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ENHANCING ESL NOVICE TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: ROLES OF PEERS IN OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING THROUGH PEER MENTORING

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Abstract
The transition from pre-service training to real-world classrooms can be daunting for novice English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. A qualitative multiple-case study approach was employed to determine the impact of peer mentoring on ESL teachers' professional development through mutual classroom observations. Specifically, peer mentors' guidance on novice ESL teachers in developing effective instructions was appraised by applying Lortie's (1975) apprenticeship of observation. The data were collected through interviews with three novice ESL teachers from public primary schools who participated in peer mentoring partnerships, classroom observations, and participants' personal journal entries. Thematic analysis was performed, which demonstrated that peer mentoring facilitated a) enhanced instructional practices, b) a shift in the novices' mindset and c) a collaborative interaction in the professional learning community. The findings posited that peer mentoring provided an alternative observational learning approach for novice ESL teachers in terms of effective instructional strategies from colleagues while obtaining specific feedback on professional development. Resultantly, a nuanced comprehension of the approach employed by novice ESL teachers to enhance instructional expertise via peer support was provided. Practical implications were contributed to existing ESL training programs, novice ESL teachers, and educational institutions.

Keywords: collaborative learning community, novice teacher development, observational learning, peer mentoring, transforming novice teacher

Introduction
Malaysian young pupils' adequacy in English proficiency is an integral aspect of education. Nonetheless, unique challenges exist when teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to young pupils, especially among ESL novice teachers with limited career experiences. Hence, ESL novice teachers should receive continuous professional training to enhance instructional strategies to fulfill young pupils' tailored requirements despite pre-service training being offered to ESL novice teachers with fundamental knowledge and skills. Furthermore, Malaysian ESL novice teachers frequently encounter high instructional challenges, such as

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adapting a suitable curriculum for young pupils. Social challenges also exist, which encompass promoting a positive learning environment for diverse learners to effectively navigate classroom dynamics. Simultaneously, high workloads deprive personal time for self-directed professional growth (Anggraini, 2020).

An ESL novice teacher's professional development is contributed by several factors, including developing a distinctive professional identity and mentorship (Gibbons, 2020). The present study propounded that peer mentoring programs serve as a potent instrument in resolving the challenges that Malaysian ESL novice teachers encounter. In particular, peer mentoring acts as a collaborative and context-specific method for professional growth by allowing ESL novice teachers to observe experienced colleagues and engage in reflective discussions. Resultantly, ESL novice teachers acquire valuable insights into effective ESL instructional practices, which empowers them to develop instructional expertise, manage workloads more effectively, encourage a culture of continuous learning, and effectively navigate classroom dynamics. The current study also examined the specific benefits of peer mentoring programs for Malaysian ESL novice teachers to assist in enhancing current instructional strategies for improved pupils' learning outcomes.

ESL novice teachers require sufficient support for professional development. Several definitions of ESL novice teachers are provided by existing studies on novice or beginning teachers, although the definitions are subject to specific cultures and contexts. The present study adhered to Farrell's (2012) definition as "those who are sometimes called newly qualified teachers, who have completed their language teacher education program (including teaching practice [TP]) and have commenced teaching English in an educational institution (usually within three years of completing their teacher education program)" (p.437). Several common first-year challenges experienced by ESL novice teachers encompass managing pupils with varying capabilities and classroom and pupils' behaviors, acquiring emotional support, ensuring constant access to sufficient instructional resources and materials, and adapting to professional obligations (Veenman, 1984). Accordingly, peers can act as mentors, offering the required support to resolve all the challenges encountered. Similarly, peer mentoring programs provide opportunities for novice ESL educators to perform observational learning within a structured environment, which assists in acquiring skills from experienced colleagues in practicing effective instructions in actual classrooms. Resultantly, a deeper comprehension of effective instructional strategies is acquired.

The effectiveness of peer mentoring programs is influenced by dedicated time for mentoring activities, institutional support, and professional growth opportunities (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Tutyandari, Anandari, & Ardi, 2022). Providing a collaborative learning environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and adequate trust is also integral to maximizing peer mentoring benefits (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2022). In addition, pairing mentors and mentees through similar expertise and educating philosophies can also increase mentoring effectiveness (Kang & Toh, 2021; Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen & Kieu, 2022). An instrumental model is provided by Lortie's (1975) apprenticeship of observation to determine the significance of ESL novice teachers' professional growth. Specifically, ESL novice teachers with limited practical experiences can learn effective educational approaches via effective observations. Nevertheless, the

initially effective observation might result in subsequent replication of obsolete or ineffective instructional strategies. As such, mentors should effectively guide ESL novice teachers in performing reflective practices (Schön, 1992).

Reflective practice includes critically analyzing an individual's demeanors and experiences to determine areas for improvement. The process can be fostered by peer mentors by encouraging ESL novice teachers to appraise personal observations and seek different methods to address unique classroom challenges. Furthermore, conducting insightful post-observation discussions provides a platform for ESL novice teachers to express personal observations, reflect on personal educational practices, and pinpoint improvement areas. Simultaneously, a growth mindset will be promoted (Dweck, 2006) to assist ESL novice teachers in perceiving challenges as learning and continuous improvement opportunities. Numerous studies also highlighted that peer mentoring positively impacted ESL novice teachers' professional growth. Bhandari (2022) and Kassim and Al-Mekhlafi (2023) discovered that ESL novice teachers attained more positive experiences and perceptions of mentoring owing to the acquired benefits of classroom management skills and improved instructional knowledge and approaches. Similarly, Pandey (2022) underscored the importance of mentoring in spurring ESL novice teachers' personal, professional, and institutional development.

Mihaela (2023) demonstrated the importance of mentor training in improving mentoring qualities and competencies. The finding emphasized the equivalent obligations of both mentors and mentees in ensuring mentoring effectiveness. Furthermore, observing experienced colleagues positively impacts ESL novice teachers. Jakavonytė-Staškuvienė and Ignatavičiūtė (2022) revealed that the action of observing mentors assisted ESL novice teachers in effectively obtaining professional growth support, learning practical capabilities, and receiving emotional guidance while being equipped with the expertise to resolve inherent challenges in the first teaching year (Gholam, 2018). Rosas-Maldonado (2021) also discovered that observing mentors significantly impacted ESL novice teachers' socio-emotional and affective teaching perspectives in terms of teacher-student relationships. Peens (2022) supported strength-based mentoring to create a sustainable and impactful educational environment by capitalizing on mentors' expertise to provide effective guidance, stability, and confidence to novice ESL teachers.

The existing literature highly concentrates on determining the benefits of peer mentoring, including self-efficacy, in reducing the gap between theory and practice. Comparatively, the benefits of observing peer mentors in terms of enhanced instructional practices among ESL novice teachers were scarcely examined. Hence, the present study seeks to bridge the current literature gap by investigating the role of peer mentoring on ESL novice teachers' professional growth, promoting a culture of continuous learning, and improving student learning outcomes. Essentially, peer mentoring may serve as a crucial driver of a collaborative learning environment, with experienced teachers acting as peer mentors to offer guidance and support to mentees or ESL novice teachers. This study appraised peer mentors' roles through observational learning programmes and recommended effective implementation approaches to acquire a more nuanced comprehension of the impact of peer mentoring on ESL novice teachers' professional growth.

One central question guided the study: In what way does peer mentoring contribute to ESL novice teachers' professional development? Additional questions that helped steer the collection of data and analysis of data are:

a) What do ESL novices gain from peer classroom observation?
b) How do peers contribute to ESL novices' development in teaching?

Method

The present study utilized a multiple case study design to holistically assess observational learning processes among ESL novice teachers, namely the learning dynamics in a quarterly peer mentoring partnership, by applying Yin's (2003) framework. The case study methodology was suitable to the present study context by scrutinizing the unique context to determine nuanced mechanisms and interactions in peer mentoring partnerships. The case study methodology is also relevant to educational research when exploring intricate relationships. Examining multiple cases would contribute comprehensive insights into existing teaching strategies and policies while discovering specific trends and differences in mentoring relationships. Ethical approval was acquired from the ethics committee before data collection. Voluntary participation was ensured, and participants were informed of the right to halt participation upon perceiving discomfort in the mentoring partnership. All three study participants remained in the mentoring relationships until study completion.

Research context and participants

Three public primary schools in Peninsula Malaysia were selected to recruit the three ESL novice teachers. The first school was located in an urban area, the second in a suburban, and the third in a small village. The three different contexts offered a more comprehensive insight into different teaching contexts, requirements, and experiences. Primary pupils were aged between seven and 12 years old, with the enrolment number in each school ranging from 579 pupils for the village to 1,234 pupils for the urban.

Maira, Feyra, and Alana are three ESL novice teachers who are teaching the English language in three different public primary schools in the southern region states in Peninsular Malaysia. They were selected due to their identity as former trainees of the Institute of Teacher Education (ITE). Having been trained from the same ITE, all three participants were involved in similar comprehensive five-and-a-half-year ESL instructional training. The extensive training not only equipped the three participants with deep theoretical knowledge but also practical skills. However, different school placements after training have impacted their professional growth and development. Thus, unique experiences and perspectives were garnered to determine the efficacies of ESL training programs for ESL teachers. Additionally, the three participants possessed three years of teaching experience, which signified a crucial professional growth phase transitioning from theoretical knowledge to teaching practices in actual classrooms. Accordingly, specific successes, challenges, and learning trajectories among ESL novice teachers could be accurately determined.

Before recruiting the study participants, the researchers submitted an application to conduct research from the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC). Once approval was obtained, the researchers contacted the

State Education Department to get the list of schools in the southern region states in Peninsular Malaysia. The states were purposely chosen due to their geographical locations, which are accessible to the researchers in terms of travel and cost. Three public primary schools which have at least two ESL novice teachers with three to five years of teaching experience were further shortlisted. The potential participants were personally contacted through phone calls and emails to explain the details of the study. Once an agreement was reached and the participants were fully aware of their rights to participate or withdraw from the peer mentoring partnership, the main researcher went to meet all the ESL novice participants to get them to sign the consent forms.

The twelve-week peer mentoring structure was described and discussed with all the participants to ensure their understanding of the study requirements. After signing the consent forms and getting all their questions answered, the twelve-week peer mentoring partnership between the novices commenced. The three focal participants fostered the involvement of respective peer mentors with four to five years of teaching experience, who provided insights into the vital roles of experienced teachers in promoting ESL novice teachers' professional development. Appraising the mentoring relationships between peer mentors and ESL novice teachers also assisted in thoroughly comprehending the supporting structures and professional interactions of mentorship. Summarily, the three participants contributed significant insights into the mentorship dynamics within the ESL teaching field, especially teaching practices and policies to effectively guide ESL novice teachers globally. All novices and mentors were also Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) graduates of the ITE, who underwent similar training programs in their pre-service years. Table 1 depicts the participants' demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Summary of the novice participants' demographics

Novice teacher (pseudonyms)	Education background	Years of teaching experiences	Type of school	Classes taught
Maira	ITE (B.Ed. TESL)	Three years	Public primary school	Year 1,3,4
Alana	ITE (B.Ed. TESL)	Three years	Public primary school	Year 3 (three classes)
Feyra	ITE (B.Ed. TESL)	Three years	Public primary school	Year 1,4,5

Data collection

The data were collected from three sources, namely observational notes, in-depth interviews, and personal journal entries from the novices. Each in-depth interview was conducted with the three ESL novice teachers at intervals of two to three weeks to allow adequate reflection and learning time by observing peer mentors. ESL novice teachers and respective mentors provided notes to record personal observations for further discussions and addressing in the following lessons. ESL novice teachers also recorded observational learning experiences in personal journals weekly. The partnership commenced with ESL novice teachers observing respective mentors in performing instructional practices for an hour, followed by a post-lesson discussion. The mentors would also observe ESL novice teachers and share personal reflections and discussions. The researchers performed

in-depth interviews with ESL novice teachers at the end of the fifth, eighth, and 11th weeks to identify learning outcomes derived from the mentoring partnership. The interviews were conducted and recorded on the Zoom platform owing to the lockdown measures during the pandemic. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and was transcribed and emailed to ESL novice teachers for member-checking purposes. ESL novice teachers also recorded journal entries at the end of each week before sharing personal experiences of the peer mentoring partnership with respective mentors in the 12th week.

Data analysis

The interview data were subject to iterative analysis for a holistic examination of novice ESL teachers' mentoring experiences. Axial, open, and selective raw interview data coding discovered emerging themes. The themes were discovered by categorizing and clustering open codes from each transcript. For example, the codes pertinent to classroom management challenges were classified under the theme of "Navigating Classroom Dynamics," which delineated novice ESL educators' practical challenges. Concurrently, Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development and Bandura's (1977) social learning theory were applied to support the emerging themes and highlight the importance of collaborations and pedagogical improvements for professional development. The positive impact of mentoring on ESL novice teachers' mindsets was analyzed through Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, which discovered the three themes of "Enhanced Instructional Practices," "Shift in Novices' Mindset," and "Collaborative Interaction in the Professional Learning Community." Result triangulation was also performed by incorporating participants' observational notes and personal journal entries. Observational data contributed nuanced insights into classroom dynamics and actual teaching practices, which complemented self-reflections in personal journals. Disparities between observed and perceived instructional effectiveness were resolved through triangulation to ensure sufficient credibility and depth of the study findings.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Each ESL novice teacher in the study shared a unique experience, describing their individual experience through their own lens based on the contexts they were in at the time of the study. From the data analyzed, we identified three emerging themes gathered from the in-depth interviews, namely enhanced instructional practices, shift in novices' mindset, and collaborative interaction in the professional learning community. The themes narrated in detail below answer the study's research questions.

Enhanced instructional practices

The study highlights a significant improvement in the instructional practices of all three novice teachers who participated in the twelve-week peer mentoring program. This positive outcome can be attributed to the collaborative learning environment fostered through regular discussions and exchange of ideas. Peer mentoring facilitates reflective practice (Schön, 1983), allowing novices and

mentors to analyze their teaching methods and identify areas for improvement critically.

Data from Maira exemplifies this benefit. She acknowledges the limitations of solely relying on second-hand observations (e.g., from teacher training), highlighting the potential for overlooking the suitability of certain practices for specific student populations. Peer mentoring provides a platform to observe these nuances in action, enabling novices to adapt their teaching strategies accordingly.

> *Sometimes when we learn second-hand (from observation) from other teachers, we get to know…I mean some practices maybe are not suitable for these students and we don't notice that*. (Maira, I1)

Similarly, Feyra emphasizes the value of firsthand observing her mentor's teaching style and techniques. She mentions explicitly learning strategies for capturing student attention, indicating a conscious effort to adopt effective practices witnessed during peer observations.

> *So what I learned from her is mostly from the observation and then how she helped me is like I think I could see her styles and techniques in teaching…I often look at how she tries to capture her pupils' attention. So I always look for her teaching techniques*. (Feyra, I1)

Alana's experience further underscores the impact of peer mentoring. She describes a shift from prioritizing support for weaker learners to adopting a more balanced approach incorporating two-way communication with all students. This change suggests a deeper understanding of effective classroom management gained through observing her mentor's interaction with the entire class.

> *It's important for me to use two-way communication so the pupils can focus instead of, like previously said, focusing more on my weak learners, so based on what I observed (from my mentor), she communicates with all her pupils when she's teaching, I think I can use it (the technique) with my pupils too.* (Alana, I3)

These findings support Kang and Toh's (2021) proposition that observing experienced peers in action plays a crucial role in novice teacher development. By witnessing diverse teaching approaches and receiving constructive feedback, novices gain the confidence to experiment with new strategies and refine their instructional skills to better address the needs of their students.

Shift in novices' mindset

Observing experienced peer mentors appears to have significantly impacted the novices' perceptions of effective teaching. While pre-service training equips novice teachers with fundamental knowledge and pedagogical approaches, this study suggests peer mentoring fosters contextualized learning (Eraut, 2000).

Data from Alana exemplifies this shift. Initially, her lesson planning heavily emphasized incorporating numerous activities. However, after receiving feedback from her peer mentor, Alana recognized the potential for overcrowding the lesson

and implemented a more streamlined approach while maintaining student engagement.

> *…before peer mentoring, when I do my lesson plan, I love to include activities, many activities. So after the comment (from my peer mentor), I tried to limit my activities, but at the same time, my pupils enjoyed my lesson.* (Alana, I3)

Similarly, Maira acknowledges the value of explicit guidance in expanding her pedagogical repertoire. She highlights the benefit of observing alternative approaches firsthand, particularly those not explicitly addressed during pre-service training.

> *Sometimes when we learn second-hand from other teachers, we get to know, oh, I've never thought of this before, it's actually easier to do… We need someone to point that out to us.* (Maira, I1)

These findings align with Dweck's (2006) concept of a growth mindset, suggesting that witnessing experienced mentors navigate challenges and employ diverse teaching strategies fosters a belief in the continuous development of teaching skills. Furthermore, peer feedback provides novices opportunities for reflection and adaptation, further solidifying their growth mindset (Nguyen & Kieu, 2022).

Collaborative interaction in the professional learning community

The peer mentoring program fostered extensive collaborative interaction beyond mere classroom observations and feedback sessions. This collaboration encompassed various aspects of professional development, with both novices and mentors working collectively towards shared learning objectives.

Data suggests that Feyra and Maira actively sought guidance from their mentors. Feyra's specific inquiries regarding differentiation strategies and adapting teaching materials for diverse learners exemplify the problem-solving nature of these interactions. These discussions facilitated knowledge exchange and equipped Feyra with practical strategies to address the specific needs of her students (Golombek & Klager, 2022).

> *We had some discussion regarding the assessment. I often ask not only her actual questions but also her questions about how to differentiate pupils according to their abilities and how I should adapt the teaching resources and materials for this kind of pupil. I asked her (peer mentor) how to prepare the worksheets for advanced, intermediate, and weak learners. I did ask her about this.* (Feyra, I3)

Maira's experience further highlights the mutually beneficial nature of these collaborative interactions. She emphasizes the reciprocal exchange of feedback and the opportunity to co-construct strategies for addressing classroom challenges. This supportive and open environment fostered by peer mentoring starkly contrasts her previous teaching experiences, where such collaborative problem-solving was absent.

> *Although she's my mentor, she also welcomes any comments, so we would discuss which area to focus on during the observation. Then, after observation, we discussed things that could be improved, and we complimented each other. We've never done this with any other teacher before.* (Maira, I1)

These findings align with the work of Kang and van Es (2019), who emphasize the significance of peer coaching in supporting novice teacher development. The ongoing dialogue facilitated through peer mentoring provides a platform for sharing best practices, addressing challenges collaboratively, and fostering a shared responsibility for professional growth.

Discussion

The current findings were consistent with existing studies demonstrating the pivotal roles of peer mentoring and observational learning in ESL novice teachers' professional growth (Kang & van Es, 2019). Even though peer mentoring as a construct in the Professional Learning Community (PLC) is already in place in the Malaysian educational setting, the ESL novice participants admitted that it was not practiced in their contexts due to the workload and other duties in schools. However, the findings from the interview data demonstrated that ESL novice teachers obtained adequate knowledge of effective teaching practices after observing their mentors' classroom instructional strategies. The findings also corresponded to Golombek and Klager (2022), who revealed the significance of observing experienced teachers' teaching practices. The observation reduced the discrepancy between knowledge and practice after learning the practical application approaches of classroom management strategies and instructional methods (Bowen & Thomas, 2021). The novices in this study admitted that watching other teachers in action widened their perspectives of workable approaches and classroom strategies. One ESL novice even declared that going into another teacher's classroom to observe her teaching is 'unheard of in this school.' This study established the supporting role of institutional models and mentor-mentee compatibility (Kang & Toh, 2021; Nguyen & Kieu, 2022) while exploring the nuanced impacts of mentor selection. Prior scholars discovered that providing mentees with the choice to select mentors significantly improved the efficacies of mentorship (Wilson & Huynh, 2020). Mentees' choices might shape subsequent mentorship experiences in terms of professional objectives, pedagogical techniques, and personal requirements, and future researchers could develop specific mentoring programs more effectively to fulfill ESL novice teachers' various developmental goals.

Determining the potential benefits of mentees' choices in selecting peer mentors could deepen the comprehension of support forms required by ESL novice teachers. Findings from this study suggest that there still exists a barrier between the novices and their mentors due to the pairing done by a third party (the main researcher). Prior academicians demonstrated that mentoring relationships resulted in higher degrees of effectiveness, satisfaction, and trust when mentees were provided with the freedom to choose a suitable mentor (Wilson & Huynh, 2020). The mentoring process became more personalized to mentees' developmental objectives, which positively contributed to personal learning experiences and a

conducive learning environment. Hence, effective mentoring programs should be formulated to satisfy diverse learning requirements. Peer mentoring can also be studied in various contexts to comprehensively understand the impact on ESL training. Gunn, Lee, and Steed (2017) demonstrated the significant transformative effects of peer mentoring on pedagogical approaches and intercultural interactions, which underscored that peer mentoring effectively eliminated cultural boundaries for cross-cultural understanding and interactions. Accordingly, cross-cultural interactions positively contribute to the contemporary worldwide discourse on teaching practices emphasizing reciprocal learning and inclusivity.

The present results highlighted the positive impacts of mentor-mentee relationships catered to specific requirements, dedicated time for reflective practices, and supportive institutions in improving ESL education. The international demand for effective English pedagogy suggests implementing peer mentoring programs with observational learning to improve ESL novice teachers' educational practices. Peer mentoring empowers ESL novice teachers and drives professional growth, which subsequently improves overall ESL educational quality. In addition, the importance of collaborative and experiential professional growth encourages educational institutions to facilitate a culture of continuous learning and knowledge exchange among ESL teachers through mentorship, observational learning, and self-reflection. Therefore, ESL teachers become adept at satisfying evolving educational demands and maintaining high ESL pedagogical standards.

Conclusion

The present study revealed the significant impact of peer mentoring via observational learning on ESL novice teachers' pedagogical techniques and professional development. Collaborations with peer mentors assisted ESL novice teachers in effectively replicating effective educational methods and performing contextualized knowledge applications. Furthermore, the immersive learning experience extended expertise and fostered a growth mindset for positive professional growth. The comprehensive strategy improved existing pedagogical approaches and created a supportive community for ESL novice teachers' thriving. Nevertheless, several limitations exist, as the current study only appraised peer mentoring benefits through observational learning. Future scholars can explore specific pedagogical methods or areas to identify different areas for improvement for ESL novice teachers. A longitudinal study can also be conducted to determine the long-term impacts of mentorship on teacher retention levels or pupils' learning outcomes, which can contribute significant further insights into the established benefits of mentorship programs. Meanwhile, accounting for various cultural and contextual factors with corresponding impacts on peer mentoring efficacies can assist in gaining more nuanced comprehension and formulating tailored strategies. Resultantly, ESL teachers and policymakers can refine existing mentorship programs to fulfill the evolving global demands for ESL teachers with effective pedagogical techniques.

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