31 July 2021, we together first explored what 'enhancement mentoring' for teacher-research could look like in practice.

The first task that we set ourselves as a team was to think about what we had personally achieved in our teaching/teacher education experience in the previous three months and, without ignoring the challenges that all four of us continued to face, to help one another make individual 'inventories' of the professional skills and strengths that we had managed to develop in response to the crisis. For example, Seden shared her story of how, in a Turkish university, she had maintained her professional contentment and wellbeing after the outbreak of the pandemic. As a teacher educator with an emerging need to deliver her face-to-face courses online, she had succeeded in managing these courses via Moodle and Zoom. She had also succeeded in addressing issues that arose during her remote teaching experience, such as student disengagement, irregular attendance and difficulty in submitting assignments, by trying to develop a community of learners bonded together through values of kindness, honesty, understanding and respect. Mariana shared her own story from Argentina about the actions she had taken as a teacher to keep her rural public secondary school

students motivated and to sustain their engagement in learning while teaching online since the beginning of the lockdown period. By means of personalised feedback through private messages in their virtual classroom and WhatsApp messages, she felt she had managed to build a close relationship with her teenage students, which she felt had been a major factor in keeping them motivated and highly involved. Eli and Richard, in turn, both shared different experiences of helping colleagues and others to maintain motivation in their respective workplaces in Ecuador and the UK via community-building, discussion and pedagogic innovation.

Sharing such experiences helped us understand our situations more deeply and feel more positive about them, confirming that it would be valuable to further develop the overall approach. With regard to how to take things forward, the idea began to emerge that we could formulate a series of mentoring questions together in our weekly core group sessions and try these out on one another in closed pair work (Richard with Seden, and Eli with Mariana), with the idea that this way of working could form a basis for further work with other teacher-research mentors in a wider group. In other words, after deciding on a set of questions as a group of four, we would arrange to meet our partner at a mutually agreed time during the week to go through these questions together, taking turns to act as mentor and mentee, and we would then

reflect on and improve these questions and this procedure in our subsequent group meeting.

Via this procedure, we devised a sequence of nine overall mentoring questions, together with associated prompt 'sub-questions', which we felt could take teachers forwards towards achievement-based teacher-research. Beginning with reflection on their current situation, the questions would help them home in on and begin to understand better one particular achievement or success that they could then consider building on further via teacher-research.

Outcome of Cycle 1: Questions for enhancement mentoring

Here we list and provide individual rationales for the nine mentoring questions and associated prompt questions that we developed as seen in Table 1. We arranged the questions in three sets of three questions each, the rationale of each set being as follows:

- **The first set (questions 1–3: 'Your difficulties and achievements')** was intended to establish teachers' context and their main problems and perceived achievements in the crisis. We hoped that

these questions would help participants get to know one another; get difficulties and problems into the open and 'out of the way', enabling them to move on to positive aspects; and establish some areas of overall achievement as a basis for further discussion and exploration.

- **The second set (questions 4–6: 'Pinpointing recent success')** was designed for participants to identify and become more conscious of a particular, concrete experience of success and to consider signs of and reasons for ('ingredients' of) the success in question, as well as begin to identify areas of uncertainty as a possible basis for exploratory research.

- **The final set (questions 7–9: 'Exploring and building on success')** was designed to encourage participants to formulate plans for achieving further success in the future (a positive pathway forward and/or a realistic plan for exploration as a basis for future action), as well as to evaluate their gains from the enhancement mentoring process overall.

Main question	Prompts (if any) *	Rationale
What is your context?		To encourage participants to share basic information about their respective contexts as the first step towards mutual understanding
What main problems/difficulties have you been facing professionally, and how have you overcome them?		To get difficulties out in the open and, to some extent, 'out of the way', as well as to consider any ways in which the difficulties had been overcome, for subsequent questions to focus on relatively positive experiences
What have you gained professionally overall in recent (crisis) times?	What do you feel you've gained as a teacher during the months of lockdown? What are you grateful for as a teacher during the Covid-19 pandemic? What positive feelings arose for you while teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic?	To start gradually to focus on positives and to balance these against negative aspects

Main question	Prompts (if any) *	Rationale
	What skills did you develop as a teacher during the pandemic?	
What particular successful experiences have you had recently?	What were some of the particular professional successes you have had during the months of lockdown? Talk about a particular experience or experiences What did you do? How did you do it? Why did you do it? What did you feel about it? How do you feel now after this experience?	To encourage participants to begin to focus on one particular recent successful experience and bring its various aspects fully to consciousness
What were the signs of your success?	What made it a success for you? / What signs did you get that the experience was successful? What feedback did you get from outside yourself? Was there any feedback from students, parents, managers, colleagues etc.? What were the academic and emotional outcomes for students?	To help participants gain a clearer understanding of the nature of their success To uncover areas of uncertainty, potentially leading to exploratory research
What were the reasons for your success?	What do you think were the main factors contributing to this being a successful experience? What exactly 'made it work'? What made the experience like this, compared with in other classes? What things that you did / What things about you as a teacher might have had a positive influence? How do you know?	To facilitate further understanding of successful professional experience and/or identify routes to understanding via further identification of areas of uncertainty
What do you want to explore further, to extend your success?	What areas of uncertainty/questions arise for you from the successful experience(s) you have identified? What research questions (if any) do you have – i.e. What would you like to find out more about in order to understand the success(es) better?	To help participants to identify and work with areas of uncertainty that had arisen from consideration of their recent successful experiences, inviting them to start to plan some exploratory research
What could you do to extend your success?	What/who could help you increase your potential for further success? Is it possible to transfer the ideas to other courses? So how might the successes you have had be the basis for	To encourage participants to formulate a realistic action plan, in case they were already tempted to act and not (just) to explore further

Main question	Prompts (if any) *	Rationale
	generating further future successes?	
So, what do you take from / what have you gained from this mentoring process overall, and what will you do from now, when and how?	What have you gained overall from these three sessions? How/When/Where/With whom will you explore what you want to explore? How/When/Where/With whom will you put into practice what you want to?	To help participants evaluate the enhancement mentoring process overall, and to consolidate this into a concrete plan

Note. See Appendix 1 for the full range of prompt questions suggested (these were intended as a menu to be selected from – not all of them were to be actually asked)

Table 1: Enhancement mentoring questions

Planning and process of Cycle 2 (August 2020): Trialling a three-week procedure with a wider group

By the middle of July 2020, we felt we had together experienced and developed something of value that could usefully and viably be shared more widely. Indeed, one intention had always been to further develop the community of teacher-research mentors that had begun to be set up in the January–February MTR-EVO, as mentioned above, and we felt that the above questions could usefully be shared with this wider community. Thus, we agreed that our next step would be to plan a structure for wider group meetings and to formulate an invitation to MTR-EVO participants to experience the approach that we had been developing.

As a core group, we agreed on the wording of an invitation and sent this out towards the end of July to all those who had completed the MTR-EVO earlier in the year. In the invitation, we explained our rationale for enhancement mentoring, largely as expressed in section 3 above, and said that we would like to share our sequence of questions with a wider group as an opportunity for further development of participants' teacher-research mentoring skills and to involve them in providing feedback on the new approach, which we were by now calling 'Enhancement Mentoring for Teacher-research'.

The structure we designed, with associated worksheets and templates for reflection which can be found in Appendices 1 and 2, was as follows:

Four weekly Zoom meetings (8–29 August 2020). These four meetings would proceed as follows:

- Meeting 1 (8 August) – Introduction to the approach and to Questions 1 to 3 ('Your difficulties and achievements'). Following this, for the remainder of the session, participants would also take turns to ask one another Questions 1 and 2 in randomly assigned pairs in breakout rooms and then arrange to work in a similar fashion on Question 3 at a time of their choosing during the week. Participants were also encouraged to join an online asynchronous discussion group using the Groups.io platform and to reflect there or privately on the peer-mentoring experience, responding to question prompts we provided (see Appendix 2) before Meeting 2.

- Meeting 2 (15 August) – Reflections as a group on the peer-mentoring experience, followed by an introduction to Questions 4 to 6 ('Pinpointing recent success'). Pairs would ask one another these questions (with prompt questions) at a time of their choosing during the week, reflecting on this experience using the standard reflection questions before Meeting 3.

- Meeting 3 (22 August) – Reflections as a group. Introduction to Questions 7 to 9 ('Exploring and building on success'). Pairs would work on these questions at a time of their choosing during the week, reflecting on the week's experience and on the overall process (see questions in Appendix 2) prior to Meeting 4.

- Meeting 4 (29 August) – Reflections as a group. Sharing of plans for the future. Discussion of possible follow-up meetings.

Altogether, nine mentoring pairs and one group of three were formed by 21 participants (including three members of the core group) based in nine countries: Argentina (5 participants), Ecuador (1), Peru (3), India (7), Israel (1), Nepal (1), Spain (1), Turkey (1) and Ukraine (1). The meetings proceeded weekly as described above, and we recorded the sessions so that those unable to attend could watch the recordings in their own time. All participants completed the three-week programme.

As expressed in the invitation, our aims were quite broad:

1. to help us continue to develop this new approach by confirming the usefulness or otherwise of the mentoring questions and receiving feedback on them

2. to further develop the international community of teacher-research mentors

3. to further enhance participants' mentoring skills, building on the January–February MTR-EVO

4. to benefit participants in an even more directly relevant way, enabling them to appreciate and build on their successes as educators during the pandemic

As has previously been noted, the approach we adopted reflected our overall desire not to impose an added burden on teachers or (in this case) teacher educators or to create additional stress or trauma in a situation where we did not know all the anxieties participants were potentially facing. Thus, although we had decided that we would attempt to gain feedback on the procedure we were developing, with a view to further improvement and dissemination, we also decided that we wanted to avoid data-gathering that might be perceived as 'exploiting' teachers (in this case, mentors) in difficult circumstances. Instead, we wished primarily to provide something of value which we would incidentally research. For us, then, aims 3. and 4. were uppermost in our minds as we facilitated the sessions, with our 'research' aim (i.e., 1.) only coming to the fore as we neared the last of the sessions.

Outcome of Cycle 2: Feedback on the procedure
As the process developed, it was clear from shared weekly reflections that participants were finding the experience of peer-mentoring useful from both mentor and mentee perspectives – it was building

their confidence and developing their skills and agency as mentors. It was also aiding self-reflection as participants learned about others' experience and, in the mentee role, they reported feeling that they were being given the opportunity to step back from recent experience, see the whole picture, and come to consider steps forward in relation to signs and reasons for existing success. Overall, participants highlighted the value of listening actively, building trust, questioning, encouraging and being encouraged, empathising and being empathised with, and providing and receiving feedback. We agreed as a core group that the experiences participants were particularly highlighting concerned:

1. sharing (exchanging positive feelings and thoughts)

2. comparing (noting similarities and differences in experience)

3. confirming (gaining reassurance and understanding one's achievements better)

4. enhancing (considering improvements for future application)

We had not asked for permission in advance to share participants' weekly reflections, and so we do not quote from them here. We did, however, decide after the first two meetings that it would be useful to disseminate further what by now was proving to be a successful procedure not just for ourselves but for the wider group. We therefore asked for and gained permission to share written reflections responding to a set of questions about the overall experience, which we distributed in advance of the fourth and supposedly final meeting. These questions were as follows (see also Appendix 2):

1. Did the idea of 'enhancement mentoring for teacher-research' work for you overall as a mentor and as a mentee? If so, how? If not, why not?

2. How different is this / might this be from a problem-focused/difficulty-focused mentoring approach? Strengths? Weaknesses?

3. In what context(s) do you think you might be able to implement 'enhancement mentoring for teacher-research'?

4. Any further suggestions for the overall project?

In the following paragraphs, we summarise the themes (highlighted with italics) which emerged

from feedback generated at this point in relation to questions 1. and 2. above. Answers to question 3. are covered under 'Cycle 3' below, and the (few) suggestions received in response to question 4. are taken up in the Discussion. Reflections received from a total of 12 participants, including three members of the core team, were analysed (but only reflections of those who were not members of the core team are quoted from below):

One theme that emerged, unsurprisingly, was *mentor development*: participants had had an opportunity to engage in and reflect on mentoring and, in a few cases, this was their first such experience. However, the work in pairs also proved beneficial for more experienced mentors. For example, one noted having been fortunate to be paired with a research student: "She is a perfect guide for me. I can observe her research methodology and learn from her better." There were many comments like this one about the qualities of assigned partners, and how much had been learned from them – clearly, over the course of only three hour-long sessions, a close bond had been established within many of the pairings, and information of practical relevance to participants had been exchanged. An added dimension to this arose from the fact that, in almost all cases, the random pairings turned out to be international ones, enabling intercultural exchange accompanied by a recognition of shared interests. As one participant explained,

> I was fortunate to get a mentor who is from another culture, who works in a completely different context, who faces challenges every day but is willing to fight out, face difficulties and bring success in her workplace. It was a genuine exchange of professional experiences, knowledge and ideas. We both have the same approach at some points. We suggested to each other our solutions.

In many cases, there was *mentor development and personal development combined*, via, as one participant put it, 'cooperative dialogue with an active speaker and an active listener'. Several participants mentioned the way taking turns to mentor and be mentored brought a special quality of relationship and learning:

> One called for a leading role whereas the other one a reflective role. As a mentee, it was important to articulate my thoughts, share my concerns, whereas as a mentor, I was an empathetic listener.

Self-development via being mentored was another general outcome. As one put it,

> I think the genuine nature of our mentor–mentee dialogue contributed a lot to the way I could reveal the details of what has happened on my pathway to the successful experience. My mentor's choice of prompt questions, attentive listening and kind and respectful attitude [were] also important.

The kind of self-development, whether professional or personal, which was by far the most frequently mentioned was *boosted confidence, agency and/or self-esteem via a focus on positives*. Here are just two of the reflections participants shared:

> This was a positive thinking experience. Made me feel doubly confident and empowered, showed the quality and quantity of work I have done during this pandemic.

> Talking about the positives felt more inspiring and confident. That fostered my creativity to think about the possible ways to tweak some aspects of my current successful experience.

Some contrasted this with a more typical problem- or difficulty-focused approach:

> [Focusing on] success has a [positive] ripple effect unlike a problem. One problem leads to another thus compounding problems. There will be multitude of problems, a teacher may be entangled in this circuit, may not be able to come out of it. It's like a cobweb.

> By focusing on the positive aspects of our teaching practices we can have more energy, feel more self-confident, more creative, more innovative to overcome future challenges which in turn allows us to generate further success.

There were some positive indications, also, of the *feasibility / perceived practical value* of adopting the procedure – or aspects of it – in participants' mentoring practice:

> I can relate this experience easily to teachers – one of the teachers said: I don't know where to start from. Problems are umpteen, overwhelming at times. In a government school, everything is a problem. Teachers do not know where to begin from.

Additionally, there were some indications of its particular *appropriateness in a pandemic / in difficult circumstances*:

> The approach is hugely satisfying for people who do not want to lie down and die.

Finally, some participants considered that the approach was *good, but in balance with work on problems*.

In other words, these participants felt the approach could best be integrated with, rather than exclude, a more conventional focus on teachers' difficulties as a starting point for research.

Planning and process of Cycle 3 (September 2020 onwards): Cascading the approach
During Meeting 4, the wider group participants agreed to meet a fifth time, two weeks later, on 12th September, although this had not been in the original three-week/four meetings plan. At this fifth meeting, participants proposed a number of ideas regarding local projects they wished to take forward that would replicate the EM experience, with some of the projects having already started. There were so many initiatives already shaping up that the whole group decided to meet again at the end of the same month (26 September) to monitor and discuss the progress of projects together. There was then a further, final meeting, on 31 October.

During these well-attended further meetings, progress reports regarding plans for dissemination were presented by participants. Participation continued to be high in all three follow-up meetings (12, 26 September; 31 October), with between 12 and 14 participants (not counting ourselves) attending each one. With participants having the option of listening to the recordings in their own time, the total number participating probably approached that of the original wider group (21). It should also be noted that during all of the initial meeting weeks (8–29 August) and follow-up meeting weeks (12, 26 September; 31 October), we carried on with our core group meetings in order to reflect on and plan wider group sessions.

Outcome of Cycle 3: The main cascaded initiatives
The extent to which participants voluntarily decided to lead projects arising from the three-week procedure described above exceeded our expectations and seemed to provide further evidence of the perceived usefulness of the approach we had developed. Table 2 provides an overview of the main initiatives involving enhancement mentoring – represented here in a manner agreed with the facilitators concerned – that were implemented voluntarily by Cycle 2 participants, all online.

	Place	**Date**	**Facilitator(s)**	**Participants**	**Nature of initiative**
1.	South India	Sept.–Oct. 2020	Ravinarayan Chakrakodi	82 teachers	EM questions (mainly via peer-coaching) incorporated into pre-arranged full-time in-service training course
2.	Telangana, India	Sept.–Oct. 2020	Vinayadhar Raju, Mamatha Sadu, Syed Irshadali and Sampat Kumar Kokkul	48 Teacher Association members	Full Cycle 2 procedure adopted via peer-coaching
3.	Buenos Aires, Argentina	Oct. 2020	Ruben Mazzei	27 teachers	First set of EM questions used as prompts in a shared Google document for participants to write into, following discussion in pairs, in a critical reading and academic literacies course for teachers
4.	Turkey	Dec. 2020–Jan. 2021	Seden Tuyan	12 teachers	All Cycle 2 questions used in a professional development module as part of MA ELT

	Place	Date	Facilitator(s)	Participants	Nature of initiative
					programme; participants engaged in 'self-mentoring' with the questions and made a poster presentation / wrote a paper about their successful experiences of teaching during the pandemic
5.	Maharashtra, India	Nov.–Dec. 2020	Manjusha Shamrao Sagrolikar and Suchita Mahorkar	40 Teacher Activity Group leaders	EM questions and prompts used as part of training participants to become mentors of teacher-research for around 90 teachers
6.	Israel	Jan. 2021	Nahla Nassar	28 student-teachers	Students engaged in peer-coaching with regard to successful experiences as learners or teachers using EM question prompts, as a basis for deciding on research topics
7.	India and Nepal	Dec. 2020	Ravinarayan Chakrakodi and Richard Smith	18 former Indian and Nepali mentors on the British Council Action Research Mentoring Scheme	Cycle 2 completely replicated, leading to a further cycle / cascade of enhancement mentoring being initiated by a number of the participants
8.	Spain	Jan. 2021 onwards	Sidney Martin Mota	20 teachers	The facilitator led discussions of the initial EM questions in a 'Blended Learning Work Team' (voluntary teacher development group)

Table 2: New enhancement mentoring (EM) initiatives implemented by Cycle 2 participants

As can be seen from this overview, there was a variety of ways in which Enhancement Mentoring was incorporated into Cycle 2 participants' teacher education or teacher development-related practice. The projects that participants formulated were either overall EAR-mentoring projects where an enhancement mentoring element was incorporated (project 1 above), other adaptations of our approach (3, 4, 6, 8), or projects with the same design and the same set of questions that we had piloted with the group (2, 5, 7). Interestingly, in several cases (1, 2, 6) there was an emphasis on what might be termed enhancement peer-*coaching* rather than involving the practice of mentoring for prospective mentors. We discuss this point further in section 5 below.

A further evaluation of the impact
In December 2020, the core team sent out a questionnaire to all who had participated in Cycle 2, requesting evaluations of the experience to help

us with a presentation we were due to make for IATEFL Research SIG in January 2021 as well as for writing this article. 13 participants completed the questionnaire (including 6 who had not submitted written reflections for Session 4 in August).

We asked four questions, as follows:

1. What are you pleased to have accomplished after having participated in the Enhancement Mentoring initiative?

2. Has the EM initiative made any difference to you as an ELT professional?

3. Has the EM initiative influenced your life in any other way (if so, how)?

4. Has the EM initiative made any difference to others (such as your students, your colleagues)? If so, how?

We collated all answers to these questions and analysed them thematically. Very similar themes to those already reported under 4.4 above emerged from this analysis (relating particularly to impact on self-confidence, and personal and professional development benefits). However, there was by now also evidence that participants' exposure to the approach had been having an impact on teachers they were in contact with, whether in mentoring, peer-coaching or less formalised relationships. For example, in relation to the Telangana project (the second project, as seen in Table 2), one of the four mentors said that:

> [Teachers] felt happy to share their success with others. They [were] overjoyed to read and reflect [with] the templates provided in EM initiative. [...] It acted as a booster to continue their journey more purposeful[ly,] and ultimately the knowledge and practices are helpful to students.

One of the two leaders of the Maharashtra project (the fifth project, as seen in Table 2) said that:

> My team of mentors [...] found it very interesting and shared that they could build a friendly rapport with their peer mentors quite easily due to enhancement approach.

There were other assessments, too, of mentoring initiatives which had been voluntarily engaged in as a result of the Cycle 2 experience:

- I am encouraging a small group of teachers who I have been working with at

present. They are enjoying talking about their small efforts /achievement.

- My Whatsapp group has got [a] new face with enhancement mentoring initiative. This group has become more active. They are attending webinar sessions, completing tasks, sharing their knowledge and ideas and preparing plans for exploring things.

- With my colleagues, although we haven't talked or mentioned specific details about this approach, I have introduced this approach without them noticing.

- My students and colleagues, too, learnt being patient and [the] value of questioning. It also developed mutual respect.

Discussion

In the first place, we view our initiative as having contributed to the emerging field of teacher-research mentoring and, more generally, in the area of supporting teachers who are facing difficult circumstances. In the absence of much research in the former area (see Introduction), this article has shown one way for teacher-research mentor development to be facilitated, and at the same time has described the development of a new approach to teacher-research mentoring, one which focuses on recent achievements rather than problems as a starting point. The plausibility and appropriateness of this approach in the difficult circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic were confirmed by feedback received on Cycles 2 and 3 and, especially, by the way participants in Cycle 2 felt motivated to bring the approach voluntarily into their work with others (Cycle 3). Additionally, the three-week / four-meeting procedure involving peer-mentoring combined with reflection, which we planned for purposes of mentor development, also proved to be an effective innovation in its own right, being adopted in the majority of the Cycle 3 initiatives. While some of these initiatives were themselves geared towards mentor development (specifically, 5. and 7., as seen in Table 2), in most cases the focus was on teacher or student-teacher development. Thus, it is perhaps more appropriate to call what was occurring in pairs in these cases peer-*coaching*, reserving 'mentoring' for the kind of relationship between teacher and more experienced other which was being practised in our Cycle 2 intervention. In other words, in our Cycle 2 arrangements, the pairing-off procedure had been

designed to give teacher-research mentors practice in mentoring with a view primarily to providing an opportunity for self-improvement as mentors. However, in the peer-*coaching* relationships established in several of the Cycle 3 initiatives (specifically, 1., 2. and 6., as seen in Table 2), teachers were helping one another to grow professionally, independently of any involvement, real or simulated, of an 'official' mentor.

This brings us to the general field of support for teaching in difficult circumstances, which is another area where we feel we have made a contribution. Our initiative can be counted as an addition to the development of resources in this field (additional to those already available via the TELCnet website referred to in 2. Background above). The initiative adds to the developing literature advocating success-based approaches as opposed to deficit-based models, in particular for teachers in challenging situations in developing countries (see Smith, Padwad & Bullock, 2017; Shrestha, 2019). The philosophy of starting with positives and building on these has been shown to be adaptable to the field of teacher-research, having already been identified (e.g. by Smith, 2011) as a particularly useful way to develop appropriate methodologies for developing country contexts in a situation where academic research has tended to neglect issues of real importance to teachers. In this article, we have, then, helped to define further what an 'enhancement approach' to teacher development in difficult circumstances might look like in practice, with a particular focus on mentoring for teacher-research.

Some incidental contributions of our work also deserve highlighting. Firstly, the way our approach has been taken up within the Telangana teacher association (TA) (initiative 2., as seen in Table 2) offers hope that the approach can be reproduced as a teacher development activity in other TAs, especially given the importance that TAs can have in providing opportunities for CPD in developing country contexts (Smith and Kuchah, 2016). If enhancement mentoring could be taken up further, this might contribute towards a growing tendency for TAs to become involved in supporting research, as argued for by Smith and Kuchah (*ibid.*).

There is still, of course, an important open question – does / can this approach lead into actual teacher-research (involving data-generation) which begins from a success or achievement? Here, some of the feedback from Cycle 2 is relevant. Two participants suggested

incorporating more data collection and analysis into the three-week procedure. We did not do so because (a) we were conscious of not wishing to create added burdens in the pandemic situation and (b) because we considered at that point that we were mainly pursuing mentor-training. However, the South India and Maharashtra initiatives (nos. 1 and 5., as seen in Table 2) are providing indications that enhancement mentoring can be integrated into a broader EAR programme. It also appears that some of the projects emerging from these particular initiatives were success- rather than problem-oriented. So far, although we have witnessed few examples of actual research emerging from the enhancement mentoring process, we have seen that it can stand independently as a form of mentoring or peer-coaching which enables teachers to become more conscious of their successes and achievements. The set of questions and the peer-coaching based arrangements we developed can, from this perspective, be viewed as useful in their own right, without them needing to lead into data generation.

Conclusion

In this article, we have chosen to focus on narrating the way we quite rapidly developed a response to the Covid-19 crisis from a combination of previous practical work, particular contextual requirements and a belief in the practical value of focusing on positives, rather than claiming that the approach was founded on any particular theory of innovation or teacher development. Nevertheless, as we have discussed the approach, we have become more conscious of different strands of work which have predated or run parallel to it and whose relevance could be considered in future theorisation and/or elaboration of the approach. Of apparent relevance, for example, is previous (e.g. Grant, 2012) and ongoing (e.g. Ghul, 2020) work which compares the merits of 'solution-focused' and 'problem-focused' coaching in general. Solution-focused coaching, however, is not quite the same thing as enhancement mentoring, which highlights and explores the value of existing achievements rather than being entirely focused on future success. There are also apparent parallels with the concept of 'appreciative facilitation' (e.g. Torres, 2001) – associated with the leadership and management area of 'appreciative inquiry' (Bushe, 2005; van Ginkel, 2010) – although similarities in labelling can be deceptive, and our current perception is that appreciative facilitation and inquiry, intended as

they are mainly for bringing about change in organisations, are not directly comparable with the person-centred, relatively bottom-up approach we are terming 'enhancement mentoring' here. Finally, our approach can be related to the field of positive psychology and the concerns with teacher wellbeing which have increasingly come to the fore during the pandemic. As MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer (2020: 11) found in a large-scale survey during the early days of the pandemic, "coping techniques that can be considered more active and approach-oriented, ones that more tackle the issues created by the situation including the emotions aroused, are associated with more positive outcomes". Rather than simply analysing teachers' responses to the pandemic, we set out to develop a positive active response which proved to be helpful to mentors and teachers, and which, in retrospect, can be seen to have engaged most of the "approach-oriented" strategies highlighted by MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer (*ibid.*), namely acceptance, emotional support, positive reframing, active coping, and planning. Now that the enhancement mentoring procedures we developed have proved useful and replicable in practice, we hope they will be adopted and adapted by others, and further theorised.

Acknowledgements

Funding source

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Appendix 1: Handouts for Sessions 1, 2 and 3

Handout for Session 1 – Your difficulties and achievements (1 hour)
Aims:
- establish a good relationship
- get difficulties / problems out in the open and 'out of the way', to move on to positives
- establish some areas of overall achievement

1. What is your context? (5 mins. total)
Exchange basic information about your teaching context at the beginning, then go into 2.

2. What main problems/difficulties have you been facing professionally, and how have you overcome them? (15 mins. total)
Take turns to share – or free-write about this.

3. What have you gained professionally overall in recent (crisis) times? (20 mins. each)
Take turns to consider this overall question (approx. 20 minutes each), making notes about the gains highlighted by the other person.
Example prompt questions (choose from these):
● What do you feel you've gained as a teacher during the months of lockdown?

- What are you grateful for as a teacher during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What positive feelings arose for you while teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What skills did you develop as a teacher during the pandemic?

Follow-up
- Arrange a time for your next mentoring session
- Debrief (reflect on the session) by answering the 'After each session' questions in notes / in writing.
- Contribute your reflections to groups.io
- Make the notes about your partner's achievements clearer (you will begin Session 2 by sharing what you remember about these)
- Also prepare for the next session by thinking (more) about some *particular*, concrete experiences of success that you've had recently

Handout for Session 2 – Pinpointing recent success (1 hour)
 Aims:
- become conscious of recent positive experiences
- think about / identify the main signs of success
- consider *reasons* for ('ingredients of') success
- identify areas of uncertainty as a possible basis for exploratory research

   Split the session into two halves (30 minutes each). Go through 4., 5. and 6. for one person, then switch roles and go through the same questions for the other person. Before you begin, read the questions to decide, as a mentor, *which* of the questions you mainly want to ask, as there probably won't be time to ask all of them, and some of them may be overlapping.

   As a mentor, begin by sharing your recollection of the other person's recent achievements (from Session 1) – i.e. remind your partner of what they said about these – then go into 4. below. As the other person speaks, make notes and underline any areas of uncertainty (where they say 'maybe ...', 'I think that ...' etc.), reflecting these back to your partner at the end (these could become exploratory research questions).

4. What *particular* successful experiences have you had recently?   (10 mins.)
Example prompt questions (choose from these):
- What were some of the particular professional successes you have had during the months of lockdown? Talk about a particular experience or experiences.
- What did you do? How did you do it? Why did you do it? What did you feel about it?
- What actions did you take / what efforts did you make to achieve it?
- How do you feel now after this experience?
- Can you think of other times in the past when you had a similar experience?

5. What were the *signs* of your success?   (10 mins.)
Example prompt questions (choose from these):
- What made it a success for you? / What signs did you get that the experience was successful?
- What feedback did you get inside yourself? How did you feel during / as a result of the experience?
- In what ways (if any) do you feel stronger / more confident / more empowered / more creative / more innovative as a result of the experience?
- What did you learn as a teacher?
- What feedback did you get from outside yourself? Was there any feedback from studefnts, parents, manager, colleagues etc.?
- What were the academic and emotional outcomes for students?

6. What were the *reasons* for your success? (10 mins.)
Example prompt questions (choose from these):
- What do you think were the main factors contributing to this being a successful experience? What exactly 'made it work'?
- What made the experience like this, compared with in other classes?
- In what ways were you building on previous positive experiences in what you did?
- What things that you did / What things about you as a teacher might have had a positive influence? How do you know?

- How did students contribute to your success? Why do you think they did so?
- Why did the students enjoy the experience? What makes you think that way?
- Were others (colleagues, parents etc.) part of your success? In what ways?

A final question to discuss together: On the basis of 4., 5. and 6., are there any things you're unsure about? Is there anything you might like to explore further?

Follow-up
- Arrange a time for your next mentoring session
- Debrief (reflect on the session) by answering the 'After each session' questions in notes / in writing / in a separate debrief session with your partner
- Contribute your reflections to groups.io
- Write about your partner's successful experience(s) and areas of apparent uncertainty, using your notes (you will begin the next session by sharing this description) (you can check this description with your partner, e.g. by email, if you wish / if you have time)
- Make the notes about your partner's successful experience(s) and areas of apparent uncertainty clearer (you will begin Session 2 by sharing what you remember about these)
- Also prepare for the next session by thinking about: (1) any areas of uncertainty and whether/how you'd like to find out more about them, and (2) how you might be able to build on the successes you've had, in other words 'take them further forward' in some way.

Handout for Session 3 – Exploring and building on success (1 hour)
Aims:
- to identify a positive pathway forward
- to formulate a realistic exploration/action plan
    Split the session into two halves (30 minutes each). Go through 7., 8. and 9. for one person, then switch roles and go through the same questions for the other person.
    As a mentor, begin by sharing what you have written about the other person's successes, reasons for success and areas of uncertainty (from Session 2), then go into 7. below. As the other person speaks, note down any decisions about pathways forward and reflect these back to them during 9. (these will help in forming a plan for further exploration or action).

7. What do you want to explore further, to extend your success? (10 mins.)
Example prompt questions (choose from these):
- What areas of uncertainty / questions arise for you from the successful experience(s) you focused on last time?
- What research questions (if any) do you have – i.e. What would you like to find out more about in order to understand the success(es) better?
- What would you like to explore further?

8. What could you do to extend your success? (10 mins.)
Example prompt questions (choose from these):
- How might your success(es) be the basis for generating further future successes?
- When you picture your success(es) in your mind, what would you add to the picture to make it even 'better'?
- If you could do it again, what could you do more of or less of in order to improve the successful experience even more? / What aspects would you slightly change ('tweak')? / What would you do differently?
- How would your experience be if it were any better?
- What/who could help you increase your potential for further success?
- What/who could be a source of inspiration/motivation to help you increase your potential for further success?
- Is it possible to transfer the ideas to other courses ?
- Can you see a way to build on this for 'more difficult' groups ?
- So how might the successes you have had be the basis for generating further future successes?

9. So, what do you take from / what have you gained from this mentoring process overall, and what will you do from now, when and how? (10 mins.)
Lead your partner to consider what to do next (e.g. exploratory research / action research / simply action / further mentoring meetings) for the coming e.g. month. Example prompt questions (choose from these):
- What have you gained overall from these three sessions?
- How can you continue to highlight positives to yourself / build on successes in your teaching?
- How/When/Where/With whom will you explore what you want to explore?
- How/When/Where/With whom will you put into practice what you want to do?
- Would there be any distractors or possible challenges that might come your way, and, if so, how could you overcome them?
- What would your Plan A, Plan B and Plan C be? (e.g. consider further online teaching, or teaching in class, or other scenarios)

Follow-up
- Arrange a session (one month from now?) when you can report back to one another on the success or otherwise of your action plans (optional)
- Debrief (reflect on the session) by answering the 'After each session' questions in notes / in writing / in a separate debrief session with your partner
- Contribute reflections to groups.io

Appendix 2: Reflection templates
In Cycle 2, apart from encouraging participants to take notes during their peer-mentoring sessions in relation to the questions they were asking, we also provided the following prompts for reflection *after* each session and before the following whole-group session. We encouraged participants to share answers to these questions in the online discussion group prior to the (live) whole-group sessions, and many did so.

1) As a mentee ….
- How did you feel?/ How did you benefit?/What did you learn?
- What made you feel this way/benefit in this way/learn in this way…?
- What was the value of this session? Why was it/was it not valuable?
- What will/might you do differently as a consequence of this session?/ Did questions for further exploration arise for you?
2) As a mentor ...
- How did you feel?/ How did you benefit?/What did you learn?
- What made you feel this way/benefit in this way/learn in this way…?
- What was the value of this session? Why was it/was it not valuable?
- What will/might you do differently as a consequence of this session?/ Did questions for further exploration arise for you?
3) About the session overall:
- How long did this session take?
- What questions did you find particularly powerful from among those suggested? Did you formulate any further questions? If so, what questions?
- What would you add to/modify about the suggested procedure, to make it more interesting/useful?
- Any further reflections about Session 1 overall?

Prior to the fourth and (supposedly) final whole-group session, we additionally requested participants to reflect on and share answers to the following overall questions:

4) About Sessions 1–3 overall:
- Did the idea of 'enhancement mentoring for teacher-research' work for you overall as a mentor and as a mentee? If so, how? If not, why not?
- How different is this / might this be from a problem-focused/difficulty-focused mentoring approach? Strengths? Weaknesses?
- In what context(s) do you think you might be able to implement 'enhancement mentoring for teacher-research'?
- Any further suggestions for the overall project?