Social Constructivist Mentoring Program to Support Teacher Professional Development: An Action Research Approach

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Abstract
Despite the presence of various TPD initiatives from governmental and non-governmental organizations, English teachers in the private universities in Indonesia continue to encounter challenges in accessing TPD programs, that fit their specific needs. This study explored the implementation of a social constructivist mentoring program to support the professional development of seven teachers teaching English academic writing. Using an action research approach, this mentoring emphasized collaborative inquiry, reflective practice, and continuous improvement. We opted for a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding and exploration of the learning process within the program. Data were collected from multiple resources such as interviews, teachers’ self-evaluation reports, observations, and discussions, and analyzed using the thematic analysis method by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify and extract significant themes from the collected data. Our findings indicated that using the social constructivism and action research in the program fostered promising progress. The teachers and their students experienced a notable positive transformation, with learning activities becoming more captivating, meaningful, and enjoyable. The teachers expanded their pedagogical knowledge and practices, accompanied by a transformation in their attitudes and mindsets after a series of interventions in the nine-month mentoring program. Finally, not only did we note that the program had a central role in nurturing teachers’ self-identity and helping them overcome internal barriers, but it also contributed to the continuous professional development of the teachers in the long run.

Keywords
social constructivist mentoring program, action research approach, teacher professional development, private university English teachers, English academic-writing classroom

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Social Constructivist Mentoring Program to Support Teacher Professional Development: An Action Research Approach

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Despite the presence of various TPD initiatives from governmental and non-governmental organizations, English teachers in the private universities in Indonesia continue to encounter challenges in accessing TPD programs, that fit their specific needs. This study explored the implementation of a social constructivist mentoring program to support the professional development of seven teachers teaching English academic writing. Using an action research approach, this mentoring emphasized collaborative inquiry, reflective practice, and continuous improvement. We opted for a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding and exploration of the learning process within the program. Data were collected from multiple resources such as interviews, teachers’ self-evaluation reports, observations, and discussions, and analyzed using the thematic analysis method by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify and extract significant themes from the collected data. Our findings indicated that using the social constructivism and action research in the program fostered promising progress. The teachers and their students experienced a notable positive transformation, with learning activities becoming more captivating, meaningful, and enjoyable. The teachers expanded their pedagogical knowledge and practices, accompanied by a transformation in their attitudes and mindsets after a series of interventions in the nine-month mentoring program. Finally, not only did we note that the program had a central role in nurturing teachers’ self-identity and helping them overcome internal barriers, but it also contributed to the continuous professional development of the teachers in the long run.

Keywords: social constructivist mentoring program, action research approach, teacher professional development, private university English teachers, English academic-writing classroom

Introduction

Proficiency in English academic writing has become crucial for academic success and is a valuable skill that prepares students for diverse career prospects in the future. For English teachers in private universities in Central Java Province, Indonesia, this growing demand for students’ academic writing mastery has posed a distinctive challenge. In addition to grappling with domestic challenges such as inadequate English language proficiency, cultural differences, and socioeconomic disparities among students, along with insufficient instructional support, they also face the critical need for suitable professional development to enhance their ability to teach the subject effectively. This condition leads to stagnant teaching practices and hinders their ability to align with educational advancements, ultimately undermining the educational process. Thus, effective teacher professional development (from now on called TPD) is required to ensure they can effectively contribute to the instruction
process. TPD refers to formal and informal activities and initiatives to improve teachers’ knowledge, skills, and effectiveness (Njenga, 2023). These activities help bridge the gap between their existing competencies and the demands of real-world teaching (Nugroho et al., 2020; Peralta et al., 2020). Despite the benefits for teacher development, designing effective personal TPD and participating in effective teacher professional development remains challenging for many teachers (Koellner et al., 2024). Many still engage in programs that adopt a top-down and one-size-fits-all model of TPD, which may not adequately address their individual needs and contexts (Nugroho et al., 2020). For example, a standardized workshop on classroom management techniques may not be effective for a teacher working in a rural school with limited resources compared to one teaching in a well-funded urban institution. Hence, when queries arise regarding the efficiency of the TPD in which teachers engage, they are likely to indicate that the programs they participate in have constrained their professional development in tackling classroom challenges (Kennedy, 2016; Nugroho et al., 2020; Roux & Valladares, 2014). Scholars argue that teachers own their unique expertise and individual needs for development (Jensvoll & Lekang, 2018). Thus, issues related to the design of TPD are often regarded as unique and complex (Dayoub & Bashiruddin, 2012). Learning is personal and contextual (Clardy, 2000; Kiilo & Kutsar, 2012; Kwakman, 2003). TPD practices that prove successful in a specific setting can face challenges in yielding similar outcomes when applied to a different context of professional development practices (Opfer & Pedder, 2010). Understanding various factors affecting teacher participation and the development process is critical to ensure that TPD effectively accommodates their individual development need. However, many TPDs fail to control the influential factors in their practice (Guskey, 2002). As a result, the development initiatives teachers participate in are neither practical nor successful.

The benefit of mentoring for TPD has been widely recognized and extensive (Kiilo & Kutsar, 2012; Van Ginkel, Verloop, et al., 2016). Mentoring promotes participants’ understanding of their teaching experience, improves their teaching skills, and shapes their teaching careers (Daly & Milton, 2017; Van Ginkel, Oolbekkink, et al., 2016). It also enhances and cultivates teacher’s professionalism, increases job satisfaction, and mitigates teacher turnover (Spooner-Lane, 2017). Although incorporating mentoring activities into TPD is often attractive (Van Ginkel, Verloop, et al., 2016), the implementation can be significantly more difficult. Teachers are frequently confronted with issues like timely and appropriate support from institutions, more duties outside the classroom, and lack of energy and motivation, which, in the end, make the program's contribution unclear. Therefore, attention to the quality of the mentoring program needs to be consistently provided.

Based on the emerging issue, while drawing inspiration from the complexity theories (Mason, 2008a, 2008b) and studies on the complexity in education (Cohen & Grossman, 2016; Rahman, 2016), a social constructivist learning theory was adopted into the mentoring design as an alternative to traditional professional development programs for English teachers from private universities who participated in this study. The purpose was to elevate their skills to the required level and equip them with personal and professional resources to perform their professional duties effectively. This mentoring was carried out in close collaboration with researchers, adhering to the principles of action research design. Action research was employed as the primary research methodology, allowing collaborative problem-solving and reflection and fostering continuous improvement in teaching practices.

**Rationale and Research Questions**

In the last two decades, numerous studies have documented the outcomes of mentoring programs for English teachers (e.g., Andreasen, 2023; Beshah & Anshu, 2024; Deen, 2023; Xie & Cui, 2021). Despite their significant contributions to supporting practices in TPD,
extending the results of the present studies is essential to enrich discussion in TPD for English teachers. At the same time, we try to resolve the growing challenges faced by teacher participants from the private universities in Central Java, Indonesia. Additionally, we attempt to provide insights for mentoring practices that promote the integration between action and research in a sequence of adaptable cycles, approached holistically rather than as distinct stages (Somekh, 2006), and grounded in the principles of social constructivist learning. To guide the study, this research tries to answer the central question: How do social constructivist mentoring practices help teachers develop their professionalism?

**Literature Review**

**Empowering Mentoring Activities for TPD: Harnessing the Power of Social Constructivism and Action Research**

TPD refers to a diverse range of supported learning activities that promote teachers developing their professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to cope with their contextual issues and student learning outcomes (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Spooner-Lane, 2017). TPD encourages teachers to gain new knowledge and skills beyond what was learned during their initial teaching preparation (Abakah et al., 2023). This practice helps teachers remain quality and updated with educational trends (Darling-Hammond, 2017). For these reasons, many academic institutions across countries have made TPD a tool to assure the quality of education. Despite the apparent evidence of TPD for the teacher profession, engaging in high-quality and effective professional development remains challenging for many teachers in Indonesia. Institutional efforts to enhance educational quality have predominantly geared towards providing infrastructure such as classrooms, equipment, teaching and learning materials, and ensuring an adequate supply of teachers while placing less emphasis on how teacher education can foster teacher competencies that align with the learning needs of students in authentic classroom settings. In general, TPD in which the teachers participated consistently point out ineffectiveness. Among the reasons, the primary ones often revolve around levels of alignment with teachers’ specific, concrete, and practical learning objectives (Ax et al., 2008; Guskey, 2002; Opfer & Pedder, 2011), policy within the educational system and actual implementation in practice (Koellner et al., 2024; Revina et al., 2020), teachers’ active engagement (Jones & Brader-araje, 2002; Perkins, 1999), teachers’ collaborative and collegial environment (Knapp, 2003; Reigeluth, 2019), teachers’ commitment (Tanang & Abu, 2014; Thornton & Cherrington, 2019), teachers’ reflection (Gleeson & Davison, 2016; Richards, 1990), continuous mentoring and evaluation (Loucks-Horsley et al., 2010), teachers’ ownership of personal and professional resources from developmental practice (Kiilo & Kutsar, 2012), and most importantly teachers’ increase in their classroom intervention, in addition to their students’ academic achievement (Koellner et al., 2024; Sapkota et al., 2023). Reflecting on this, the issues around TPD are regarded as complex and systematic (Tias & Tongjean, 2022).

In light of these considerations, a mentoring program was formulated and grounded in the principles of social constructivist learning to address these challenges. Teachers participating in the program were encouraged to become active, social, and creative learners (Akpan et al., 2020). Active learners are those who can pursue diverse paths to discovery and knowledge acquisition (Modell, 1996). Social learners refer to active engagement in dialogues with peers, exchanging ideas, and collectively constructing knowledge through meaningful interactions, valuing diverse perspectives and contributing to collaborative learning environments (Forte & Flores, 2014; Kiilo & Kutsar, 2012). While, creative learners are related to the capability to think innovatively, problem-solve creatively, and apply knowledge in novel
contexts. In this case, they will receive external and internal support for development. External support aids learners in acquiring knowledge by simplifying tasks, demonstrating, guiding, offering feedback, and gradually transferring responsibility for learning to the learners. Internal support involves learners in self-reflection and self-assessment to make meaning and improve conceptual understanding (Kaufman, 2004). Most importantly, they are encouraged to take ownership of personal and professional resources from the activity and to continuously develop the resources to the level they require to be independent learners (Quoc & Van, 2023). The mentoring experience provides the learners with opportunities to actively interact with raw data, engaging their minds in identifying emerging patterns, acquiring new concepts, and constructing fresh understandings. Utilizing constructivist social language learning methods may effectively mitigate and tackle the potential marginalization and disempowerment of participating teachers in the program (Kiilo & Kutsar, 2012).

Action research in the present study served as a methodological tool for examining and evaluating mentoring activities through the lens of social constructivist learning principles. Teachers were engaged in a cyclical process of “planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then, re-planning, acting and observing, reflecting, and so on” (Mctaggart et al., 2017, p. 21). For instance, they systematically observed and reflected on their mentoring experiences, gathering data on interactions with mentors and the impact of the mentoring on their teaching practices in the classrooms. Other than to benefit the program, this iterative approach was a critical stage that empowered the teachers to address challenges and make informed decisions to improve their teaching skills (Seider & Lemma, 2004). In the end, they become self-directed and lifelong learners (Smith, 2020). Thus, integrating social constructivist learning and practices into the methodical and iterative process such as action research eventually facilitated professional development among the participating teachers.

Methods

Design of intervention

This research was designed with a qualitative approach to answer the research question. Such an approach is characterized by “the interest in the interviewees’ words and ideas, not in arraying the responses numerically.” It enables an in-depth exploration to obtain varied data characteristics, allowing for generating novel insights and understanding of phenomena (Farsani & Asaie, 2024). This research aimed to study how the mentoring program helped the participants develop their professionalism as English academic writing teachers.

Under the qualitative approach, action research was selected as the primary methodological tool for this program because it has the potential to address the constraints of conventional methodologies in studying evolving situations and integrate research on substantive matters with an investigation into the developmental process to enhance comprehension of the factors facilitating or impeding change (Somekh, 2006). By participating in action research, the teachers were involved in a series of activities to help them construct a new understanding and create a logical process to develop practices under the situation they were experiencing. The mentoring adopted a cyclical analytical process of “planning a change, acting and observing the process and consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then, re-planning, acting and observing, reflecting, and so on.” Based on the process, the following primary stages in Table 1 of the integrative approach to action and research in the mentoring program were designed.
### Table 1: Cyclical processes of action research during the mentoring periods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle</th>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Act</th>
<th>Observe</th>
<th>Reflect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st cycle</td>
<td>Collecting data, developing a plan</td>
<td>Mentors trained the teachers about appreciative inquiry, threshold concept, and social constructivism in teaching.</td>
<td>During the teachers’ session of the intervention focusing on developing the teachers’ knowledge in teaching English academic writing (June to July 2022)</td>
<td>All teachers, mentors, researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd cycle</td>
<td>Mentors developed their action plan.</td>
<td>Mentors trained the teachers, focusing on the threshold concept and the use of social constructivism in language learning.</td>
<td>During the teachers’ session of the intervention focusing on developing teachers’ skills in teaching English academic writing based on the principles of social constructivism in language learning (August 2022)</td>
<td>All teachers, mentors, researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd cycle</td>
<td>Teachers designed an action plan for class intervention with students</td>
<td>Teachers taught their students, focusing on the threshold and the use of social constructivism in language learning</td>
<td>During their class intervention (September to October)</td>
<td>All teachers, mentors, researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th cycle</td>
<td>Teachers planned an action plan.</td>
<td>Teachers taught their students, focusing on the threshold, learning sustainability, and learning community.</td>
<td>During their class intervention (November to December 2022)</td>
<td>All teachers, mentors, researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th cycle</td>
<td>Teachers made an individual plan to develop aspects of learning sustainability and made a follow-up to the action plan.</td>
<td>From January to February 2023, they focused on the action plan.</td>
<td>During the end of the mentoring activities (January to February 2023)</td>
<td>All teachers, mentors, researchers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before the program began, we, as researchers, carried out a preliminary study by observing classroom dynamics and conducting open-ended interviews with the academic writing teachers (teacher participants) to understand their current instructional practices, challenges, and expectations for professional development. Additionally, we interviewed their students to gain insight into their learning experiences, needs, and perceptions of the teachers' instructional approaches. We also conducted a document analysis to support our study. This stage took about one month, and it was critical to gain insights into the contextual issues faced by both the teachers and their students. All data collection processes were recorded and analyzed to benefit the project’s development.

From the findings, it was observed that the teachers consistently received inadequate professional development support in teaching academic writing skills. As a result, they often had to struggle to find effective ways to teach for example complex writing concepts, to provide timely and constructive feedback, and to offer varied learning resources in addition to designing engaging academic writing activities. The students, as we recorded, insufficiently received appropriate exposure to the targeted language. Drawing upon the findings, in the first cycle, we collaboratively worked with some experts (part of the project team who served as mentors) to develop a comprehensive action plan for the entire program. The plan was thoroughly reviewed and refined before the implementation. This program spanned nine months, commencing in June 2022 and finishing in February 2023. After the preliminary data collection and planning, the next stage was to expose the teachers to appreciative inquiry, threshold concepts, and the principles of social constructivism for pedagogy. We had them learn by participating in a series of activities involving case studies, role-playing exercises, collaborative work, and reflective discussion. Appreciative inquiry is a technique required to help guide learners in exploring past experiences, leveraging their benefits, envisioning the future, and devising effective strategies to accomplish goals (Grant & Humphries, 2006). The threshold concept is an effort to facilitate a transformative shift in learners’ understanding,
enabling them to comprehend more complex aspects of the subject matter or teaching process (Land et al., 2016). The principles of social constructivism refer to the theoretical frameworks that guide teaching by emphasizing the importance of social interaction, collaboration, and hands-on experiences in the process (Saleem et al., 2021). By understanding the concepts and principles, the teachers were expected to implement the knowledge into pedagogical practices that promoted deep learning, critical thinking, and transformative understanding on the side of their students while facilitating them with active, collaborative, and meaningful learning experiences affecting their learning outcomes. Not only did the teachers learn about the concepts and the principles, but in this stage, they were also allowed to examine what they learned from the activities and connect it to situations they encountered in reality. Insights from this cycle were subsequently utilized to improve the nine-month mentoring program. All teachers, mentors, and researchers attended our reflection stage of the first cycle.

In the second cycle, the previous design was replanned based on the results of the earlier step to fit the need for mentorship. The subsequent program focused on providing hands-on training to enhance teachers' skills based on the threshold findings from the previous phase. Using social constructivism as the underlying approach for the intervention, the teachers practiced the teaching of English academic writing while emphasizing student-centered learning. Reflection was conducted at the end of the stage and attended by all teachers, mentors, and researchers. The discussion was intensively carried out to gain insights to improve the process better. The results of reflection became the basis for proceeding with the next intervention in the following stage.

In the third cycle, the teachers were promoted to design an action plan for their actual classroom intervention, scheduled to begin from September to December 2022. This design of intervention focused on fostering deeper understanding, critical thinking skills, and active engagement of students into the learning process. Therefore, the appreciative inquiry, the threshold concepts, and the principles of the social constructivist learning approach were employed in the stage. As the preparation steps were completed, the teachers began their classroom teaching. Students under their guidance worked on the prearranged activities. For example, they identified positive aspects within the subject they were going to learn in a semester. Completed with the step, they were encouraged to envision and articulate a desired future state, then followed by planning before implementing actions to achieve that vision. All the students were promoted into collaboration, creativity, and innovation as they were working towards their project goals. To provide ongoing support, feedback, and resources to the students, the teachers facilitated regular progress meetings, offered guidance on problem-solving and decision-making, and ensured that the students stayed focused on their goals and timelines. Additionally, not only did the teachers supervise the collaboration process among the students, but also fostered a positive and supportive learning environment to enhance the effectiveness of the project-based learning in providing meaningful experiences to the students. While the series of pedagogical processes were taking place, the mentors were doing their job by several times observing the intervention. Data collected were later discussed at the end of the cycle as scheduled.

In the fourth cycle, the teachers redesigned their action plan based on the outcome of their reflection on the third cycle. By executing the new design of the plan, they prioritized threshold understanding and learning sustainability, along with fostering a learning community among the students. During the intervention between the teachers and their students, the mentors observed their performance and discussed the findings at the end of the cycle as scheduled.

As the third and fourth cycles focused on the students, the last cycle was concerned more with developing the teachers’ personal qualities as professional teachers. In this stage, the teachers designed an individual plan to realize their learning sustainability and designed a
realistic plan to follow up their action plan. They executed the plan from January to February 2023. During this period, their progress was periodically observed. The observation results and the teachers’ reflections became the baseline for the discussion.

The social constructivist learning approach was consistently applied as the theoretical basis for guiding the teachers in the mentoring. This program focused on how they constructed meaning through interactions with their experiences and ideas with minimal intervention from the mentors and external parties. Instead of exerting control over the program, the role of the mentors was to assist the teachers in discovering professional development concepts that fit their needs. They were not practically involved in pedagogical activities with the teachers, yet in regular discussions to reflect, adjust, and plan for their future personal and professional development. To provide the teachers with tailored mentoring, the appreciative inquiry concept, as discussed earlier, was modified to examine and appreciate their positive past experiences, envision their future, and adjust mentoring approaches and techniques to align with the needs of the teachers' development (Grant & Humphries, 2006; Kiilo & Kutsar, 2012).

The data collected from the appreciative inquiry concept were analyzed using the threshold concept to facilitate learning and to address any gaps identified during the evaluation stage of previous actions (Land et al., 2016). Through a comprehensive adoption of these concepts, both the researchers, the mentors, and the teachers gained valuable insights through a deliberate process of reflection. By leveraging the advantages of these concepts, the teachers were motivated to incorporate these principles into their teaching methods continuously. As a result, their instructional practices would emphasize the importance of dialogue, sharing, and discussion during the intervention, effectively nurturing and maintaining students' motivation.

Participants

This research was conducted in three private universities located in Central Java Province, Indonesia, from June 2022 to February 2023. Given that it was a collaborative project between the universities and us, the researchers, the recruitment was facilitated by coordinators from each university. During the initial phase, the coordinators at each institution assisted in opening early communication with English academic writing teachers. Names of the potential candidates were compiled and forwarded to us. All individuals on the list were contacted via email, telephone, or text message and invited to attend a scheduled meeting. During the meeting, the candidates were briefed on the program's objectives and asked for their willingness to participate. Out of the ten teachers who attended the meeting, only seven, consisting of three males and four females, agreed to participate in the project. The majority of them were within the age range of thirty-five to forty-seven, with none younger than thirty-five and none older than forty-seven. All possess master's degrees, with two in English literature and five in English language education. They work as full-time teachers at their universities. See Table 1 below for demographic information of the participants.

Table 1
Demographic information of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Under 25</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25- to 40-year-old</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41- to 55-year-old</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>55- to 65-year-old</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Experience in teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Under 5 years</th>
<th>6 to 10 years</th>
<th>11 to 15 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic writing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Educational Qualification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Bachelor degree</th>
<th>Master degree</th>
<th>Doctoral degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Employment status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Full-time</th>
<th>Part-time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To ensure the participants were fully informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the program, each was given a consent letter to sign. This letter included the right to receive intervention for approximately nine months, during which the participants had the autonomy to determine their learning objectives and desired outcomes.

Analyses

Data were collected through participants’ self-evaluation reports, monthly discussions, open-ended interviews, and observations to answer the research question. The research team worked collaboratively to code and analyze the data. This process was iterative and cyclical, with frequent discussions between the two coders to ensure consistency in coding. Using the same codebook outlined in Table 2 facilitated consistent and reliable data analysis among all members of the research team. The qualitative data comprised concise remarks provided by the teachers during the open-ended interviews, typically consisting of 1–3 brief sentences (Dong et al., 2020). In general, the qualitative data gathered were clear-cut in forming categories. The two coders convened to resolve any discrepancies in coding, employing strategies such as redefining the codes to achieve consensus.

Table 2
Excerpt of the codebook for analyzing how social constructivist mentoring helps teachers develop their professionalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coded for</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Data extract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Needs and expectations</td>
<td>The code refers to teachers’ and students’ voices about being involved in the academic writing class before the mentoring.</td>
<td>[Lack of support certainly has an impact …] (teachers’ collective responses) [Our teachers rarely provided detailed comments on our assignments. …] (students’ response)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformative change</td>
<td>The code refers to the teachers’ voices after a series of interventions.</td>
<td>[We admit that we have to plan; it cannot be random … It is indeed very critical.] [Theories are important, but theories without massive exposure on the students' side would not make them proficient English users.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The impact of TPD on students</td>
<td>The code refers to students’ voices on their teachers’ performance</td>
<td>[we feel that the bridging program is helpful. We receive supplementary materials to practice at home as an enrichment. The materials are worthwhile to practice … yes, they (learning materials) are easy to follow … The teacher is patient, helpful … friendly … pleasant. … They do not like threatening]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of problems</td>
<td>The code refers to problems interfering with the learning</td>
<td>[… several students sometimes relied on us (teachers) to help them fix their grammatical mistakes and organize their writing.]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thematic analysis was utilized to discern, interpret, and present recurring patterns found within the data. The qualitative data analysis adhered to a structured process outlined in six distinct phases. The first phase was familiarising ourselves with the data. The data in this phase were transcribed, reviewed, and re-reviewed. Initial ideas revealed from the process were also jotted down. Second, noteworthy aspects of data were coded systematically across the entire data set, compiling data pertinent to each code. Third, in searching for themes, all data relevant to each potential theme was gathered by collating codes into the themes. Fourth, reviewing themes, in this phase, the themes were checked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set; Fifth, defining and naming themes; and sixth, generating qualitative report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For instance, teachers’ comments were coded into a broad category of how social constructivist mentoring practices helped the teachers develop their professionalism. The initial category was subsequently restructured and organized into thematic groups. Among all the thematic groups identified, four themes emerged: need and expectation for TPD, transformative changes achieved by the teachers during the mentoring activities, the impacts of teachers’ professional development on the students, and the source of problems interfering with learning.

Findings

To avoid overlapping, findings from data collection of this present study were presented into four thematic aspects: (1) needs and expectations for TPD, (2) transformative changes achieved by the teachers during the mentoring activities, (3) the impacts of teachers’ professional development on the students, and (4) source of problems interfering learning. We draw upon quotations and use pseudonyms to identify the participants.

Needs and expectations for TPD

Before the intervention began, we conducted preliminary data collection to study the contextual issues, including problems faced by both the teachers and their students at the site of research. On the side of the teachers, they admitted to hardly receiving support to develop skills in teaching academic writing, for instance, up-to-date learning resources and materials, continuous professional development programs, mentoring initiatives, and a collaborative learning environment. Following their comments, our collective interview recorded the following snapshot.

[Lack of support certainly has an impact … Teaching academic writing is challenging, especially teaching complex writing concepts … not only that, but also in delivering prompt and constructive feedback, offering diverse learning resources … and, of course, designing engaging academic writing activities to students.]

This finding could also be associated with data we collected from the interviews and document analyses where the students’ academic writing achievement was still under the expected standard. In addition to the early data collection and analysis, we carried out classroom observations to build a thorough understanding of the case. In the observation, we evaluated teachers’ performance and recorded some problems that hampered the teachers in delivering effective teaching. Lack of clarity: The teachers used to find it hard to explain the structure and organization of an essay clearly. This situation made their students often puzzled about how to structure their writing effectively. Inappropriate learning contents: We noticed that the teachers used irrelevant writing prompts and assignments, which did not align with
either students’ interests or real-world writing contexts. Less appropriate classroom management, they applied ineffective strategies for managing time during writing tasks, resulting in students feeling rushed and overwhelmed and a lack of clear guidelines for behavior during writing activities. We recorded that it caused the students to be disruptive or engage in activities unrelated to the task at hand. Lack of engagement: The teachers did not actively participate in class discussions, and often less provided constructive feedback on students’ writing. As a result, their students might feel uninspired and disengaged from the learning process. Limited interaction, the teachers predominantly delivered lectures without actively fostering their student involvement and dialogue, seldom posed questions to stimulate discussions, and offered limited chances for students to interact with one another or the content through group tasks or peer review sessions. Inadequate assessment: The teacher assessed their students’ assignments primarily focusing on grammar and spelling mistakes while offering less constructive feedback on content, structure, or argument development. Consequently, it did not effectively assist their students in enhancing their overall writing abilities.

On the side of the students, we recorded the following responses related to the skill acquisition endeavor. First, the students lacked not only sufficient exposure to the specific academic writing skills targeted in the curriculum but also the opportunities for activities like collaborative writing tasks and peer review sessions, according to which they could exchange drafts of their writing assignments and offer constructive feedback on content, organization, and language use. Second, they inadequately received feedback, support, and motivation from their teachers.

[Our teachers rarely provided detailed comments on our assignments. We often find it difficult to see our progress in the program … There were no supporting programs to assist academically less developed students. For those who fell behind in class, they had to struggle on their own. … We hope our class will become more enjoyable and supportive so we can learn better and stay motivated. … So far, we have often been worried about making mistakes and lacked confidence in our English, especially when interacting with our classmates]

Third, the students typically hesitated to seek assistance from teachers regarding their difficulties. One student respondent explained that:

[I feel inconvenient of being criticized. Also, I would not say I like it when someone is concerned about my shortcomings. This makes me unconfident … coming to the teacher does not solve my problems; for example, I am often still puzzled to relate what I learned to work on the assignments. Maybe the mistake is on me. I do not feel good to question more after his explanation. Just feeling reluctant, I am afraid of being impolite to my teacher … Sometimes because the time does not fit each other. My teacher is very busy …]

Fourth, since the teachers spent most of their time lecturing, the students often had limited time to work on the assignment. Consequently, they could not practice the assignments well. Fifth, some student respondents admitted to dislike reading, making learning academic writing challenging. Sixth, our conversation with the students about self-regulation indicated they had a moderate to low level of interest and responsibility for learning the subject. At the same time, this highlighted other potential challenges that could impede the attainment of their learning objectives. Additionally, our review of students’ portfolios further underlined that the
students did not have sufficient English skills to mingle with the challenges of academic writing rules and grammar and difficulty detecting cultural variations in the context of writing.

This section revealed contextual challenges that the teachers and their students experienced in the classroom. Our data presentation of this stage was not intended to showcase the shortcomings of the participants and their learning ambiance. We used these data as stepping stones to mitigate, if not resolve, the existing problems through the nine-month mentoring program. Transformative changes on the teacher's side, which impacted students’ learning performance, became an important measure of the study.

*Transformative changes achieved by the teachers during the mentoring activities*

Our initial data collection analyses showed that the teachers were proficient in English. However, this situation did not align with their ability to teach. We found they still faced various problems in teaching, as mentioned earlier, such as a lack of clarity, less accurate learning materials, less accurate classroom management, lack of engagement, limited interaction, and inadequate assessment. We used the findings to intervene with the teachers. Rather than only helping them mitigate the problems, we also helped the teachers resolve problems of giving their students sufficient exposure to the target language. We grounded our mentorship activities on social constructivism and action research as one of the underlying approaches in the research.

In the early stages of our mentorship activities, we realized our biggest challenges were not only to give the teachers promising mentoring activities but also changing their mindset about language learning. Most teachers who participated in the early data collection still adhered to the concept.

[... teachers are the primary authority figure in the classroom, possessing the most knowledge among all individuals present. ... Students have to follow their instructions - sit well, listen to them, and behave accordingly to learn ... to us, we direct the learning process. We decided on the classroom environment based on our plan. ... follow the syllabus, of course. ... there is a book we share with our students to read. ... Our class is based on the book. We do not use other books but the ones already provided to the students. ... We explain the contents step by step because if not, they will not understand. ... yeah, we have the Q&A session, and we do it soon after our explanation is completed ... Knowledge mastery is our primary teaching target ...]

To cope with the issue, we started our programs by (a) discussing the fundamental principles of English language teaching and (b) discussing different issues around the teaching of the language. This stage covered all the problems identified from the preliminary study, and (c) practiced solving the issues based on the fundamental principles of teaching English as discussed at the initial stage to broaden their understanding of teaching the language. We proceeded to another stage after the objectives of the earlier session had been achieved.

In the following stage, we organized some activities for the teachers to rehearse. Our objective was to help them find the connection between theories and practices. In the session, they planned the lesson for the whole semester. They set the objectives, designed the assessments, selected the teaching methods, named the materials and resources, set the time management, set differentiation, mentioned the anticipated challenges, and set the methods to conduct reflection. We were involved in a reflection once they completed the lesson plan draft. As the mentoring was intensive, focused, and consistent, the teachers showed promising learning progress. Completing these one-month preparatory stages, they began formal teaching
in September 2022. To ensure they were all assisted while implementing the plan, we supervised them for one semester until the program terminated.

In February 2023, the end of our mentorship program, we recorded their promising learning progress. Class, which used to be teacher-oriented, had gradually shifted to student-oriented. We noted that not only had the teachers taken the role of teachers who lectured their students but also as facilitators who created a learning environment, facilitated learning activities, supported student-centered learning, fostered collaboration, and provided feedback in addition to assessing learning. The activities they implemented in the classroom helped the students be active and engaged learners who transformed abstract knowledge into language practices. Most importantly, the teachers experienced a change in perspective on teaching English. Our discussion with them uncovered the following.

[English is a skill. Theories are important, but theories without massive exposure on the students' side would not make them proficient English users.]

They also stated that

[we admit that we have to plan; it cannot be random … It is indeed very critical. We can plan many things and get ready for teaching. In the planning, we also decide the learners’ need to follow up … design activities to push a positive and engaging learning environment, select communication skills fittest for teaching, find the way to provide contextual input to students, mention activities that support learners’ autonomy, select the assessment methods to fit our classroom, and set the strategy to provide feedback for our students…]

Although the lesson plan had been well designed, they stated that

[It is possible to make some changes to fit the class…. The lesson plan had to be flexible and adaptable.]

In addition to the promising mentoring outcomes, we also documented positive shifts as reported by the mentors about the teachers’ behaviour and attitudes during the intervention contributing to these changes. First, their ability to establish mutual trust with other people. The mentors explained:

[They (the teachers) showed their honesty and open-mindedness for development during the program by sharing personal experiences and challenges openly with us. … They demonstrated their receptiveness to feedback and guidance. … We also discussed areas for improvement in their teaching practices.]

Second, their willingness to collaboratively identify problems, find their causative factors, and discuss possible solutions. Our data analysis showed that teachers engaged in group discussions and brainstorming sessions in which they collectively identified challenges in teaching academic writing. They demonstrated a willingness to explore the underlying factors contributing to these challenges, such as student engagement issues or ineffective instructional strategies. Moreover, they actively participated in discussions to generate potential solutions, and share insights and experiences to inform decision-making processes. Third, the teachers were open to understanding, collaborating, and helping each other. For example, they engaged in constructive dialogue, offering suggestions and support to one another based on their
individual strengths and experiences. They also actively sought clarification and guidance from their mentors and colleagues, indicating a mutual desire to understand and learn from each other. Fourth, their great will to change. Our conversation with the mentors revealed the following snapshot:

[The teachers exhibited persistence in their efforts to improve their teaching practices, actively seeking out and utilizing various learning resources … to enhance their skills and knowledge. During discussions with us, they often posed critical questions to deepen their understanding of key concepts and refine their instructional approaches.]

Fifth, their positive experiences of participating in the program. This aspect was indicated by the teachers’ frequently expressing satisfaction and enthusiasm regarding their involvement, emphasizing the value they found in the mentoring sessions, collaborative discussions, and learning activities. Their positive feedback and expressions of enjoyment during the reflection session indicated high engagement and appreciation for the program’s content and structure.

To sum up, we admitted the contribution of social constructivism and action research to the program. For social constructivism, this underlying concept played a critical role in exposure and cognitive experience for the teachers, resulting in changes in knowledge, competencies, and attitudes toward English language teaching for higher education students. Through the appreciative inquiry method and threshold concept as applied in the program, we could record even small progress of the teachers, celebrate positive achievements, and use these data to improve the earlier designs. Following the framework of action research, activities such as planning, acting, observing, and reflecting were conducted and geared towards achieving not only the results of the program but also the processes of transformative changes in the teacher’s learning attitudes and environment. Ultimately, we learned that (1) the process was not less important than the results. Mentorship activities had to embrace the teacher’s needs for development; (2) the teachers’ knowledge and competency development from a series of continuous professional development is important to ensure powerful learning on the side of the students.

The impacts of teachers’ professional development on the students

Continuous transformation is fundamental for teachers. However, the transformation would lack significance unless it results in beneficial effects on the development and advancement of students. In this section, we present our findings on a group of students who underwent a series of interventions with their teachers (mentoring participants). Our report was grounded on at least four different sources of data: (1) students’ self-evaluation reports, (2) students’ portfolios, (3) interview reports with the students, and (4) classroom observation. We used these data interchangeably to explain the impacts of teachers’ professional development on the students’ transformation of learning. To begin the journey of formal teaching, all teachers grounded their teaching plans on the following collective excerpts revealed from our preliminary research:

[Teachers carried out lecturing, then asked us to work on assignments. To us, it is not easy, maybe because we do not have sufficient vocabulary. We are still often confused with various concepts in grammar and structure, different writing conventions, cultural differences in the language, and an unconducive learning environment. Some mates are noisy. They talked to each other about irrelevant stuff, and it distracts our concentration]
Having the teaching plan completed, they tried it out, observed, reflected, replanned, and acted. These processes spun up repeatedly until the objectives were achieved. Complying the principles of action research in the process, we saw a gradual transformation on the side of the teachers, mainly in the aspects of teaching and the ability to research and reflect. We observed that the teachers began to learn to control their talking time and class and behave more as facilitators in the classroom. They gave the students sufficient exposure to the skills they intended to develop. Most importantly, they made the students achieve the competencies targeted as planned. During the intervention, the students developed their ability to outline, connect ideas, write an introduction, body, and conclusion of an essay, use a reference manager platform to insert citations and use grammar, vocabulary, and conventions more properly.

The teachers went beyond their classroom roles to effectively support students in achieving their learning objectives. Alongside classroom interventions, they established a study group and implemented a bridging program as additional initiatives to enrich the student's learning journey. These endeavors aimed to extend the learning opportunities for students beyond regular class hours. While the study group was to foster cooperation and facilitate the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and notions among the regular students, in addition to providing them with an opportunity to review each other's writing works, the bridging program was established to create a space for academically less developed students to overcome their learning difficulties. Participating in the bridging program, the students received the necessary support to catch up with their peers in the classroom. Most importantly, they benefited from the initiatives and valued these endeavors positively. See the following collective snapshots.

[we feel that the bridging program is helpful. We receive supplementary materials to practice at home as an enrichment. The materials are worthwhile to practice … yes, they (learning materials) are easy to follow … The teacher is patient, helpful … friendly … pleasant. … They do not like threatening]

From the mentoring practices, we noted the teachers not only prioritised the academic progress of the students but also dedicated attention to fostering the students’ self-discipline and self-regulation abilities, such as the capacity to control their conduct, resist impulses, and manage their emotions, ultimately resulting in enhanced self-control and independence through the implementation of learning rules based on those aspects. These rules were mandatory for all students to adhere to. Our evaluation substantiated that the rules implemented in the intervention were powerful enough to facilitate the development of self-discipline and self-regulation skills among the students as intended.

**Source of problems interfering with learning**

Although our program was carefully planned, its execution was not without challenges. On the side of the teachers, they articulated:

[At the beginning, we faced numerous challenges in devising the most suitable learning model for our class that adhered to the principles of social constructivism in English Language Teaching (ELT) … we had to manage our internal resistances … losing face … interfering with other work … having more work … loss of routine … no concern about future competencies, etc. It was not easy initially, but we can manage … commitment is important. The project was time and energy-consuming … We frequently provided guidance and mentorship to our students outside the typical working hours. We often tailor learning materials to benefit our students. … It is particularly important
to motivate academically less developed students and let them experience continuous progress. We sometimes found it difficult to engage our students in the lesson and make them focus on it. … having the students submit the assignments accordingly needed hard efforts, but we learned to handle it …]

Thus, they admitted that support from the mentors and continuous improvement of the plans were necessary.

On the side of the students, we revealed that they often struggled with some issues like self-discipline, self-regulation, learning focus, limited sources of learning, fear of making mistakes, and fear of being ridiculous and incompetent in addition to facing an unconducive classroom learning environment.

During our evaluation with the teachers, we discovered that some students experienced a decrease in motivation, faced challenges in selecting writing topics, and faced difficulties writing ideas in the target language. These problems arose due to disparities between prior knowledge, background competence, and the desired level of proficiency. As a result, some teachers stated:

[… several students sometimes relied on us (teachers) to help them fix their grammatical mistakes and organize their writing.]

This learning condition was not ideal until the students learned to address the issue themselves. Despite the obstacles hindering the students’ learning, the teachers were able to consistently provide support and help their students overcome the challenges they encountered in the academic writing class.

Discussion

Our mentoring program was conducted as a strategy to support the professional development of the teachers. We adopted action research and social constructivism as the underlying approach and theory to guide the program. To give powerful learning to teachers’ side, we actively involve them in the process, such as planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (McTaggart et al., 2017). Not only did their involvement develop their teaching, knowledge, learning attitude, and self-identity (Kiilo & Kutsar, 2012), but also their students’ writing skills (Nugroho et al., 2020). This mentoring program provided the teachers with a unique space to share experiences, discuss challenges, and engage in critical discussions with other participants and mentors. We based our mentoring practices on data we collected using multiple methods before, during, and after the intervention. While addressing issues hampering the teachers' professional competencies, we were also challenged to deal with other contextual issues affecting the teachers’ low self-efficacy, troubled identity, and disempowerment.

Our nine-month mentoring program had shown promising results of intervention. Social constructivism, as the underlying theory in the mentoring program, supported all the teachers in developing motivation based on their needs and helped them increase their learning responsibility. Through the appreciative inquiry method and threshold concept within the social constructivist mentoring program, the teachers could make decisions about specific aspects they wanted to develop.

Following a series of mentoring activities, the teachers learned to internalize the importance of reflective practice, personalized learning, practical application of knowledge, collaboration and shared learning, professional empowerment, evidence-based practice, and continuous improvement for their professional development. These were something the teachers valued most during the mentoring period. It seems to us that a social constructivist
mentoring program guided by action research has become a powerful instrument to provide a
dynamic and transformative learning experience that fosters professional growth, promotes
evidence-based practices, and enhances the overall quality of teaching and learning for teachers.

Despite the favorable outcomes of the mentoring activities, we faced significant
challenges related to the roles and power dynamics inherent in the research process. First,
researchers participating in action research teams were not impartial and actively shaping the
team's work through their interventions and discourse (Huzzard et al., 2010). In our study,
power relationships were inevitably present. On the one hand, we assumed the role of mentors
tasked with gathering data on professional development and the growth of the participants,
with the aim of gaining insights and offering recommendations for wider interprofessional
collaboration. On the other hand, we also served as critical partners to the participants (Salm,
2014). The blending of these two roles occurred naturally. Our engagement in the process
involved collaborating with the teachers and providing them with support for development.
However, we remained mindful that our perspectives as educators and teacher educators could
potentially influence the teachers’ viewpoints during our discussions. As a result, the teachers
might develop a dependency on our guidance. Therefore, the collaboration in the action
research within the program should not aim solely to "empower" the teachers by introducing
new perspectives. Rather, it should be based on mutual engagement and a shared commitment
to working together, fostering the teachers’ growth as lifelong learners (Somekh, 2006). Second,
we were concerned about issues such as the perception of increased workload or time
constraints, a desire to maintain the status quo after achieving positive results, a lack of
confidence in their research skills, or a belief that their previous success was an isolated
incident. Additionally, the teachers might be hesitant to take on the challenges and uncertainties
associated with new research projects, preferring to focus on their teaching responsibilities
instead. In the end, it becomes concerned whether the teachers’ development would be
sustained long-term after the termination of the program. To address this resistance, it is
important to acknowledge and validate the teacher’s concerns while emphasizing the ongoing
benefits of action research within mentoring practices. Providing continued support and
professional development opportunities could help build confidence and enhance research
skills. Demonstrating the potential for further growth and improvement through action research
could motivate the teachers to overcome their resistance and continue their journey as lifelong
learners. Sharing success stories and testimonials from other teachers who have benefited from
a mentoring program based on action research could also serve as inspiration and encouragement.
Ultimately, fostering a collaborative and supportive culture that values continuous improvement and innovation could help alleviate resistance and encourage the
teacher to embrace future action research opportunities.

To conclude, despite having been gaining popularity as a powerful strategy to help and
support teachers’ development, establishing effective mentoring programs for teachers is not
easy. Meticulous plans are needed to successfully execute the programs. Our research showed
that the integration between research and teaching conducted under the social constructivist
mentoring practices guided by the action research had been reported to be effective and greatly
benefitted the teachers’ development. For example, the teachers’ ability to (1) develop a growth
mindset, (2) effectively facilitate their student’s development of academic writing, self-
discipline, and self-regulation skills, (3) commence using the student-centered approach in
learning, (4) develop teaching plans accommodating students’ need, (5) be critical and
reflective as an endeavor to improve their teaching practices, and (6) to make the class more
joyful and meaningful on the side of the students. Furthermore, the teachers established a
positive self-identity, managed to overcome internal resistance, and developed a positive
attitude towards TPD during the mentoring period.
Similar to other investigations, our study had certain limitations. Firstly, it had a small sample size and was conducted within a limited range, involving only seven university teachers teaching English academic writing. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to other mentoring practices in a broader setting. Additionally, our study did not compare the developmental outcomes of the teachers across various factors, such as personal background and life story, career stage, opportunities and support for TPD in and out of school, working conditions, school cultures, leadership, and external influence. Recognizing these limitations, future research should aim to explore the application of social constructivist mentoring practices guided by action research in larger and more diverse samples, encompassing a wider range of research areas and contexts. By comparing the results of such studies with our own, a more comprehensive and robust understanding of mentoring practices can be attained.

Furthermore, despite the positive results of the intervention, we still had a critical question regarding the participants' integrative motivation and their ability to sustainably develop their academic and professional competencies in the long term. To address this question, the roles of institutions and other initiatives in providing relevant and bottom-up support, including infrastructure, programs, and policies, are essential. Such support can contribute to the continuous growth and success of both teachers and students. Ultimately, the qualitative approach employed in our study emerged as a promising concept for enhancing the quality of educational processes.

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