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Our global readership includes teachers of English as a second language, TESOL teachers, trainers, linguists, educators, and anyone with an interest in English language teaching research in global contexts.

This journal is a refereed publication that aims at providing free online access to our readership on advances and research into the classroom teaching of English to speakers of other languages.

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We further wish to thank our anonymous peer-reviewers, without whose scholarly collaborations and collegial insights we could not have realized this publication.

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Foreword

This second issue of the *ELT Classroom Research Journal* (Volume 2, Issue 1) has seen some of the growing pains of any new activity – after a fervent beginning, things become more difficult (sometimes called a "sophomore slump" in US-based sports).

Part of the challenge has been staying true to our calling, instead of accepting manuscripts further from our theme of "research reports that are accessible to teachers or reports about what themselves think about what they do" (Farrell, 2016, 352).

You will notice on the "inside cover" of this issue the invitation for applications for TIRF Kathleen M. Bailey Teacher-Research Award. We are very pleased to see this new grant for Teacher-Researchers, too often overlooked in the competitive battles for "scholar research grants." As mentioned last issue, there are also few journals available that focus on "Action Research" or "Teacher Research" specific to ELT, and these rarely offer pragmatic investigations of the ELT classroom. The esteemed "gap in the literature" is the *raison-d'etre* of most scholarly research, rather than addressing immediate issues in teaching and learning.

A particular focus for the *Journal* is grounding in the classroom. There are plenty of journals open to scholars writing their studies *about* language learning, but few are ready to accept papers from language learning classroom teachers *focusing on* the issues teachers face *with their* learners. Teachers often lack research funding, time, and experience with scholarly research methodologies. Requirements for extensive literature reviews, formulaic writing models, and high desk rejection rates do not help teachers share their classroom understandings. Instead *ELTCRJ* offers a mentoring model for submissions, assisting teachers to move beyond poster displays to journal publication.

This issue of our journal features articles from across the English as a Foreign Language map, including Myanmar, Spain, Lithuania, Mexico, Korea, and Nepal. Special thanks go to Erzsébet Ágnes Békés and the team at MenTRnet for connecting us with teacher-researchers they mentor, some of whom have contributed to this issue. We look forward to future collaborations, and in the interest of encouraging teachers to mentor others in research, offer this brief introduction of that group here:

> *MenTRnet (https://mentrnet.net/) is an international free-to-join community of practice/ network for mentors of teacher-research in the field of TESOL which has grown up organically since 2020 and now numbers 260+ members. MenTRnet organizes monthly online support group meetings, yearly introductory workshops and an annual 'Teachers Research!' conference in association with IATEFL Research SIG.*

We hope you enjoy reading this issue of *ELT Classroom Research Journal*, share the publication with others, and we warmly invite you to consider sharing your own classroom investigations with our readers.

References

Farrell, T. S. C. (2016). Teacher-Researchers in action. *ELT Journal, 70*(3), 352-355. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccw034

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The Impact of Gamification on Students' Motivation Towards Learning System Lessons in Online Classrooms

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Abstract

This Exploratory Action Research project investigates the impact of gamification on students' motivation in online English classrooms. It was conducted at International House Yangon-Mandalay with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) B1/B1+ students. The study addresses the low engagement in traditional textbook controlled-practice exercises by replacing them with games to explore learners' motivation. A mixed-methods approach was used, including questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. Initial findings revealed a preference for game activities, with students reporting increased motivation and a preference for pair work in most games. The action stage discovered pre-assigned roles in games and examined whether students' preferences shifted due to these roles. The action stage's data showed high student satisfaction with assigned roles and a continued preference for collaborative learning: pair work in vocabulary and group work in grammar. The study observed that role assignments can influence students' engagement and their perceived comfort with applying vocabulary and grammar, suggesting potential benefits for the learning experience. The findings suggest further studies into English learning across diverse proficiency levels and class modes.

Keywords: gamification; online classroom; system lessons; collaborative learning; learners' motivation; exploratory action research

1. Introduction

The use of educational technology has brought remarkable changes to teaching practices. The shift towards online teaching has occurred rapidly, subsequently changing how students are engaged (Atmacasoy & Aksu, 2018). There are multiple disciplines to be considered as part of the online teaching-learning setting when digitalisation comes together with both advantages and side effects in the classrooms. Especially in maintaining interactive online language learning, rapid digitalisation in education has led to new distinct problems regarding greater accessibility and flexibility (Hodges et al., 2020). Thus, one of the systematic approaches that teachers can master in applying in a language education setting is gamification.

Gamification is defined as the use of game-involved features and game concepts in non-game situations (Deterding et al., 2011). It has emerged as a viable method for increasing student motivation and engagement in multiple teaching and learning environments. This approach promotes the chances of success in learning by appealing to social interaction and competition, thus making learning tasks more enjoyable. When it comes to language teaching, gamification brings solutions to some of the most common issues of students' low motivation and concentration difficulties in distance learning (Dehghanzadeh et al., 2019).

Thus, this action research investigates the application of gamification methods in an online English language classroom for students with the Common European Framework of Reference Languages (CEFR) B1/B1+ levels. It explores the impact of game activities on student motivation and engagement while learning two system lessons: vocabulary and grammar. Examining students' specific preferences and behaviours in different game formats (individual, pair, and group), this study investigates gamification aspects in language learning.

1.1 Research Background and the Problem

This research was part of Exploratory Action Research Thailand 2024 (EAR-Th 2024). The researcher was a school teacher in the project, responsible for conducting classroom research after the theoretical and practical training. Thus, this study was conducted at the International House Yangon-Mandalay, Myanmar, with 23 CEFR B1/B1+ level students. Their average age was 28.6. All participants were Myanmar nationality students; some resided in Japan, Singapore, and Thailand. All students were enrolled in a General English four-skills online course that uses the Cambridge Empower series (B1 level).

1.2 English Language Learners' Problems in Myanmar

Myanmar was unfamiliar with the online mode of learning until COVID-19. Gradually, hundreds of online language classes tried to open along with advanced technologies and teaching resources during the first lockdown period. A year later, in February 2021, the Military Coup caused online censorship, internet blackouts in conflict areas, and raised the cost of operators' mobile data and Wi-Fi networks. The average internet bandwidth in Myanmar is not strong enough for users to learn online seamlessly. Moreover, the electricity supplies run with the shift, in which everyone could access electricity for 6-12 hours a day in monsoon and 3-4 hours in summer. The problems continued when the Military Conscription Law was announced in early 2024, leading many young people to avoid going outside at night and forcing them to leave the country (as much as possible). At the same time, they need to learn English for multiple purposes in their destination countries, such as professional communication, business English, and academic English.

1.3 The Problem

The initial observations during online classes revealed that students were not enthusiastic about the typical system lesson exercises from the textbook. Despite following instructions, their engagement seemed lacking. It was discovered when I casually asked their preference for games or exercises in the textbook. I did not use to host many games because I worried that several students did not have a strong connection to engage in the play. However, I realised that they were expecting something more exciting and interactive. This concerned me as the researcher wanted to ensure they got the most out of our lessons. The students were learning through technological devices but doing regular exercises from the coursebook as if they were attending traditional in-person classes. Therefore, this action research focuses on the impact of implementing gamified controlled practice exercises instead of textbook pen-and-paper exercises.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gamification in Education

The theoretical foundation of gamification in education is rooted in several learning theories. Firstly, constructivism, as proposed by Piaget (1976) and elaborated by Vygotsky (1978), underscores a learner's activity in the construction of knowledge through interaction with the environment and people socially. More research has proved how gamification can perform well with constructivist principles by offering learners interactive, experiential, and gamified learning lessons (Kingsley & Grabner-Hagen, 2015). For example, Hamari et al. (2016) found that some constructivist aspects of gamified learning, such as manual work and group gameplay, were positively associated with learners' learning capability and better construction of knowledge.

2.2 Self-Determination Theory and Motivation

Learners' autonomy dramatically drives modern teaching-learning. One of the defining motivations for students is their self-determination. According to Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT), an individual's intrinsic motivation emerges if three basic psychological needs are satisfied: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Gamified learning environments often foster these needs through choice-driven activities, progressive challenges, and collaborative tasks. A systematic review by Sailer and Homner (2020) revealed that elements designed to support learners' autonomy in gamification increased intrinsic motivation while providing feedback on their competencies facilitated greater effort. Additionally, van Roy and Zaman (2019) conducted a longitudinal study that underscored that the learners' satisfaction needs were associated with continued participation in gamified learning with strong autonomy support.

2.3 Gamification in Language Learning

Gamification has proven effective in relieving learner anxiety and motivation-related challenges in language learning. Kapp (2012) contended that educational gamification elevates one's motivation and engagement by exploiting the basic human need for competition, success, and socialisation. This is very important for online students who need to stay engaged in the learning process, especially while being physically away from the teachers (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017).

The use of gamification within online language learning also had its achievements. In one study, Yang et al. (2020) researched the effects of a cognitive complexity-based competition game on English vocabulary learning, developing a system with three levels that automatically adjusted difficulty based on 51 high school students' performance. The study revealed that participants using the adaptive game had significantly better learning outcomes compared to those using a traditional game, particularly with low-achieving students benefiting most from this approach. The study highlighted that effective in-class games should balance between cognitive complexity and gaming challenges to create an optimal "flow state" for learners.

Lee and Hammer (2011) claimed that gamification could motivate classroom engagement, give teachers better tools to guide students, and show that education can be joyful. However, educators need to be aware of its challenges as it might consume teacher resources

or teach students to learn only for external rewards. Successful gamification must address real school challenges, focus on high-value areas, be research-based, and avoid potential dangers.

2.4 System Lesson Acquisitions and Gamification: Vocabulary and Grammar

Systems of the English language contain grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and discourse (British Council, n.d.). This study focuses on vocabulary and grammar, particularly controlled-practice exercises, which will lead the learners to the production stage or freer practice in the English language classroom. There are several benefits of using game activities in delivering input and measuring the output of the learners' system, such as lesson acquisition.

Schmitt (2008) conducted multiple research studies on the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching in second language learning. The article also addresses factors that may assist in vocabulary acquisition, such as the quality of input and learner participation. Schmitt (2008) has pointed out that several contexts of target words should be encountered for successful vocabulary learning, with the repetition of various gamified language learning activities. This supports the idea that learners can improve vocabulary through gamification since learners are provided with active and motivating experiences.

Wu and Huang's study (2017) on gamification in vocabulary lessons claimed its efficiency during an experiment conducted with 94 EFL learners. Learners with gamified lessons had better vocabulary retention, greater motivation to learn new vocabulary, and higher self-reported enjoyment. These findings propose that vocabulary teaching can be greatly assisted with gamification, as it is possible to expose learners to high-quality inputs along with their active participation.

Ellis (2006) reviewed the issue of teaching grammar based on second language acquisition by addressing explicit and implicit teaching, input and output, and various methodologies. Ellis (2006) noted that all learners benefit from a blended approach. In terms of grammar, learners are able to notice grammatical forms and structures while explicit instruction is given, and learn them implicitly because of their procedural knowledge. However, both implicit and explicit grammar teaching forms can be utilised through gamified learning by providing explanations, examples, and explicit correction, as well as through contexts that possess grammatical structures used for everyday communication.

The Schmitt (2008) and Ellis (2006) studies have provided evidence for using gamification in teaching system lessons, especially vocabulary and grammar. Thus, the results stated in these studies can be used to gamify language learning by optimising exposure, input, learner participation, and the ratio of explicit and implicit instruction, and all these improve the learning experience and increase the motivation and engagement of students.

2.5 Exploratory Action Research

Exploratory action research has emerged as a powerful tool for teachers to systematically investigate and improve their teaching practices through two cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). Classroom action research is a systematic inquiry made public that involves teachers investigating issues within their classrooms (Dickey, 2024). While traditional academic research often focuses on finding gaps in the literature, teacher-driven classroom research typically starts from practical, specific classroom challenges (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). Thus, the emergence of fresh, exploratory

action research can enable educators to bridge the needs of practical classroom experience, challenges, and success to existing theory-driven academic studies. This study uses an Exploratory Action Research (EAR) approach. It was conducted in two phases, each guided by specific research questions: an exploratory phase followed by an action phase.

The following three questions were investigated in the EAR first cycle.

1. How do learners feel about playing games to practice grammar and vocabulary system lessons?
2. What types of online games motivate the learners (individual, pair, and team)?
3. What is the role of the teacher while playing games?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Context and Course Structure

The study was conducted in an online General English course at International House Yangon-Mandalay. The course followed the Cambridge Empower series (B1 level) curriculum, which allocates approximately 30-40% of class time to system lessons (vocabulary and grammar). In a standard 120-minute class session, approximately 45-50 minutes were dedicated to teaching vocabulary or grammar daily. During the research period, these textbook exercises were replaced with game-based activities. Each game activity lasted approximately 15-20 minutes, replacing the original controlled practice portion of the lesson while keeping the teacher explanations and freer practice components intact.

In the action phase, the same frequency of game implementation was maintained (3 times per week), but with the addition of assigned student roles. The games primarily utilised Wordwall, Kahoot, and Baamboozle. Class sessions maintained their regular structure of warm-up activities, presentation of new language, controlled practice (now implemented as games), and freer practice or production activities.

Since this EAR primarily highlighted the impact of gamified controlled practice activities in the class, all the necessary controlled practice activities needed to be transformed into interactive game activities. Thus, Kahoot, Baamboozle, and Wordwall websites were used to create grammar and vocabulary practices into games that can be performed in groups, pairs, and individually. Most activities from the Cambridge Empower series textbook, Units 3 to 5, were focused on seeing the result of the exploratory phase, also named "First Cycle."

3.2 Transformation of Textbook Exercises into Game Activities

The textbook exercises from the Cambridge Empower series (B1 level) were systematically transformed into interactive game activities. For each unit, textbook exercises were redesigned into controlled-practice game activities. In the first example (3.1), a vocabulary exercise that students were supposed to match clothing items was converted into a Kahoot quiz where students selected the correct answer from multiple choices. The second example (3.2) shows how a reading and vocabulary exercise about travel problems was transformed into a Baamboozle team competition where students competed to identify travel-related vocabulary. The third example (3.3) demonstrates how a grammar exercise on modal verbs (must/have to/can) was redesigned as an interactive Wordwall activity where students moved the characters to match the correct modal verbs in context.

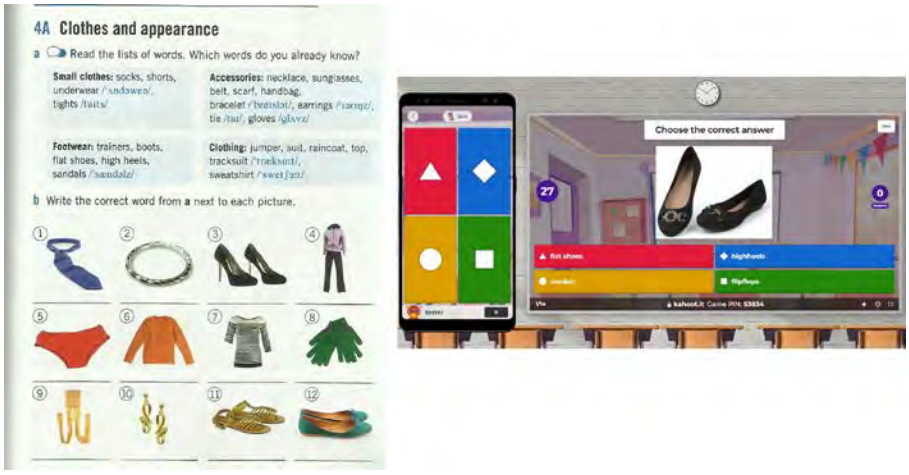

Figure 3.1.
An illustration of how a vocabulary exercise was transformed into a Kahoot activity

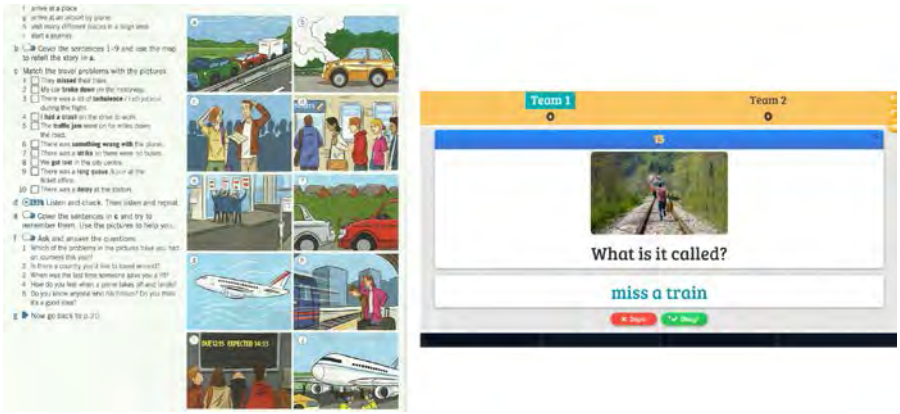

Figure 3.2.
An illustration of how a vocabulary exercise was transformed into a Baamboozle activity

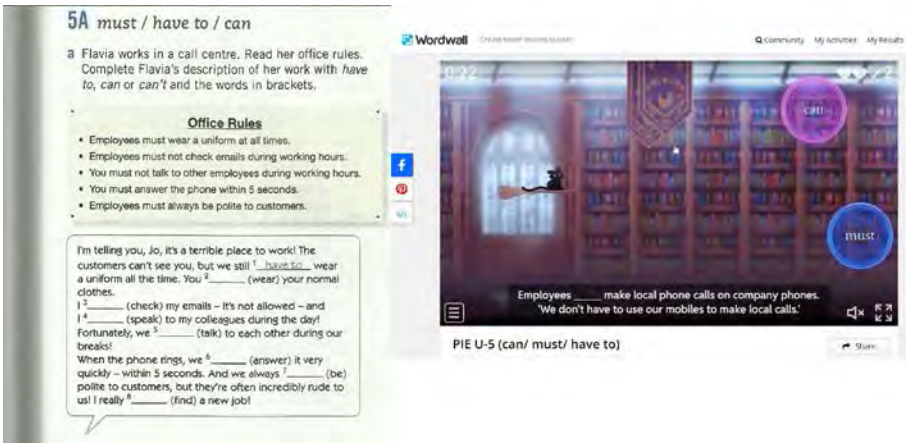

Figure 3.3.
An illustration of how a grammar exercise was transformed into a Wordwall activity

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3.3 First Cycle Process

3.3.1 Data Collection

The data collection tool was a bilingual questionnaire developed in Myanmar and English, which allowed participants to answer the questions comfortably in their preferred language. This questionnaire aimed to collect information from students regarding their experiences with different game platforms, the types of activities they preferred, and the levels to which they were comfortable participating.

Particular participants were selected to investigate further information. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the language the student was most comfortable with and explored the understanding of their motivations, challenges, and suggestions for gamified activities. Seven interview participants were selected based on their interest, participation during the gamified activities, and availability. The interview was conducted in either English or the Myanmar language outside of the class period. Both questionnaires and semi-structured interview questions were developed after careful discussion with two mentors, as the research project period was limited to running a pilot test or cross-checking the validity.

In addition to this, the students were also observed regularly throughout the study period. Observations were documented in the teacher's reflection notes, in which the daily observations were organised week by week. These observations covered the students' behaviours, the level of engagement in the gamified activities, and the interaction patterns within the activities.

3.3.2 Data Analysis Process

The collected data was analysed using qualitative (thematic analysis) and quantitative approaches. The qualitative information was derived from interviews, observations, and reflective journals. Data from questionnaires was quantitatively processed using descriptive statistics to highlight students' participation and preference patterns. This combination of methods created a more holistic approach to understanding how gamification affects student motivation and engagement.

3.3.3 Ethical Considerations

Every participant received written details about the focus of the study. Since all learners were over 18, no additional parental consent was considered. Then, all of their consent was achieved. Information was collected in a manner that had the least or no impact on the normal learning practices. Additionally, the students were informed that the volunteer interviewees might have an additional 10-15 minute section after the class and were interviewed in a one-on-one discussion. To protect students' confidentiality, all information that was collected was anonymised. Furthermore, the research was conducted with the supervision and guidance of the International House Yangon-Mandalay.

4. Results

4.1 Exploratory Phase Findings

The initial investigation unveiled important insights into students' perspectives and preferences towards gamified activities. It was noted that all students like working on both vocabulary and grammar games, with most feeling at ease when playing them. However, every student clearly stated in their interview that vocabulary games facilitated particular aspects of

their learning. There are four benefits they received from playing games in the controlled practice.

1. Visual Learning
2. Engagement & Motivation
3. Memory Techniques
4. Spelling Awareness

The interview data analysis suggests a preference for interactive, visual, and gamified controlled practice for vocabulary learning over traditional exercises. Participant 3 quoted, *"I can learn by telling and listening the answers in the game."* Participant 4 also quoted*, "picture and words together, so that's more memorize* (easier to memorise) *for me.* Finally, Participant 2 expressed their opinion, *"...word practice in the games gives us some awareness to spell them correctly."*(Translated by the researcher). There's also an emphasis on engagement and enjoyment as factors that enhance memory and retention.

Most students revealed information about grammar games during the interview, as follows.

1. Interactive Game-Based Learning
2. Pattern Recognition
3. Word Order and Sentence Structure
4. Contextual Learning
5. Engagement and Accessibility

The result of the interview on gamified grammar activities reveals more comprehensive answers. Participant 1 and 2 stated their opinion, *"Reordering the words to get the correct structure gives us more exposure to the correct use of them in the speaking activities."* (Translated by the researcher). Participant 2 continued, *"extra example sentences in the games make me remember better."* (Translated by the researcher). Participant 7 also supported that idea*, "With the example sentences, it's easy to understand."* Participant 7 also concluded, *"fun and competitive elements of games can keep you motivated to practice more often."*

Thus, "Pattern recognition" emerges as one of the techniques that helps them internalise language patterns. Additionally, word order and sentence structure activities improve their awareness of syntax rules. Contextual learning through example sentences also provides practical demonstrations of grammar in use. Finally, engagement and accessibility feature prominently throughout the responses, with an emphasis on simplicity, clear choices, and enjoyable learning processes.

Table 1.
Students' initial perception towards playing games

Aspect of Game-Based Learning	Mean (out of 5)
Enjoyment of in-class games	5.0
Comfort level while playing	4.3
Helpfulness of vocabulary games	5.0
Helpfulness of grammar games	4.7
Motivation to play after winning	5.0
Motivation to play after losing	4.7

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Finally, students were motivated irrespective of the game achievements, which, for other research on the benefits of gamification, is an important factor to consider regarding why students are engaged in their learning.

The analysis of game format preferences revealed the answer to the second research question. The pie charts represented the percentages of 23 students' preferences towards the games. For vocabulary games, approximately half of the class preferred group competition. In grammar games, preferences between group and pair competition were evenly distributed. Notably, very few students expressed interest in individual competition. During follow-up discussions, students mentioned various reasons for these preferences. Some students highlighted the increased opportunities for vocabulary practice, while others appreciated the higher level of activity involved.

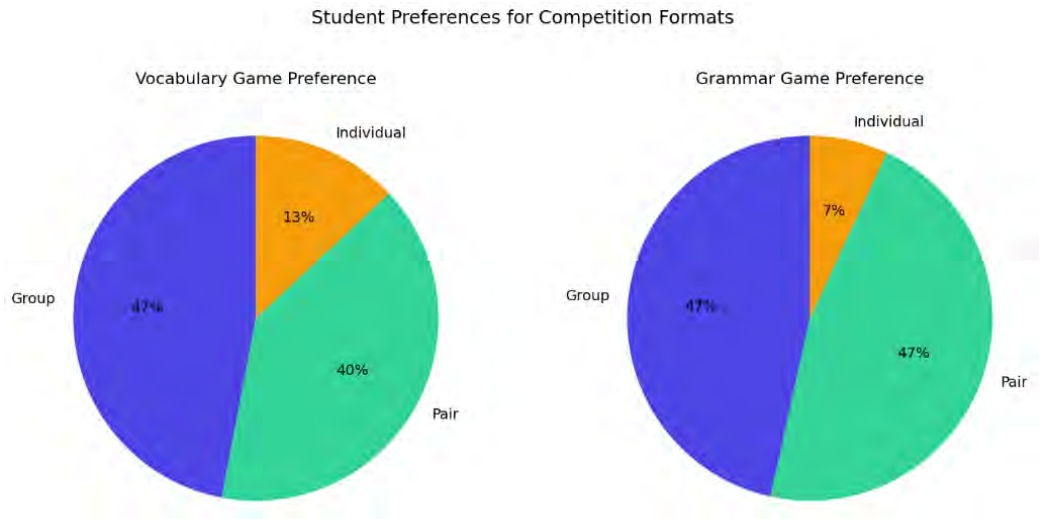

Figure 4.1.
Students' initial preferences towards playing games

The outcomes of the surveys conducted on game format preferences are worth discussing. For vocabulary games, approximately fifty percent of the class respondents selected group competitions. Group and pair competition were equally preferred in grammar games. 7-13% of students appeared to be interested in more individualistic types of competition.

Regarding teacher participation, the students noted overwhelmingly that the instructions given were to the point and easy to understand. Their questionnaire answers showed some appreciation of the different roles, and none of them wished the teacher would take part in the games as a competitor, indicating a preference for a more conventional form of teacher-student relationship in a game situation.

4.2 Second Cycle Implementation

Referring back to the exploratory stage, I planned an implementation stage, focusing on role allocation in practising through games. The plan consisted of students being assigned to three specific roles prior to any group or pair game. These roles included 1) game hosts, who shared their screen and controlled the game; 2) discussion leaders, who negotiated the answers

with other students; and 3) followers, who noted down the answers. This strategy was intended to improve participation and task distribution during the game activities.

Then, action phase research questions were applied to observe the implementation stage and how role shifting influences their preference for the games.

1. What are the students' perceptions of their roles while participating in pair work and group work?
2. How did the students behave while learning in pairs and groups? Were there any differences between the two?
3. Did the students' preferences shift when each was given a role when participating in pair and group work? Why?

The implementation phase lasted around 25 days (more than 3 weeks) and included a systematic rotation so that every student could experience different roles. This strategy was applied to all vocabulary and grammar games from the coursebook, regardless of whether the activities were done in pairs or groups. Special attention was always paid to the technical struggles of some students during the implementation. For example, students using mobile phones were not assigned as hosts because they had limited capabilities.

Finally, the teacher maintained reflective journals throughout the research period, recording the observations and insights about the implementation process. These provided valuable contextual information and helped track the progress of action-stage strategies based on student feedback.

4.2.1 Action Phase Outcomes

Role Assignment Impact. Students enjoyed the role-based approach, as noted from the post-implementation data. 96% of participants enjoyed their assigned roles, whereas 89% noted that participation in activities was easier due to the students' confidence in the structure put into place. The preference for student role assignments was so strong that 92% of students indicated that this method was the most effective for organising group work, which was a systematic approach.

Students demonstrated certain patterns in their preferred styles of learning. For instance, in vocabulary exercises, three-quarters of the participants (73%) said they preferred working in pairs, whereas 68% preferred working in groups during grammar classes. The reasoning behind this is believed to stem from the need for varying types of language learning activities to be designed with an element of collaboration.

The students reported feeling comfortable across the different collaborative formats in equal measure, although they preferred pair work. The mean reported comfort level was 4.2 out of 5 for pair work activities compared to 4.1 out of 5 for group work. These high comfort levels across both formats suggest that the role-based approach successfully created a supportive learning environment regardless of the group size.

Observable Behavioral Changes. Teacher journals and classroom observation showed that students' engagement improved markedly during implementation. Students participated more actively in discussions and were more willing to provide ideas and comments and respond to their peers. Additionally, the quality of interactions among peers improved. Students engaged in more constructive exchanges and collaborative problem-solving. For example, within a group, Student A shared the screen and hosted the game, Student B referred to the textbook to double-check the answers, and Student C led the answer negotiation and discussion. Another significant example is during the Baamboozle game, there was a host and two team members, who accommodated some answer differences and ensured that the other students' spelling and pronunciation were correct. Moreover, task completion rates also improved, indicating students' motivation and commitment to learning activities increased.

The implementation process further revealed significant trends regarding the use of technology. Students with computers and tablets tended to favour hosting roles owing to the ease of screen sharing and navigating through these devices. In comparison, mobile phone users had technical limitations affecting their ability to participate in certain active roles. Nonetheless, students showed great flexibility by employing various techniques for these technical challenges and ensuring they could participate effectively regardless of the type of device used.

5. Discussion

The findings of this action research project reveal several significant insights about gamification's impact on student motivation and engagement in online language classrooms. The results can be analysed through multiple theoretical lenses while considering the practical implications for online language teaching.

5.1 Impact on Student Motivation and Engagement

The results of the exploratory phase showed that the students were comfortable participating in the vocabulary and grammar games. Gamification helps them improve their engagement by using competition and achievement, which aligns with Kapp's (2012) claim that games enhance engagement through natural human inclinations toward competition. Another supporting factor is that all students are motivated regardless of the outcomes of the games, which shows that the level of motivation was high in the first place, even before anything competitive took place.

5.2 Collaborative Learning Preferences

An interesting observation was also noted concerning students' preferences towards collaboration: collaboration in pairs, groups and individually in competitions. During the vocabulary games, around half of the classroom preferred competition in groups, while in the grammar games, there was an even split between group work and pair work. There was a very low preference towards individual competition. This study supports Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that highlights the role of social interaction in cognitive development. These findings indicate that collaborative game formats are useful for peer learning, especially in situations where social interactions are distant, as in some online learning environments.

5.3 Role Assignment and Structured Participation

The action phase findings demonstrated the effectiveness of structured role assignments, as 96% of students expressed satisfaction with their assigned roles. This high satisfaction rate is consistent with Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of "legitimate peripheral participation," which posits that defined roles within a learning community promote more profound engagement. Different language learning tasks may benefit from specific collaborative configurations, as evidenced by the emerging preference patterns: pair work for vocabulary (73%) and group work for grammar (68%).

Regarding the third research question about preference assigned role shifts, the data showed distinct patterns emerging after role implementation. Different language learning tasks appeared to benefit from specific collaborative configurations, as evidenced by the preference patterns: pair work for vocabulary (73%) and group work for grammar (68%). This represents a shift from the exploratory phase, where preferences were more evenly distributed between pair and group formats. The structured roles appeared to clarify which collaboration format was most effective for different language tasks, suggesting that role clarity might influence format preferences.

5.4 Technology Integration and Adaptation

The implementation revealed critical considerations regarding device limitations in online learning. Students using computers and tablets showed strong preferences for hosting roles, while mobile phone users confronted certain technical constraints. However, the observation data demonstrated remarkable student adaptability in developing strategies to overcome these limitations. This finding contributes to our comprehension of how technological factors influence participation patterns in online gamified learning environments.

The observation data demonstrated student adaptability in developing strategies to overcome these limitations. This adaptation showed that students modified their interaction patterns based on their assigned roles. For instance, mobile phone users developed better note-taking skills as followers, while laptop users excelled in screen-sharing and hosting duties.

Moreover, addressing the third research question, these technological considerations partially explain why preferences shifted after role implementation. Students' comfort with certain roles based on their technological capabilities likely influenced their preference for pair or group formats, depending on their convenience.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This EAR provided insight into gamification and its success, which rests not in introducing games to classes but in carefully implementing them in the way the teacher wants the learners to achieve. Most students responded positively to having distinct responsibilities in-game activities, indicating how structure may enhance the gaming experience. Moreover, students exhibited obvious preferences for different collaborative arrangements: pair work emerged as the favoured structure for vocabulary acquisition, while group work was more beneficial for grammatical practice. These diverse preferences demonstrate how careful attention to activity designs can steer online language learning from a passive experience into engaging and collaborative learning. Students changed their roles to overcome their obstacles. These adjustments should accommodate the different technology worlds that learners practise.

Observation notes suggested that students began incorporating vocabulary and structures from game activities into their independent work, indicating potential for transfer of learning. This study has fundamentally changed my approach to online language instruction as a teacher-researcher.

As a teacher-researcher, this study has changed my approach to online classes. In the future, I plan to continue adapting my teaching practices based on these findings. I intend to differentiate my grouping strategies according to the specific language focus, implementing pair work for vocabulary acquisition where students demonstrated higher comfort levels. Additionally, I will be more attentive to technological equity issues and strategies that ensure all students can participate regardless of their individual limitations. By continuing to apply action research principles to my teaching practice, I hope to create increasingly effective and engaging learning environments adapted to my students' specific needs and preferences.

7. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when analysing these results. The relatively short implementation time of three weeks may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research could address these limits by conducting longitudinal studies to investigate long-term effects and the extent of the transfer; these initial observations suggest that well-designed gamification might help bridge the gap between classroom activities and practical language usage.

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Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

The author has no financial or conflicts of interest to declare. I hereby certify that the submission is my own original work.

Appendix

Exploratory stage questionnaire

Part 1: Students' background

1. What devices are you using to attend class?
   - Phone
   - Laptop/PC
   - tablet

2. What games have you played in the class so far?
   - Kahoot
   - Wordwall
   - Bamboozle

Part 2: Students' perception

3. How comfortable are you in general while playing games in class?
   No comfortable 1 2 3 4 5 very comfortable

4. How easy/challenging do you find the games in general?
   Very easy 1 2 3 4 5 very challenging

5. Which games do you like the most for vocabulary exercises?
   - Kahoot
   - Wordwall
   - Bamboozle

6. Which games do you like the most for grammar exercises?
   - Kahoot
   - Wordwall
   - Bamboozle

7. Do you enjoy playing games for vocabulary exercises?
   - Yes
   - No
   - If yes,

8. What mode of competition do you like the most for vocabulary exercises?
   - Individual competition
   - Pair-by-pair competition
   - group competition
   - playing against the teacher

9. Do you enjoy playing games for grammar exercises?
   - Yes
   - No
   - If yes,

10. What mode of competition do you like the most for grammar exercises?
    - Individual competition
    - Pair-by-pair competition
    - group competition
    - playing against the teacher

11. Do you think games help you remember the vocabulary exercises better?
    Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

12. Do you think games help you remember the grammar exercises better?
    Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Agree

13. Do you feel motivated to play next time when you win the game?
    - Yes
    - No
    - It depends / Sometimes (probably)

14. Do you still feel motivated to play when you lose the game next time?
    - Yes
    - No
    - It depends / Sometimes (probably)

15. What would you like your teacher to be/do while playing vocabulary games?
    - Game host (*screen share like Kahoot*)
    - Judge
    - Contestant
    - Observer

16. What would you like your teacher to be/do while playing grammar games?
    - Game host (*screen share like Kahoot*)
    - Judge
    - Contestant
    - Observer

17. How often does your teacher give complete instructions and rules before the games?
    Never 1 2 3 4 5 Always

Interview Questions

18. How does playing games help you learn vocabulary and grammar?

Action stage questionnaire

1. Did you enjoy the roles you were assigned by the teachers in the learning activities?
   - Yes
   - No

If you answered "**Yes**," **why** did you enjoy your role?
If you answered "**No**," **why** didn't you enjoy your role?

2. For vocabulary learning activities, which do you prefer?
   - Pair Work
   - Group Work

Why?

3. For grammar learning activities, which do you prefer?
   - Pair Work
   - Group Work

Why?

4. In pair work activities, which role did you prefer?
- a person who is reading the questions and discussing
- a person who is discussing and writing the answers
- a person who is screensharing and playing

Other:

5. How comfortable did you feel in your assigned role during pair work?

very uncomfortable 1 2 3 4 5 very comfortable

6. Do you think pair work helped you learn the material better?
- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Please explain your reason

7. In group work activities (e.g., Wordwall, Kahoot, Baamboozle), which role did you like the most for **vocabulary** games?
- team leader (who mostly leads the discussion)
- team member (who mostly follows the discussion)
- game host (who mostly shares the screen fpr the games)

8. In group work activities (e.g., Wordwall, Kahoot, Baamboozle), which role did you like the most for **grammar** games?
- team leader (who mostly leads the discussion)
- team member (who mostly follows the discussion)
- game host (who mostly shares the screen for the games)

9. How comfortable did you feel in your assigned role during group work?

very uncomfortable 1 2 3 4 5 very comfortable

10. Do you think group **work helped you learn** the lesson better?
- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Please explain your reason

11. Did you feel more **challenged** when working in:
- Pairs
- Groups
- Equally challenged in both

12. In which setting do you think you learned more?
- Pair work
- Group work
- Both equally

13. Do you feel you learned more about the lesson by having assigned roles in the games? Please explain.

Reflections on the Exploration Phase of an EAR Project on Teaching Speaking

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Abstract

This article offers a reflective account of the exploration phase completed for an Exploratory Action Research project on teaching speaking. It was completed over a 6-month period, with the help of a critical friend. The focus of this article is the thought process that the teacher-researcher went through while engaged in the exploration, as well as the way that collaboration with a critical friend pushed the exploration forward. The recount draws on the teacher's diary kept during the whole process as well as the transcripts of recorded meetings with a critical friend, and seeks to highlight the importance of in-depth exploration for teachers' professional growth.

Keywords: Exploratory Action Research; exploration; classroom-based research; teaching speaking; teacher-researchers; mentoring; teachers' professional development

Introduction

The exploration phase in Exploratory Action Research (EAR) is meant for helping teachers to pinpoint the issue to be solved in later stages of the research process (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). While undoubtedly an important step, in my experience, exploration can be rushed through by teacher-researchers. For example, while mentoring an EAR project by a colleague, I observed how quickly she went from exploring to looking for possible fixes to the issue (Mačėnaitė, 2024). Similarly, Mahorkar (2024) and Raju (2024) describe how they struggled to keep teachers on the exploration track before they would jump to solutions. There are several potential downsides to this. One is that teachers end up feeling frustrated thinking that they have already tried everything before truly considering the possible actions, as was the case with my mentee (Mačėnaitė, 2024). They also might formulate very broad goals for the action and reflection stage, which are difficult to work on in the long run, as in Mahorkar's (2024) account. Finally, Smith and Rebolledo (2018) note that without proper exploration, the actual roots of the problem remain unknown:

> […] sometimes, taking a decision too quickly and without exploring the situation further, can involve incorrect assumptions or simply assumptions which may be based on signs and intuition instead of reasons why this situation is happening, as can be explored through the collection of data. (p. 20)

In such cases, action and reflection end up being applied in a trial and error fashion, solely relying on intuition, and the level of their effectiveness is left to chance.

By extension, I believe there is value in unveiling how busy teacher-researchers actually experience the exploration phase in EAR, what is going through a teacher's mind, what

possible obstacles occur, and how they might be overcome. I hope that this account inspires teachers for in-depth exploration of their practices, and possibly helps teacher-research mentors to guide their mentees during this stage of research as well.

In order to provide all the necessary details for a truthful recounting of my experience, I have divided the article into three parts: first, I will describe my context and the classroom-based research project I engaged in; secondly, I will outline my exploratory journey and the thinking that accompanied it drawing on my diary entries and transcripts of recorded meetings with my critical friend; and, thirdly, I will share my reflections on the completed exploration phase and summarise the elements which supported it in my case.

Part 1. Context and the project

Context

Before diving into the story of my experience it is important to note that I was able to engage in a prolonged, data-driven exploration because my context allowed and facilitated it. I am an English teacher at a private primary school in Vilnius, Lithuania. The classes here are relatively small (10–18 children) and very well-equipped. My pupils are used to completing self-evaluation forms and questionnaires, because the school encourages learners' reflection on their progress as a means to develop independent learners. As a result, collecting data from my learners is usually quick and quite effective.

The teachers' community at the school is collaborative and supportive, albeit very busy with lesson preparations, evaluations, school events, meetings, etc. We are accustomed to being observed; however, it is usually done by the director of quality as opposed to teacher-colleagues and generally perceived as looking for flaws in teachers' work. This is a deeply engrained perception in my context, permeating through the layers of teacher education and their professional development into their practice, in spite of the emphasis in current research that the assessment of teachers' work should avoid being judgemental (Malderez, 2024; Hobson, 2016). Nevertheless, my colleagues and the director of quality do support me in my classroom-based research endeavours and carry out targeted observations for me when they can.

The school encourages teachers to keep learning, although it is mainly associated with attending conferences, workshops, and seminars, while there is little knowledge spread about classroom-based research. Thus, engaging in such projects mostly depends on a teacher's personal motivation and requires dedicating some extra time. However, the comparatively reasonable amount of teaching hours per week, a friendly atmosphere, and the appreciation for teachers' development by the school management are important factors enabling such engagement.

Motivation

At the beginning of the school year 2024–2025, I started feeling like my professional growth has stalled and I was losing the spark in teaching. It was going to be my 4th year at the school and I had already acquired the strategies for classroom management, got used to the way the school is run and began feeling comfortable in that system, built bonds with my learners and colleagues, and had become very familiar with the content of my courses. Naturally, I was not learning as much as I had been during my first years at the school. The most problematic part of it was that despite my best efforts to adapt the lessons to the needs of

each group and to approach the material creatively with my learners, the courses became repetitive for me and I was no longer inspired to deliver them. It seemed like I was hitting the ceiling in my situation and, as a result, plateauing in my profession i.e. teaching was becoming routine (Milstein, 1990). Nevertheless, I was convinced that I could not have already reached the peak in my professional development. Thus, I started looking for professional growth opportunities in order to regain enthusiasm for teaching (Farrell, 2013).

Choosing the Topic

An area of my practice which I decided to focus on was the way I approached teaching speaking. It was first brought to my attention during a DELTA course feedback session, when my tutor noted that I seemed to be very comfortable with grammar and vocabulary topics, while teaching speaking was pushed a little aside. This sharp observation made me admit to myself that I was avoiding speaking activities in my lessons. Such inclination probably stems from my background in linguistics and my belief that focused and structured classes aid learning. In contrast, during speaking tasks it is much more difficult to manage the noise level, to maintain control of my learners' behaviour, their output, and their improvement. There are also indications that language teachers for whom English is an additional language, find teaching grammar to be a safer ground than teaching speaking (Medgyes, 2021; Selvi, 2024), and this could have played a role in my case too. Whatever the reason, the DELTA tutor's feedback was later echoed in conversations with some of my learners, whom I had been teaching for a couple of year – they observed that speaking was what they struggled with the most. As a result, I now had substantial grounds for looking into the way I teach speaking.

The Research Project

I had found classroom-based research to be the most effective way of professional development in the past, which is why I turned to it in this case, too. In order to really delve into my practice, I decided to spend the whole school year on this project. This was also appealing because I was curious about the effect of a long-term research project on my professional development. The overall goal which I had set for myself before starting the project was to transform my practice through thorough exploration and focused actions.

I believe that it is easy to abandon such self-initiated projects unless they have a clear structure and there is a sense of accountability. Therefore, I approached a fellow member of the MenTRnet community (https://mentrnet.net/), Ella, whom I had taken notice of in previous teacher-research conferences, and asked her to be my mentor during this year-long quest. Ella was very kind in accepting and suggested the role of a critical friend instead of a mentor. The suggestion was particularly fitting to my situation, because critical friendship in teacher professional development implies a supportive relationship, without any hint of subordination (Costa, 2008). This meant that I would be the one responsible for the organisation of my research project and would have a space to reflect on my progress through a constructive and thought-provoking dialogue with my critical friend (Kelley et al., 2022).

Ella and I agreed to meet once a month for the whole school year and to keep notes on our meetings through a shared google document. These monthly meetings became the timeline of my project and the document served as my main planning tool, where I shared and developed all of my ideas for research questions, methods, and data analysis, while Ella could leave her comments, if she so wished.

I have chosen the EAR methodology over any other type of Practitioner Research precisely because I granted myself so much time – sufficient to go through each phase of EAR without stress or pressure. I also liked the combination of exploration plus reflection and action, which I intuitively felt are the steps to be taken in order to transform the way I tend to approach teaching speaking. My research design was therefore based on the "staircase" structure of the EAR process as depicted in Smith and Rebolledo (2018, p. 25):

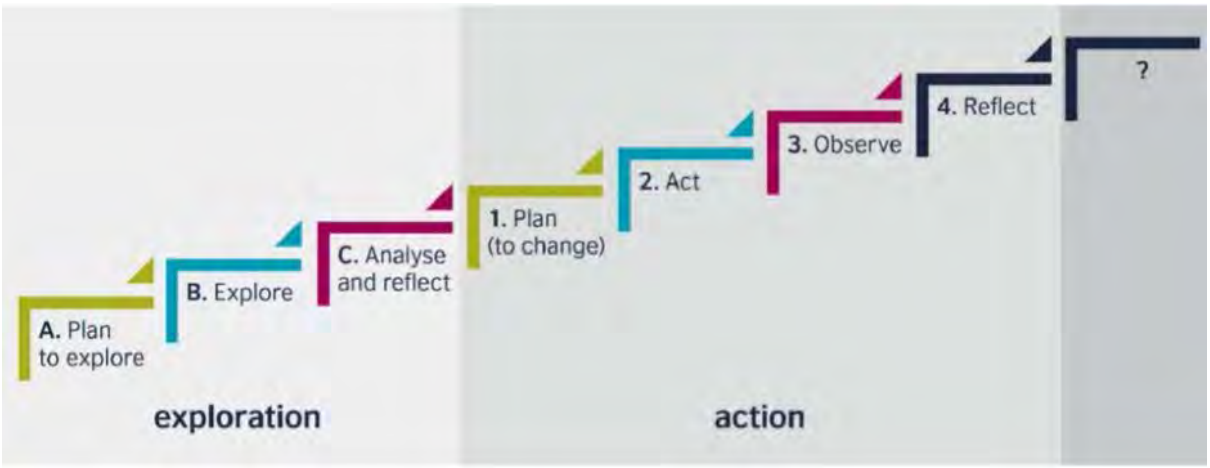

Figure 1.
Steps of Exploratory Action Research

At the moment of writing, I have completed the exploration phase and I am about to embark on the action phase. It took me 6 months (starting in September, 2024, ending in February, 2025), during which I had met with Ella 4 times (in September, October, November, and December 2024), to complete this stage, and to have the results which I could use as a springboard for action and reflection. The following part of this article will be dedicated to the detailed description of the exploration process together with the thinking that accompanied it.

Part 2. Exploration

Initial Research Questions

We kicked the exploration off during our first meeting with Ella, where we discussed the focus of my research, as well as the possible research questions and data collection methods. At this point all I knew was that I wanted to look into the way I teach speaking, because something about it was not working. After a conversation with Ella and a few days of reflections after that, I decided to first look into the techniques that I was already using to teach speaking and the speaking-related areas my learners actually needed to improve. Thus, I ended up with such research questions:

1. What are the areas that my learners need to improve in their speaking?
2. How do I teach speaking (divided into a few more specific questions):
    2.1. What are my go-to strategies for organising speaking activities?
    2.2. How do they go?
    2.3. Are learners engaged / bored?
    2.4. Do they speak to me / to each other?
    2.5. Is a lot of language generated / not so much?
    2.6. In an average lesson, how many speaking opportunities are there for learners?

Data Collection

I used a wide array of data collection tools in this stage. First, I wrote an entry in my reflection journal each time I included a speaking activity into my lessons. These reflections did not have a particular structure and were more like a stream of thoughts. Second, I had a quick evaluation checklist, which I used right after speaking activities to mark the aspects which I felt inhibited my learners' speaking (Appendix 1). Third, I invited observers to my lessons and asked them to take notes on the speaking activities, focusing on: who is speaking, the way the learners participate, and how much language is generated (Appendix 2). Lastly, after the observed speaking activities, I handed out questionnaires to my learners asking about their confidence level when speaking English and the reasons for it, hoping to find their actual areas of struggle when speaking.

Initial Findings

What I ended up with after roughly a month, was a huge amount of data and tentative answers to my research questions. For example, in response to the questionnaire some learners mentioned that they weren't very confident when speaking, because they didn't know or understand some words. Simultaneously, the checklist results revealed that my learners tended to speak Lithuanian or did not find words and ready-made chunks during speaking tasks. Thus, I concluded that my 3rd and 4th graders struggled with speaking because of vocabulary gaps. I had also discovered that speaking tasks in my lessons were teacher-led, since observations, such as the ones cited here were abundant in my diary: "*I hate how the group discussion is always me checking understanding*"; "*Most of the speaking is teacher-led*"; "*It always goes back to me, or mostly goes back to me*." These were then two possible areas to focus on further. We discussed it with my critical friend during our second meeting and by this time I saw possibilities for taking action, saying to Ella: "*now, I've collected a lot of data, <…> and I would like to <…> maybe try something out. So, basically, maybe starting a second phase in this Exploratory Action Research*." (Meeting 2, 17th October, 2024).

After this meeting, I wrote down possible action ideas in the google document: 1) plan speaking activities more purposefully; 2) search for more varied speaking activities where learners could engage with each other; 3) work to provide my learners with expressions to be used in conversations; 4) continue with the data analysis of my diary reflections and the learners' questionnaire replies.

Feeling Lost and Demotivated

However, as the third meeting with Ella rolled in, I started it by saying: "*I have to say that I've done very, very little this month*." (Meeting 3, 26th November, 2024) This was echoed in my diary entry written just before the meeting: "*I'm not doing anything related to this lately.*" In fact, I was really unmotivated to follow through with the action ideas that I had come up with and the sentiment really baffled me: "*Why the lack of engagement on my part?"* – I asked in my diary.

We spent the bulk of the third meeting with my critical friend analysing the situation that I was in. I kept repeating that "*I feel some change [in my practice]*", "*I do feel like I've grown already*", "*I realize something about my practice and it is bettering in some way*", "*I noticed some change in my practice*" (here and below: Meeting 3, 26th November, 2024). While collecting the data over the previous months, as I was very eager, I had tried new activities,

read up on teaching speaking (namely: Murdoch, 2024; Gabbrielli, 2024; Sandstrom, 2024), reflected on the way I teach speaking, and worked to include more interaction patterns into my lessons, so, obviously, my practice had changed. But the lack of motivation to pursue the action and reflection steps came together with this change. I wondered "*did I get comfortable?*" Maybe "*this is enough for me*" and "*the desired results arrived*", due to which I was "*less engaged, less <…> energetic about it <…> less willing to put an effort*" into any actions. After all, the action steps that I had planned, meant that I would need to continuously read and meticulously plan new activities, which I found exhausting, and, as I noted "*I am not doing it*". It wasn't making sense to me, why did I have to continue with such an effort, if I felt like my practice had already changed for the better? "*It seems like work, but I am not sure of why. Why am I doing it? Of course, expanding my repertoire and all, all of that. But it's work, and it's quite good already. And then this is like extra work*."

However, at the same time, I was not content about where I had arrived. This was not how I expected the project to unfold. I told Ella that "*It should be more like a snowball effect*" through which I would "*better maybe one aspect of my teaching*" and thus grow as a teacher. Where I was at now, however, made me feel like the improvement was rather haphazard. I started feeling overwhelmed: "*it's like there's no end <...> I think there's no line where it will be just a perfect lesson*" – I said to my critical friend. This was an exhausting sensation, as if one will never be good enough. I also started doubting all aspects of my project, beginning with my data collection and ending with my initial notion that teaching speaking was something I needed to work on: "*maybe it wasn't a problem to begin with?*". Nevertheless, I had clear reasons why I started the project, which helped to rebut this idea. A more convincing direction of thought was that even though there was more speaking in my lessons now and I was more conscious of how I conduct these activities, I still didn't quite know what in earnest the problem was – why did my learners feel like they weren't improving in their speaking? In other words, what I had done so far was like putting a plaster on the wound without finding the cause for it. I realised that I still didn't know what aspects of my practice I needed to work on and I was asking my critical friend "*what could be next?*"

A Deep Dive

Replying to my question Ella reminded me that I had already done a lot and needed to take the positive outcomes into account. She encouraged me to go back and revisit the data to see if it tells me anything else than what I had already extracted in order to answer my initial research questions. My reply to the suggestion was: "*That's exactly the outsider's point of view that I needed because you know, I'm kind of swimming in [this]*". As I had already spent hours analysing and reflecting on the data, my own approach at that point was that there was nothing more to learn from it. However, in the light of what I knew and how I felt by the third meeting, it made sense to revisit everything I had collected with a fresh pair of eyes. Thus, Ella's supportive and insightful input here motivated me and helped me out of the apparent dead-end.

As a result, I returned to the analysis step of the exploration phase (Figure 1). First, I went through all the learners' responses to the questionnaire, sorting them again, scanning them for key words, and setting up two lists: things that my learners found inhibited their speaking and things that they deemed helpful (Appendix 3). Next, I did the same with my diary. I read through it and listed all the different activities that I had used to teach speaking, including their brief evaluation – was it an effective activity and why / why not? I then collected key words from this evaluation and also ended up with two lists of criteria: what makes a successful and

an unsuccessful speaking activity for me. I was hoping to locate precisely the aspects of my practice I could fix in the action stage.

At this point I experienced an aha! moment, as I realised that I had already had really successful speaking lessons which I wrote about in my diary. For instance, in the middle of September we had a lesson where my learners role-played interviews, which we also filmed. After the lesson I noted in my diary: "*They were very interested and they said many beautiful things. B. said that the lesson was very interesting. They spoke quite a lot*." At the end of September, after a lesson meant for practicing phrases with present participles or infinitives, I wrote: "*This was a good task, they were engaged and spoke a lot.*" Looking at the lists of criteria for successful and unsuccessful activities that I had made and with Ella's supportive comments ringing in my ears, I thought that these instances of good practice are precisely the moments I should look deeper into and learn from (Smith et al., 2021).

Then, as I wrote in my diary, "*instead of asking what is wrong and missing from my class, I thought, but what makes a successful speaking class?*" This led to the formulation of a new research question:

What are the criteria for a successful speaking activity?

The criteria obtained through diary analysis provided the bulk of the answer. I also added the criterion about having enough vocabulary to my list, based on the initial checklist-based evaluation results. Key words from learners' questionnaires shadowed some of my criteria and provided a few more. In this way, I ended up with a set of criteria defining a successful speaking activity for both my learners and me.

Table 1.
Combined criteria related to successful speaking activities

My reflection and checklist evaluations	Learners' questionnaires
1. Learners are engaged in the task	
2. A lot of language generated	
3. Learners speak EN	
4. Learners like / are interested in the content (texts, topics)	Activity is fun
5. Many learners participate	
6. Learners had the language for speaking	Know the language to use
	7. Feel prepared
	8. Collaborate with each other well
	9. Activity and instructions are clear
	10. Complete the activity in time

My next step was to understand what hides behind these criteria – what did I do in my successful lessons to meet them? This led to the following research question:

What are the elements of a successful speaking activity?

To answer it, I converted each criterion into a question, e.g. Why are learners engaged in the task? In some cases, I knew the answer myself, but for most of them I had to scan my diary

entries. I had 16 entries by then, in which I looked for the mention of these criteria and the classroom practices that were attached to it. The thematic analysis revealed a collection of elements, contributing to successful speaking activities in my lessons:

- Interesting topic / input / activity (games / problem solving) / learners can talk about themselves
- It is well planned
- Work in pairs / groups / with friends
- Instructions are clear (clearly explained / evident in the activity what to do)
- Learners know the language to be used / get enough help with the language
- Clear criteria for successful completion
- Example
- Enough time
- Time limit

Deep Exploration Outcomes

At this point, I could not have felt more empowered. The final list of elements emerged from exploring my practice and my learners' experiences, which meant that it was bottom-up and practice-led, reflecting the specific context of our classroom. My lessons have to be useful to my learners first and foremost and I am the person who is the most tuned into the shortcomings of my class. Therefore, having this list and knowing what particular techniques and elements I need to strive to incorporate into my practice in my specific context felt incredibly empowering and truly transformative. This sentiment is reflected in my diary entry, after I had turned the elements into an observation sheet (Appendix 4) and invited the director of quality to my classroom. Comparing the results from this observation and the earlier ones, I noted:

> *".. the list feels right to me. I tested it out, I asked L. to observe my speaking activity using these criteria. And her observation was much more fruitful than the ones I did in the beginning, which I actually ended up not using here because they don't tell me much, except that I speak a lot. They felt off point, I felt like they did not cover the reason or pointed out the main problem of the ineffectiveness of my speaking activities."*

In contrast, this time I felt like the observation results were "*laser sharp*", as I told Ella during our 4th meeting (Meeting 4, 28th December, 2024). While the initial observation results, which I obtained in September, were mostly positive and descriptive, now I knew that the observer will have no other option but to mark the exact elements that my day-to-day speaking activities are missing. For example, one thing that the director of quality pointed out this time, was that there was no active listening task during the speaking activity, meaning that learners had no incentive to listen while the others were speaking and therefore got distracted and bored. I reflected in my diary that "*Obviously, it's a planning issue.*" Thus, I concluded that the list of successful speaking activity elements which I had compiled was to the point: "*I do feel like if my speaking lessons lean on those elements that I listed, they will become better.*"

By the time of writing, I have collected data from 4 observations and I have discovered further elements which I can include in my daily speaking activities. My long-term goal now is to ensure that these elements become a part of my routine, as I believe that in order to transform my practice I need to build new habits.

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Part 3. Final reflections

When I look back on my exploration journey, it seems to have been exhausting but worthwhile. It was by no means a straightforward one – instead it was more like an upward moving cycle, resembling the spiralling process of action research (Burns, 2010). My initial research questions only served me for data collection, and it seemed that I got nowhere by answering them. I believe that having just started the exploration, I was still not in a position to formulate what I needed to look into. I had to go through a lot of data to actually pinpoint the issue. By the 4th meeting with Ella, when I told her about my new research questions, I felt like I had climbed over a high mountain, or have emerged from really deep woods. Even though I was 4 months into my exploration and was again at the place where I had just formulated the research questions, this time I was immensely more informed and more knowledgeable about what I wanted to know and what was happening in my lessons during the speaking activities. This knowing was deeply empowering.

In retrospect, I can also see that there were certain elements which were particularly helpful for me to stay on the process of exploration and to make the most of it:

1. Having time – the fact that I was not restricted by time and could spend as many weeks as I felt fit for exploration was a true blessing, as otherwise it would have been too stressful. Having time for data analysis was also crucial.

2. The critical friend – Ella's presence provided me with a sense of accountability to have something to show for our meetings, and thus to plan my tasks accordingly. In addition, her input, support, and the fact that I could run my ideas past a person, who is knowledgeable about and experienced with classroom-based research and reflection, helped to sustain and advance my exploration.

3. Keeping the reflection diary – the diary proved to be the most useful tool of the ones that I had employed for data collection. I was very content that I kept it diligently throughout the whole exploration and that I did not restrict myself with a particular system of writing as a lot has emerged from the stream of thoughts.

4. Collecting feedback from my learners – it proved to be a valuable addition to my diary reflections. First, it helped to confirm some aspects which I found from my own observations and reflections, i.e., helped triangulate my findings (Burns, 2010). Second, I could add important points to the list of elements based on the learners' answers. As the lessons need to be helpful for the learners, first and foremost, I find that getting their perspective can be incredibly revealing.

Overall, what the experience has taught me was the usefulness of an in-depth exploration before taking action. For one, I learnt to appreciate my good practices and the benefits of looking closely at such instances. In addition, through conversations with my colleagues and a close inspection of the initial data, I could locate aspects of my practice which I initially thought to be irrelevant, or considered to be working well during my lessons. This, in turn, has created ground for a much more targeted problem solving in the later phase of EAR.

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Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.
There is no financial interest to report.
I hereby certify that the submission is my own original work and is not under review at any other publication.

Appendix 1: An extract from the evaluation checklist.

Date	09-17	09-20	09-26	09-30	10-03	10-08	10-08	10-09	10-10	10-14	10-15	10-16	
Grade	IV	IV	III	IV	III	III	III	IV	III	III	III	III	
Didn't have ideas	+												1
Didn't find words				+		+		+	+	+	+		6
Didn't find correct expression		Some	some						+	+	+		5
Lacked grammar (couldn't make a sentence)								+		+	+		3

Appendix 2: Extract from the initial observation.

Brief description of activity	Who is speaking	How are learners participating	Amount of language generated / length of the speaking activity?	My reflection
Lesson introduction	Teacher	Listen	Short, up to 1 min.	
Word revision	Learners, teacher corrects and calls on learners	Raise their hand and wait to be called upon, then say one word each.	Up to 3 min	
Learners talk about the clothes they wear using the lesson vocabulary.	Teacher asks questions, learners answer	Most learners answer yes / no, some say a sentence	Around 5 min.	

Appendix 3: List of elements affecting learners' confidence when speaking positively and negatively, based on key words from their questionnaires.

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
• They know the language (forms / words); • Are prepared to do the task; • Completes in time; • Completes without mistakes (they know the language); • Work well with partners; • It is clear what to do in the activity; • It is fun.	• Lack of time; • Don't understand well what do in the activity; • Need and don't get enough help with the language to be used in the activity; • Class management is off (noisy classroom).

Appendix 4: Extract from the second observation.

A short description of activity	Speaking in a circle with the teacher
Are the kids interested?	Some are interested, others are not
Are there any issues with planning? If so, what?	Some could be writing, noting down what the others are saying (lack of active listening)
Are the kids working in groups / pairs?	+
Are the instructions of the activity clear to the kids?	+
Aren't the kids lacking help with the language?	Teacher helps when kids need it
Are the success criteria for activity completion clear?	+
Was there an example?	+
Did the kids have enough time to successfully complete the activity?	+
Was there a time limit?	
Was the activity successful?	

Enriching Instruction via Sustained Self-Observation

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Abstract

The benefits of recording teacher performance for purposes of reflection and analysis has long been recognized in ELT (see Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Farrell, 2015) and in general education (see Tripp, 2010). Between June 5th to November 22nd 2024, I engaged in self-observation with subsequent reflection and analysis of a blend of audio and video recordings from 15 different lessons. I will discuss the procedures for engaging in self-observation and subsequent reflection, perceived benefits of sustained self-observation, modifications of teaching performance partially triggered by the act of self-observation and the limitations of such an approach. Perceived benefits included greater awareness of multiple aspects of teaching performance, activating and strengthening professional knowledge bases, creating a space for reflection and making implicit theories explicit.

Keywords: *s*elf-observation; reflective practice; recording; teacher development

Introduction

This paper will qualitatively analyze a series of 15 recordings of the author's teaching practice during 2024. The author will list a series of self-perceived benefits derived from engaging in self-observation, provide illustrations of shifts in personal teaching practice which aligned with core professional teaching values espoused by the author and consider more broadly how the sustained practice of self-observation impacted the author's teaching performance. The latter portion of this paper considers the limitations of both this particular study and engaging in sustained forms of self-observation.

I currently work primarily as a "conversational English teacher" at a Foreign Language High School in South Korea. I have held the position of head teacher of Native English teachers at this institution since 2015. This has afforded me a degree of flexibility in designing my curriculum and selecting course materials. Student levels range widely. In any given class, learners range from advanced (due to several years of study abroad) to false beginner. Unfortunately, no precise data was available when I inquired about the range of student proficiencies with my supervisors. Class size ranges between 11-13 students. I am required to teach the exact same 50-minute lesson 10 times, thus once each for my 10 different groups of learners during the academic year. This reality provided me with an incentive to record my lessons. It enabled me to make immediate adjustments to my instructional delivery and teaching materials and subsequently be provided with a forum to check (albeit subjectively) if my alterations were of any use.

Thus, to put it simply, my primary motivation to record my lessons and engage in self-observation was to deliver a "better" lesson that was informed by my previous experience. Stated more formally, I used self-observation to engage in more focused forms of deliberative reflection and technical rationality (Valli, 1997, p. 75). The self-observation recordings essentially served as a form of prompting for both reflection and modification of practice.

Some may ask what does "better" mean? This is a question of values. In brief, my core teaching values include: a) clarity; learners should be able to understand the teacher, expectations should be easy to comprehend; b) minimize non-essential teacher talk; c) provide learners with an incentive to listen when the teacher does in fact need to talk. This could be done with relatively simplistic strategies, such as word-gapping a handout which learners fill in while the teacher lectures, or communicating essential information (such as grading criteria for an assignment, etc.) in the form of a dictation; d) keep learners cognitively, behaviorally and emotionally engaged as much as possible (see Theuma, 2017, p. 181 for further discussion of the varieties of learner engagement). These teacher values likely had a significant influence on what I consciously attended to while engaging in self-observation and any subsequent modifications of my instructional practice. I wish to stress that while these beliefs were likely implicitly held during the period of data collection, I did not explicitly engage in self-observation with a deliberate focus on these core values.

Literature Review

The value of recording, whether via audio or video, one's teaching performance has long been recognized in ELT and more broadly in general education (Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Farrell, 2015; Tripp, 2010). Tripp (2010) performed a meta-analysis in conjunction with a multiple case studies research project focused on a group of seven teachers' experiences with video recording and meeting as a group over a period of several months. The results indicated that viewing and reflecting on their personal videoed teacher performances helped a) focus analysis, b) see their teaching from a new perspective, c) trust the feedback they receive, d) feel accountable to alter their teaching practice, e) remember to put changes into practice and f) notice professional progress (p. 53). Tripp argues that video recording of teacher performance has certain built-in mechanisms which serve to motivate change in a teacher's performance: "teachers continually talked about trusting video analysis feedback more than previous feedback methods they had used." Brinko (1993, 579) reported that feedback is most effective when teachers view the source as credible," and "feedback is more effective when it contains irrefutable evidence" (as cited in Tripp, 2010, p. 97).

Frameworks for Reflection

Emerging from a variety of disciplines, several frameworks for engaging in reflection, which self-observation can help stimulate, have been in circulation since the 1930s. Such frameworks can help a practitioner to devise more systematic and sustainable forms of reflection. Reproduced below are several frameworks which may serve as entry points for more detailed forms of reflection for the interested reader. All frameworks cited below appear in Farrell (2015).

I hesitate to provide any advice or guidance related to using reflective frameworks that exist in the professional literature. This is because I have not implemented any framework precisely in the spirit or method as intended by the initial authors. Nevertheless, I believe it is good to be aware of these frameworks and I leave it up to the reader to customize the frameworks reproduced here to develop a personalized approach. Regarding evidence-based forms of reflective practice, I would emphasize to any readers that it is best to start *anywhere* and to do *anything* and develop from a place where you feel comfortable. There is little need to stress over where to focus attention. Especially in the early stages, it is crucial to just get started. As Gillie Bolton writes: "In reflective practice no detail is too trivial or insignificant to write, think and talk about" (Bolton, 2018, p. 114). Mandated and compelled forms of reflection

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are unlikely to be effective or sustainable. Sometimes these frameworks, which often call for "research", "hypothesis testing", and to "re-theorize" can intimidate the harried and less experienced teaching practitioner. In my experience, doing an imperfect form of sustained reflection is far superior to more rigorous methods which are less likely to be sustained. As Schön emphasized, sometimes we must choose between "rigor or relevance (Schön, p. 42)." I feel Harwood's (2022) reminder about how teachers can adapt materials similarly applies to reflective frameworks: teachers can add, delete, modify, or resequence the frameworks (p. 141).

Table 1.
John Dewey's Model of Reflective Inquiry (1933)

Sequence	Keyword	Further Description
#1	Suggestion	Notice an issue in your classroom that you consider problematic.
#2	Intellectualization	Transform this issue into a problem to be solved.
#3	Guiding Idea	Form a hypothesis as to the root cause of the issue—use it to "guide observation and other operations in the collection of factual material."
#4	Reasoning	Consider possible solutions for the problem.
#5	Hypothesis Testing	"the testing can be by overt action or in thought (imaginative action) …"

Note: All quotes from Farrell, 2015

Table 2.
Zeichner and Liston's 5 Dimensions of Reflection (1996)

Sequence	Keyword	Further Description
#1	Rapid Reaction	"Something happens and a teacher acts instinctively. The teacher is immediate in reflection and action."
#2	Repair	"The teacher pauses for thought about what happened. May try to repair the situation. This is more thoughtful reflection-in-action."
#3	Review	"The teacher takes time out (hours or days) to reassess the situation."
#4	Research	"A teacher researches the situation in all its forms (systematic). This is more systematic and deliberative reflection-on-action."
#5	Re-theorize/ Research	Re-evaluate the situation based on prior experience and research, and consideration of multiple research paradigms. Should be viewed as a long-term process.

Note: All quotes from Farrell, 2015

Table 3.
Korthagen: ALACT (1985)

Sequence	Keyword
#1	Action
#2	Looking Back on Action
#3	Awareness of Essential Aspects
#4	Creating Alternative Methods of Action
#5	Trial

Table 4.
A Simpler Method for Engaging in Reflective Practice (Farrell, 2015)

Sequence	Keyword	Further Description
#1	Problem Identification	"A doubtful situation is understood to be problematic."
#2	Generating Solutions	"Possible solutions are generated."
#3	Testing Solutions	"The refined idea is reached, and the testing of this refined hypothesis takes place; the testing can be by overt action or in thought."
#4	Learning from Reflecting	"The reflective process leads to an enhancement of the teacher's understanding used to give meaning to the professional context in which the problem was identified."

Note: All quotes from Farrell, 2015

Research Questions

1) What were the benefits of engaging in self-observation?
2) Are alterations in teaching performance, triggered in part by self-observation, connected to the self-observing teacher's professional values?
3) How did self-observation through recordings impact my teaching performance?

Methodology

My "methods" were simply to listen to the audio recording and note anything I would like to change. At the start of this exploration into my teaching practice, I did not document the total number of recordings, however, I have engaged in self-observation for at least 15 classes starting on June 5th, 2024 until November 22nd, 2024. I either made changes to existing materials while listening to the audio or immediately after and when appropriate I would make a memo about various behavioral changes I as a teacher hoped to implement in subsequent teaching performances of the same lesson.

Starting on September 3rd, my approach changed and became somewhat more sophisticated. This was facilitated by the President of the Seoul Korea TESOL chapter organizing a 'reflective roundtable' for a future academic conference. I subsequently became the primary organizer of that roundtable session. As I felt I would need to have concrete experiences that I would have to articulately relate, I began taking somewhat detailed notes during and after listening to the audio recordings which I continued to record on an approximately weekly basis. Notes were not compiled in a precise or systematic manner, as I did not enter into this period of self-observation with a specific area of focus. Following my unstructured note-taking during the self-observation, these were typed out in a word processor (Google Drive). Taking a more open-ended approach allowed for flexibility of attending to issues which became salient to myself through the process of engaging in self-observation. Areas of focus ranged from student interaction, problematic utterances, "issues," "solutions" (when applicable!), and "comments." Thus, I compiled somewhat extensive notes for 10 lessons related to self-observations identified in this article. The length of the written reflections ranged from 443 (Sept 10) to 2226 words (Sept 23). In my experience this process of compiling notes, while adding approximately an hour to the process of reflective self-observation per self-observed lesson, nevertheless helped to focus my attention on areas of concern. All recordings

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were audio-only, except for the final recording of the 2024 academic year, which occurred on November 22nd. The process of observing recordings, adjusting materials, and typing out reflective notes rarely took more than two hours per self-observed lesson, and often significantly less time was required.

Additionally, all materials produced for the lessons in which I engaged in self-observation were extensively reviewed. The reasons for doing so were to note emergent patterns (Dick, 2001, p. 3). Also, more precisely, I wished to note what personally innovative instructional strategies that did emerge during the performance of self-observation were actually integrated into subsequent lessons (see Table 6 for a list of instructional shifts that were repeated multiple times in the lessons contained in the data collected for this study).

Notably absent in my methods was the use of collaboration. While the potential benefits of collaboration for self-observation or reflection have been noted (see Godinez Martinez, 2022, 88). I deliberately did not seek any form of collegial input related to self-observation and the data considered in this study. As Godinez Martinez also notes, "disposition/readiness [to engage in reflection], flexibility and openness to collegiality" are prerequisites to derive benefits from teacher reflection. In the absence of such traits, competitiveness and susceptibility to groupthink are among the potential undesirable outcomes (Godinez Martinez, 92-95). Previous attempts initiated by myself in my current workplace to implement a peer observation program were met with what I perceived to be a tepid response. My perceptions were later explicitly confirmed during informal interaction with colleagues. I believe that mandated reflection can lead to counter-productive outcomes. Thus, using my professional judgement, I decided not to engage with immediate colleagues in a structured, semi long-term cycle of self-observation and inquiry.

Table 5.
Recorded lessons: Dates and Themes

#	Date	Lesson Theme
1	June 5	Movie Taglines
2	June 6	Woodstock 1999
3	June 14	Song + Vocabulary-Green Day *When I Come Around*
4	Aug 20	Dilemmas part 1
5	Aug 27	Dilemmas part 2
6	Sept 3	Dilemmas part 4
7	Sept 10	The Physical Message (part of a larger unit on presentation skills)
8	Sept 23	Audience Engagement (part of a larger unit on presentation skills)
9	Sept 26	Script Feedback + Revisions (part of a larger unit on presentation skills)
10	Sept 30	Bill Burr on Steve Jobs (**note**: not a part of the formal curriculum as this lesson occurred the week before midterm exams and teachers were instructed to engage in lighter activities with no connection to assessment)
11	Oct 31	Beatles *Revolution*-Vocabulary Focus
12	Nov 1	Beatles *Revolution*-Culture and Song Background Focus
13	Nov 8	Bob Marley *War*-Vocabulary Focus
14	Nov 21	Bob Marley *War*-Culture and Song Background Focus
15	Nov 22 *	Grand Master Flash and the Furious 5-*The Message*-Vocabulary Focus

*This was the only lesson which was video recorded. All lessons previous to November 22nd indicated here were audio-recorded.

Table 6.
Instructional Shifts Triggered by Self-Observation that Aligned with Core Teaching Values

Personal Teaching Value	Illustration of Enrichments of Teaching Performance for Subsequent Performances of the Same Lesson (Following the Initial Recording)	Date of Recording
Clarity	• Enriching visual cues through a PPT about assessment expectations	Sept 23
	• Simplifying and illustrating, via written input, task expectations for a mini-storytelling task based off of a lesson-relevant picture	Nov 1
	• Adding pictures to visually support a brief teacher anecdote illustrating themes related to the lesson objectives	Nov 1
Minimizing Non-essential Teacher Talk	• Deleting a teacher display question that was likely outside of students' range of awareness (Question: Who else promoted non-violence in 1968? Answer: MLK)	Nov 1
	• Consistently adding visual written support for a) lesson objectives, b) pre-task instructions, c) models ("worked examples") of task performance	Multiple Times
	• Deletion of a statement that created confusion among students (discussion prompt→"What makes you feel close to the edge?" …teacher statement (prior to discussion about personal difficulties): "and I challenge you not to say test")	Nov 22
Providing an Incentive to Listen to Teacher Talk	• Whispering the final part of an interactive lecture related to audience engagement during public speaking→ "call back"	Sept 23
	• Providing absurd suspense: claiming I have a medical condition, later revealed to be amnesia as a ploy to have students retell key ideas related to appropriate posture in public speaking, a form of "control the teacher (Nation & Newton, 2009, p. 108-109)"	Sept 10
Engagement (Emotional, Cognitive, Behavioral)	• Greater incorporation of visual thinking strategies (Donaghy, 2021); cognitive and behavioral engagement	Multiple Times
	• Decision to extend planning time in which learners silently completed a survey with their personal answers prior to engaging in a mingling task; cognitive and behavioral engagement	Oct 31
	• Providing learners with a series of preview questions which included photo illustrations discussed with peers related to instruction related to aspects of bad posture during public speaking; cognitive and behavioral engagement	Sept 10

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Results

Research Question #1: What were the benefits of engaging in self-observation?

The benefits were many and varied. I will provide a brief explanation of the benefits I believe I derived from sustained self-observation and illustrate those benefits when possible or appropriate.

A space and reason for sustained concentration and reflection on a lesson.

By establishing a weekly habit of viewing my performance, I established a space – a set aside block of time each week – to focus on my recent professional experiences. By recording myself, I took my experience and turned it into an artifact. This facilitated analysis and alteration of learning materials. In many respects, observing your own teacher performance is a type of stimulated recall project. While listening to the audio, a multitude of opportunities to enrich my materials became apparent. For instance, since I teach mixed-level classes, I would often try to elicit learner's prior knowledge before providing more detailed instruction when providing learners with topic-related vocabulary. Initially, I simply provided the terms and in pairs had learners either guess or explain what the terms meant. After reflecting, most likely motivated by listening to the audio of my teaching performance, I recognized that little shifts, such as adding guided questions, highlighting prefixes and suffixes on instructional materials (i.e. the PowerPoint), providing pictures, or providing sentences with the keyword embedded in a larger context were able to help elicit responses from learners without me needing to directly explain much of anything to learners.

An incentive to "improve."

I became increasingly more excited about teaching and viewing my recording on a weekly basis. As I attempted to illustrate in the previous example, self-observation either provided me with novel insight or activated prior knowledge which pushed me to try to have the best lesson (note, not curriculum or assessment procedures) I could at that particular time. Tripp (2010) reports similar motivational shifts in her research. Here is one participant from Tripp's research: "Knowing that you're going to be video recorded again, and you have to watch it again, I think it makes me more apt to change" (p. 66). Tripp later comments "Each time teachers recorded a lesson, they wanted to see improvement" (p. 85).

Activation of inert knowledge and strengthening of professional knowledge.

As a part of my professional development mix, I often read professional books. One such book, *The Routledge handbook of materials development for language teachers* included an article by Brian Tomlinson. Tomlinson (2022) emphasized that learners and teachers actively reinterpret materials, often in ways that are different from what the original designers of the materials intended. It was an interesting point, but one that didn't have much immediate relevance to my professional context. However, I appreciated Tomlinson's point more thoroughly after engaging in self-observation of the lesson recorded on September 30th. The lesson made use of a brief video from a well-known American comedian and he finished the short clip with this utterance (in reference to Steve Jobs): "…you'd think I was trashing the President." Later in that lesson, I provided learners with a worksheet making use of that slang term. The gist of the opinion-gap discussion task was: "Does celebrity X deserve to be trashed or not?" The Korean language uses the noun form of "trash" to deliver a harsh insult to another person. When listening to the audio recording of the lesson, I was surprised to discover that several learners were using trash nearly exclusively as a noun (with utterances such as "he is trash"). This is despite the fact that my written materials and aural input for that lesson

exclusively used trash as a verb. Obviously, some degree of L1 interference was at play and made me reflect on the need to be sensitive to how the L1 can influence how learners make use of materials.

As mentioned in the methodology section, starting on the lesson recorded on September 3rd, post self-observation, I would type up reflective notes related to the self-observation experience and include a "comments" section related to various issues I noticed. This was a somewhat deliberate choice. It has long been understood that elaboration promotes "learning" and long-term memory storage (see Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Equally uncontroversial is that connecting new information to prior knowledge helps promote learning (see McTighe & Silver, 2020 for a brief argument and an array of learning activities illustrating the principle). Those two beliefs informed my post-observation written reflections. To be explicit, I would try to connect my more recent experiences embedded in recordings of my teaching performance to prior conceptual knowledge I have accumulated over my career. Additionally, I tried to make similar connections to what I deemed to be relevant personal or professional experiences. I calculated at least 43 explicit connections to my professional knowledge base in my reflective entries, including generally well-known concepts in the field of education, such as referential and display questions, ungermane cognitive load (Clark et al., 2006), planning time (Ellis, 2003, p. 109); principles communicated by well-known ELT presenters, such as Marc Helgesen's principle for delivering quality presentations ("one idea, one slide"; Online Teachers in Japan, 2020) among many others. I also calculated 10 connections I made to personal experiences or non-professional sources, such as how a transition into an activity (returning scripts to students) made use of a rhetorical move from a Winston Churchill speech that a former colleague used to quote around the office where I work ("What I hold in my hands…"). Additionally, I wish to emphasize that all notes were compiled on the day of the audio recording and were not modified subsequently.

Though modestly speculative, it seems a fair argument that written reflection, especially when coupled with self-observation, is highly likely to strengthen pre-existing knowledge bases. As I engaged in written reflection, I literally and demonstrably activated and elaborated on knowledge I was previously acquainted with. Furthermore, I was able to link professional knowledge and experience with personal forms as well. It is not difficult to imagine how such deliberate forms of conscious processing of professional experience and knowledge may result in more integrated and robust forms of understanding of professional concepts and knowledge.

More refined levels of awareness.

Tripp speaks of a saturation point in her multiple case studies. She comments "After repeating the analysis three times with the same codes, the teachers felt they had 'improved enough' and were ready to move to another aspect of their teaching" (2010, p. 83). As mentioned, my process of sustained self-observation was far from rigorous, but a similar "saturation point" manifested itself. I noticed that my awareness and focus would shift. For instance, just focusing on my spoken output, early in the process of listening to audio recordings, I was concerned with my rate of speech and "garbage words." As I continued week in and week out with recording, my attention shifted to concerns such as wondering if it is problematic that I occasionally use reduced forms? Then I began to wonder if I am using vocabulary above many learners' level.

Observing the classroom recordings allowed me to "listen in" to student interaction after the fact (i.e. during the activity of self-observation) in a way that I was unable to during the actual lessons. The process was quite illuminating. For example, it made me more aware of the

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potential pitfalls of relying on peer scaffolding to assist with instruction. During the November 8th recording, prior to a listening task, I had students do a series of inductive activities focused on topic-related vocabulary. One lexical item was "second class citizen." An advanced learner explained to the best of his ability what second class citizen meant to a less proficient learner. In the recording the less proficient learner responded "like lower," to which the more proficient student responded "yes." Reflecting on that interaction, I was left wondering, had the less proficient learner conflated the lexical items lower class and second class? Should I *always* supplement inductive activities with explicit vocabulary instruction to minimize misunderstandings? I started to recognize that I have a bias. I tend to want to nearly eliminate all forms of lecture in front of students, hence a preference, especially as it pertains to lexical instruction, for inductive activities, conducted primarily through peer interaction. Nevertheless, without some form of concrete delivery of information (however condensed) or direct monitoring and intervention by myself in the role of a teacher, learner misunderstandings may develop and persist.

Making implicit theories explicit.

Meade and Meriman (1992) state "the process [of using video as a stimulant for reflection] helped make the teachers' implicit theories about teaching explicit" (as cited in Tripp, p. 36). Observing myself, I gained a deeper appreciation for the rationale I used when modifying my materials. I provide a simple illustration in the next paragraph based on the November 1st recording.

Without getting too deep into the context, learners during this section of the lesson were exposed to different viewpoints in left-wing politics in America in the late 1960s. The reading text which students engaged with had the well-known quote from the Beatles' song "Revolution": "If you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao, you ain't gonna make it with anyone anyhow." After students finished the reading I tried to convey verbally how shocking it was to "normal" Americans to see people in New York City walking around carrying a banner with Mao Zedong. I perceived many learners to have a puzzled look on their faces while I verbally shared this short anecdote. While listening to the audio recording, it was obvious to me that the materials should have included an image of what I was trying to convey. Subsequently, I added an image to my PowerPoint of people in New York City carrying a series of large pictures of "Chairman Mao." When I showed that image in subsequent performances of this lesson, many learners let out a slight gasp of surprise. At that moment I believe I had both emotionally engaged (Theuma, 2017) learners in a way that my exclusively verbal anecdote had failed to and also made the content of the lesson clearer. Though these details seem minor, especially in a conversational English class, it is important to remember that these shifts I have attempted to explain here are informed by principles and guidelines circulating in the educational literature. For example, in this "Chairman Mao" anecdote my change in materials was informed by an awareness that we are a visual species. As Theuma (2017, p. 181) states: "70% of the sensory receptors in the body are found in the eye."

Research Question #2: Are alterations in teaching performance, triggered in part by self-observation, connected to the self-observing teacher's professional values?

This question requires interpretation. Ultimately, no causality between self-observation and modifications in practice can be definitively established. Nevertheless, through analyzing journal entries and modified materials I feel it is justified to claim that many of the instructional shifts that I felt compelled to make in subsequent performances of identical lessons related to

the recordings under consideration in this study were heavily influenced by my espoused values (Bolton, 2014, p. 29).

One shift related to the aforementioned espoused professional value of clarity is more consistent use of providing written, visual supports when delivering instructions and clarifying task expectations. Previously, I would often orally deliver instructions. Given the range of listening proficiency among my learners, listening to audio recordings of my teaching performance made me sensitive to the drawbacks of that pedagogical move. Namely, I would often repeat myself to ensure learners understood (this was true even when coupled with comprehension-checking questions) and less proficient students would often seek clarification from their peers about task expectations. Through the process of performing consistent self-observation, I began to become motivated to consistently provide written instructions to learners, often on a Powerpoint slide (see Figure 1 for an example taken from the Nov 22 recorded class), as well as a written worked example illustrating how I expected learners to perform the task (see Figure 2 for an example taken from the Nov 21 class). These were not wholly absent previously in my teaching, but the experience of listening to audio recordings created a felt need to consistently supplement the delivery of instructions and communicate task expectations with written and visual supports.

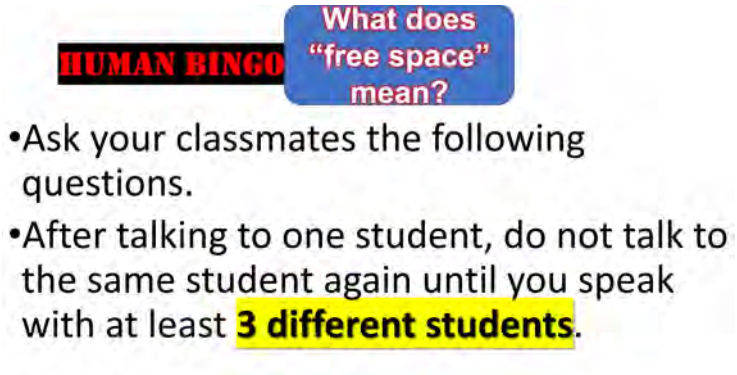

Figure 1.
Visual support to more efficiently deliver instructions and task expectations

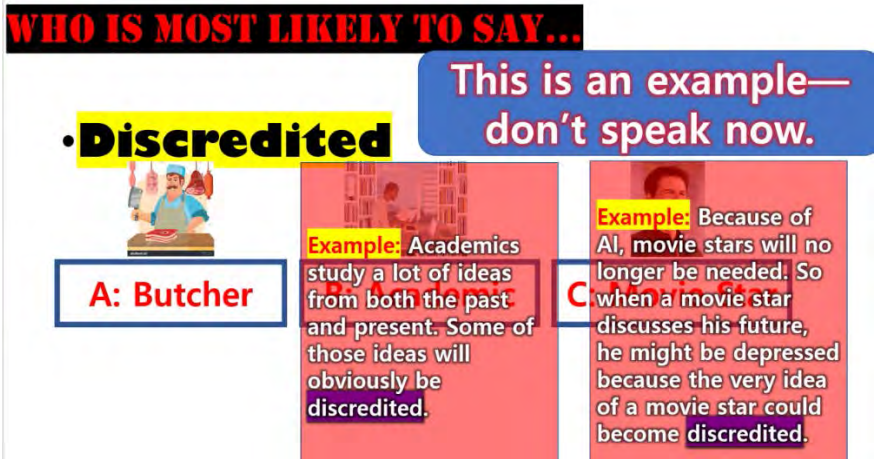

Figure 2.
Illustration of a "worked example"

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I, at times, removed non-essential teacher talk for subsequent performances of the same lesson. For instance, in the recording of the November 1st lesson I asked students the display question "who else promoted non-violence in 1968 (the lesson was focused on the Beatles' song *Revolution*)?" Only one student was able to provide the answer I intended (Martin Luther King Jr.). Significantly, the one student who was able to answer the question had spent considerable time outside of South Korea. I decided it was confusing to students (related to the espoused value of clarity) and would reduce their speaking time (related to the espoused value of minimizing non-essential teacher talk) for me to repeat that question in subsequent performances. Table 6 provides additional illustrations of instructional shifts triggered (partially) by self-observation which aligned with core teaching values.

Research Question #3: How did self-observation through recordings impact my teaching performance?

Recording lessons and engaging in self-observation had a variety of impacts on my teaching performance. Some of the most salient include an increased use of visual elements, more productive methods to get students to engage in planning time (Ellis, 2003, p. 109), clearer use of language, and a greater variety of instructional strategies, especially related to comprehension checking.

Greater use of visual elements.

Previously in this article, I have alluded to greater use of visual scaffolding to deliver instruction, communicate expectations of task performance, and promote inferring of meaning of recently introduced vocabulary items. In addition to those instructional shifts, I began to incorporate questions that required students to analyze visual imagery and draw their own interpretations (see Figure 3 taken from a modified lesson based on the June 10th recording) related to the image. I made deliberate use of what Clark and Lyons refer to as "signals" in images (Clark & Lyons, 2004, p. 67) to draw student attention to features of the image under consideration. For example, in a lesson modified from the June 10th recording, I added signals to the image (see Figure 4 taken from a lesson modified based on the June 10th recording) to direct student attention. In the initial recording of that lesson, the signals were absent, which necessitated additional oral teacher explanation. Such additional explanation is problematic as it a) increases teacher talk time and b) may not be comprehended by lower proficiency students. Following self-observation, I often added visuals to PowerPoints to further scaffold teacher oral input to aid student comprehension. This is illustrated in Figure 5, in a slide taken from a modified lesson based on the September 3rd recording.

Figure 3.
Increased use of imagery coupled with questions to sustain student engagement.

Figure 4.
Use of signals to reduce non-essential teacher talk and heighten clarity of input for learners with weaker listening proficiencies.

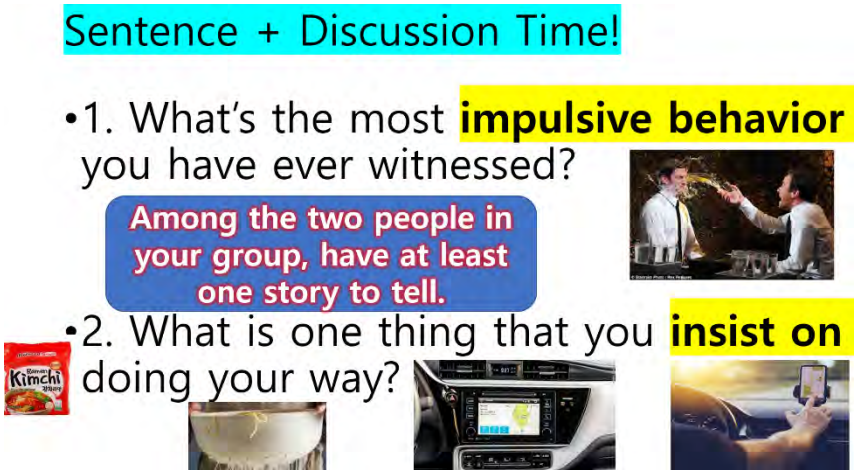

Figure 5.
Increased use of visuals motivated by self-observation to aid student comprehension of teacher oral input.

More productive methods to get students to engage in planning time.

There is robust support for the benefits of having students engage in planning time prior to task performance (Ellis, 2003, p. 109). Previously, often before a discussion prompt, such as an opinion gap, I would often instruct students to brainstorm or free write on the topic for a set number of minutes (often 2 or 3 minutes). I would model expectations. With my group of high school learners, I often had the feeling that my learners were not engaging in planning time in a wholehearted manner. Nevertheless, I persisted with the strategy, believing that output will be enhanced if learners have some additional time to consider the topic prior to oral interaction regardless of their behavior during the designated planning time. In part due to greater incorporation of visual thinking strategies (Donaghy, 2021) and reflection triggered by self-observation, I began to appreciate that learners in my professional context are more productive during planning time when precise targets of performance are communicated in advance. On the November 21st lesson, rather than having students choose between freewriting or brainstorming in advance of a discussion, I specified that learners need to write three sentences

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both describing the image and explaining their feelings in relation to the image (see Figure 6 for an image taken from the November 21st lesson materials). I soon came to believe that precise guidelines should accompany most, if not all, forms of planning time I instruct learners to engage in.

Figure 6.
Self-observation helped motivate a shift to providing learners with more precise guidelines when engaging in planning time

Clearer language delivered to students.

One instance is from the lesson modified from the September 30th recording. In the recorded lesson I gave learners in pairs a discussion prompt related to a controversial series of Apple advertisements from the late 1990s. My initial prompt was "does this advertisement offend you?" Listening to the recordings I was disappointed with student output. Learners would often answer "no." They found it difficult to justify their answers. Thus, I decided to change the prompt to "Is this poster appropriate or inappropriate?" Generally, students responded that they considered the advertisements inappropriate and in my opinion were able to provide a partial justification for their opinions (I do not have recordings to provide data on this claim unfortunately).

Greater variety of instructional strategies, especially for comprehension checking.

I frequently make use of pyramid procedures to check learner comprehension. Pyramid procedures refers to the process of having learners consider their response to a teacher prompt alone, then in a small group setting, and finally in a whole class setting (Nation & Newton, 2009, p. 124). One unfortunate exception is at the very beginning of a lesson. At that time, perhaps due to a desire to quickly move beyond prior content, I have tended to often ask review questions to the whole class and let volunteers answer. On the September 3rd lesson, I observed that only the higher level students were volunteering answers during the opening segment of the lesson. This outcome seems equal parts predictable and undesirable in hindsight. However, it serves as a reminder of the need for principled strategies at all stages of a lesson. I also recognized that my use of whole class questioning and instructional strategies most typically did not engage the entire class. Thus, during many of my whole class segments of instruction many students were, at least for brief stretches of time, not behaviorally engaged. I attempted to remedy this perceived problem (i.e. limited student engagement during whole class segments of instruction) with a variety of instructional moves. These included use of hold-up cards, one word summary (mediated with individual student mini-whiteboards to allow for simultaneous engagement by all learning dyads; see Himmele & Himmele, 2017, p. 176) and kinesthetic approaches (see Kuczala & Lengel, 2017). Related to kinesthetic approaches, whereas previously I may have overused display questions at the start of a lesson, I began to deliver

statements to students, such as I did in the lesson recorded on the November 21st. In pairs, students would stand up and signal their view on a specified statement (i.e. true or false).

Discussion

Self-observation triggered a desire to modify my lesson materials. What consistently impressed me about the process of self-observation was the tendency to either "discover" personally novel teaching strategies, such as the shift in how I implemented planning time following the November 21st recording; or a strong desire to enrich my materials (such as a greater use of visual elements to direct attention or to clarify expectations). Awareness of the principles and techniques that informed many of the modifications to my teaching performance I made during this period of self-observation were already personally known prior to engaging in sustained self-observation. I believe I did engage in wholehearted lesson planning before initially teaching the lessons under consideration in this study. Nevertheless, despite possessing a thorough knowledge base and exhibiting sincere effort, I was unable to envision these enrichments prior to engaging in self-observation. In that sense, performing the act of self-observation itself served as a catalyst for inspiration to enhance the lessons I delivered. Nevertheless, despite my previous post-lesson reflections, I still was not able to perceive during lesson planning the value of adding many of the enrichments that I ultimately did add post self-observation.

What might account for this heightened appreciation of instructional possibilities? I can only offer speculations. It is well-understood that humans seek to find a justification for personal investment of resources. This can have harmful consequences, as illustrated in the well-known psychological phenomenon of the cost-sunk fallacy. However, it can also motivate a teacher who engages in self-observation. Did the fact that I chose to invest approximately 1-2 hours weekly to engage in deliberate forms of self-observation and reflection compel me to find a "payoff for my investment" in the form of modified and what I believe to have been improved teaching performance?

Additionally, self-observation is performed in a manner which is inherently less cognitively demanding than the actual delivery of teaching performance. Self-observation does not require monitoring the behavior and performance of many students. It doesn't require the online processing of formulating utterances intended for public consumption. Nor does it require the prioritizing that is essential when classroom time is limited. This can allow for fuller concentration on one's teaching performance while engaging in self-observation and the appreciation for opportunities that were not fully perceived either while lesson planning or during actual teaching performance.

Furthermore, self-perceived mistakes are documented (in this study, examples include the use of questions that are excessively difficult for students, such as a display question I asked related to Martin Luther King Jr. in the November 1st recorded lesson and the initial habit of orally delivering instructions prior to a task). When a self-perceived mistake occurs, yet is not documented, it is easy to forget, distort or minimize the magnitude of the issue. However, when the mistake is documented, it becomes easier to analyze, consider alternatives and hence implement modifications in future teaching performances.

Limitations

I have engaged in limited forms of sustained self-observation (up to six lessons over the course of one semester, see Miller, 2016) nearly a decade ago and intermittently since then. While recognizing the utility of the exercise at the time, I was not as intensely impressed by the experience compared to my self-observation practices in 2024. What changed? Likely the accumulation of a large amount of experience and professional knowledge. Thus, I am left with the suspicion that reflective practice in any form, while useful for all wholehearted, open-minded and responsible practitioners (Dewey, 1933, as quoted in Farrell, 2015, p. 13) is of greater benefit for those who are both more informed and experienced.

Future studies involving self-observation could incorporate input and insight from interested colleagues. I previously stated the reasons for not involving immediate colleagues. However, through professional organizations, such as Korea TESOL in my local context and their affiliated special interest groups (SIG), most notably the Reflective Practice SIG, there is the possibility of finding a community willingly interested in engaging in community-based forms of self-observation. On the surface, the potential benefits are numerous, including access to different perspectives, a limiting influence concerning personal biases and general communal support. However, this writer cautions those interested in pursuing a community-based form of self-observation to try to implement Gebhard's advice: "follow agreed on rules that aim at nonjudgmental and non-prescriptive discussion (Gebhard, 2005, p. 12).

Many of the alterations to practice identified in the present study center around modification of the instructional materials or methods to clarify expectations to students. However, important dimensions of instruction were not considered. For instance, methods for delivering oral corrective feedback (see Ellis et al., 2006) were not considered in this study. Likewise, during-class teacher intervention strategies concerning substandard learner performance and learner misunderstanding of expectations were not considered in the present study. Future inquiry cycles making use of self-observation could seek to observe and collect data on those dimensions of practice using a tally count method (Farrell, 2015). Future inquiry cycles involving self-observation could make use of an evaluative checklist, either constructed alone or as part of a collaborative team, as suggested by Godinez Martinez (2022, 94).

Much of the reflection considered during the present study is focused on areas of practical and technical reflection (see Butun Ikwuegbu & Harris, 2024). Emancipatory (ibid) or critical reflection are absent. This follows a familiar pattern in the literature, in which the critical dimension is considered with much less frequency (Anani Sarab & Mardian, 2023). Future inquiry cycles utilizing self-observation could seek to explore possibilities of influencing areas that go beyond mere instructional delivery occurring during class time. Such possibilities include the contemplation of more suitable content for the learners, principled modification of course objectives and selection of tasks and activities.

Self-observation, while undeniably illuminating for dimensions of classroom management and the communication of expectations to learners, has a restricted utility. Recordings of individual lessons have, almost by definition, a narrower focus than the goals for a course curriculum. Recordings can provide excellent feedback on the performance of a teacher in delivering instruction, monitoring aspects of student performance, and providing learners with opportunities for engaging instruction and activities during class. However, as Wiggins and McTighe (2005) artfully describe in *Understanding by Design*, effective teachers competently address three overarching features of instruction. First, competent teachers are

capable of establishing suitable performance or understanding goals. Secondly, they are able to devise valid assessments. These two features subsequently serve to structure the third aspect of teaching, classroom activity. Thus, in Wiggins and McTighe's framework, classroom instruction is the final component of successful teaching. A teacher can masterfully perform the final component and still have grave deficiencies related to the first two items in course design. In that sense, an excessive focus on recordings of teacher performance at the level of the individual lesson may take away from a teacher's ability to more soberly reflect on the adequacy of course objectives and assessment choices.

The generalizability of the claimed benefits pertaining to self-observation in this study are quite limited. As an experienced educator with over a decade of experience in the same institution, I possess a certain degree of social capital and trust from my supervisors. Thus, modification of materials or even modification of the curriculum, if communicated prior to the start of a semester, has rarely been a problem for myself. These factors contributed (and still contribute) to a greater sense of teacher agency (Priestley, et al., 2023) for myself. Additionally, during the period of data collection, I only had to teach two different lessons per week (excluding afterschool classes). That afforded considerable time for reflection and lesson preparation. Teachers with a heavier "prep load" may find it challenging to reflect after engaging in self-observation and to devote time to modifying materials. Butun Ikwuegbu and Harris (2024) argue that heavy workloads can negatively impact teacher agency. On a somewhat related note, Anani Sarab and Mardian (2023) argue that school climate can influence a teacher's ability to reflect.

Conclusion

I have attempted to relate my experiences related to self-observation of my teaching performance for 15 lessons recorded between June 5th through November 22nd, 2024. Sustained self-observation served to heighten awareness of self-perceived deficiencies and activated prior knowledge which ultimately motivated me to make a wide array of individually minor, but overall substantial changes in my teaching. I found the process extremely invigorating. Schön's words quoted below from *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) resonated deeply with me as I engaged in sustained and more evidence-based forms of reflection. Thus, I close with his words. I hope those unacquainted with sustained evidence-based forms of reflection may begin to appreciate the promise of continual forms of self-observation:

> When practice is a repetitive administration of techniques to the same kinds of problems, the practitioner may look to leisure as a source of relief, or to early retirement; but when he functions as a researcher-in-practice, the practice itself is a source of renewal. The recognition of error, with its resulting uncertainty, can become a source of discovery rather than an occasion for self-defense. (p. 299)

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Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Exploring Reluctance Towards Oral Presentations: An EAR Study of Nepali Secondary Students

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Abstract

This Exploratory Action Research (EAR) project investigated the issue of why students at a Nepali secondary school were reluctant to give oral presentations in class. The project was carried out at a government-run school involving 42 secondary school (Class 9) students aged 15-16. The intervention involved several stages of exploration and action. Data were collected through a survey questionnaire, focus group discussions, peer observation and the teacher's reflective diary. The exploratory stage revealed that the majority of students were both confused about how a good presentation could be given, and felt anxious about speaking in class. In the action phase, a number of interventions were carried out to improve the quality of the presentations and reduce anxiety levels. Help was provided with content and vocabulary, and useful tips to enhance the effectiveness of oral presentations were supplied. Even though initially the actions carried out by the teacher-researcher did not seem to achieve perceivable results, further help with setting SMART goals, rehearsals in pairs and groups and the friendly atmosphere created in class eventually led to a breakthrough. The EAR project described underlines the importance of flexibility in approaching classroom issues. It also highlights the realization that teachers bear responsibility for the performance of their students when they aim at improving their students' presentation skills, which are deemed essential components for success in students' professional lives and their advancement in the 21st century.

Keywords: oral presentations; public speaking anxiety; low confidence; presentation skills; peer feedback

Introduction and Context

I teach secondary school students aged 15-16 years studying at Gandaki Boarding School. The school is situated in the Pokhara Metropolitan City of Gandaki province in Nepal and offers primary and secondary education to students of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds between the ages of 9 and 18. Apart from the differences in their socioeconomic status, the students also come from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The languages used include Teli, Maithili, Newar, Gurung, but there are many others that are also spoken in the students' own linguistic communities. However, the school offers education in two languages only (English and Nepali) as the medium of instruction. Nepali is the official language of Nepal written in the Devanagari script. English is not officially recognized but is still considered a widely-used dominant language. This implies that my students usually speak at least three languages: their home language, Nepali as the official language of the country, and English for educational and communication purposes.

The school is run under an education trust managed by the Government of Nepal and offers scholarships to underprivileged students based on a merit exam. It collects nominal fees from the day scholars and boarding scholars, who are also selected on a competitive, merit-based exam. Gandaki has a deep-rooted legacy of functioning as an autonomous educational entity and its work is well-regarded nationwide. The school has played a leading role in the Pokhara valley with its outstanding contribution to educating competent and accomplished students. Many Gandakians are accepted to top universities and educational institutions both at national and international level.

My Professional Background and Immediate Context

I have been working at Gandaki Boarding School for over ten years, teaching diverse groups of students, adapting my methods to meet varied learning needs and styles. Since I am an early career researcher, I actively engage in research endeavors including Action Research (AR) projects that focus on improving instructional practices, and following that, assessing their impact on student engagement. I am passionate about discovering new horizons in teaching and learning. I believe in the power of collaboration, often working with colleagues to design and implement evidence-based interventions for improving my performance and that of my students. I am keenly interested in professional development, regularly attending workshops to stay abreast of the latest educational research and trends. My involvement in many professional organizations and online AR groups has given me insights into how to explore classroom issues and focus on prevailing challenges.

Despite the growing need for the inclusion of presentations in teaching-learning activities in general (Thanachitditsaya et al., 2023), in my immediate context of working with Class 9, I could see how my students' interest was waning. I have taught this course for many years, and I often had the impression that many students were uninterested in giving presentation. So, while the issue persisted for some years, the class that I was teaching in 2023 (Class 9 at the time) appeared to be even less interested. I decided to start observing and documenting what I was experiencing more systematically in order to find some solutions to the issue.

The Challenge I Faced

In my class, I found that my students were showing very little interest in presentations, even though these are required to be set for students as part of the internal assessment system and are also perceived as a student-centered activity. The purpose of setting oral presentation tasks is to enhance both language production and performance while also allowing for some level of creativity. However, my students appeared to have lost interest in making presentations and often resorted to feeble explanations as to why they felt they could not perform them. They came up with unconvincing excuses, or wanted to get their presentations over with as quickly as possible. Instead of speaking freely, they read the text without any sign of engagement or interactions with the audience. It seemed to me that they perceived presentations as a burden, and no wonder the students watching these presentations also became distracted and disengaged.

In Nepal, the academic year is divided into three semesters. In the second semester of the academic year in 2023 (July/August/September), I found that the percentage rate of students who seemed to be engaged in presentations and carried them out with some effectiveness had dropped to around 40%. This percentage rate is based on my daily records and the entries in my reflective journal. I found that there were only 16-17 students who displayed genuine

interest in giving presentations. Since I believe that giving successful presentations is an important life skill that would be necessary for success beyond the school's walls, I decided that it was time to explore the issue. My aim was to boost my students' confidence and improve their speaking skills as well. I decided to conduct an EAR project in the third term of the school year (from October to December 2023). During the preparatory period, I also made an attempt to consult some of the relevant research studies related to the issue I was going to explore.

Literature Review

Teaching is a multidimensional process which has undergone profound modality changes in recent years. With the advent of technology and the paradigm shift in education, there have been changes in teaching methods, too. These days student-centered methods are spreading as there is a need to prepare learners for a competitive world by helping them acquire 21st-century skills (Suryawanshi et al., 2023), such as problem-solving and communication skills (Rao, 2019; Zaitseva, 2020), which leads us to why presentation skills have acquired such prominence across education systems all over the world in a consistent way (Ekoc, 2020; Zitouni, 2013).

Le Hoai (2021) is only one of the authors who highlight the importance of students' oral presentations because accomplishing them successfully is perceived as a useful life skill. For this very reason, they need to be integrated into classroom activities and become part of the internal assessment system. Scholars recognize the importance of classroom oral presentations (Barrett et al., 2021). Ding et al., (2021) underline that oral presentations are meant to prepare students of all classes, especially secondary level 9-12 for every stage of life, therefore, they should be included in teaching-learning activities. Stressing the usefulness of oral presentations, Salem (2019) states that it contributes to students' language improvement as well as other skills, such as proper communication style, clarity of voice in delivery and applying the right gestures. Likewise, Barrett et al. (2021) stress the role of oral presentations in preparing students for problem-solving, decision-making, and developing qualities that the 21st century requires of them.

Accordingly, the education policy of Nepal emphasizes making use of student-centered methods of teaching (Poudel & Choi, 2022), such as setting presentation tasks to prepare learners for lifelong learning (MOEST, Education Policy of Nepal, 2019). Nevertheless, studies carried out recently, for example, by Flick et al. (2023) found that students often struggle with giving presentations, even though they are expected to accomplish this type of activity on a regular basis. From the students' perspective, giving presentations can lead to a heightened level of anxiety (Bodie, 2010; Fadlan, 2020) or stage fright (Bippus & Daly, 1999; Egea Galera, 2024). The fear of presenting or speaking in public is a well-known phenomenon and is often referred to as Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD). It hinders speaking in front of an audience and impedes full interaction among students (Grieve et al., 2021). Hussein (2021) stresses the challenges and high-levels of anxiety brought about by oral presentations. Rahman and Pane (2023) also studied the challenges students face when needing to give presentations. They found that students are usually anxious about giving presentations and feel that they lack the confidence needed to present in front of the whole class (or a larger audience).

However, I was keen on looking at other factors that might have an effect on how secondary students perform when giving presentations. Is it just anxiety and lack of confidence or are there other reasons that students are ready to identify? I was hoping that pinpointing and

dealing with the issues might lead to solutions in my own context and could provide insights for language teachers and educators in other secondary-school institutions as well.

Initial Exploration

Classroom Observation

Dikilitaş and Comoglu (2022) argue that in the case of EAR projects, beside the perspectives of other stakeholders (students, parents, school management, etc.) that of the teacher constitutes a unique set of data. For this reason, I was keen on observing my students and gathering information related to how I thought they performed when giving presentations. Once again, I could see that they were not able to make their presentations interactive, failed to make proper eye contact, and were found reading the text prepared rather than speaking freely to deliver the content. Most of the presentations were poorly organized and the students looked nervous, stumbling over words and sometimes forgetting to deliver key information. I wondered if the reason was that they did not like the *models* of presentation that they were given beforehand.

The structure of presentations that they were supplied with was icebreaking, greetings, opening the floor, free content delivery, and the use of checklists of the content or the books they had consulted, if required. However, the presentations did not meet the requirements, so it is perhaps no wonder that the rest of the students were not listening and could not provide feedback to their peers.

Seeking Support

In the course of looking for ways to improve the quality of my students' presentations, as a first step, I contacted one of my language teacher friends, Indra, who is also in my AR learning group on an online platform. It was Indra who encouraged me to carry out not an AR, but an EAR project. Second, my school also offered a three-credit course to learn AR and signed an agreement with Kathmandu University School of Education for the project. I then got to learn more about practitioner research from our course facilitator, Basu Prasad Subedi. I realized that among the various forms of classroom research, EAR is a type of practice-based research that aims at solving classroom issues through exploration and possible action. Smith and Rebolledo (2018) argue that "EAR is an effective way to address and cope with genuine issues in the classroom since it enables teachers to gain a better understanding of their classroom contexts and develop appropriate ways of teaching" (p. 4). So, I decided to explore the reasons behind the low interest of my students in making oral presentations. I also wanted to develop the understanding of my classroom setting and improve my practice through an EAR intervention.

Designing the EAR Project

I defined the objectives of the EAR project presented here as follows:

- To explore why students are reluctant to do oral presentations
- To implement actions to make presentations more engaging
- To develop effective presentation skills

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I was convinced that my students at Gandaki Boarding School had the basic skills required for presentations and that those skills could be improved so that the students could reach the standards of other privately-run schools in the province. I also felt that I can create the conditions for improvement because I had been their teacher in Class 8 and I knew all of them rather well individually and could see their potential.

It needs to be mentioned that even before embarking on a properly set up EAR cycle, I felt that I needed to act before starting the exploratory phase. This is a feeling that I think many teachers share. Smith and Rebolledo (2018) make a mention of this reaction that is probably typical of people working in education. The authors call this "immediately leaping into action (p. 20) and caution against it:

> […] sometimes, taking a decision too quickly and without exploring the situation further, can involve incorrect assumptions or simply assumptions which may be based on signs and intuition instead of reasons why this situation is happening, as can be explored through the collection of data. (p. 20)

I felt that the changes I was going to introduce immediately would "cause no harm" while they could result in some improvement in the short term. However, in the coming months, I learnt that the exploratory phase was extremely valuable and could lead to realizations that might have been "blind spots" before.

Stage 1: Immediate Action

As a first set of changes, I adopted the following measures:

- providing more time for the preparation of presentations,
- allowing students to choose the topic freely,
- letting students choose their delivery style,
- providing space for them to learn using group support,
- offering short mentoring sessions with me,
- consulting YouTube channels as models of presentations during their internet classes,
- I also praised the ones who were able to make the best presentation with compliments and asked them to assist those who were struggling when preparing them.

Over and above these immediate solutions, I provided support by offering to clarify issues, give feedback, run follow-up sessions and compile guidelines (see Xu et al., 2021). However, even though I tried everything listed above, the students' presentations did not improve. I still found my students not taking the task seriously enough, arriving for presentations without preparation, and reading instead of making an attempt to speak freely. When reflecting on my responsibilities as a teacher, I knew I was committed to investigating the root causes of the issue through the principles of EAR.

At the time when I was trying to identify the research questions, I had to face my own feelings of self-doubt. Namely, I was doubting my own performance and was wondering why my students were so disengaged and unable to give better quality presentations. As I have mentioned before, I decided to ask for help. I contacted my friend in my MPhil class with whom I work online in AR mentoring projects, too, and shared the problem. She had been my

research companion and learning companion since 2020. I explained to Indra that I knew I was not overloading my students and I provided only limited and easy topics for the presentation. However, I was not sure whether my students' liked presentations or perceived them as a burden or if there were some other reasons behind their apparent reluctance to make oral presentations in my classes. I consulted colleagues who taught at other schools and shared my experience with them. I came to learn that students were not showing interest in doing oral presentations in their classes either. As a next step, I decided to consider the issue by asking my students about their experiences related to giving presentations so that I could understand their perspectives better and find answers to the research questions that were set out as follows:

Research Questions

1. How do my students feel about doing oral presentations in class?
2. What are the factors that contribute to the reluctance of my students to give oral presentations?
3. Do they have enough time and confidence and content preparation to do oral presentations?
4. What kind of support do my students expect from their teacher and peers?

Methodology

The present EAR project employed a mixed methods research design as I gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. I used convenience sampling, namely, I used the 42 students of my Class 9 because they were the participants whom I was targeting and they were also available for the purposes of the research project. Students in Class 9 to Class 12 are considered as seniors at our school, and improving their presentations skills is treated as a pedagogical priority. Furthermore, I taught this group in Class 8 and felt that I had established good rapport with them. I was also going to carry on with the same students in Class 10, so investing in developing their presentation skills appeared to be a move that I expected would benefit everyone involved in the long run, too.

I used a Google form questionnaire designed in English to explore my students' concerns with both open-ended and closed-ended questions (see Appendix 1**)**. The questionnaire was developed in English, because after 9 years of formal English classes, the exam results showed that most of the students were at B2 level according to CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). I sent the forms to all 42 students of Class 9 and 29 students (69%) sent back their responses In some cases I only received 28 responses to some of the questions. The filling in of the questionnaire was a voluntary task and the responses were provided anonymously.

I also conducted a focus group discussion with seven students to explore the problem more deeply. I recorded their responses in Nepali because I hoped students would be more prepared to share their views openly, without the language barrier that English might have meant for them. My students' level of Nepali is around C1 level (Council of Europe, 2001), which is not surprising, since Nepali is the commonly used language after their mother tongue. The discussion touched on their dislike for presentations, the difficulties they encountered, and the role teachers should play in teaching presentation skills. Later I translated the discussion into English, and analyzed the content thematically.

Furthermore, I kept the records of their presentations in a dedicated file. I also requested my colleagues teaching at my school and those teaching at other institutions to provide feedback on

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my students' improvement in presentation skills. I kept a reflective journal and used my daily observations to investigate the real causes behind their lack of interest in making classroom presentations. Here is one quote from my reflective journal: "*students were found lazy in doing presentation on 9 September while presenting the topic editorial, they are found using unfair means"* (journal entry from September 2023). The parents whom I often consulted also told me that their children were hesitant when they had to speak in public and asked me to set my students more presentation-type tasks. I gathered data from all possible sources, such as my reflective journal, the reflective notes of students, observation notes, and suggestions from colleagues. I transcribed, coded, categorized and developed different themes for interpretation following the thematic analysis of the findings. I aimed at aligning the data with the research questions following the recommendations of EAR and thematic analysis (Allwright, 2005; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings from the Exploratory Phase

Based on the responses, I was able to identify some of the causes of the students' reluctance to present in front of the whole class. Figure 1 shows how students felt while presenting in front of the teacher and their peers.

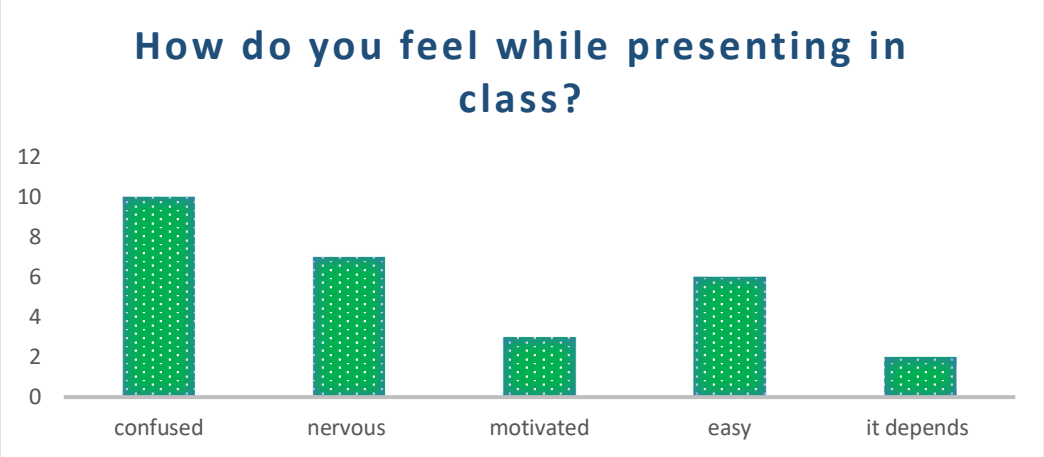

Figure 1.
Students' feelings during presentations (28 responses for this question)

Figure 1 shows that 10 students felt confused and seven were nervous while presenting. However, six students found that presentations were easy, three students were even motivated by this task while two students chose the category "it depends".

From the survey results, I was also able to deduce the following challenges: most of the students believed that they have neither self-confidence nor sufficient vocabulary; some referred to peer pressure and bullying, an inadequate timeframe, and content requirements as their major concerns. Others mentioned that they didn't know how to deliver in the classroom and perceived their performance inefficient. Yet again, others revealed that they had a fear of making mistakes and needed the teachers' extra support; they also expected teachers to be more available and more involved in their presentations.

The survey revealed several critical insights into students' attitudes towards oral presentations. A notable majority expressed feelings of anxiety and nervousness, frequently

exacerbated by the fear of negative evaluation. Participants indicated that their motivation to excel was significantly influenced by prior public speaking experiences, suggesting a cycle of avoidance stemming from negative encounters. Additionally, students' self-perception of their speaking abilities played a pivotal role in their willingness to engage. Those who considered themselves competent speakers demonstrated greater enthusiasm, while those lacking confidence exhibited clear reluctance. This highlights the necessity of fostering positive self-image among students.

These findings resonate with existing literature that identifies communication apprehension as a substantial barrier to participation in oral presentations. McCroskey (1977) posited that individuals with high communication apprehension tend to avoid speaking situations, badly affecting their academic performance and self-confidence. Similarly, Tian (2019) found that anxiety can hinder effective communication, creating difficulties in students' ability to articulate their ideas. The motivational aspects are further underscored by Ucar and Sungur (2017), who emphasized self-efficacy as a determinant of motivation. Students confident in their capabilities are more inclined to tackle challenging tasks, such as oral presentations. The survey findings echo this notion, indicating that bolstering students' self-efficacy could serve as a vital intervention point for educators.

Here are some of the responses that the students gave me in the open-ended section of the questionnaire.

Table 1.
Responses related to challenges and recommendations by the students

What are the reasons for hesitating to do presentations in class?	**What are your expectations from your teacher?**
Lack of confidence	Make pairs for doing presentations maybe?
	encourage everyone
Fear of being judged	Building students' confidence
Fear of teachers, and speaking in front of the class	They should be made more comfortable
Fear of making mistakes	Encourage them and punish those who tease their friends for making mistakes
Lack or low level of confidence, fear of making mistake, etc.	Ask if the student is ready or not
	The teacher can give us the content
Lack of content and vocabulary	Create an environment where everyone feels comfortable to ask questions and neither the teacher nor the students get impatient or frustrated
	Give more time
Not being prepared sometimes	Make it fun with enough time to finish
Do not know how to start and feeling anxious	Share ideas on how to do a presentation properly

Presentations in class can evoke significant anxiety among students due to various psychological barriers. A principal reason for this hesitation is a lack of confidence, which aligns with Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory, emphasizing the role of self-efficacy in performance. Students often fear being judged by peers and teachers, which can inhibit their willingness to engage in public speaking (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2012). This fear is compounded by the anxiety of making mistakes, leading to an avoidance of situations where they may be subjected to ridicule (Benight & Bandura, 2004). Therefore, it is crucial for educators to foster a supportive environment that encourages risk-taking without the fear of negative repercussions.

The following excerpts were gleaned from the focus group discussions (held in Nepali but translated into English by myself). The reflections were sorted into four themes following the norms of thematic analysis as discussed by Braun & Clarke (2006).

Confidence Issues and Poor Vocabulary

The excerpts from the participants reveal profound challenges related to pronunciation and self-confidence, which are critical factors influencing their willingness to engage in public speaking.

- **Participant A:** *"It is very difficult to utter some words, I get all red when I go from … it challenging in fact…."*
- **Participant B:** *"I am poor at pronunciation, so I do hesitate to present in class."*
- **Participant C:** *"I forget all pronunciation and accent when I go for presentation."*

These excerpts reflect a common struggle among students who face anxiety related to their pronunciation abilities. The fear of mispronouncing words or speaking with an accent can significantly hinder their confidence and engagement in academic settings. The phenomenon of pronunciation anxiety is well-documented in the literature. According to Liu (2024), pronunciation anxiety can hinder learners' willingness to communicate and participate in speaking activities, which ultimately affects their language development. The participants' experiences resonate with findings from this study, as they express feelings of embarrassment and hesitation when speaking in front of peers.

Furthermore, the emotional responses described by the participants, such as blushing and feeling overwhelmed, align with the concept of "communication apprehension" articulated by McCroskey (1977). This apprehension can stem from a fear of negative evaluation by peers, contributing to a cycle of anxiety that inhibits students' ability to express themselves effectively. Participant B's acknowledgment of poor pronunciation serves as a critical reminder of the importance of pronunciation instruction in language learning contexts.

Peer Pressure and Bullying

The narratives shared by participants highlight significant challenges arising from bullying and unconstructive feedback, which inhibit their confidence and performance.

- **Participant A:** "*It's very annoying to see peers giving nonsense tips and feedback, they keep on shouting and yelling for no reason whenever I start presenting, it's an awkward moment…."*
- **Participant B:** *"I hate my peers' yells and screeches."*
- **Participant C:** *"I would have presented well if no bullying and nonsense feedback had occurred."*

These statements reflect the emotional distress caused by negative peer interactions, which can significantly deter students from participating in presentations. The feelings of annoyance, frustration, and fear of bullying expressed by the participants underscore a critical need for educators to address the role of peer dynamics in the classroom.

Participant C's comment illustrates how bullying can directly influence students' performance. Research has shown that bullying creates a hostile learning environment that can lead to decreased academic performance and increased absenteeism (Juvonen et al., 2003). The fear of being bullied while presenting may lead students to avoid speaking opportunities altogether, thereby stunting their personal and academic growth.

No Efficacy of the Presentation Skills

The theme of presentation efficacy highlights the challenges faced by individuals who lack confidence and a clear understanding of how to effectively present their ideas. Many students express feelings of inadequacy, often stating, "*I don't know the way I should follow while presenting"; I do it at random."* This sentiment is further echoed by those who feel that they are not naturally inclined to present, as one participant remarked, "*I am not born to present; I don't know how. I simply do it for the sake of doing it."* Such expressions underscore the need for structured guidance and support to enhance students' presentation skills and self-efficacy.

In light of these factors, it is essential for educators to foster a supportive classroom environment that encourages constructive feedback and collaborative learning. By doing so, teachers can mitigate the adverse effects of anxiety and peer interactions, ultimately enhancing students' confidence and performance in oral presentations (Schunk, 2020). Such supportive practices are vital for developing students' communication skills, which are essential for their academic and professional success.

Teacher Support

The findings illustrate a pronounced need for teacher support in alleviating students' anxieties surrounding presentations. One participant's statement, *"I always think that I will make mistakes and I lose confidence whenever I go in front of all,"* underscores the pervasive fear of failure that can hinder effective communication (Liu, 2024). This fear is often exacerbated by a lack of preparation and clear guidance. Research suggests that when educators offer explicit instruction and resources, students are more likely to feel prepared and confident, thereby enhancing their overall presentation performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Furthermore, a supportive learning environment that includes constructive feedback can significantly reduce anxiety and improve self-efficacy, enabling students to embrace public speaking opportunities more fully (Schunk, 2020). In conclusion, the critical role of teacher support in fostering presentation skills is essential for empowering students to overcome their fears and engage effectively in public speaking.

My Plan and Further Action

After learning about the main causes hindering my students from making better quality presentations, I decided to change the way students were preparing for their presentations. Before the intervention, they needed to give their presentation individually, now I encouraged them to first work in groups and then in pairs. I found that this setup made students more confident. I supported them whenever they needed my help. I also did one demo session on how to start a presentation, for which I consulted different sources including other teachers' reflective journals (Messiou, 2019), which supplied rich ideas.

Stage 2: Actions Adopted for Change

After realizing the main causes of my students' problems with doing presentations (through Stage 1, above), I kept an account of all the issues and started providing some tips as listed below in Table 2.

Table 2.
Initial tips provided to make presentations more effective

1.	Know your audience
2.	Rehearse well
3.	Use a simple delivery style
4.	Don't be afraid of making mistakes
5.	Use a catchy topic
6.	Start with an ice breaker
7.	Be in charge during the presentation, stay focused throughout
8.	Keep eye contact
9.	Use appropriate gestures and body language

I asked each of the students to follow these tips for further presentations. However, following these tips did not make much noticeable difference in the quality of my students' presentations. I went back to my colleagues for further presentation tips.

Peer Suggestions

The presentation tips provided by my colleagues included:

- Colleague A "to move from simple to complex in the content part" …. I added this point, and I told my students that they should not overcomplicate the content part either.
- Another tip I got from Colleague B is "please be more friendly to avoid the fear of public speaking…" I also realized that having more intimacy and openness with friends and peers can reduce the fear of facing the audience. Following these tips resulted in slight improvements but I still felt that they were not as effective as I would have expected.

Stage 3: Asking the Students

I began having interactions with the students again to discuss their problems. I started working on the vocabulary of the given topic before assigning my students to prepare a presentation. I helped my students to have a conceptual understanding of difficult terminologies and content

before assigning presentations. For example, if they had to present on the topic of social security, I made the meaning and its need in society very clear conceptually. I started organizing quizzes and crosschecking strategies before they presented the assigned task. I further provided them with enough time for preparation and requested them to have rehearsals whenever they were free in class in front of their friends inside and outside the classroom and even in front of the mirror assuming that they would become confident when delivering their presentation (Ekoç, 2020).

I introduced them to SMART objectives (Specific, Measurable Appropriate, Related and Time-bound) for the purposes of their presentations (Day & Tosey, 2011; Lawlor & Hornyak, 2012). I further encouraged the rest of the students to provide feedback on their peers' presentations constructively by providing a check-list and requesting to evaluate their friends. I used the same rubric / check list (see Appendix 3) for the evaluation of the presentations.

Stage 4: Breakthrough

While doing all this, I discovered that there was a change in my students' attitude because they started finding great joy in the new-style assignments. They were found to have more interest in doing presentations and were found busy most of the time in the preparatory stages of the presentation. I could only praise them for their enthusiasm and courage. I could notice the passion for improvement and becoming the best presenter. It gave me a sense of contentment and I was further motivated to carry on with great joy. I reflected on all my strategies and it seemed that I was, finally, able to help my students after applying various actions and plans in the different stages as shown in Table 3.

Table 3.
Different strategies adopted for improving students' presentation

Very first strategies adopted	Effectiveness	Second stage of action and strategies	Effectiveness observed	Third stage of strategies	Effectiveness Observed
To be simple in delivery	Minimal	Colleague A "simple to complex …"	Slightly Better	Check list of presentations	Good
Knowing the audience	Minimal	Colleague B, "friendly presentation"	Slightly better	SMART model of presentation	Good
Use of right gestures	Minimal	Colleague C "Precise presentation"	Slightly better	Constructive feedback provided by friends	Good
				Presentations in group and in pairs	Good

Discussion of the Final Findings After Intervention

Student Reflections on the Process

At the end of the whole process, I requested my students to reflect on their journey of presenting in class based on their very first to the last presentation they did in class by calling

them up in class and sharing their reflections in a plenary held in the Information and Communication lab, where there was enough space for the students to spread out. It was worth listening to them. Many of the students were now happy to do presentations after having participated in the intervention detailed above.

The students' reflections revealed a marked transformation in their attitudes towards presentations, which were previously perceived as daunting tasks. The positive shift in their perceptions can be attributed to a structured intervention that emphasized preparation, collaboration, and supportive feedback. Notably, the comments reflect an increase in confidence and enjoyment associated with the presentation process. This aligns with the principles of social constructivism, which posits that learning is fundamentally a social process, facilitated through interaction and collaboration among peers (Vygotsky & Cole, 2018).

Social Interaction in Class

Social constructivism, as articulated by Vygotsky and Cole (2018), suggests that knowledge is co-constructed through social interactions. The students' feedback underscores this theory, as many expressed that working in pairs and engaging in group presentations enhanced their confidence and understanding of presentation skills. For instance, one student noted, *"Working in pairs was fun as I didn't have to worry about all the stuff and being interactive is worth remembering."* This statement highlights the collaborative nature of learning, where students can support one another, thereby reducing anxiety associated with public speaking.

Moreover, the use of ice-breaking tips, which were particularly appreciated by the students, exemplifies how educators can create a psychologically safe environment conducive to learning. By implementing strategies that foster interaction and reduce apprehension, educators can effectively address the reluctance students often feel in multilingual classrooms, where language barriers can exacerbate anxiety.

Learning-Conducive Classroom Environment

The progress observed during the practice sessions of my EAR project was both rewarding and enlightening. The palpable enthusiasm among students, evidenced by their improved clarity of speech and accelerated pace, was reflected in their assessment grades. This transformation aligns with the findings of Reyes et al. (2012), which highlight the critical role of a supportive learning environment in fostering student engagement and performance. The implementation of peer feedback emerged as a pivotal strategy, enabling students to learn collaboratively and gain confidence in articulating their ideas effectively (Gielen et al., 2010).

Implications of the Study

The findings from the exploration of reluctance towards oral presentations among Nepali secondary students underscore the necessity for targeted interventions within the classroom. To cultivate confidence and competence in oral communication skills, educators must consider implementing the following practical recommendations in Nepali classroom settings:

1. **Curriculum Integration**: Oral presentation skills should be systematically integrated into the curriculum across various subjects by incorporating regular opportunities for students to engage in presentations.

2. **Skill Development Workshops**: Schools should organize workshops focused on developing public speaking skills, including techniques for effective communication, body language, and managing anxiety.
3. **Peer Support Systems**: Establishing peer mentoring programs can foster a supportive environment where students feel comfortable practicing their presentation skills. Pairing less confident students with their peers who exhibit stronger communication abilities can enhance learning through collaboration and encouragement. So due focus should be given to peer learning and collaborative tasks.
4. **Feedback Mechanisms**: Implementing constructive feedback mechanisms is vital. So, it's imperative for educators to provide specific, actionable feedback to students after their presentations, focusing on strengths and areas for improvement, which can aid in building their skills progressively.

By adopting these recommendations, educators and school administrators can create a more conducive learning environment that empowers students to overcome their reluctance towards oral presentations, thereby enhancing their overall educational experience.

Limitation of this Exploratory Action Research

This EAR project is bound by the following limitations.

1. **Generalizability**: The findings of this study may not be applicable to other classrooms or educational contexts due to the unique characteristics of the specific setting studied. This is because the Nepali classroom context can be different from other countries' classroom contexts.
2. **Sample Size**: This study used the method of convenience sampling. The use of limited sample sizes can affect the reliability of results and their applicability to broader populations.
3. **Methodological Constraints**: Research designs may limit the ability to establish causal relationships. This study has adopted a mixed method design by integrating a student survey, focused group discussion interviews, reflective notes, and colleagues' and parents' suggestions for triangulation.
4. **Self-Reported Data**: This study used the self-reported data of the students. Reliance on surveys or interviews can introduce bias, as participants may not accurately report their experiences or perceptions.

Personal Reflections

As for my own personal reflection, firstly, I am happy to know now that my exploration has worked and my students are progressing. I realized that the rehearsal and presentation tips have worked. Secondly, I also learnt that peers' constructive feedback also laid a strong foundation for improvement. Thirdly, it turned out that pair and group discussions were one of the best strategies to make my students confident.

Ultimately, I found that, even though I was trying to do my best by taking action early on and without triangulating my data, it was EAR that has led to a real breakthrough in the improvement of the presentations and also changed the students' attitude to a great extent. Something that they tried to avoid at all costs has become an enjoyable activity. I realized that EAR is a type of classroom research that can lead to finding solutions to classroom problems.

I learned many things, and EAR has doubled my potential. It's worth understanding that it is not just the students that are to be held responsible for making mistakes and doing things imperfectly. It is part of the role of teachers as educators to help students accomplish the tasks set up in a way that leads to continuous improvement. This research project has been very useful in helping me to recognize my students' and my own potential, and to carry out such tasks with great zeal in the future, too.

Conclusion

The present EAR account aimed at describing the exploratory and action phases of a piece of classroom research which investigated students' reluctance to present in front of their peers and their teacher. While perceived as an essential 21st century skill for effective communication, presentations in an additional language are fraught with challenges. Students have linguistic, social, and psychological barriers to surmount and, therefore, there needs to be a multipronged approach to overcome these obstacles. As a result of the exploratory phase of the project, I realized that problems do not really always come from the students' side. They are the result of our far too high expectations of them and our failure to understand their problems. We need to be interested in finding solutions to their problems and doing justice to them. Instead of blaming students for not being able to perform well, we must explore what has hindered them from doing well.

The report emphasizes that even though teachers might be inclined to act fast and resort to actions that might potentially be considered helpful, the study underlines the importance of spending a sufficient amount of time on the exploratory phase. This can help identify issues that have either been misinterpreted or constitute "blind spots" for language teachers, and educators in general. The investigation of the research problem led to a realization that both AR and EAR are iterative processes, and breakthrough can only be achieved after the careful investigation of the underlying causes and the implementation of targeted and well-designed activities that can alleviate the burden of oral presentations and can create a classroom climate that is conducive to learning – including that of the teacher. In order to do better, all of us involved in these projects, namely, student, parents, myself as the teacher and my colleagues, needed to reflect on our practice to achieve improvement.

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About the Author

Laxmi Sharma is a Ph.D. scholar at Kathmandu University, holding an M.Phil. in Educational Leadership and a Master's in English Literature. With 14 years of experience as a secondary-level teacher, her research interests include exploratory action research, the flipped classroom, digital leadership, artificial intelligence, and teacher research. Laxmi is dedicated to enhancing educational practices and is passionate about exploring innovative teaching methods to improve student learning outcomes. Her commitment to research reflects her desire to foster effective teaching strategies in today's evolving educational landscape. Email: 9819140173angel@gmail.com

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part in this transformative research experience. My family's contribution is always worth remembering and they deserve acknowledgement as well.

Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

I hereby declare that the above work is my original work. I have no conflicts of interest to declare. There is no financial interest to report.

Appendices

Appendix 1 A google form Questionnaire in the exploratory phase

Laxmi Sharma

Dear Students,

I would like to request you all to participate in this simple survey for my research work on " Nepalese students' reluctance to do a presentation in the classroom. " This form is designed to determine the effectiveness of presentation in classroom teaching. All collected data will be used only for research purposes only by the first person. No information about the respondents will be disclosed.

Laxmi Sharma
Teacher
Gandaki Boarding school ,Pokhara

* Indicates required question

1. **Do you like to do presentation?**

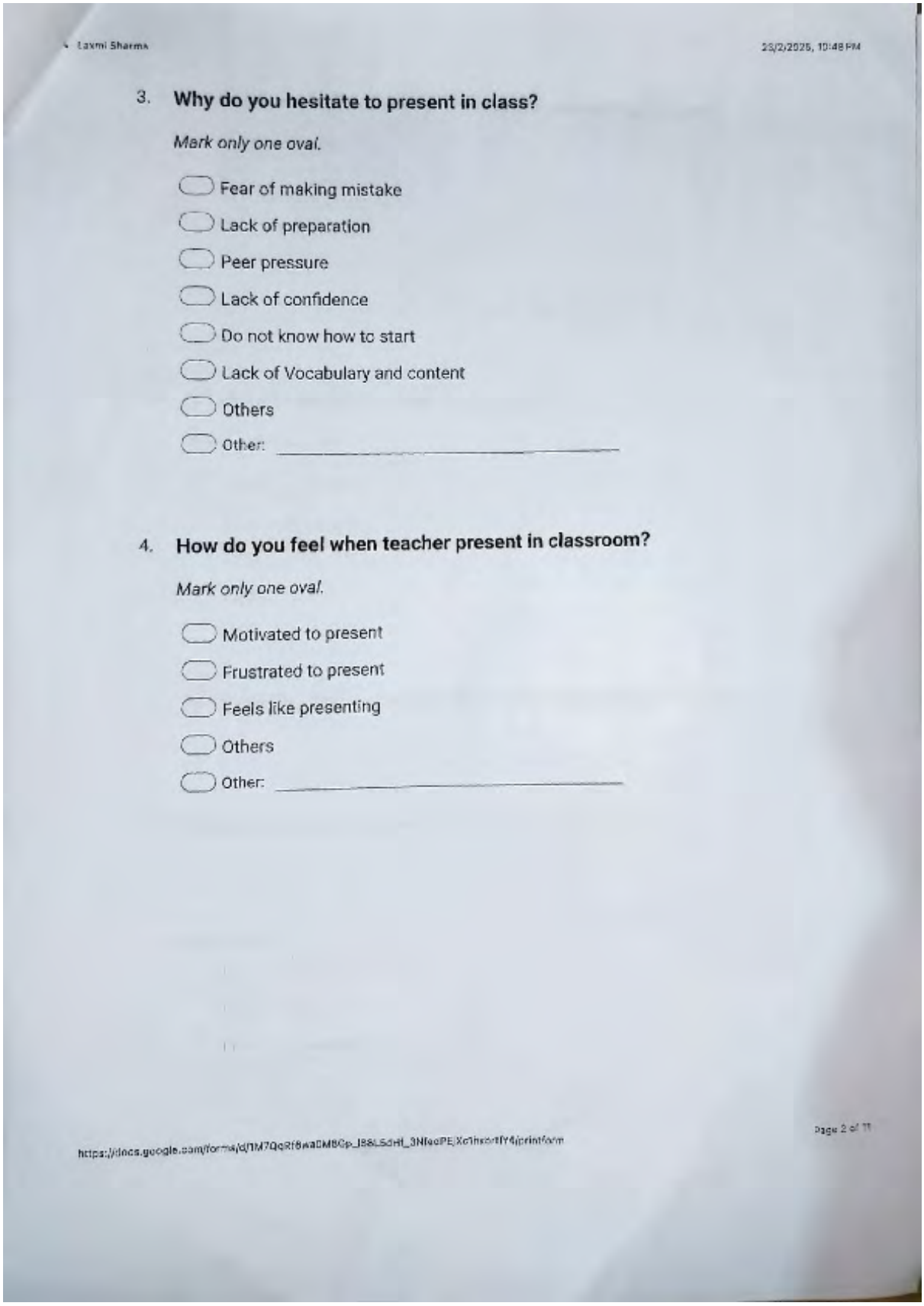
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

2. **How do you feel while presenting in class?**

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Motivated
- ◯ Easy
- ◯ Cnfident
- ◯ Confused
- ◯ Other: _____



Laxmi Sharma 23/2/2025, 10:48 PM

3. **Why do you hesitate to present in class?**

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Fear of making mistake
- ◯ Lack of preparation
- ◯ Peer pressure
- ◯ Lack of confidence
- ◯ Do not know how to start
- ◯ Lack of Vocabulary and content
- ◯ Others
- ◯ Other: _____

4. **How do you feel when teacher present in classroom?**

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Motivated to present
- ◯ Frustrated to present
- ◯ Feels like presenting
- ◯ Others
- ◯ Other: _____

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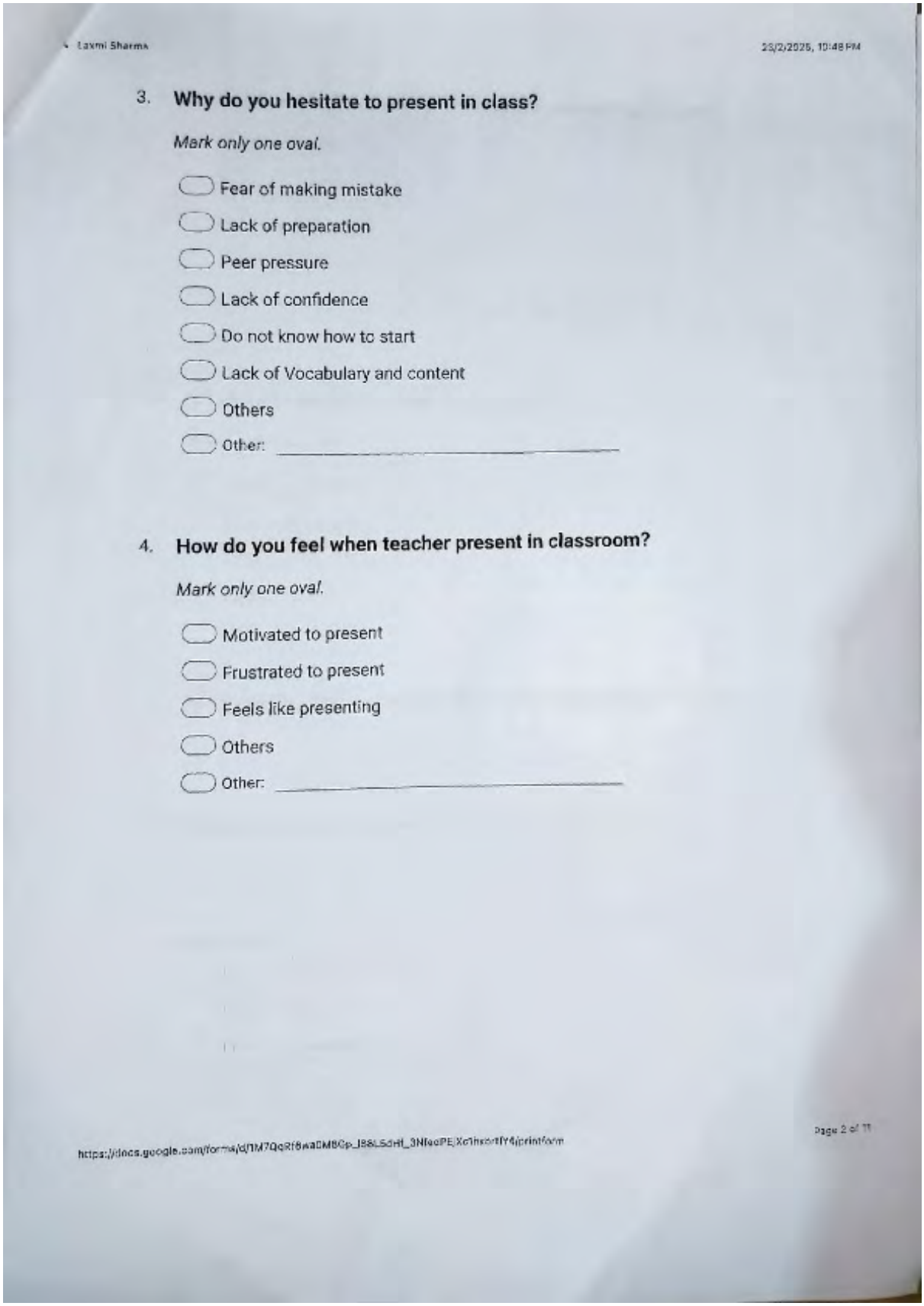

Laxmi Sharma 23/2/2025, 10:48 PM

3. **Why do you hesitate to present in class?**

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Fear of making mistake
- ◯ Lack of preparation
- ◯ Peer pressure
- ◯ Lack of confidence
- ◯ Do not know how to start
- ◯ Lack of Vocabulary and content
- ◯ Others
- ◯ Other: _____

4. **How do you feel when teacher present in classroom?**

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Motivated to present
- ◯ Frustrated to present
- ◯ Feels like presenting
- ◯ Others
- ◯ Other: _____

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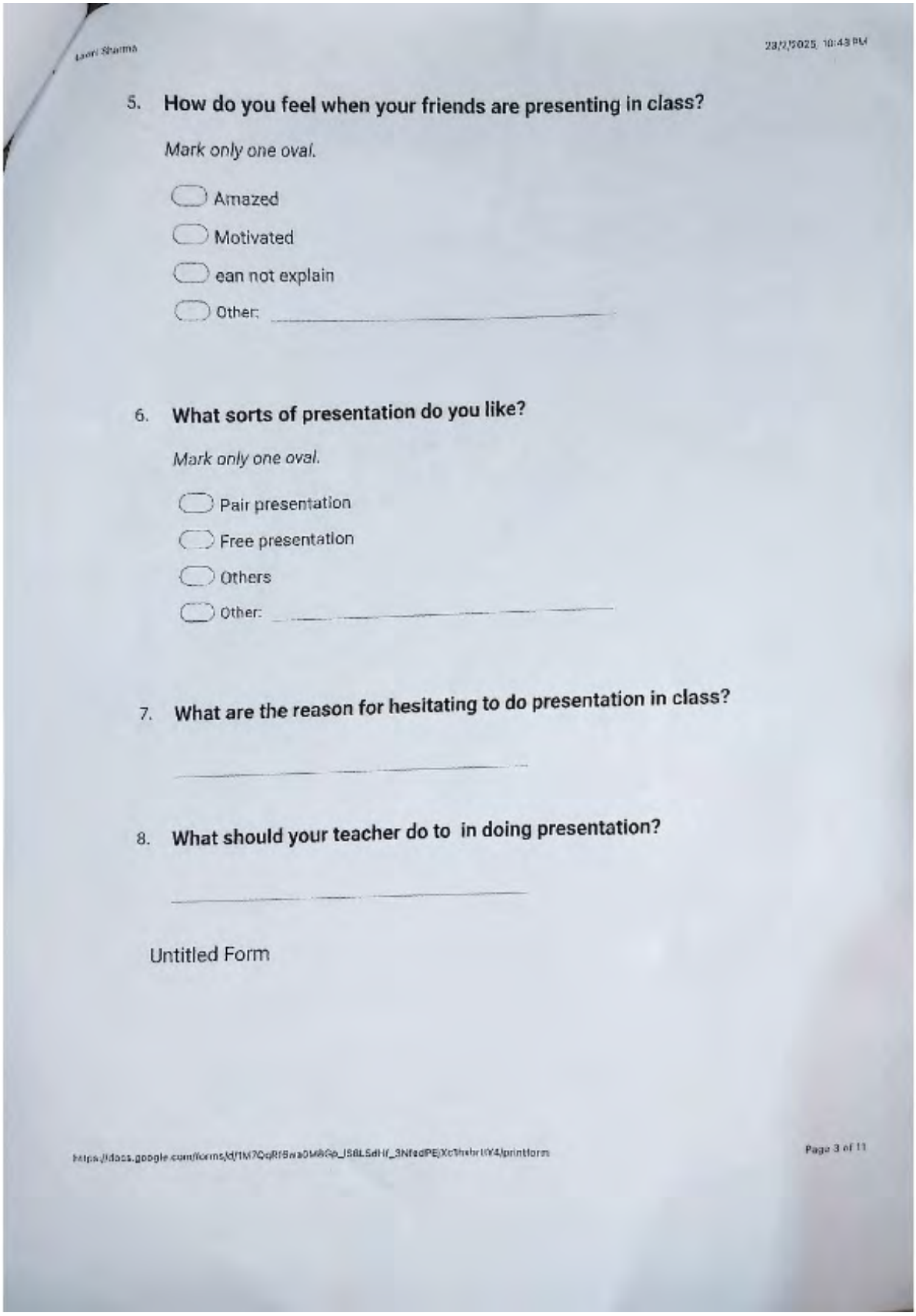

Laxmi Sharma 23/2/2025, 10:43 PM

5. **How do you feel when your friends are presenting in class?**

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Amazed
- ◯ Motivated
- ◯ ean not explain
- ◯ Other: _____

6. **What sorts of presentation do you like?**

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Pair presentation
- ◯ Free presentation
- ◯ Others
- ◯ Other: _____

7. **What are the reason for hesitating to do presentation in class?**

_____

8. **What should your teacher do to in doing presentation?**

_____

Untitled Form

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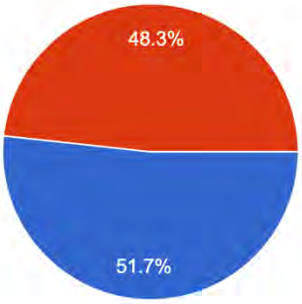
Appendix 2

Google form questionnaire responses (Some students did not answer all the questions).

Do you like to do presentation?

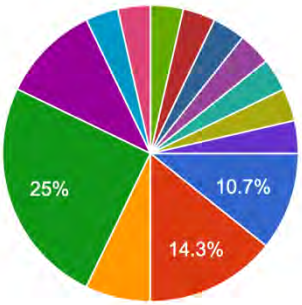
29 responses



Yes
No

How do you feel while presenting in class?

28 responses

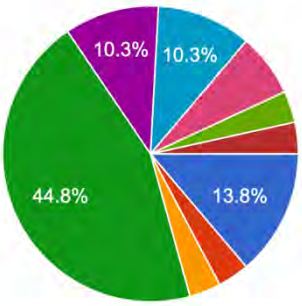


Motivated
Easy
Cnfident
Confused
Nervous
nervous
It depends. If the presentation topic is…
It's not "Cnfident" it's "Confident".

1/2

Why do you hesitate to present in class?

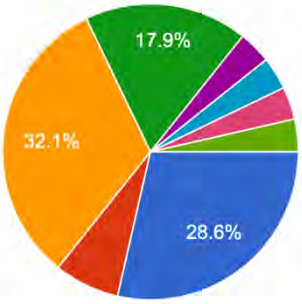
29 responses



Fear of making mistake
Lack of preparation
Peer pressure
Lack of confidence
Do not know how to start
Lack of Vocabulary and content
Others
Lack of confidence, and also because there are many judgemental people in…
"Others" and "Other" should be the sa…

How do you feel when teacher present in classroom?

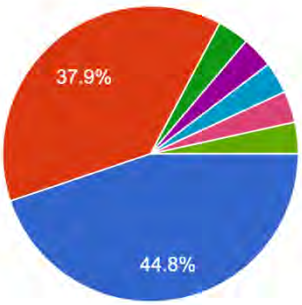
28 responses



- Motivated to present
- Frustrated to present
- Feels like presenting
- Others
- I would not want to present it myself after seeing the teacher present.
- "Feels like presenting" Bad English. Also "Others" and "Other" should be the sa…
- I'm afraid
- Good to see and listen

What sorts of presentation do you like?

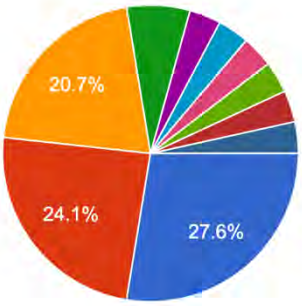
29 responses



- Pair presentation
- Free presentation
- Others
- "Others" and "Other" should be the same option.
- Presenting voluntarily , if u have knowledge about the topic and have s…
- Both
- I don't want to present.im afraid.
- I prefer not to present

How do you feel when your friends are presenting in class?

29 responses



- Amazed
- Motivated
- ean not explain
-
- depends on the presentation
- If the presentation is good, I fell very a…
- It's not "ean not explain" it's "can not e…
- Most of them are like same(hesitating…

1/2 ▼

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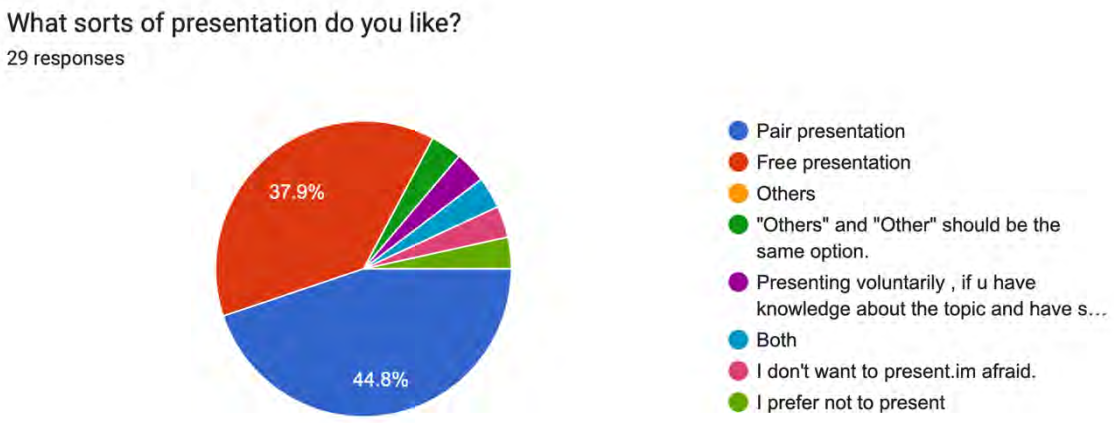

What is the reason for hesitating to do presentation in class?21 responses

lack of confidence

Scared of making mistakes, fear of getting judged

I feel like IF i can present the full content or not. it’s better not to involve if you can't give 100% of it and there are others too to

Afraid to be in front of everyone, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes

Well, especially in my class (that is 9 "B"), there are many judgmental people who judge your every move. I feel scared that something will go wrong when I'm presenting in front of the classroom and I will get judged. That is the main reason why I don't want to do presentation. People just laugh on me!

some reasons for hesitating to do presentation in classrooms: no confidence, doesn’t feel comfortable, feels like everyone is judging you, doesn’t feel free to talk, language

Nothing

Fix your English please.

Do not know how to start

Sometimes fear of public speaking like presenting for internal marks

I don't hesitate

Anxiety

The main reason behind hesitating to do presentation in class is lack of content and vocabulary. There is no idea how to do presentation, what type of content to share and lack of vocabulary. Lack of preparation is also the reason behind this. And another problem is also the judging people besides us.

Not being prepared sometimes

Fear of doing mistake, Fear of teachers and mass

Lack of confidence

The class and friends often make fun of us

My friends try to make fun of me when i am presenting

it would be because pf my lack of confidence and the fear of making a blunder and embarrassing myself infront of my classmates

What should your teacher do to in doing presentation?18 responses

Encourage everyone

Share idea how to do presentation properly

Presentations should be more comfortable

Make pairs for doing presentation maybe?

Building students confidence

Give more time

Shouldn't disturbed in between, not making fun afterwards, everyone has knowledge about Different things so better to choose or give opportunity to person who have the knowledge about the topic (it's not possible always but as much as possible)

Make an environment where everyone feels easy to ask questions and not angry

Encourage them and punish those who tease their friends for presenting

Ask the student is ready or not

Teacher can give us the content. Can discuss and explore the content.

Teach students how to do presentation. Give some ideas. Can give us the preparation time.

Make the student feel free for presenting by being friendly with them.

Make it fun and longlisting

Teacher should make the presentation very creative. The content should be engaging and interesting, students should be free for the presentation etc.

Not make presentation a compulsion

He/she should help presenting, give motivations.

I'm not sure

They should be confident so that we can be motivated and confident while presenting something

Appendix 3

Feedback rubric for the teacher and students' peers

Criteria	**Exemplary (4)**	**Proficient (3**	**Basic (2)**	**Needs Improvement (1)**
Content knowledge delivered	Demonstrates good understanding; confidently presents	Shows good understanding; answers most questions accurately	Shows some understanding; struggles with questions	Lacks understanding; cannot answer questions
Organizations of ideas displayed	Ideas are logically organized; smooth transitions between points	Ideas are mostly organized; some transitions present	Ideas are somewhat organized; transitions are unclear	Ideas are disorganized; lacks clear transitions.
Presentation skills displayed	Speaks clearly with excellent eye contact and body language is fine	Speaks clearly; good eye contact and body language is observed	Occasionally unclear; limited eye contact and gesture	Difficult to get; poor eye contact and gestures

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Teacher Research Mentors' Perceptions of Book Review Writing in a Global Community of Practice

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Abstract

The research account describes the experiences of 36 teacher-research mentors who participated in a book review writing project facilitated by dedicated writing mentors in a global community of practice (MenTRnet). Even though members of the community were mainly concerned with mentoring the carrying out of classroom research, writing up and disseminating their mentees' and their own findings were also pursued through research articles and blogs. The two authors, who were involved in supporting all types of writing in the community, were interested in how a specific genre in English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP), namely, book review writing can support members' continuing professional development by enhancing their academic development and scholarly writing. The research account presents the exceptionally high rate of acceptance of the reviews submitted, and investigates the perceptions of the review writers regarding their motivations and expectations as well as their reflections on the support they received from the writing mentors over a prolonged period from being commissioned to write a review up to the point of publication.

Keywords: writing for publication; mentoring writing; teacher-research mentoring; community of practice; MenTRnet

Introduction and Context

This research account aims at sharing the authors' experiences gained in a community of practice called MenTRnet (https://mentrnet.net/), which primarily functions as an international network of teacher-research mentors, but also supports and facilitates the writing activities of its members. Whilst the remit of this community of practice does not focus on how its members may choose to disseminate the results of their research findings, over the years (mainly between 2021 and 2025), there have been several opportunities to support members and their mentees to not only present their research orally, but also to write up their teacher-research and teacher-research mentoring experiences as full-length articles and book chapters. As a subset of our writing activities, and as a result of the first author's professional interest and experience, a fair amount of writing has taken the form of reviews on books related to teacher education, teacher-research and mentoring teachers; therefore, that genre is our main focus.

In their *Handbook for Exploratory Action Research*, Smith and Rebolledo (2018) express a number of useful ideas on how teacher-researchers and, by extension, teacher-research mentors can disseminate their findings: "you can place your writing in a blog, a newsletter or

even a Facebook group or on your own website" (p. 86). However, as mentioned above, we have chosen to focus on another activity, namely, the writing of book reviews. Beyond having its value *per se*, our expectation is that the facilitation of such writing, in due course, will help novice authors to write up their own pieces of research with the support that our community of practice offers.

By providing an account of how far the prospective book review writers were receptive to the idea of experimenting with this genre of academic writing, what their expectations were related to the process and how successful the review writing project turned out to be, we hope to present a pathway to similar initiatives which, in our view, can benefit the continuing professional development (CPD) of both teacher-researchers and their mentors. It needs to be pointed out that on several occasions, our first names, that is, Sidney and Eli (the latter being the name of the first author, Erzsébet, in the community) are mentioned for contextual reasons. As for the terminology employed to describe the participants, they are alternately referred to as "mentees", "prospective authors" or "authors" depending on what stage of the project is being discussed.

Participating in a Community of Practice

For many of us, the experience that we (i.e., the co- authors, Eli and Sidney) are going to recount below, started about five years ago (in 2020), just before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning with TESOL's Electronic Village Online (EVO) workshops on teacher-research and teacher-research mentoring in January–February 2020. By then, Exploratory Action Research had become a well-established approach to classroom research and an international network of teacher-research mentors also started to emerge following the EVO on Mentoring Teacher-Research (led by Richard Smith and Seden Eraldemir Tuyan) in that year. This community of practice, in whose activities we both participate, and which is now officially named MenTRnet (https://mentrnet.net/), has over 250 members from all over the world (Smith et al., 2024). The same-named Facebook (FB) group has more than 570 members. (https://www.facebook.com/groups/373366133378401).

Nurturing Writing

Over the past five years, MenTRnet has been supporting the writing-up of community members' experiences related to teacher-research and teacher-research mentoring. Apart from many individual successes in publishing, what specifically stand out are the *Proceedings* of the Teachers Research! conferences (Smith et al., 2022; Göktürk Sağlam et al., 2024; Vargas Gil et al., 2025) and the recently published edited volume, *Stories of Mentoring Teacher-Research* (Smith et al., 2024). Another major writing drive has, in fact, been related to this very journal. In October 2023, we set up a multi-layered writing support system specifically for *ELT Classroom Research Journal*'s first issue (October, 2024). As a result of a year-long writing process, MenTRnet members and their teacher-research mentees successfully submitted three full-length articles and two book reviews for that issue (*ELT Classroom Research Journal*, 2024). However, judging by the number of published pieces, what appears to have been the most prolific genre is that of *book reviews* (see Figure 2 on the output between 2021 and 2025). So, even though we will refer to other types of writing in our community, our exploratory account here will focus on book review writing and how our MenTRnet members took the activity in their stride.

Our focus on book review writing can be justified by the fact that this activity has involved a fairly large number of our members (see Appendix Table 2 on the authors' profiles and geographical distribution), and has proved to be a highly successful and inclusive activity. Success, in our specific case, can be measured in two ways. Quantitatively, it can be expressed by the ratio of publications over submissions, which is often referred to as the "rejection rate", or, more positively, the "acceptance rate". The latter can be as low as 5% for a journal such as, for example, *RELC Journal* (Renandya & Floris, 2018). Qualitatively, "success" can be understood as the overwhelmingly positive feedback that was provided by the authors regarding the book review writing experience.

We treat this research project as "exploratory" in its design, constituting a piece of preliminary empirical investigation. Our aim is to highlight aspects of mentoring writing that might be applicable in other contexts as well. Ours, therefore, can be perceived as a precursor to a more systematic research study on how and to what extent book review writing can lead to teacher-researchers and their mentors' academic development and scholarly writing, and contribute to an increased feeling of confidence in them arising from successfully reaching a "real" audience.

The data gathering focussed on several issues related to the specific genre of book review writing, posing the following questions:

- Why did prospective writers decide to volunteer to write a book review?
- What did they expect to be the major challenges in the write-up process?
- How did they find the overall writing experience?
- What kind of support did they find helpful (if at all) and why?

Ultimately, book review writing for publication can be perceived as a useful means of continuing professional development for in-service teachers (see Orosz et al., 2019), but it can also be applied in pre-service teacher education contexts. Banegas et al., (2020) conducted a collaborative, action-research based study on how book review writing for publication affected 57 student teachers' experience with academic writing. The data gathered showed that the initiative to introduce genre pedagogy (presenting and employing the specific characteristics of book reviews) improved student-teachers' motivation, and it enhanced their sense of self-efficacy. Further, writing for publication had a positive effect on the student teachers' perception of academic writing since the task had an authentic audience as its target and the process involved experiential learning.

In the sections that follow, we will describe in detail how writing for publication, and specifically, writing book reviews has been supported in our community of practice. We present both the challenges and the successes as well as the reflections of the authors and their principal writing mentor.

Methodology

Considerations

Our aim was to facilitate the production of publishable pieces of writing, mainly that of book reviews but articles as well (see Figure 2 below). We also decided to gather information at various stages of the project, synchronised with the writing process itself. This means that we gathered data by asking prospective authors about what they needed most at the given stage. The two google forms sent out initially aimed at establishing the authors' expectations,

motivations and concerns and were also helping us, mentors, to match review writers with potential outlets for the books chosen. The third google form served the purposes of guided reflection as well as offered an opportunity to mentees to provide feedback to the writing mentors.

This approach allowed us to monitor the process and let the information gathered feed back into our practice continuously and almost instantaneously.

Research Method

We have already mentioned that the present account is of exploratory nature, and within that, employs a design that falls under exploratory mixed methods research. Further, it belongs to the category of convergent parallel design since the gathering of qualitative and quantitative data was carried out simultaneously with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the issues related to our research questions. We have given equal weight to the complementary data sets as they were deemed equally important for the purposes of triangulating and interpreting the findings.

Quantitative data were gathered by the methodical collection of information on both published pieces and work-in-progress submissions as well as the related information on publishing outlets (see Appendix Table 1).

Qualitative data were mainly obtained by using survey questionnaires containing both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Inductive thematic analysis was applied involving a bottom-up approach, because owing to the exploratory nature of the project, we were looking for themes that could emerge directly from the data without prior assumptions.

The responses were thematically coded. The co-authors carried out the thematic coding process individually, and following that step they discussed and identified the emerging themes. These were further refined and, finally, agreed on for data presentation.

By using a mixed methods approach, we obtained two complementary data sets, namely, the narrative responses and the data referring to acceptance rates and the publishing of the output. As we will demonstrate below, these show a high level of correlation (strong relationship). It means that the authors' positive experiences are in line with the high rate of success in publishing.

Participants

The number of participants over the years under consideration totals 36, out of whom 34 are members of MenTRnet and two (Valeria and Anabella) are external authors. Most of them work in secondary or tertiary contexts (see Appendix Table 2) with a teaching experience of between 3 and 35 years (Eli is an outlier with her 50+ years in English teaching). Their mother tongues are as varied as their geographical background: we have one trilingual and several bilingual members in the group surveyed, their additional languages always contain English, but beyond that, L+ languages include Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Chinese.

To start with, we would like to emphasize that our global teacher-research mentor support community is truly international. It is also worth pointing out that our membership data

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demonstrate a wide geographical spread and also reflect a conscious effort on MenTRnet's part to propagate and support "de-centring", namely, a drive that promotes and celebrates local knowledge as opposed to "wisdom" parachuted in from the centre (Banegas et al, 2022; see Corona Gala's review (2024) on the related book, Padwad & Smith, 2023). It also needs to be stressed that networking in a global community of practice has become exponentially easier with the availability of the Internet and all the online tools and applications that we have seen spreading over the past decade (Martin, 2024).

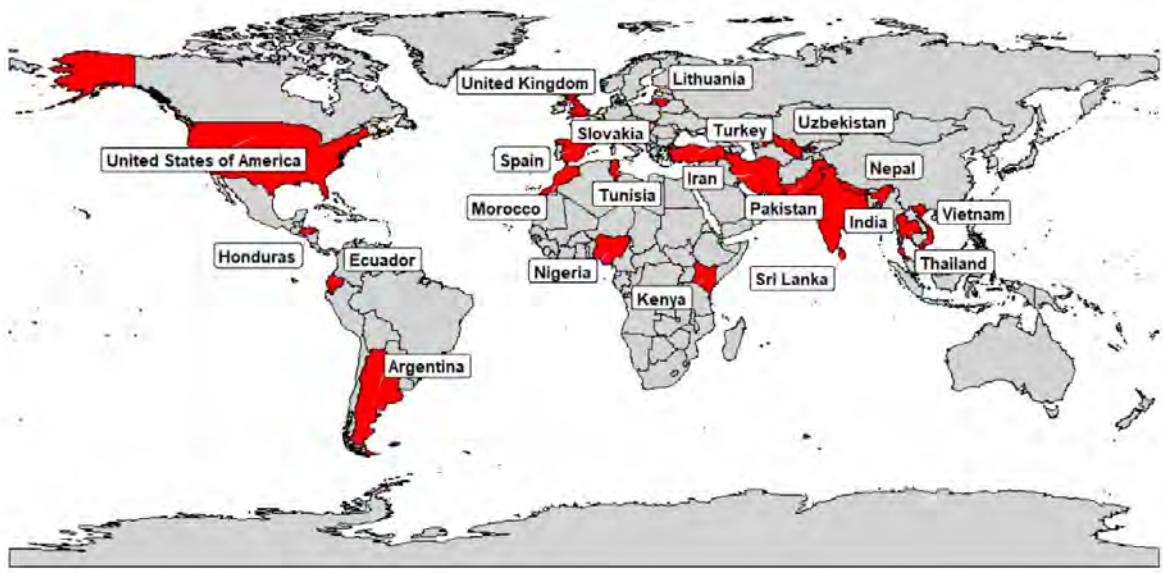

Figure 1.
The Geographical Spread of the Participants in the Writing Projects
Note: Based on articles and book reviews only.

Research Ethics

The 36 participants of the writing projects took part voluntarily and had no obligation to take on writing tasks or provide responses for the questionnaires. In fact, several opted out before or during writing for personal circumstances, such as COVID-19, sudden deaths in the family, accidents, and mental health problems. Each time somebody opted out, we made sure to explain that there will be further opportunities, and they can join writing projects when they feel they are ready to.

All those involved in the project were sent a copy of the present manuscript for "member checking", namely, to agree that the personal details included in it were up-to-date and also to confirm that our interpretation of the events was correct. They were also given the choice of being referred to anonymously or by their own given names, and all opted for the latter.

Data Gathering

The data discussed below were mainly gathered from the responses to the google form questionnaires sent out to (prospective) authors. A substantial amount of time was spent on collating and counting the data including the listing of publications (articles and book reviews) and work-in-progress type of writing (both for articles and book reviews). Further, we have compiled a detailed list of publishing outlets (a truncated list is contained in Appendix Table 1),

and put together all relevant information on editors, review editors, materials editors as well as those who are responsible for sending out printed and e-copies of books for review on behalf of publishers. We believe that all these will be useful resources for the MenTRnet community, four members of which are taking over the tasks related to mentoring and publishing later this year (July 2025) from the first author.

The google forms were sent out in 2023 and 2024, often in the form of personalized emails to seek feedback or support the upcoming writing task. Feedback was not gathered from the authors who published book reviews in 2025.

Table 1.
Description of the Key Characteristics of the Surveys Conducted

Name of the survey	Purpose	Number of respondents	Timing
The Prospective Book Review Writers Questionnaire (PBRQ)	To identify and connect potential book review writers within our community, and help us match them with suitable publishing opportunities.	20	sent out in 2024
The Book Review Questionnaire (BRQ)	To explore how far our members, in general, were prepared to write book reviews as a tool for continuous professional development.	7	sent out in 2023
The Book Review Feedback Questionnaire (BRFQ)	To gather data on the participants' recent book review writing experience. This was a follow-up to the Book Review Questionnaire that some of them filled in at the beginning of their book review writing journey.	11	sent out in 2023 and 2024

In total, 38 responses were received from members of MenTRnet (out of a community of more than 250 members). The feedback questionnaire was only administered to those who had written book reviews.

The professional profile of the participants is contained in Appendix Table 2. The data on the publishing output (see Figure 2 below) relate to the period between 2021 and early 2025 (the cut-off point was April 2025).

Findings and Discussion

Altogether, 34 members of MenTRnet and two external co-authors took part in the writing of articles and book reviews. It needs to be pointed out that the same members and others in MenTRnet have written several other articles, reviews, blog posts, and features over the same period of time (2021–2025), but they do not exactly come under the heading of our "mentoring writing" project. The latter has been characterized by a systematic search for various outlets for publishing classroom research, looking for suitable books to review, and identifying potential authors as well as providing continued support in the collaborative writing-up phase.

Data Gathered from Questionnaires PBRQ and BRQ

Even though the aim of the two questionnaires listed above was slightly different, we collapsed the data contained in both to focus on three main aspects: motivation, concerns and expectations of prospective book review writers.

It is important to stress that members in MenTRnet did not seem specifically interested in book review writing until the "publication nudger", Eli (based on her own book review writing experience) offered opportunities for others to do so. Therefore, first, we wanted to find out why prospective writers would come forward to take on the task when the occasion arose (the writing opportunities were announced in our groups.io community). Table 2 summarizes both the themes and the *verbatim* responses of some of the prospective authors.

Table 2.
Reasons for Volunteering to Write a Book Review

Enhancing writing skills	*"I am applying for a PhD so I want to develop my academic writing skill". (Gyanu)*
Interest in writing and publishing	*"To learn more both about writing in a new genre as well as about an area I work in". (Saba)*
	"I like writing book reviews". (Azadeh)
Learning the structure and techniques	*"I really want to know what's the structure involved in the book review, how the language should be, what are all the things we need to keep in mind while writing the review". (Vanita)*
Learning from more experienced peers	*"Collaboration with other team members and learning and developing skills when writing a review—and the best part, to be mentored by someone like Eli, who has so much expertise in book [review] writing and publishing to guide us in our journey". (Vanita)*
Enjoyment and personal engagement	*"I expect to learn to write a review, and also to enjoy the experience. (And of course, to raise curiosity and interest in my readers!)". (Maria Marta)*
Research and academic growth	*"I am an avid learner who enjoys reading and writing as well as analyzing and critiquing. This would be an opportunity for me to remain stimulated, updated, and engaged in ELT research". (Nada)*
	"It's something I've been thinking about for some time now. I see it as a motivational path to research work". (Isaac)
	"To contribute to academic discourse and share my expertise from my context as an English language teacher educator". (Cynthia)
Professional and career development	*"For my own CPD (Continuing Professional Development), as this is something I have never done till now". (Vanita)*
Contributing to the profession's knowledge base	*"Writing a book review for The Teacher Trainer Journal is a remarkable opportunity for me because this platform allows me to reach and influence an audience of dedicated educators, sharing insights from literature that can inform and enrich their teaching practices". (Krishna)*

The reasons that prospective authors gave reflects their intention to develop writing skills for a specific genre, the aim to promote their professional and career development as well as become part of a professional community and contribute to the building of the knowledge base of the profession. It is also notable that Isaac perceives book review writing as a potentially engaging way of setting him on the path of carrying out research projects of his own.

We also wanted to learn what kind of challenges the prospective book review writers thought they would face in the write-up phase. Table 3 presents the main themes and some excerpts from the responses given.

Table 3.
Challenges Expected by Prospective Review Writers

Writing academically, structuring the review	*"Organizing the ideas (book content and what I want to write about) in one piece of writing)". (Renu)*
Writing style observing the conventions of the genre	*"Adapting one's writing to the requirements of book reviews". (Sidney)*
Being objective	*"The greatest challenge will probably be providing a balanced and fair critique while highlighting both the strengths and weaknesses of the book without bias". (Isaac)*
Engaging readers	*"The greatest challenge would be to what extent the book review would reflect the content of the book and how it would fuel the audience's eagerness to read the book". (Maaouia)*
Lack of experience and confidence	*"I have never professionally written a book review and I think the urge to give a completely fair and insightful review in a wording that is clear and meaningful would make me ponder every word I write. That is why having a writing mentor would be of great help to me". (Nada)*
Finding time for writing	*"Time management and making notes for every chapter…". (Vanita)*
	"The timing may be an issue depending on my schedule". (Rasheedat)

The challenges that future authors could envisage highlight several different aspects that novice writers and busy teachers hoping to engage in writing often mention: writing academically (also engagingly!) and, within that area, following the conventions of the genre as well as displaying academic honesty and objectivity. They point out their lack of experience and, as a result, lack of confidence in their writing skills. Finally, they mention the very mundane but widespread issue of making time for this "extracurricular" activity.

As can be seen from Table 4 below, prospective writers were able to verbalize what kind of support they felt they needed from their writing mentors. Many of them had not written a book review before, but were ready to learn the specific skills related to the genre.

The themes mentioned in Table 4 are, in fact, *suggested solutions* to the challenges mentioned before: emotional support, readily available mentoring, considered and considerate feedback, and guidance from a more experienced peer.

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We were also wondering if the book review writers thought they would benefit from both the writing process and the fact that they managed to publish. The responses reflect that prospective writers could clearly see some benefits for their professional advancement by adding a new skill to their repertoire.

Table 4.
Support Expected from the Book Review Writing Mentor

Guidance in book review writing as a genre	*"Advice on how to proceed and some guidelines about the structure of the book review". (Samira)*
Providing feedback	*"Feedback on where I could improve, maybe suggestions on what to read to improve my review if necessary, clear communication to understand mutual expectations". (Hai Yen)*
Mentoring offered	*"[…] the mentorship makes it quite manageable as there's the trust that the trained eye can pick up errors and areas for improvement". (Isaac)*
Emotional support	*"[…] suggestions, encouragement, and motivation". (Cynthia)*

Table 5.
Potential Effects of Book Review Writing / Publishing

Improved critical thinking skills	*"Through the meticulous dissection of the book's content and the careful construction of a coherent review, I can prominently display my prowess in critical thinking and adept communication". (Renu)*
Continuing Professional Development (CPD)	*"Honestly speaking, CPD is indeed the key highlight but as a freelancer it will definitely help me then get into individual book review writing assignments to hone my skills". (Vanita)*
	"This achievement will be a notable addition to my professional portfolio, demonstrating my capacity for critical engagement and clear articulation of complex concepts". (Krishna)
Professional advancement	*"It will help me look for better prospects as a writer." (Saba)*
	"It gets me points, it is a great way to earn recognition". (Omid)
	"I have reviewed manuscripts for IGI Global publications for more than a decade. Now I am interested in reviewing books". (Revathi)
Networking	*"I am optimistic that the visibility and networking possibilities arising from this endeavor will lead to new opportunities for collaboration and career advancement". (Krishna)*

So "what's in it for them?" is a question that can be raised, and the respondents are vocal about how they perceive the potential benefits of book review writing: improved critical thinking skills, an engaging way to develop professionally, opportunities for promotion and professional advancement coupled with increased recognition and a chance that the process will lead to becoming a member of an extended network of ELT professionals (on occasion, even getting in touch with the author(s) of the book when a review comes out (Maksakova & Chumbi Landy, 2023).

The Book Review Feedback Questionnaire

A total of 11 out of 22 authors responded to the questionnaire (sent out in 2023 and 2024).

Reflections on the book review writing process.

The aim of this section is to describe how mentees felt about the book review writing experience. The mentoring was mainly performed by the first author (Eli), but she is soon (end of June 2025) handing over to a four-member publication support team within MenTRnet, and the learnings from recent book writing projects may be helpful in their work.

Feedback on authors' recent book review writing experience.

Respondents called it *"an insightful experience",* leading to a *"great sense of accomplishment"*, and felt *"motivated and empowered"*. *"Fulfilled"*, *"satisfied"* and *"proud"* were also mentioned, with the experience described as *"very enjoyable"*.

Nada's response is interesting, because it shows that sometimes it is only a bit of "nudging" and some regular "checking in" that is needed to get someone started on the road of writing, which is, arguably, the most difficult of the four language skills (Pardede, 2024) for both L1 and L+ speakers:

> *It was a great motivation and inspiration to read and get back to the ELT world of development and research. It has been a while since I read any ELT related books, so this, for one, made the experience useful. Secondly, I immensely enjoy writing especially knowing that I'd receive feedback and guidance. On my own, I am not sure what to write or how to improve what I write when I do.*

As for whether the experience was similar to what the authors anticipated, the whole spectrum was on display from *"exactly how I expected"* through to *"similar"* and *"much more difficult than I thought"*.

Anabella, who said that the experience was better than expected, explained it this way:

> *"I suffer from writer's block and I'm really self conscious, I always fear my colleagues or peers will heavily criticize what I wrote. If it were not for my mentor and co-author, I would have never sent a proposal"*.

Whilst *before* writing, the authors had a fair idea about what the anticipated challenges might be, *after* having written the reviews, the challenges that they were able to recall were a lot more specific:

- Formal language use, referencing conventions, journals' style guides
- Structuring the review, relatable language
- Keeping to the word limit
- Going through the comments and carrying out revisions
- Providing accurate critique tactfully; critical analysis while maintaining a respectful and objective tone
- Communicating with journal editors

We have suggested before that book review writing could be perceived as the "ante room" of "writing in earnest", namely carrying out your own research and writing it up. When

looking at the list above, it is quite clear that prospective authors will face the same or similar challenges, and for this reason, book review writing can be treated as a kind of "rehearsal" or "trial performance", especially when the reviewer delves into compiled volumes and feels that "I could write a chapter like this".

Altogether, when reflecting on the quantitative and qualitative data sets, we can confirm that even though the authors' book review writing experience brought a fair number of challenges with it, the overall positive feedback and the exceptionally high rate of acceptance (and publication, in due course) may be perceived as triangulated proof of the project's success. The narrative responses and the year-on-year increase in accepted and published book reviews show that the authors did not only enjoy the experience (several of them asking for further opportunities to write) but that their pieces were positively received and ultimately successfully shared with a wider, "real" readership. This kind of authenticity in writing projects is difficult to achieve (Banegas et al., 2020), and according to our best knowledge, there are only few that have so far combined genre instruction with genuine publication opportunities (for an example, see Orosz et al., 2019).

Outcomes

First of all, it needs to be stressed that feedback was requested from authors via personalized emails after their book reviews had been published. Further, however difficult (or not) the *process* might have been, the *product* was an unequivocal success. We have already mentioned how reputable ELT journals' acceptance rate hovers around 5-10% (Renandya & Floris, 2018). In our case, this figure is 100%. Out of 32 book reviews submitted between 2021 and April 2025, 32 were published or have been accepted for publication. It was only on one occasion that a book review was rejected, but a re-edited, shorter version of the same was soon offered to and accepted by another journal. This is not because our authors are extraordinary writers or that the journals are of less than excellent standing (see Appendix Table 1 for details), it is only that book review writers cannot easily suffer rejection once a piece has been commissioned and the mentoring of the writing process follows some straightforward and sensible steps (Békés, 2024c). The output related to articles and book reviews specifically is summarised in Figure 2 below.

So far in 2025, there have been no articles published, so that zero value does not show up on the bar graph.

As can be seen from the bar graph (Figure 2), writing activities started in a modest way in the years 2021 and 2022, but the published items were already there as samples or models for further writing in subsequent years. In 2023, even though there was only modest growth in our output, the upward trend continued. 2024 proved to be exceptionally successful: we have already mentioned the publication of *Stories of Mentoring Teacher-Research* (Smith et al., 2024), not included in the graph, but article writing beyond that volume also continued to flourish, with three of the five articles published appearing in *ELT Classroom Research Journal* (2024). More than a dozen book reviews also came out involving 14 authors altogether. Some of them acted as co-authors, while three of them published more than once (Abeer, Eli and Regina).

The year of 2025 has started well. At the time of writing (April 2025), three articles have been included in the present issue of *ELTCRJ,* and another has been submitted to the journal titled *Profile* by Seden and Mariana.

As for the book reviews scheduled for this year, six have already been published and 15 are in the "work-in-progress" stage, all commissioned for this calendar year or 2026.

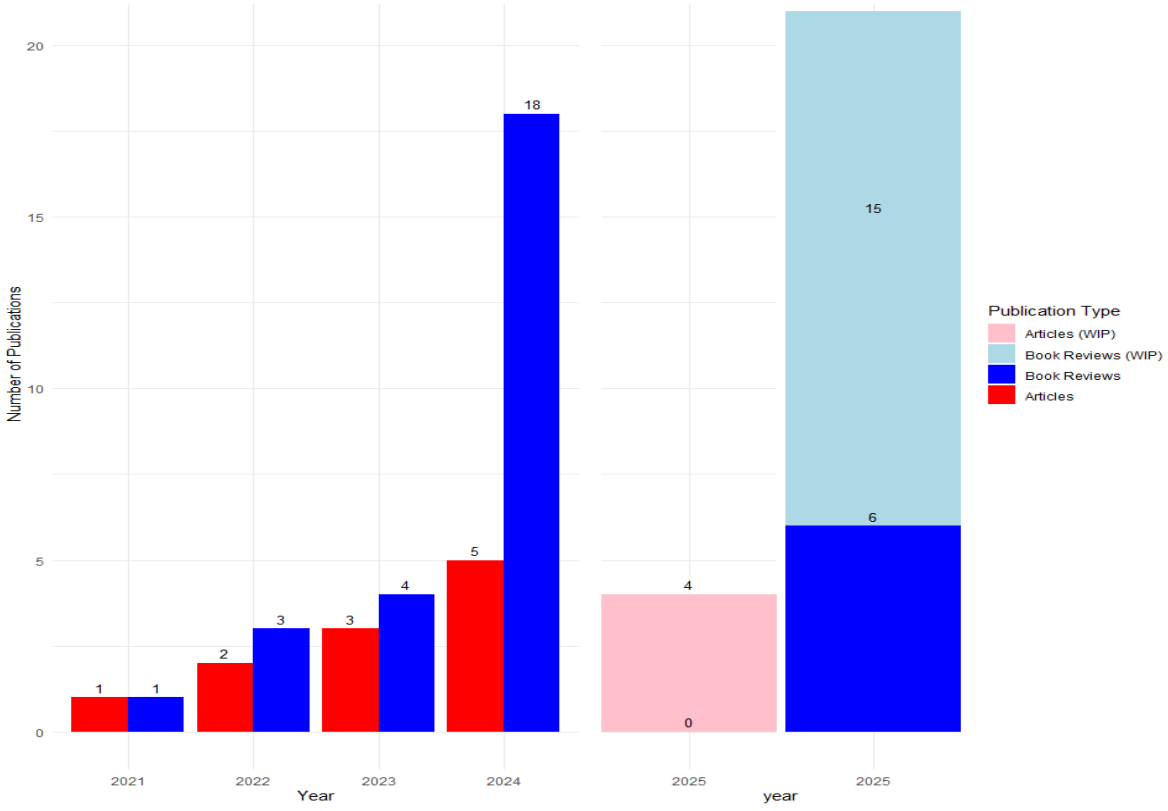

Figure 2.
MenTRnet Article and Book Review Publishing Output between 2021 and 2025
Note: WIP: work-in-progress

In the next section, we summarize the kind of support that book review writers found useful, including some suggestions for future writing projects.

Support Provided by the Book Writing Mentor

Respondents characterized the type of mentoring they received by mentioning the following elements:

- Continued support, encouragement, guidance
- Keeping track of progress
- Professionalism and expertise, efficacy and competence

Some mentees sent back fairly detailed responses that reflected how complex mentoring can be at several levels and in various roles as laid out in Malderez (2024):

Support role
[provided] … "unwavering encouragement and confidence boost". (Chang)

"She was at the reach any time her support was needed". (Maaouia)

> *"I felt supported from the very beginning. She checked in at different times to keep track of my progress but still gave me space to go on my own pace". (Nada)*
>
> *"We were supported and encouraged all along the process". (Maria Marta)*
>
> *"I [appreciated] her understanding of my feelings towards writing. We combined a professional and personal relationship by talking about family for example, that was humanising and helped me understand academic writers are not aliens". (Anabella)*

Acculturator

In book review writing contexts, this role includes not just introducing mentees to the world of publishing, of which Renandya succinctly says: "It is really a jungle out there" (2014, p. 2). It means introducing mentees to levels of formality, the in-house conventions and style guides of journals, preparing the authors for rigorous (and, on occasion, pedantic) peer review processes as well as modelling how to provide critique respectfully and considerately.

In this regard, Omid mentioned that he was given *"a structure to follow so I knew what main parts to write about"* while Chang wrote that *"Her willingness to guide me through the intricacies of book reviewing … was invaluable".*

Model

It is important that writing mentors should model behaviour, and what better way is there than for them to "walk the talk" and share their experience. Smith (2020) mentions several reasons why this should be so:

> Mentors, too, should reflect on and think about publicly sharing their experiences of mentoring teacher-researchers. You may need to report on your mentoring activity to a sponsor, or you may simply wish to record your experiences as a good way to complete a particular round of mentoring and as an opportunity to reflect and plan better for the future. You may also find that the data you gather in this process, with appropriate permissions from the teachers involved, can be used for a conference presentation and/or an article for a wider audience. (pp. 65–66)

Eli's mentees referred to several aspects of such modelling behaviour:

> *"Her professionalism and expertise were evident from the outset". (Chang)*
>
> *"She is open to suggestions and comments making the mentor-mentee relationship a two-way exchange of views, experiences and knowledge". (Mariana)*

She has also written widely on the topic (Békés, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c).

Sponsor

This aspect was not highlighted much in the feedback responses, since this role, which means "using your knowledge and contacts to help your mentee" (Malderez, 2024, p. 19) usually takes place behind the scenes. It involves finding opportunities, identifying the right outlet, negotiating with journal editors and making sure the mentees have the space and can shine on the stage built for them.

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Educator

In a mentoring relationship, mentors and mentees learn together. There are aspects (such as their local context) that the mentees have a lot more expertise in, while the mentor may have gained years of experience regarding a special aspect in (teacher-research) mentoring. In our case, the first author's experience in book review writing was the result of years of work in this area. As a more experienced peer, she had a lot to share, which her mentees were quick to point out:

> *"Regular interaction allowed for the continuous exchange of ideas, feedback and progress update". (Chang)*

> *"I loved her guiding questions, which came in ideal as a kick-off for writing"! (María Marta)*

Finally, some of the responses to how the book review writing mentor could improve their practice:

> *"By spending more time mentoring me, or mentoring me more often". (Omid)*

> *"Have more patience with mentees". (Cynthia)*

> *"I felt I might have benefitted from more frequent check-ins". (Rasheedat)*

> *"Personally, I was hoping for more feedback after the final submission of the review". (Nada)*

And something heartwarming for the technophobe that she is, says Eli:

> *"She is much more technologically skilled nowadays than what she used to be." (Mariana)*

Let's close this set of excerpts by a remark in response to whether the authors would like to write further reviews (as six out of the 11 respondents actually did!):

> *"Yes, I would. I benefited immensely from the experience. I was spurred to finish the book and I processed it on a deeper level than when just reading for information and pleasure. I would like to practice that level of reflection and analysis more often". (Rasheedat)*

Altogether, it seems to be the case that book review writing works best when the prospective authors feel supported in each and every stage of the process, from choosing the right book, to getting in touch with the potential outlets and facilitating the write-up in several rounds of revision, and ultimately making a submission. The process does not end there, as the editors and peer reviewers' comments will need to be taken on board until a manuscript is finally accepted and, in due course, sees the light of day and becomes – official!

Conclusion

In this exploratory report, we made an attempt to demonstrate how a community of practice (MenTRnet) has been supporting a dedicated group from among its more than 250

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members in their writing efforts. While writing for publishing is not the principal activity for the community's members, over the past couple of years there has been a notable rise in publications and a vigorous writing drive has resulted in a number of articles, book chapters, blogs and book reviews being brought out. With the help of a dedicated team of writing mentors and internal editors, MenTRnet members experienced both the challenges and the far-above-average success rate of their efforts. From among the types of academic writing, book review writing turned out to be highly regarded among members both for the opportunities that such activities may provide for professional development and for the opportunities it creates for book review writers, who might gain skills that they can use later on when they decide to disseminate their own teacher-research or teacher-research mentoring findings.

Book review writing has been a steep learning curve for both the authors and those of us who have been involved in managing and mentoring the process (increasingly passed on to a new team supporting writing and publishing). It is the authors' hope, though, that book review writing, as a niche genre of English for Research Publication Purposes, will remain an enticing and engaging activity for the members of our community of practice in the coming years as well.

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Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

The contributors have seen the contents of the manuscript, and the authors agree with the contents and the order of presentation. The listing of authors correctly identifies their level of contribution to this work.

Appendix Table 1.

Collaborating Journals

Journal's full name and short version	**Open Access (Yes or No)**	**Frequency of publication**	**Month of publication**	**Website**
Argentinian Journal of Applied Linguistics *AJAL*	Yes	Biannual	May and November	https://ajal.faapi.org.ar/ojs-3.3.0-5/index.php/AJAL
ELT Classroom Research Journal *ELTCRJ*	Yes	Biannual	April and October	https://eltcrj.com/
ELT Journal *ELTJ*	No	Quarterly	Jan/Feb/March, etc.	https://academic.oup.com/eltj
English Language Teacher Education and Development Journal *ELTED Journal*	Yes	Annual	Feb of the following year	http://www.elted.net/
ELT Research *ELT R*	No	Annual	Feb of the following year	https://resig.weebly.com/
Humanising Language Teaching *HLT*	Yes	Bi-monthly	Jan/Feb, etc.	https://www.hltmag.co.uk/
Modern English Teacher *MET*	No	Bi-monthly	Jan/Feb, etc.	https://www.modernenglishteacher.com/
The Teacher Trainer Journal	Yes	Quarterly	Nov/Dec/Jan Feb/March/ Apr, etc.	https://pilgrimsttj.com/
Voices	No	Bi-monthly	Jan/Feb, etc.	Membership magazine, no website Contact: editor@iatefl.org

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Appendix Table 2.

Participants' Professional Profile

First name	Country where you are from and where you reside now (if different)	The level you teach now (primary, secondary, tertiary, other)	Years of experience	L1	L+
Abeer	Egypt	Adults	28	Arabic/English	Arabic
Ana	Spain/UK	Teachers	31	English/Spanish	Portuguese French
Anabella	Argentina	Secondary, tertiary	10	Spanish	English, German and Portuguese
Anek	Thailand	Secondary	10	Thai	English
Chang	China	Tertiary & Secondary	11	Chinese	English
Chris	UK /Spain	Secondary	15	English/Welsh	Spanish Portuguese
Cynthia	Nigeria	Tertiary	25	Igbo	English French
Eli	Hungary/Ecuador	Tertiary (now retired)	50	Hungarian	English Spanish
Ella	Uzbekistan	Tertiary: Adults and young adults	12	Russian	English German
Ganga	Nepal	Tertiary	18	Nepali	English Hindi
Grazzia	Honduras	Tertiary	32	Spanish	English German Italian Portuguese
Gyanu	Nepal/UK	Secondary	18	Nepali	English
Hai-Yen	Vietnam	Various	7	Vietnamese	English German Chinese
Indra	Nepal	Secondary	17	Nepali	English
Isaac	Kenya/Sri Lanka	---	---	---	---
Khoi	Vietnam/Thailand	Teacher trainer	3+	Vietnamese	English
Krishna	Nepal	Tertiary	13	Nepali	English Hindi
Laxmi	Nepal	Secondary	15	Nepali	English
Maaouia	Tunisia	Teacher trainer	16	Arabic / Tunisian Arabic	French English
Maria	Slovakia	---	---	---	---
Mariana	Argentina	Secondary, university, adults	27	Spanish	English
Maria Marta	Argentina	Secondary (recently retired)	35+	Spanish	English Italian
Meifang	China/UK	Tertiary	15	Chinese Putian dialect	English
Nada	Egypt/US	Tertiary	10	Arabic	English
Nishtha	India	Primary	3 months	Hindi	English Punjabi
Omid	Iran/Ecuador	Tertiary	13	Persian	English Spanish

Rasheedat	Nigeria	Primary and Secondary	14	Yoruba	English
Regina	Mexico	Primary, Tertiary, ESP		Spanish	English
Renu	India	Secondary	31	Hindi	English, Marathi
Samira	Morocco	---	---	---	---
Seden	Türkiye	Tertiary ELT and English Translation Students	32	Turkish	English German (B1) French (A2)
Sidney	Australia/Spain	Other: adults	30	English/Spanish /Catalan	
Simona	Lithuania	Primary and adults	11	Lithuanian	English Spanish Russian
Teresa	Kenya	Tertiary	15	Dhoulo	English Kiswahili
Valeria	Ecuador	Tertiary	11	Spanish	English
Vanita	India	Tertiary and in-service teachers	17	Hindi Punjabi	English

Notes: --- data unavailable

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BOOK REVIEW

English Connects Action Research: Learnings from the African Classroom

Edited by P. Rebolledo, T. Okoth, & I. Simiyu (2023).
British Council (Dakar, Senegal)
Available online at
https://africa.teachingenglish.org.uk/education/publications/learning-from-the-african-classroom

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English Connects Action Research: Learnings from the African Classroom, edited by Paula Rebolledo, Teresa Okoth, and Irene Simiyu, is a compelling collection of teacher narratives that draw attention to the power of reflection through Exploratory Action Research (EAR) in English language education. This volume starts with an introduction that outlines the background and objectives of an initiative called English Connects Action Research program that supported teachers and encouraged classroom research. The British Council funded and launched this initiative in 2020, and a second cohort followed in 2022. The program included online and in-person training sessions, collaborative exploration of classroom challenges, and ongoing mentoring. Participants designed, conducted, and reflected on their own research projects, which they later shared in online events and in this publication. Their work illustrates how EAR leads to more student-centered teaching. The edition follows a group of twenty-two teachers from six sub-Saharan African countries: Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Mali, Djibouti, and Côte d'Ivoire. Furthermore, the authors bring their teaching experiences to life through their stories, showing how EAR helps them strengthen their practice.

The editors have divided this e-book into five thematically organized chapters, covering language skills, such as speaking, reading and writing (Chapters 1 and 2), pedagogical resources, classroom behavior, and teaching approaches. As a result, the reader envisions, and waits for, the moment when Africa intertwines in a common thread. This publication is an immersive experience of the authentic energy of the African classroom. Despite my being based in Mexico, the stories in this volume resonated deeply with me, transcending geographical boundaries. Teachers in Sub-Saharan African classrooms expressed shared human emotions and struggles that felt familiar. I kept nodding, seeing my struggles reflected in theirs: working with limited resources, facing inequality, and showing up every day with unwavering commitment to our students. Reflecting on their stories helped me reconnect with my purpose and reminded me of why we teach and how powerful it is when we pause, listen, and learn from each other.

Chapter 1 explores five stories about the difficulties and strategies related to speaking skills in the classroom. The stories are vivid and engaging, bringing this crucial but often elusive skill to life. The opening narrative sets the tone for Mayyada Assadig Hamdan Mohammed's research into the challenges primary school students face with speaking participation. Her action plan, which included pre-speaking activities and visual aids, significantly improved students' participation and confidence. In the second account, Bethel

Uzochukwu Udeh's exploration of her students' deficient performance in speaking English highlights the impact of socio-cultural factors. She points out the importance of engaging students through debates and impromptu speaking activities. The rest of this intriguing chapter presents even more compelling examples. Dagnachew Adefris tackled his first-year pedagogical science students' reluctance to speak English through EAR. Using questionnaires, observations, and interviews, he made an evidence-based decision and introduced think-pair-share. His findings aligned with Vygotsky's social constructivism, showed that peer interaction can reduce anxiety and foster inclusive dialogue and confidence. This demonstrates the power of student-centered and collaborative tasks. In a similar context, Mansaray (2021) emphasizes that developing proficiency in English takes time and patience; it is not an overnight process but an ongoing journey. Students can improve their speaking skills through tailored activities that actively engage them, boost their confidence, and promote regular English practice. This section offers clear practical ways to improve speaking skills and encourage an engaging and supportive classroom.

Chapter 2 delves into six stories that capture the struggles and achievements involved in learning to read and write. From teachers trying new techniques to students discovering their own potential, these narratives show us how sometimes a change of heart can lead to aha moments and breakthroughs in the classroom. Moreover, these narratives offer down-to-earth solutions and context-sensitive approaches to literacy instruction. In this chapter, Chinenye Bernard-Nnabuike's research focuses on the reading comprehension challenges faced by deaf students. She improved their skills by shifting lessons to morning hours and using visual aids, underscoring the need for tailored strategies in special education. Digital tools are also transforming literacy instruction, as shown by Patrice Kané and Moussa Tangara's innovative WhatsApp mentoring program. Their remote teacher support system led to notable improvements in challenging contexts. They observed significant improvements in teachers' approach to writing lessons and students' attitudes, reinforcing the positive impact of instructional changes. In a similar situation, mindset shifts among educators are reported to be just as crucial as instructional strategies. Mawela (2022) recognizes the importance of taking responsibility for students' writing development instead of attributing struggles solely to them. Both pieces of writing bring into focus how a shift in the teacher's mindset can benefit students. Mawela's perspective further aligns and supports Kané and Tangara's findings showing that a collaborative teaching approach improves writing skills. This section resonates with me because it emphasizes personalized, supportive, and dynamic teaching methods, which are crucial for fostering genuine literacy growth.

Chapter 3 points out a simple truth: the tools we use to teach can change everything in our classroom. From the fun of a new app to the connection we feel to relatable stories, the way we learn, everything shapes how we understand the world and ourselves. Through the next three narratives, this section highlights how innovative strategies such as digital tools, interactive reading techniques, or culturally relevant texts respond to the diverse needs of students and foster an inclusive learning environment. One particularly striking example is Sufian Mabarook's research on how using smartphones can enhance writing tasks. His findings reveal that integrating mobile technology not only improves student engagement but also bridges the digital skills gap, making learning interactive and accessible. Another standout case is Sarah Balogun's strategies for motivating students to read literary texts, such as reading aloud, group reading, and role play, fostering a love for literature while strengthening comprehension. Her practical techniques make literature engaging and her story particularly inspiring. Finally, the last story in this section, written by Geremew Wozie, further reinforces the power of culturally relevant reading texts. His student-centered approach helps students

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connect with content, enhancing comprehension and engagement. Together, these approaches illustrate the transformative effect of well-chosen instructional resources. When students experience learning as interactive, inclusive, and connected to their lives, they embark on a journey that inspires lifelong learning.

Chapter 4 delves into three thought-provoking accounts that emphasize the importance of classroom management, discipline, and student motivation. The stories provide valuable insights into creating an engaging and well-structured learning environment. The first account in this chapter featuring Abdisalan Muhumed's research on managing large classes through think-pair-share and peer feedback is particularly insightful. His approach encourages active participation and collaborative learning, making it a favorite for its effective solutions to common classroom challenges. A similar approach was implemented by Issa Tidiane Tounkara (2023) in his classroom, where students reflected on the benefits of working in pairs. One student noted that it "built self-confidence and gave me a sense of unity, complicity, and solidarity" (Tounkara, 2023, p. 68). This comment draws attention to the deeper impact of peer collaboration, reinforcing Muhumed's findings, demonstrating that structured interaction promotes a positive and efficient learning environment. Moreover, Muhumed's story subtly reminds us of the need for gender balance in focus groups, reflecting a commitment to inclusive gender-sensitive practices in African education. Making sure everyone feels included, especially female students, is important in many classrooms. We can almost feel the difference, can't we?

Bringing another layer to this part of the e-book, the third story by Yassin Mohamed Omar and Ali Farah Warsama highlights the role of moral support and student involvement in boosting motivation. Their approach addresses the emotional and psychological aspects of learning, making their story stand out for its holistic perspective. They found that having students have a say can encourage them to make a difference in their motivation levels. It is that feeling of 'someone believes in me' that is crucial for building communities and effective learning environments that meet students' academic and emotional needs. In short, it is about creating a classroom where students want to be. I appreciate that this section focuses on practical strategies and discipline management to maintain an engaging and well-organized classroom.

Chapter 5 explores the power of innovative teaching approaches in shaping students' success. The five stories are all about those sparks of brilliance that happen when teachers get creative and find ways to make learning click. The moments when students feel genuinely excited. This chapter's initial story presents Isaac Akinseye's research on improving spelling tasks through pre-practice and group activities is particularly insightful. His approach reduces student anxiety and builds confidence. Suddenly, spelling is not a mountain to climb anymore. It is a task students can tackle as a team, and we can almost see the relief on their faces.

Continuing this section's theme, the third narrative explores how Aliyi Hassen's work on strengthening programming skills through increased practice and coding clubs fosters creativity and problem-solving. His innovative techniques provide students with hands-on experience, engagingly improving technical skills to build something and figure things out together. Moving forward, the fifth story shifts the focus to Ahmed Shareef's research on the flipped classroom strategy which brings teaching up-to-date and improves learning outcomes by blending online and in-class activities. He shows us that prioritizing students' needs means effectively meeting them at their point of learning. In general, in this chapter, teachers are not

just teaching; they are showing their students that learning can be exciting, that they are capable of more than they think while making learning feel like a journey they are all on together.

I appreciate the unique perspective of African teachers, writing with great empathy, and understanding of their educational system's cultural nuances and complexities. In sub-Saharan Africa, Ubuntu is both a philosophical concept and a linguistic expression found in many Bantu-derived languages spoken across central, eastern, and southern regions. Ubuntu emerges from the Nguni language family, but its values transcend linguistic and geographical boundaries (Udom, 2024). One of the understandings of Ubuntu is the belief that "I am because we are," emphasizing interconnectedness, compassion, and shared humanity. This is deeply reflected in their teaching approach through the implementation EAR since growth and improvement are seen as collective efforts. To better understand the connecting idea of this volume, an African map in the very first pages of the e-book is presented to show a commanding view of the continent and indicate the local settings of the narratives. It is this map that further plays a key role in one's evolving awareness and the final representation of the African classroom. It becomes a visual and conceptual anchor for the reader as it shows that diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds embody a shared journey in which growth is a collective process. Besides, it adds to the reader's understanding of the volume as teachers come together in unity and shared purpose, conveying a sense of connection individually and collectively across the continent. Moreover, teachers' insights into diverse teaching practices make this volume a significant contribution to educational literature. However, the absence of page numbers hinders navigation, making it difficult for readers to reference specific sections or revisit ideas efficiently.

For anyone interested in improving English language teaching, this publication is an essential resource. It provides practical insights and evidence-based strategies that instructors, educators, researchers, and policymakers can apply in various educational settings. This volume of EAR stories is a powerhouse of hope and innovation for those navigating complex educational environments. As a result, it demonstrates how even minor changes can profoundly impact progress and achievement while guiding transformative practices and reshaping our societies.

Ultimately, this collection brings forward the transformative power of EAR and challenges us to reimagine our role as educators. The stories remind us that in the dynamic field of education, the most impactful educators are lifelong learners. Further, the experiences shared in the volume are relevant to the African context but also resonate globally, making it a pertinent read for those engaged in language education. Finally, this volume is also a vibrant reminder: excellent teaching connects us all, everywhere!

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The Reviewer

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Statement on Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. There is no financial interest to report. I hereby certify that the submission is my own original.

BOOK REVIEW

Stories of Mentoring Teacher-Research

Edited by R. Smith, S. Eraldemir Tuyan, M. Serra, & E. Á Békés (2024).
IATEFL/MenTRnet, 150 pages.
Available online at: https://mentrnet.net/mentoring-stories/

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As Exploratory Action Research (EAR) has become more widely practised in different countries as an approach to classroom based teacher-research, so has the number of publications with teachers' accounts of their experiences and what they learned on their research journeys (see British Council, 2013—2023) in a range of countries including Chile, Peru, Mexico or Senegal. However, little has been published by mentors who are the companions on the teacher-research journey. This book, entitled *Stories of Mentoring Teacher-Research,* fills that gap and will no doubt be the first of several publications describing the challenges and joys of mentoring a teacher and observing the transformation from teacher to teacher-researcher.

These stories emerged after an online event (IATEFL ReSIG, 2023), where the mentors shared their experiences of mentoring teachers who presented at the TeachersResearch! Online Conference (IATEFL ReSIG, 2021). The authors are 25 mentors from 15 different countries, mainly in the Global South, and describe a range of mentoring experiences and their accompanying challenges.

In the introduction, Smith et al. (2024) emphasise that the stories prioritise the mentors' experiences rather than any theoretical considerations in order to make the book appealing to a wider audience, and I will return to this point at the end of the review. The mentors were given guidelines to make the book "reader-friendly" as "the main intention would be to inspire others to engage in teacher-research mentoring and to provide practical support for such mentoring via concrete examples" (Smith et al., 2024, p.4).

There are twenty stories in all, which describe a range of challenges—from maintaining motivation to building rapport, to nurturing teacher agency, to building teacher resilience. The mentors worked in a range of contexts such as with pre-service/in-service teachers, large groups of mentees, colleagues, in difficult circumstances (Covid/war), in person/online, co-mentoring, etc. It is also important to bear in mind that, in most cases, mentors were volunteering their time and expertise.

The chapters follow a recommended format, which is a presentation of the setting and the participants, a description of the issue faced, and how the mentor addressed it in order to provide concrete examples of solutions providing practical support, as cited above.

It is impossible to do justice to all the stories, but I will highlight a few which I think exemplify a range of challenges and how mentors overcame these in a variety of ways. For example, three of the stories deal with mentoring large groups of teachers; these are by Chakrakodi (Chapter 4), Raju (Chapter 8), and Ekembe (Chapter 10). Both Chakrakodi and Raju set up a series of online tools to be able to communicate with mentees directly but asynchronously in order to motivate them, while Ekembe devolved responsibilities to mentees in order to create agency. As Ekembe states, "we should avoid universal prescriptions about mentoring and fully acknowledge contextual factors" (Smith et al., 2024, p. 79), as evidenced by these different approaches to a similar problem.

Two of the mentors describe their first experience of mentoring: Liu (Chapter 6) and Mačėnaitė (Chapter 5), and it is refreshing to see the candour with which they share their challenges. Mačėnaitė describes the apparently ordinary problems a beginning mentor faces, and despite all the author's doubts and misgivings, her mentee went on to do a larger research project on the basis of this initial classroom-research. Liu describes similar initial challenges and evaluated the success of the mentoring process on mentee achievements, proposed areas for improvement, and the need to find a balance between being passive/active as a mentor. These experiences will ring true with anyone who has undertaken mentoring of a teacher, whether it is of a colleague as in Mačėnaitė's case, or colleagues but at a distance, in Liu's case.

Motivation is a recurring challenge, and Zhuo's account (Chapter 7) describes a range of strategies, which evidence an admirable commitment to the process. These included: methods of communication, sharing opportunities for a sense of achievement through conference presentations, peer pressure/collaboration, insisting on reflection, encouraging teacher initiatives (e.g., collecting all the mentees' presentations into one document), and adjusting her own mentor mentality (not blaming herself if teachers are demotivated). She concludes that the strategies worked as all 11 teachers continued with their research activities after a year.

Another commonly faced challenge is the concept of research itself, either as being too "large" or academic, as sometimes expressed by teachers, or that EAR is too "small" as is sometimes felt by educators who have experience of academic research. These problems are addressed in two mirrored accounts by Shamin and Smith (Chapter 16), who mentored university teachers in carrying out EAR, and those same educators who then recount their own experience of mentoring teachers on placements: Ahmed et al. Chapter 17). While Shamin and Smith responded to Ahmed et al's initial reaction that EAR was not rigorous enough, the latter then went on to address their own mentees' view that classroom-research was too demanding. Their conclusion is valid for all mentoring journeys in, "viewing it as a non-linear process and coming to see it as a reflective process" (Smith et al., 2024, p. 124).

Other accounts describe challenging circumstances, such as Altae (Chapter 1) working with teachers in post-war Iraq or Severino (Chapter 2) in post-Covid Argentina. Other issues include writing good questions that allow mentees to delve deeper into their research questions (Mahorkar, Chapter 3) or establishing and maintaining rapport with a group of teachers in a different country (Chopra & Dahal, Chapter 9), an issue which is arising more as mentoring becomes increasingly common online.

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While I understand the co-editors' emphasis on making the stories accessible to all, I think we have now reached the stage where research can be carried out to underpin some of these mentoring practices. More formal research has its place and readership, and there is a wealth of practice and experience among this group of mentors.

I would recommend this book as a companion to Smith's (2020) *Mentoring teachers to research their classrooms: a practical guide* to any educator considering mentoring a teacher to carry out classroom-research. There are stories that illustrate each stage of the mentoring process and there is comfort to be drawn from seeing that the problems you face are not unique, and that there is a solution. As Raju states, "in a world where education serves as the cornerstone of progress, mentoring plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of teaching*"* (Smith et al., 2024, p. 66). I look forward to reading more stories such as these that illustrate the commitment and resilience of mentors.

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The Reviewer

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The author has no conflicts of interest to declare. There is no financial interest to report. I hereby certify that the submission is my own original.