

The Impact of Mentoring on English Language Teachers: A Case From Argentina

El impacto de la mentoría en los profesores de inglés: un caso de Argentina

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Despite evidence on the benefits of mentoring with beginning teachers, little is known about the impact of mentoring on experienced teachers. Based on a qualitative research design, this study explores mentoring with 11 teachers of English as an additional language (four mentors and seven mentees) during the COVID-19 epidemic. Data were gathered through mentees' journals, interviews, and documents. Drawing on thematic analysis, mentees were found to improve their teaching practice and develop their professional knowledge. Specifically, they displayed more sensitivity to learners, unleashed creativity, improved class management, strengthened relationships, increased motivation, and developed reflective competencies. The study argues that mentoring can allow all English language teachers to build knowledge *with* other teachers *from* their own experiences and *for* other teachers and educational stakeholders.

Keywords: continuing professional development, English language teaching, mentoring, teacher knowledge

A pesar de los beneficios que refiere la investigación internacional sobre la mentoría con profesores principiantes, poco se sabe sobre la mentoría con educadores experimentados. Este estudio cualitativo examina la mentoría con once educadores de lengua inglesa como lengua adicional con distintos grados de experiencia (cuatro mentores y siete mentorizados). Un análisis temático de los datos —recolectados de diarios, documentos y entrevistas— mostró una mejora en la enseñanza y el desarrollo profesional de los mentorizados en cuanto a la sensibilidad y relaciones con los estudiantes, la creatividad, la conducción de clase, la motivación y la reflexión. La mentoría permite a todos los educadores de lengua inglesa construir conocimiento *con* otros, *a partir de* la propia experiencia y *para* ellos mismos y otros actores de la educación.


Palabras clave: conocimiento de la enseñanza, desarrollo profesional continuo, enseñanza del inglés como lengua adicional, mentoría

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Introduction

International research evidence reveals substantial benefits when beginner English language teachers and teachers of other subjects engage in mentoring as a form of continuing professional development (CPD) (Aliaga-Salas, 2018; Banegas, 2022; Bao, 2021; Chan, 2020; Grassinger et al., 2010; Griffiths et al., 2020; Hobson et al., 2016; Lasater et al., 2021; Mullen, 2021). However, little is known about the impact mentoring has on English language teachers of varying degrees of experience since most studies have been conducted with early career teachers. Because of this—and concerned about supporting English language teaching (ELT) educators' CPD during the disconcerting times caused by the COVID-19 pandemic—we, members of the Public Schools special interest group (SIG) from the Buenos Aires English Teachers' Association (APIBA) set up a mentoring programme involving ELT educators of different degrees of experience. We also designed a research project to determine the initiative's impact.

Grounded in sociocultural theory (Johnson, 2006), this study aims to understand how the abovementioned mentoring scheme, as a way of CPD, helped support ELT teachers. In particular, we sought to find out how the mentees viewed the mentoring and how it impacted their CPD. To that end, we reviewed the literature on mentoring and analysed the data we had gathered from the study. We explored the mentoring process from the mentees' point of view.

Conceptual Framework

Mentoring is a well-established practice in education. It ranges from formally institutionalised endeavour within a specific scheme or programme (Aliaga-Salas, 2018; Hobson, 2016) to a self-driven informal tradition among colleagues (Tracey et al., 2008). The concept of mentoring goes back to Homer's *Odyssey* times (Grassinger et al., 2010). In the Greek poem, Odysseus's friend, Mentor, is entrusted with the education of Odysseus's son. Thus, in its roots, mentoring harbours

concepts such as protection and guidance. Since then, mentoring has evolved into a much less overarching term focusing mainly on support, learnacy (Claxton, 2004), agency, reflective practice, and acculturation (Aliaga-Salas, 2018). Mentoring has been implemented within institutions mainly to help beginner teachers adjust to the school culture (Gakonga, 2019) and less frequently outside the school-university domains (e.g., Banegas, 2022).

For this study, mentoring has been conceptualised as a “two-way process that develops a reflective approach to learning through the key processes of collaboration, dialogue, observation, critical reflection, and enquiry” (Griffiths et al., 2020, p. 211). This definition foregrounds relationships as “structures through which individuals and groups engage in conversations,” which, in turn, promote professional development (Cherkowski & Walker, 2019, p. 346). Hence, the present study is grounded in a sociocultural approach, which regards learning as a social process where the context in which each person lives plays a crucial role in the development of that person and, in turn, through participation, each influences their social context (Lantolf et al., 2018; Vygotsky, 1978; Williams et al., 2015).

The literature on mentoring has identified benefits for both mentors and mentees regardless of teachers' subject specialisation (Griffiths et al., 2020; Kochan & Trimble, 2000; Woloshyn et al., 2019), as well as for the broader educational systems within which they are situated (Hobson et al., 2009). These gains include the development of mentees' teaching skills, self-reflection, confidence, and self-esteem (Gakonga, 2019; Hobson et al., 2016; Lindgren, 2005; McIntyre & Hagger, 1996). During 2020–2021, research emerged to specifically address mentoring carried out online during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing nurturing (Ersin & Atay, 2021; Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Lasater et al., 2021). In such cases, mentoring has been shown to facilitate educators' development in the face of instability (e.g., Banegas, 2022; Chan, 2020; Mullen, 2021).

Mentoring appeared to be successful in ELT when it evidenced: (a) a clear purpose (e.g., a scheme outcome); (b) unified conceptualisation (e.g., participants showed an understanding of mentoring); (c) choice (e.g., mentees select mentors and whether to engage in mentoring or not); (d) review (e.g., mentors and mentees identify concerns in their relationship and make the necessary adjustments); (e) individualisation (e.g., mentees' specific needs tailor the mentoring process; and (f) support (e.g., participants are supported throughout the programme) (Gakonga, 2019; Hobson et al., 2016). Furthermore, it has been found that mentoring calls for non-hierarchical, off-line relationships, that is, outside line management or supervision, which are not tasked with evaluation (Hobson et al., 2016).

From a sociocultural perspective, and in the ELT context, in particular, mentoring has been regarded as a form of CPD—teachers build knowledge through mentor–mentees' interaction provided teachers have the affordance to do so (Banegas, 2022; Banegas & Glatigny, 2021; Gakonga, 2019; Johnson, 2006; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Messiou & Ainscow, 2020; Williams et al., 2015). Mentoring offers guided reflection and emotional and technical support (Gakonga, 2019). Hence, participants see how they shape their learning. Likewise, CPD programmes aim to help teachers develop insights to improve the quality of learners' learning (Cordingley et al., 2015). Impactful CPD initiatives in ELT address the diverse needs of teachers, are prolonged, offer support towards the co-construction of contextual knowledge, deepen the teachers' capacity to reflect and make informed decisions (Gakonga, 2019; Schön, 1991), and raise awareness of the effect of their teaching on student learning (Cordingley et al., 2015; Richardson & Díaz-Maggioli, 2018). Moreover, teachers' reflective practice has been found to foster changes in pedagogical beliefs and enhance teacher expertise—both mentoring's and CPD's ultimate purpose (Banegas, 2022; Richardson & Díaz-Maggioli, 2018). Not many accounts of socially built teacher knowledge have found their way into the ELT literature.

The research on mentorship in ELT has been explicit about how mentoring has been carried out (e.g., individually, collectively, in person, online, within and outside an institution) and what it has aimed to achieve (e.g., informed reflective practice, acculturation, support, learnacy, and agency) (Aliaga-Salas, 2018; Gakonga, 2019). It is fair to say that most of the literature deals with mentoring as a formal undertaking; that is, mentors usually take over a mentoring role within the context of a broader scheme (Butcher, 2002; Gakonga, 2019; Hobson, 2016; Kay & Hinds, 2002). Meanwhile, informal mentoring seems to be an under-researched practice (Tracey et al., 2008).

Even more importantly, the literature on mentoring in ELT has—with rare exceptions (e.g., Bao, 2021; Wasner, 2020)—exclusively focused on novice or preservice teachers (Aliaga-Salas, 2018; Gakonga, 2019; Hobson, 2016) and student-teachers in their practicum (Chan, 2020; Díaz-Maggioli, 2014; Tian & Louw, 2020). Novice teachers—also referred to as early career, newly qualified, or beginning—are teachers in their first year at school with a maximum of three years' teaching experience (Gakonga, 2019; Hobson et al., 2009; Shin et al., 2021). The assumption seems to be that mentoring only benefits teachers with little or no experience. Thus, this study seeks to explore mentoring with teachers of varying degrees of expertise who voluntarily engaged in mentoring as an alternative form of CPD during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most teachers may have felt it was like starting from scratch (Banegas, 2022).

The following questions guided the present study:

RQ1: How did mentees view mentoring as a way to develop professionally?

RQ2: How did mentoring impact mentees' CPD?

Method

This small-scale exploratory study is framed within a qualitative research paradigm (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The study focuses on a mentoring experience in Buenos Aires during the COVID-19 pandemic in

2021. It considers the views of the participating mentees (English language teachers) through their reflection in journals, in-depth interviews (Mann, 2011) and some internal documents. Through such a qualitative lens, we seek to understand the views of those who participated in the mentoring experience by analysing their discerned purposes, lived experiences, and situated paths.

Context

The study was conducted for five months (April–August) in 2021, initially with ten English language teachers who met at APIBA Public Schools SIG. A mentoring scheme was set up for English language teachers who worked in public schools, regardless of whether they attended the Public Schools SIG. The study took place in Buenos Aires, where, to our knowledge, neither face-to-face nor online mentoring existed in ELT.

Grounded in a sociocultural view of teacher education, that is, acknowledging that knowledge emerges from the interaction as a mediated and situated activity (Lantolf et al., 2018), we embarked on a mentoring scheme as an alternative form of CPD with ELT teachers with varying degrees of experience. The programme's aims were (a) to support teachers at a critical time and (b) to help them develop professionally.

The programme had the following key features: (a) participation in the mentoring project was voluntary and pro-bono; (b) mentors were experienced ELT educators and mentees were TESOL teachers of public schools; (c) mentors were free from evaluating mentees; (d) mentor–mentee pairs met regularly via videoconferencing and gathered data from their experience; (e) voluntarily, some mentors and mentees carried out the present study.

At the start of the project (April), each educator in the SIG chose to act as a mentor or mentee. Four teachers with over 15 years of experience decided to be mentors, and seven teachers with less experience chose to be mentees. A few weeks into the mentoring experience, there were several changes, such as one mentor changing mentees due to a clash of roles. During the mentoring

experience, there were several causes of preoccupation: the pandemic itself, the mentor–mentee relationship, their communication, each participant's affordance of mentoring, and an awareness of the educational loss in learners with hardship at home and no connectivity.

Against this backdrop, three teachers acted as mentors, one as a co-mentor—since she arrived late into the distribution of roles—and seven chose to be mentees (the mentee who changed mentors was counted twice to be able to explore both experiences). Mentees chose their mentors from the very few options available. Because of the low number of mentors, there was more than one mentee per mentor. There were no pre-agreed guidelines on how mentoring would be carried out. Based on an initial meeting, each mentee–mentor pair set up their own ground rules, such as confidentiality and goals. Most mentor–mentee couples met once a week on Zoom or Skype, communicated via WhatsApp in between meetings, and opened a shared Word document on Google Drive to write ideas and reflect after each session. The approximate number of weekly hours pairs devoted to mentoring ranged from two to four, including writing their reflective journals. Journal entries did not follow any specific format but consisted of taking stock of the topics dealt with during the meeting, followed by a 250/300-word reflection.

Two mentees, two mentors, and one co-mentor made up the present study research group to analyse the data and write about the experience. All mentees but one had the chance to choose the group of learners to focus their mentoring on, usually the most challenging class.

Participants

There were 11 participants in this study: seven mentees, three mentors, and one co-mentor. Mentees were teachers of English as an additional language (Table 1) of varying degrees of experience who worked at state-run primary or secondary schools in Buenos Aires or the province of Buenos Aires (Argentina). Most mentees teach 18 hours a week in various schools to students learning English as

an additional language for approximately three hours a week. Most of them held a teaching degree from a higher education institution or a university in Argentina, except for two mentees close to graduating. It is important to point out that most teachers in Argentina start teaching without a teaching degree due to the high demand for ELT educators across the country. The preceding has a knock-on effect on how experience is considered before

graduation, as evidenced by some mentees who perceived themselves as beginner teachers when they had several years of experience (Table 1). Mentors were experienced teachers with over 15 years of experience, with master's and postgraduate degrees, while the co-mentor was a novice teacher with seven years of experience. This paper's research team and authors consisted of two mentees, two mentors, and a co-mentor.

Table 1. Mentees' Academic Background

Mentees' pseudonyms	Years of teaching experience	Self-perceived teaching experience	XX SIG member	Graduate (G) / Non-graduate (NG)	Number of classes (groups) taught throughout the week	Number of weekly hours (60 min) taught in the group/s chosen for mentoring
Antonella	20	Experienced	Yes	NG	4	4
Cecilia	14	Early career	Yes	G	8	2
Dora	9	Early career	No	G	6	1.5
Gabriela	12	Experienced	No	G	6	3.5
Lara	5	Early career	Yes	NG	2	5
Mara	15	Experienced	Yes	G	10	3
Sarah	7	Early career	Yes	G	6	2

Written consent was obtained from all participants. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, anonymity, and participants' right to withdraw their consent without any consequences were observed. Mentees were informed that the data collected through journals and interviews would be used for a research study and that they would have the chance to validate the data and read the study before publication (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from mentees' journals (except for one) to find out the mentees' views of mentoring and the impact mentoring had on their CPD; an 8,396-word shared document on Google Drive that

contained minutes from participants' meetings, as well as in-depth interviews on Google forms, completed by all but two mentees. There were 53 journal entries gathered; on average, each mentee wrote nine entries (each containing around 300 words). Mentees wrote in English, the language of instruction. Although there were no guidelines for journal entries, all participants summarised the meetings first and wrote their reflections in the narrative form below.

In-depth interviews were conducted through Google forms. They consisted of 15 questions in English, and the research team could ask probing questions if needed through a video call. We sought to triangulate sources and points of view and acknowledge the ecology of the mentoring scheme, that is, understanding participants'

data within the contexts of the systems they work at and live in (Banegas, 2022; Edwards, 2020; Gibson, 1979).

We carried out an iterative and inductive thematic analysis (Cohen et al., 2018). Data were first analysed individually by each researcher before working as a group to reach a consensus. With the focus questions in mind, the data were read to identify axial codes and emerging themes directly connected to the research questions (Mertens, 2015). Data segments were selected and copied onto a shared Excel document. Then, for the sake of the study scope, data addressing only two main themes were identified and colour-coded: the participants’ view of mentoring and the impact mentoring had on their CPD.

Table 2 shows the axial codes in direct line with the two overall themes guiding this study and some extracts from the data which exemplify each main sub-theme. We acknowledge that the axial codes listed at the head of the list and those indented below are not exact synonyms but were seen as extended synonyms in this analysis. This analysis was carried out by the whole research team, who met online to agree on the analysis, to add to the reliability of an interpretive-natured study and acknowledged that assigning codes and showing their interconnectedness is a highly subjective task (Bell & Waters, 2014). All mentees engaged in member-checking, and none requested data analysis and interpretation changes.

Table 2. Thematic Analysis

Themes	Axial codes	Data segment example
Views	CPD valid form	
	Professional improvement	“Mentoring should definitely be put into practice as teachers’ situated CPD.” (Gabriela)
	Professional development	
	Learnacy	
	Situated	
	Context-driven	“I could find myself with real tools, designed for the class I was teaching, for the real children.” (Gabriela)
	Tailor-made	
	Practice-oriented	
	Down-to-earth	
	Genuine	
Inclusive		
Horizontal	“We built an inclusive community of practice.” (Dora)	
Democratic		
Distributed responsibilities		
Dynamic		
Flexible	“It was very dynamic and flexible. We would reschedule meetings.” (Antonella)	
Supportive		
Caring	“[There was] evidence of flexibility, commitment, empathy and respect for others and generosity.” (Sarah)	
Empathy-driven		
Sensitive		
Relationship-bound		
Goal-oriented	“We discussed our mentoring goals and our teaching goals.” (Dora)	
Clear framework	“We needed a clear framework.” (Lara)	

Themes	Axial codes	Data segment example
Views	Build knowledge Knowledge-building	“We built a team and we built knowledge (what to teach, how).” (Sarah)
	Time-consuming	“Making time requires effort and we usually tend to prioritise activities that allow us to earn a living or give us other types of personal gain.” (Lara)
Impact	Motivation Confidence Empowerment Inspiration Engagement Renewal Enlightening	“Increasing my motivation.” (Lara)
	Agency	“Sarah led the entire session today.” (Sarah)
	Improved teaching Technical support Help in teaching Emotional support Theory into practice Creativity Informed decisions	“I added new insights and ways of working to my teacher toolbox.” (Lara) “Focusing on one class has had an impact on all my teaching.” (Gabriela)
	Acculturation	“Mentoring helped me understand better how schools work.” (Lara)
	Interaction development Active listening Attention Listening development Narrating Dialogue Conversation	“We learnt how to be better listeners, here and with learners.” (Gabriela)
	Collaboration We Community Group work Strengthened relationships Bond Two-way Community of practice Learning community Learning with others Empathy Interculturality Other Diversity	“There was flow, collaboration and genuineness.” (Gabriela)

Themes	Axial codes	Data segment example
Impact	Self-generated learning Reflective practice Learning from others Outsider Evidence-based Data-driven Data Samples Pictures	“Learning has been so much faster because this experience is tailor-made.” (Gabriela)
	Knowledge construction Contextualised tools Socially-constructed Inventing	“I shared the outcomes with my mentor, and, based on that, we developed a course of action: We built knowledge together.” (Gabriela)
	Learners	“I realised mentoring did not only benefit me, but also them [learners].” (Gabriela)

Findings

Below we describe the research findings, grouped into two main areas corresponding to the research questions that drove the study.

Mentoring as a Way to Develop Professionally

An analysis of the mentees’ data shed light on how English language teachers viewed mentoring as a form of CPD. Most of the findings coincide with the literature (Cherkowski & Walker, 2019; Gakonga, 2019; Griffiths et al., 2020; Hobson et al., 2009), revealing mentoring to be seen as situated, inclusive, dynamic, supportive, and time-consuming. It was also viewed as an endeavour that required a clear goal and framework and allowed mentees to build knowledge with others (see Table 2).

It came as no surprise that the emotional and social dimensions (feeling of pride and sense of belonging and collegiality) also present in the literature (Ersin & Atay, 2021; Kutsyuruba & Godden, 2019; Lasater et al., 2021) were central in the data due to the extra pressure which the COVID-19 pandemic put on teachers and learners, as Antonella voiced:

Extract 1

We spent quite a bit of time on the importance of reinforcing the bond and checking on the emotional state of the students, as well as on us. (Journal)

While the literature describes mentoring as support from one person to another (Clutterbuck, 2014; Gakonga, 2019), data analysis from participating teachers with varying degrees of expertise who benefited from mentoring in this study exposes teachers’ need for a bottom-up reflective practice. This allowed them not only to get support to improve the quality of learners’ learning but also to “explore [their] creativity” (Lara, Interview, Extract 2) and build their knowledge as locals to their contexts (Johnson, 2006; Johnson & Golombek, 2011), as Extract 3 from a mentee illustrates:

Extract 3

I am anchoring every week our shared ideas in my own practice, for example, observing learners’ diversity, and I am learning from my practice by telling you about it and finding meaning in what happened. . . . We’re inventing a way of improving. (Gabriela, Journal)

The analysis of the data also revealed a sociocultural perspective of learning in participants who benefited from mentoring, placing interaction in English centre stage:

Extract 4

Conversations are very rich to clarify understandings. We reflected on my practice and built collective knowledge. (Sarah, Journal)

Moreover, data analysis exhibits “the core role which relationships played in mentoring, sustaining our motivation” in an endeavour viewed as horizontal and democratic, that is, with consented proceedings (Sarah, Minutes of meeting, Extract 5).

The analysis of the data also exhibited that the view of mentoring as a two-way practice that pursued socially-constructed knowledge might have discouraged participants with a more top-down expectation of learning, as Extract 6 from a mentee who dropped out from the mentoring programme shows:

Extract 6

I wanted to learn from people who had more experience in the field, who could provide me with new ideas. (Dora, Interview)

Furthermore, mentoring was viewed as a time-consuming and self-generated venture. In Gabriela’s words: “What seemed to make the community of practice fruitful was what we put into it” (Journal, Extract 7). It seems to address a core issue in how mentees who benefited from the scheme conceptualised mentoring in this study—namely, teachers as protagonists of their learning.

The data analysis also revealed mentoring as a practice that helped teachers to reflect on their views based on their own lived classroom experiences (Extracts 8 and 9). Mentoring was also seen as a dynamic activity (Extract 10).

Extract 8

Our meeting gave us insight on the present situation and ways to overcome the difficulties. (Antonella, Journal)

Extract 9

I could find myself with real tools, designed for the class I was teaching, for the real children. (Gabriela, Interview)

Extract 10

You don’t always have the words for what you want to say, so when you have them you write your thoughts or arrange a call. (Gabriela, Journal)

In line with the literature on mentoring as a form of CPD with early career teachers (Banegas, 2022; Banegas & Glatigny, 2021; Gakonga, 2019; Johnson, 2006; Messiou & Ainscow, 2020), the analysis of the data from teachers of varying degrees of experience revealed that mentoring was viewed as a “valid way of CPD” (Antonella, Journal, Extract 11). Furthermore, some mentees seemed to change their minds, such as Gabriela, who had negative feelings towards traditional CPD (Extract 12), but after the study, she saw mentoring as an excellent alternative to CPD (Extract 13).

Extract 12

I have always felt that these courses [traditional forms of CPD] were not easily applicable to the contexts where I work. Thus, I would leave the training sessions with a sour feeling of having wasted my time. (Interview)

Extract 13

Mentoring . . . should definitely be put into practice as . . . teachers’ situated CPD. (Interview)

Impact of Mentoring on the Mentees’ CPD

Aligned with studies on mentoring with early career teachers (Aliaga-Salas, 2018; Banegas, 2022; Gakonga, 2019; Hobson et al., 2016; Lindgren, 2005; McIntyre & Hagger, 1996), data analysis from English language teachers with varying degrees of expertise revealed that mentoring impacted positively on their CPD. It was unexpected, considering that most teachers had some

teaching experience, and the mentoring experience lasted only five months. However, the data analysis revealed that participants benefited from mentoring regarding their (a) teaching practice and (b) teacher development (Table 2), as Gabriela reflects in a journal entry:

Extract 14

It has been a thoroughly enlightening experience, from which I was able to be listened to and learn, get a different point of view to solving everyday issues in the foreign language class.

In line with previous studies on mentoring with early career teachers, enhanced teaching practice (Gakonga, 2019; Hobson et al., 2016; Lindgren, 2005) was seen, for example, in teachers becoming more sensitive to individual learners, as Gabriela states in Extract 15.

Extract 15

I feel connected to the children for the first time in ages. I feel I have an educational goal; I feel I am their educator, not the technical entertainer like they once made me believe I was. (Journal)

There was also reference to developed teaching strategies such as teachers unleashing their creativity (“I explored my creativity as regards activities.” Lara, Interview, Extract 16); “improving class management,” (Lara, Journal, Extract 17); and showing “inclusive strategies, flexibility beyond planned [tasks] and achiev[ing] the goal of teaching learners how to learn” (Sarah, Journal, Extract 18). Teachers acknowledged that some of the teaching strategies they were using were inspired by those enacted in mentoring, such as flexibility, sensitivity, and inclusion, as Gabriela reflects in her journal: “In a way I am mirroring what we do together, how we listen to each other and how we learn” (Extract 19).

Teacher development was accomplished due to strengthened relationships between mentors and mentees. Sarah pointed out: “I carried on mainly because of [the relationship we have built]” (Minutes of meeting,

Extract 20). Echoing previous studies on mentoring with early career teachers (Hobson et al., 2016; Lindgren, 2005), teacher motivation also indicated teacher development, as shown in Extract 21.

Extract 21

This mentoring experience has been empowering me beyond my initial expectations. I now feel the theory we’ve read and talked about in my body. (Gabriela, Journal)

In addition, mentees pointed out developed competencies such as interaction, collaboration, and reflection, as stated by Sarah: “We developed our competencies, connecting theory and practice such as reflecting critically, interacting, and creating” (Journal, Extract 22).

Data analysis also showed developed reflective competencies leading to socially-constructed knowledge, which seems to be the most significant finding of this study. As Extract 23 indicates, mentees viewed themselves as protagonists of their learning:

Extract 23

I shared the outcomes with my mentor, and, based on that, we developed a course of action: We built knowledge together and then I shared what I learnt with other colleagues from school. They were all very interested because they saw how the children were responding. (Gabriela, Interview)

This bottom-up approach to learning which mentoring seems to have made possible, resulted in the sense of ownership and agency in the teachers. They built with others knowledge that was context-driven. It also hints at the trickle effect that teacher knowledge may have: Extracts 23 and 24 evidence the effect mentoring had on Gabriela’s CPD: “I’ve redefined and reassessed my teaching profession, satisfied with the meaning I take from my work” (Journal, Extract 24).

Consistent with the literature on how teachers build knowledge (Johnson & Golombek, 2020), the learning process teachers engaged in voluntarily was

acknowledged to be emotionally driven, socially bound, and individually based.

Below we will discuss the implications of mentoring as an alternative form of CPD with English language teachers of varying degrees of experience during a critical period such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

In this study, we sought to answer two research questions: how mentees viewed mentoring as a way to develop professionally and how mentoring impacted the mentees' CPD. In line with the literature reviewed (Aliaga-Salas, 2018; Banegas, 2022; Bao, 2021; Chan, 2020; Gakonga, 2019; Grassinger et al., 2010; Griffiths et al., 2020; Hobson et al., 2016; Lasater et al., 2021; Mullen, 2021), primarily focused on novice or preservice teachers—defined as teachers in their first year at school with a maximum of three years' teaching experience (Gakonga, 2019; Hobson et al., 2009; Shin et al., 2021)—the findings in this study showed mentoring as a promising alternative for English language teacher's CPD (Extract 13), especially during a critical time such as the COVID-19 epidemic. Our findings revealed that mentoring improved teaching practice and professional development regardless of the participants' teaching experience (Extracts 14, 18, and 22). One important caveat is that, at the time this study took place and given the unsettling context, even experienced teachers may have felt they were starting all over again (Banegas, 2022). This backdrop may have added extra motivation to those experienced and less experienced participants who remained in the mentoring programme. Conversely, it may have put extra pressure on those teachers who dropped out, regardless of their length of teaching experience.

The findings in this study allude to the critical role that mentees' conceptualisation and affordances of mentoring played in the impact mentoring had on their CPD, as well as how their learning views contributed to shaping their own learning experience (Extract

4). Some mentees viewed mentoring as a two-way bridge, allowing them to exercise their agency while benefiting substantially. They considered mentoring an inclusive and dynamic approach to learning through collaboration, dialogue, observation, critical reflection, and enquiry (Griffiths et al., 2020). Other mentees either did not view the mentoring scheme this study focused on as a good CPD experience or gauged the commitment it involved as beyond their possibilities and, therefore, withdrew. Findings showed that the latter were not game-changers—inspiring other colleagues or influencing educational policy—but game-players (Extract 6).

As opposed to other forms of CPD, mentoring has been found to offer English language teachers the possibility to engage in situated, needs-driven, personalised professional conversations to develop an informed view of their contexts and find ways not only to overcome difficulties but also to build teacher knowledge (Extracts 3 and 23). This last finding seems to add new knowledge to the literature on mentoring. The research on mentoring reviewed in this study (Banegas, 2022; Bao, 2021; Chan, 2020; Gakonga, 2019; Griffiths et al., 2020; Lasater et al., 2021; Mullen, 2021) reported improved development of mentees' teaching skills, self-reflection, and confidence, as well as higher teacher retention rates and enhanced wellbeing and teacher learning. Regarding this last repercussion, enhanced teacher learning, the literature is not explicit on whether that refers to teachers displaying improved competencies when teaching learners or whether teachers would also share their renewed views and practices with colleagues. This broader perspective of professional development is what the findings in this study explicitly forefront (Extracts 23 and 24). Although very limited in scope, the findings in this study show the advocacy of teachers when they build knowledge with others from the data they collect from their local contexts (Extract 9), demonstrated by the sharing of their knowledge with colleagues at school.

In this study, teachers were found to explore their creativity (Extract 16). As findings have shown (Extract 1), the mentoring framework which will be discussed below offered a secure environment for teachers to go beyond the quick fix of “whether their practices work, but [enquire] for whom, in what ways, and why” (Johnson, 2006, p. 248). Mentees appeared to have created possibility; for example, by showing flexibility and sensitivity to learners, teachers were said to have found meaning in what they did and reassessed their profession (Extracts 18 and 24). Mentees showed keenness in mirroring with their learners some of the competencies they developed in mentoring (Extract 19). It places mentoring as a form of CPD in a positive light, along with first-rated initiatives on teacher empowerment and equity, such as lesson study and inclusive inquiry (Messiou & Ainscow, 2020).

Specifically, findings identify mentoring as a means to foster teacher knowledge in ELT. Imbued with their teaching experience, mentees narrated the teaching events, and mentors and mentees engaged in reflection (Schön, 1991; Extract 14). In line with the latest research in reflective practice (Mann & Walsh, 2017), reflexive practice (Aslan et al., 2022), teacher research (Banegas & Consoli, 2020; Consoli & Dikilitaş, 2021; Smith, 2020), and CPD (Banegas, 2022; Cordingley et al., 2015; Johnson & Golombek, 2020; Richardson & Díaz-Maggioli, 2018), this study shows how teachers can develop knowledge (Extracts 3 and 4)—namely, engaging in reflection, conceptualising their thoughts in interaction with the mentor(s), and designing a collaborative plan (Banegas & Glatigny, 2021; Kolb & Kolb, 2018). Mentoring enabled teachers to develop agency, noticeable by the mentees’ everyday use of “we” when referring to their work (Extracts 4, 7, and 22). Thus, mentees’ individual professional development also became evident (Extracts 15 and 22). As locals to their contexts, teachers have the potential to inform not only their and their colleagues’ work but also research and educational policies (Johnson, 2006; Johnson & Golombek, 2011).

The bottom-up approach to mentoring and to building teacher knowledge revealed in this study with more and less experienced English language teachers has shown, as hinted above, an increase in teacher motivation, empowerment, and satisfaction from the meaning they took from their work (Extract 21). Findings also show that the emotional and social dimensions played a central role in mentoring (Extract 24), exposing not only feelings of pride and a sense of collegiality but also providing a space for going beyond tensions and concerns (Extracts 4 and 8) to build knowledge (Extract 22). Short of other means of professional development due to the pandemic crisis, mentoring was regarded as a highly valuable practice (Extracts 11 and 13), reinforcing the importance of providing ELT educators with varied and inclusive opportunities for CPD (Messiou & Ainscow, 2020).

At the core of mentoring lay the relationships that mentors and mentees build, promoting professional development for those involved (Cherkowski & Walker, 2019). It was by creating and strengthening the bonds in the mentoring relationships that trust, reflection in interaction, knowledge, and a sense of belonging were developed (Extract 5). As it happened, each participant created mentoring day after day, not by following some preconceived guidelines. With hindsight, relationships were thought to be the most sustaining factor (Extracts 20 and 21).

As stated above, the success of mentoring depends on an understanding of mentoring as a two-way process (Griffiths et al., 2020), which requires clear goals, commitment, effort, trust, a solid mentor–mentee relationship, freedom from evaluation, a sustained framework, and a sociocultural view of learning, that is, one that regards learning as a social process, with interaction as the centre stage (Lantolf et al., 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). As it became apparent, the most revealing outcome from this study is that mentoring as a CPD practice may enable English language teachers of varying degrees of experience to build knowledge

by themselves, *with* other teachers, *from* their own experiences, and *for* themselves and other educational stakeholders.

Conclusion

Primarily ethnographic and descriptive, this study shows the benefits of mentoring as an alternative and more inclusive form of CPD for English language teachers of varying degrees of experience, not merely for early career ones; namely, a two-way practice that can offer support and the possibility of developing competencies such as interaction, reflection, agency, and social learning. Moreover, through mentoring, teachers can create insights that can directly inform their practices and other colleagues, future researchers, and educational policies. In addition, this study suggests that English language teachers who engage in mentoring as a situated CPD practice develop their creativity and criticality and are very likely to offer their learners a similar experience. Therefore, from a sociocultural view, mentoring may have a lot to building teacher knowledge, especially during critical times.

Despite the positive findings, our study encountered several limitations: First, the small number of participants involved. However, this number permitted the diversity and depth needed for this inquiry. Second, the data collected may have been influenced by the researchers, some of whom were also mentees. Third, the amount of data collected by participants who remained in the project exceeded the data obtained from the participants who withdrew from the scheme, which limited the number of diverse views on mentoring. Last, this study would require a follow-up (e.g., after one year) to examine the sustainability of the mentees' reported outcomes.

Making recommendations for general teaching and teacher education is contrary to the approach in this study, which insists on the particularity of settings and events (Toohey & Smythe, 2021). Nevertheless, having explored some English language teachers' views of mentoring and its impact on their CPD, an emphasis

was placed on the importance of bottom-up approaches to CPD, which are context-driven, relationship-centred, and knowledge-based. As this study has shown, teachers, within their contexts, need to build knowledge with others actively. Therefore, this study has implications for CPD programmes for English language teachers showing that general, imposed, top-down, decontextualised CPD, which does not directly address teachers' needs and relegates teachers' voices, may be bound to fail. Conversely, situated, teacher-generated CPD initiatives promote socially built and disseminated knowledge.

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