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Exploring Grassroots, Innovative, and Creative Approaches to Language Learning Materials Development Through Inclusive Practitioner-Research

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This article is part of a collection of practitioner research on the theme of “Exploring Grassroots, Innovative, and Creative Approaches to Language Learning Materials Development Through Inclusive Practitioner-Research” for Issue 8 of the Learner Development Journal (LDJ8), edited by Anna Costantino, Assia Slimani-Rolls, and Nour El Houda Bouacha. Published once a year, each issue of the Learner Development Journal follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing.

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Review of *Exploratory Practice for Continuing Professional Development* (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019)

Exploratory Practice for Continuing Professional Development: An Innovative Approach for Language Teachers. Assia Slimani-Rolls & Richard Kiely. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. xiv, 213 pp.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69763-5>

Reviewed by **Erzsébet Ágnes Békés**, volunteer teacher-research mentor, Ecuador
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This book review on how Exploratory Practice can be employed for Continuing Professional Development is strongly tied to the reviewer's own experience of exploring the opportunities that book review writing by teacher-researchers and teacher-research mentors can create for their professional learning and advancement. In this review, first, a detailed account of the Language Teacher Research project featured in Slimani-Rolls and Kiely's volume is provided. This account focuses on six case studies that put learner development at the heart of the project. Drawing on the work carried out by these classroom practitioners who, with the help of the two editors, ventured into publication, the review identifies three key elements - the principles of EP, research design, and personal encouragement and confidence building - which the reviewer then relates to her own experiences and practices with mentoring book review writing as a process of co-designing authentic learning materials in a "virtual classroom." In the second part of this practice-related review the reviewer provides a concise report on how book review writing can be mentored in such a way that the review writer's mentees are supported continually in their writing and publishing efforts. The process is treated as a novel way of facilitating the creation of learner-generated materials and supporting the Continuous Professional Development of participants in the learning communities that evolve organically during the writing of book reviews.

この書評では、教員研究者や教員リサーチ・メンターによる書評執筆が継続的な専門能力開発にどのように貢献できるか、著者自身の経験をもとに探究する。はじめに、言語教員研究プロジェクトに関するSlimani-RollsとKiely'sの章を紹介する。この章は、学習者の成長を主軸にした6つのケーススタディに焦点を当てている。編集者の支援を受けながら出版を目指したこれらの教育実践者の取り組みを、書評では3つの要素—探索的実践の原則、研究デザイン、個人的な奨励と自信の構築—に分類し、著者自身の書評執筆指導の経験と「バーチャル・クラスルーム」での参加型学習教材デザインの過程に関連付ける。実践的書評の後半では、書評執筆のメンタリングがどのように行われ、メンターが執筆・出版活動において継続的な支援を受けられるかについて言及する。このプロセスは、学習者参加型の教材作成を促進し、書評執筆を通じて自然発生的に形成される学習コミュニティ内のメンバーが継続的専門能力開発できるよう支援する新しい手法である。

Keywords

Exploratory Practice, Continuing Professional Development, mentoring teacher-research, book review writing, mentoring for publication

探究的実践、継続的専門能力開発、教員研究のメンタリング、書評、出版のためのメンタリング

Introduction

I became specifically interested in Exploratory Practice (EP) when I was asked to write a review about the volume published on the work of the Exploratory Practice Group in Rio de Janeiro (Békés, 2021b). I was totally carried away by the exuberant writing in *Why seek to understand classroom life?: Experiences of the Exploratory Practice Group*, and how its members systematically searched for a better understanding of life in the classroom (Exploratory Practice Group, 2021). I was familiar with the idea that action research can contribute to teachers' professional development and autonomy (Békés, 2021a; Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017), so being invited to contribute to LDJ8 and write a review on Slimani-Rolls

and Kiely's Exploratory Practice for Continuing Professional Development (2019) offered an opportunity to further deepen my knowledge related to another branch of practitioner research. The invitation has also created a chance for me to describe and reflect on my recent practice of mentoring teacher-researchers in their publishing efforts, an activity which I have been pursuing through facilitating my mentees' book review writing since 2021. I perceive book review writing as an innovative approach to developing language learning materials as the writing process itself serves the purposes of creating a learning community and I consider such mentoring of teachers as a pedagogic activity for learner development - including my own improvement as a book review writer. The authentic materials generated in this way are related to existing ELT-specific materials (books), and are meant for a real audience. This allows my teacher-researcher mentees to move beyond the bounds of the classroom into the "real world" of publishing.

Slimani-Rolls and Kiely's book (2019), which describes how their Language Teacher Research (LTR) project was born and carried out, is notable for being the first to look at how *long-term* implementation of EP can support teachers' Continuing Professional Development (CPD). The LTR project was accomplished over two years between 2014 and 2016, and then extended for another year to mentor the participating teachers to write up the six case studies included. The aim of the LTR project was to enable the participants "to engage with practitioner research in order to understand better their professional context" (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019, p. 79). The long-term time frame proved beneficial because several of the six participating teachers needed many months before they were able to fully appreciate the principles of EP, start applying them in their classrooms and identify an issue or puzzle that appeared to be worth exploring "using normal classroom activities or Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities (PEPAs), as investigative tools" (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, 2019, p. 79). PEPAs, which can be defined as "classroom activities that integrate teaching practices and research purposes especially in collecting data" (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017, p. 290), are eminently useful in teacher research because they combine language learning with the exploratory dimension.

How is the book structured and what is my related practice?

So, let us now look at the volume, which consists of two parts: Part 1 including Chapters 1–3 and Part 2 containing Chapters 4–11. The Introduction to Part 1, which describes the connection between EP and CPD, is followed by a more detailed look at how teachers teach and learn in a language education setting (Chapter 1). Next is how and why EP can provide a principled framework for CPD (Chapter 2) and, finally, this part is rounded off by discussing how EP can be pursued in modern foreign languages in a globalised world (Chapter 3).

The Introduction to Part 2 starts by describing the CPD initiative, which was set up within an EP framework. This is followed by presenting the LTR project itself (Chapter 4). The subsequent Chapters (5–10) constitute the heart of the book, since these are the accounts of the six participating teachers and reflect the changes in their practice and perspectives. Chapter 11 brings the strands of the project together and presents the issues that have emerged for the research leads with special focus on supporting the writing up of the teachers' experience.

The foreword by Dick Allwright is a short but essential summary of how we should perceive educational practitioner research. We need to appreciate that what sets educational research apart from other types of practitioner research is that our learners are also practitioners, in other words, practitioners of learning. This implies that rather than looking at the end product of an investigation, we should be focussing on the process of exploring, whose aim is not so

much to obtain knowledge, but to move towards “understandings” (vii). The most important takeaway for me is Allwright’s apt closing remark: “... research is too good to be left to the professional researchers” (xi). To me, the message is that classroom research is not only a highly satisfying experience for practitioners, but it is also an important tool for reflection, as a result of which teacher-researchers can improve their practice and enhance the learning outcomes of their students.

The core principles of EP are explained in full in Chapter 1. Out of the seven principles, the first two put understanding the quality of life in the classroom at the heart of language learners’ and teachers’ experience. Principles 3, 4 and 5 “focus on participation, and characterise classrooms as complex spaces where identity and agency grow, and collegiality and mutuality guide decisions and actions” (p. 13). Principle 6 stresses the need for continuity, while Principle 7 underlines that EP in the classroom needs to be integrated fully into “existing curricular practices” (p. 13) to minimise the burden and maximise sustainability for classroom participants.

Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of various CPD models and highlights how practitioner research communities can be built and sustained so that they can offer opportunities for teacher learning. Teachers have expert knowledge of their classrooms, and this enables them to “develop understandings which have the potential to transform classroom life” (Slimani Rolls & Kiely, 2019, p. 38). As highlighted above, the idea of PEPAs is key here, because these allow integrating research into the practices of teaching without research becoming “parasitic and time-wasting” (vi).

In the course of the project, PEPAs turned out to be instrumental both in the teachers’ and the learners’ development because activities such as group discussions, brainstorming sessions, and learner feedback did not only provide useful data but also offered an opportunity for learners to become more involved and act as “co-researchers.” Moreover, the carefully thought-out PEPAs also led to meaningful communication in class prompting language to be used as an instrument for the exchange of ideas rather than a goal in itself. For example, Rawson (Chapter 5) asked her students to read a blog on the pros and cons of using only French in the classroom or both French and English. The students were then invited to provide their own viewpoints during a class discussion. In this manner, the teacher-researcher was able “to turn research insights into pedagogic texts, and to turn pedagogy into research” (p. 97).

Next, Chapter 3 looks at how EP may be pursued in a globalised world, where English has such predominance. The authors emphasise that whatever language is being taught and learnt, “the ulterior aim [...] is to give the learner the emotional drive to overcome their fear to interact with the other members of the classroom community” (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, p. 65). My teacher-researcher mentees, who often don’t have any previous experience in book review writing (and only sporadic experience in writing academically in an additional language), need to overcome a different kind of fear, that is, being published “for real” and then be judged by members of the academic ELT community.

Opening Part 2, Chapter 4 (Teachers and Researchers: Working Towards a Teacher Learning Community) starts with the detailed description of the LTR project, and introduces the research leads and the six language teachers who volunteered to participate in the project. What stood out for me is the way practitioner research was scaffolded by the research leads from the very early stages of the project. They set up discussions around studies based on EP, made use of an already existing Peer Observation of Teaching system, and held group meetings twice a semester to discuss how the participating teachers were

advancing on their EP journey. The authors also organised individual mentoring sessions that were made available to all the participating teachers.

How does the mentoring approach of the book relate to my own practice?

The mentoring/coaching side of the LTR project was particularly interesting to me because it involved guidance on three aspects that I could relate to: the principles of EP, research design, and “providing personal encouragement and confidence building” (Slimani-Rolls & Kiely, p. 84). In my own mentoring practice, I aim at setting up a similar facilitating and scaffolding process for our *ad hoc* “learning community” that comes together for the writing of a review. It involves clarifying the guiding principles and conventions of a specific academic genre, it offers help with the “design” by referring to previous reviews as examples or models, and entails a fair amount of emotional support while the mentees are sailing in uncharted waters.

In my mentoring role as sponsor (Malderez, 2023), I usually initiate the commissioning phase, that is, offer the submission of a book review to the lead editor (e.g., *ELT Research*) or the reviews editor of a journal (e.g., *ELT Journal*). I then announce the assignment in our teacher-research mentoring community (<https://mentrnet.net/>) and look for volunteers. When they surface, I send them the links to book reviews published in the targeted journal and we have joint sessions (if there are several co-authors) or one-to-one sessions (if there is only one author). For multi-authored pieces, co-authors function as peer coaches for each other, and we often have several rounds of revision before the manuscript is submitted. At this stage, I take on the role of expert coach (Halai, 2006), namely, that of a more experienced teacher educator and book review writer, while I also make an effort to ensure that the authors’ own voice shines through. I encourage the review writers to rely on their own classroom experience and express their opinions based on what works in their own contexts (Chumbi & Maksakova, 2023). Altogether, in due course, we develop authentic pieces of text that can be perceived as co-designed learning materials.

My own experience of mentoring for publication has given me a special perspective regarding *Exploratory Practice for Continuing Professional Development*. Reading the six practitioner research case studies (Chapters 5–10), I could particularly relate to the authors’ self-doubts. They were concerned whether what they had found out could be worthy of wider interest and if the results were generalisable at all. I can “hear” the encouragement and “see” the signs of patient and careful scaffolding as well as detect the moments of *eureka*. In other words, the realisation that exploring classroom puzzles does not only contribute to a better *understanding* of classroom life, it also leads to an increased amount of meaningful communication in the target language. It can, ultimately, even resolve some of the issues that were raised in the initial stages of the participants’ classroom research projects.

The case studies in the volume explore recurrent issues that are familiar to most language teachers. An experienced French for business teacher, Michelle Rawson, chose to explore the use of mother tongue (English) in her language classroom (Chapter 5). Using EP helped her and her students to understand the complexities of using L1 and the potential benefits of its well-considered application. Maria Esther Lecumberri has been teaching Spanish for more than two decades. In recent years, she has been increasingly puzzled by how extensively her students were using their mobiles for non-classroom activities. She wondered to what extent it might distract them from engaging with their

tasks at hand (Chapter 6). A joint exploration brought about a positive change in the classroom atmosphere including a transformation of the teacher's approach, with the students becoming less inclined to be distracted by mobile use.

Anna Costantino, an experienced teacher of Italian as a foreign language, has long been puzzled by why her students seemed to be more interested in their grades than her "clear, accessible and thorough enough" feedback (p. 121). Exploring her students' views, which led her to realise the time pressures they were constantly under, Anna introduced PEPAs for error analysis and, in the process, was able to refocus on the social life of the classroom (Chapter 7).

Chris Banister's case study in the context of a Business English programme (Chapter 8) is a great example of how *meaningful* learner reflection, feedback, and evaluation can be elicited by using innovative PEPAs, which can then create the conditions for a renewed sense of teacher self-efficacy.

John Houghton's account focuses on his learnings related to the teaching of speaking skills (Chapter 9). One is the realisation that there may not be a direct relationship between teaching and learning, and the other is that when students act as co-researchers and explore their own perceptions of their speaking skills, the resulting carefully designed and goal-oriented tasks can, in fact, lead to improved communication.

After 17 years of teaching, as a first-time researcher, Marianna Goral felt ready to explore some of her teaching methods and the way her students worked (Chapter 10). For her EP research project, Marianna created a learning environment in which her students were invited to choose and give presentations on current business topics, and generate both all-class and small group discussions following which the "topic experts" became "discussion board administrators." The opportunity for course content creation and being taught in a participatory manner turned out to be much appreciated elements by Marianna's "learner practitioners."

The six teachers describe their specific contexts and the puzzles they have identified as well as how the latter were shared with their learners. Language learning materials were developed innovatively both by the participants and their learners. For example, Anna Costantino designed semi-structured discussions and posed open-ended questions to her students so that their voices would emerge more richly. Among other data gathering sources, Chris Banister designed a two-part classroom activity using excerpts from research papers and inviting students to share their thoughts by answering research questions related to their own experiences of giving feedback. John Houghton aimed at developing report writing skills using data that his students had gathered and analysed, while Marianna Goral exploited with great flair the fact that her Business English module for exchange students involved producing student-generated materials.

The reflections of the authors' case studies contain insights that they gained through conducting "a microanalysis of the classroom with all its complex variables" (Lecumberri, p. 115). The process led to discovering blind spots, namely, aspects that as teachers or mentors we might not have been aware of, including "contradictory beliefs and assumptions" (Costantino, p. 131). All the case studies present the innovative use of PEPAs, such as classroom discussions, individual interviews, open response questionnaires, journals, surveys, regular feedback from learners, and student-created materials, just to mention a few.

The fact that dissemination was also mentioned in some of the case studies (e.g., Banister) resonated with me deeply as I perceive book review writing as a powerful and authentic tool not only for CPD as such, but for the dissemination of teacher-researchers' learnings as well. This, in my opinion, arises from three sources. Firstly, I pay special attention to choosing books

for reviewing that provide an opportunity for the review writers to engage deeply with texts related to practitioner research. These are ones that they may choose to read anyway, but perhaps not as deeply as they do when writing a review. Secondly, when reading the reviews, busy teachers may be alerted to titles that could be termed as “essential reading” for CPD that employs classroom research. Thirdly, whenever possible, I make it a point to invite reviews on books that are open access and are, therefore, freely downloadable. In my own context (a national teacher education university in one of the countries of the Global South), book review articles may not directly lead to promotion and external recognition such as Senior Lectureships and becoming Fellows of the Higher Education Academy for Chris Banister and Marianna Goral, but the “points” gained do count when my colleagues apply for tenure or go through their annual appraisals. So, by my mentees succeeding in getting published, the quality of life in our “virtual classrooms” is enhanced as we create the conditions for continuous improvement (in Japanese, “*kaizen*”) while we work through the ever-improving versions of our book reviews.

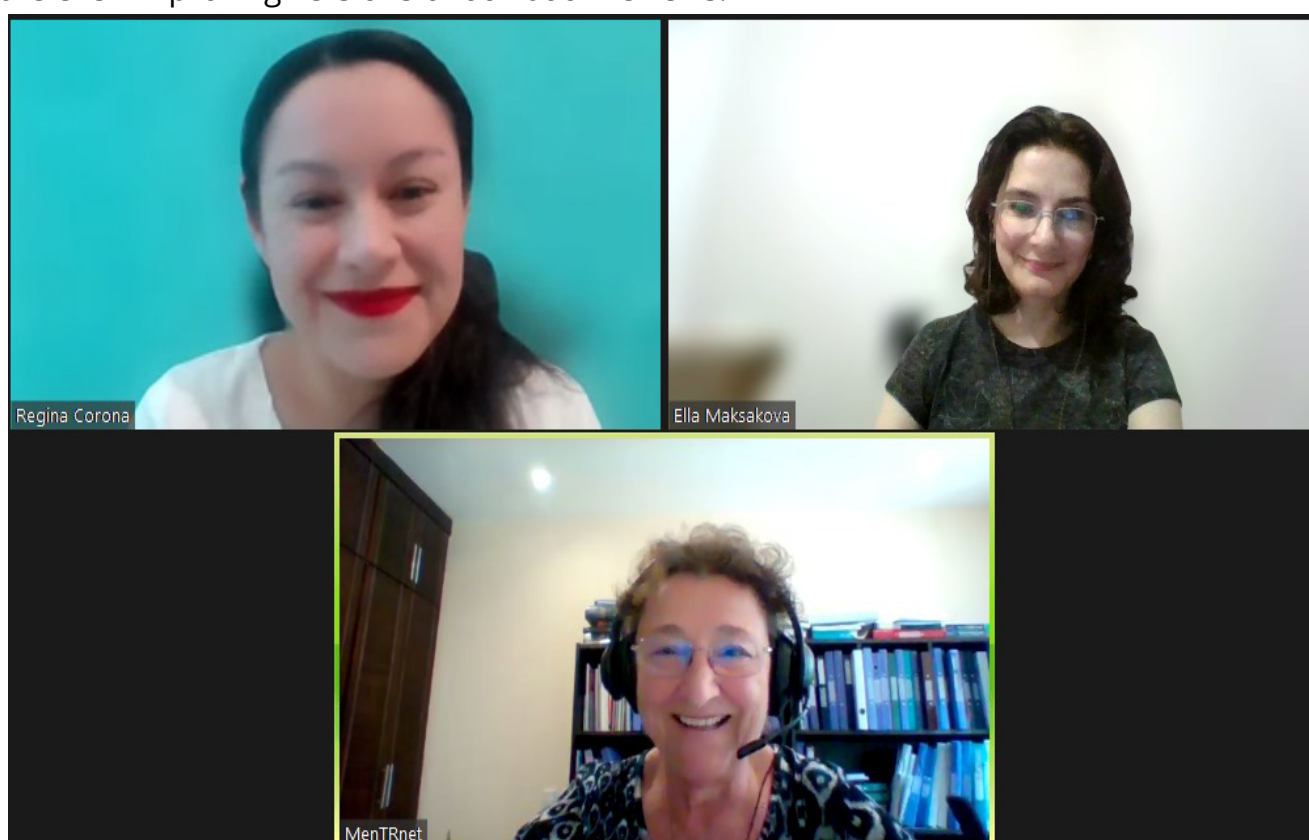


Figure 1. Zoom Book Review Writing Discussion With Ella Maksakova and Regina Corona

How does exploration through writing deepen understanding and reflection?

The closing chapter (Chapter 11) had a special appeal to me, because I tend to believe that, as teacher-research mentors, we need to “walk the talk” and explore our own mentoring practice. In the present case, the puzzle that the research leads identified was as follows: “Why have the teachers sustained their engagement with EP in the face of the challenges that they have encountered?” (p. 185). Some of the factors that the teachers themselves highlighted are to do with the fact that this project was different from other CPD initiatives “by not focussing on finding solutions to problems, and not on promoting new methods

or techniques, but rather on a different approach to the classroom” (p. 186). Sustained support and guidance from the research leads was essential, but so was the readiness of the teacher-researchers to remain on task and share the outcomes of their investigations both internally at their institutions, and externally at national or international events.

I was keenly interested in how the teachers embraced the idea of writing the book, a thought that only emerged in the final stages of the project. I fully agree with Slimani-Rolls and Kiely (2019) when they state: “We believe that the writing process and dialogic feedback, which ensued between the teachers and the editors, enhanced their critical level of thought further along the reflective continuum” (p. 187). With due modifications, this is true for book review writing as well. Reviewing a book related to one’s professional practice, and then summarising and evaluating it, requires deeper involvement than just reading it. The process necessitates critical thinking and accommodation to the conventions of a specific academic genre, which can prepare teacher-researchers to familiarise themselves with good practices in the field and help them start their own journey in publishing.

How does book review writing support CPD?

Book review writing, as a specific genre that requires writing *academically* according to the targeted journal’s in-house style and conventions, has become a passion for me over the years. Over time, I learnt how to make unsolicited offers to editors on books that were related to my field of practitioner research and language teacher identity. “A book review needs to be as good as the book reviewed, or better” was my mantra, and there came a time when I felt I was able to guide others in the process. I can now safely say that book review writing has become a way of Continuing Professional Development for me both as a reader of professional literature and a writer.

As a teacher-research mentor, I have come to the conclusion that book review writing has numerous advantages, especially as it can serve as an intermediary stage for teacher-researchers between not writing at all and writing full-length academic articles. To name just a few:

- low risk of rejection (since pre-arranged and commissioned)
- editorial support *gratis* (often peer-reviewer support as well)
- shorter piece to write on an already existing text (achievable goal)
- faster publication turnaround than original articles (on occasion only 2–3 months)
- intensive reading on a topic that is of professional interest to you
- improvement of your academic reading and writing skills
- complimentary review / inspection copies provided by publishers
- stepping out into the “real world” of publishing

In my context of mentoring teacher research at tertiary level, I have often seen the “publish or perish” principle at work: for an extreme example under COVID-19, see Békés, 2022. So nudging my mentee colleagues to venture out into publication by starting with book reviews whose writing I can scaffold and facilitate, has proved to be a successful strategy (Banegas et al., 2020; Renandya, 2014). Whenever possible, I urge collaborative book review writing because it builds a “co-peer review” element into the system (Chumbi & Morales, 2021) and, on occasion, leads to transnational networking and collaboration (Chumbi & Maksakova, 2023).

How does my mentoring experience relate to the book reviewed?

Dissemination, whether by a book chapter or an article, is a key motivating factor for teacher-researchers and can contribute to sustainability (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017). Writing a book chapter on one's own research can be a daunting task but can also lead to a huge sense of achievement. That said, most of my teacher-researcher mentees would find writing a full-length EP report an almost impossible task, especially if we look at the highest standards of education research (Yates, 2004) extending to criteria, such as "original contribution," or "national benefit." However, Hanks (2017) argues that there is what she calls "good enough research" that may not meet all the criteria but is still able "to contribute to understandings in the field, good enough to build upon, good enough to inspire others" (p. 36). In the same vein, I believe that there is "good enough publication" (e.g., a book review) that can create an appetite for writing and can result in a sense of satisfaction when a teacher-researcher accomplishes such a taxing task supported by carefully scaffolded mentoring.

There are many facets of successful teacher-research mentoring. In my own "good practice," I aim at carefully designing each and every stage of these mini-projects. The book reviewed here was the result of a three-year long process, which necessitated careful planning, meticulous setting up, the combination of academic research, mentoring, and editorial input alongside the research leads' own reflection on the project. This is why I found Chapter 11 such a satisfying read. The book editors enumerate issues that I have experienced, such as time constraints or the participants' understanding of research, which I relate to my mentees' understanding of what a high-quality book review should read like. The headings created for the case studies and the guidance on word count very much resemble the process we follow when outlining the sections of a review, the length of which might oscillate between 350 and 2,000 words. Another concept, collegiality, repeatedly evolves amongst us as well, despite the different time zones and the geographical distance between co-authors from Mexico and Uzbekistan or Egypt and Sri Lanka. My mentees often take the lead, just as the participants of the LTR project did, when they talk to each other "behind my back" and come up with much improved drafts. And this applies to me as well. Over the years, my identity as a "publication nudger" has become stronger and my own book review writing skills have improved as a result of our collaborative writing efforts (Békés, 2024).

In sum, there can be several ways to facilitate CPD; the book reviewed does it by creating a learning community of EP and disseminating the results of the project by placing the case studies at the very heart of the volume. I find that book review writing can be employed as another means for CPD resulting in enhanced confidence in an area that language teachers might find challenging: writing academically.

Finally, what is my philosophy as a teacher-research mentor? In a nutshell, I agree with Angi Malderez, who says: "I define teaching as supporting learning" (Salas, 2018, p. 114). By supporting the book review writing skills of my mentees, I accompany them on a journey that will, hopefully, lead to the writing up of their own research with greater ease and confidence than at the time when we all started out.

Review Process

This article was open peer-reviewed by Huw Davies, Daniel Hooper, and Colin Rundle of the Learner Development Journal Review Network. (*Contributors have the option of open or blind peer review.*)

Author Bio

Erzsébet Ágnes Békés is a retired Hungarian teacher educator and volunteer teacher-research mentor currently residing in Ecuador. She is a member of MenTRnet (<https://mentrnet.net/>), an international community of mentors of classroom research. In recent years, her main interest has been supporting practitioner research and facilitating the dissemination of her mentees' findings by encouraging the write-up of fully-fledged articles for reputable ELT journals and scaffolding the writing of book reviews as a means of Continuing Professional Development.

Erzsébet Ágnes Békésは現在エクアドルに在住しているハンガリー出身の教員養成に長年従事していた教育専門家であり、教員リサーチ・メンターである。彼女は教室における研究のメンターで構成される国際的なコミュニティ「MenTRnet」のメンバーである。近年では、実践者の研究支援に主な関心を寄せており、継続的な専門能力開発の一環として、メンティーが調査結果をELTジャーナルに投稿できるよう奨励し、書評執筆のサポートも行う。

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