

Critical Friend Dynamics in Exploratory Action Research Mentoring พลวัตการแลกเปลี่ยนความเห็นของที่ปรึกษาการวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการในชั้นเรียน

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ABSTRACT

The research overview of Thai education lacks substantial exploration of language classroom action research and the effectiveness of mentoring for professional and personal development. This study aims to find out the mentoring process for exploratory action research. The primary author, actively involved in mentoring for a year, shares her experiences enriched by dialogues with critical friends, represented by the second and third authors. Through this collaborative approach, the study seeks to illuminate the dynamics and effectiveness of mentoring in the context of action research. By documenting the journey of becoming a mentor and facilitating exploratory action research, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the mentorship process and its impacts on both mentors and mentees. Through dialogic interactions and reflective practices, the authors navigate the complexities of mentoring, offering practical guidance and theoretical insights for educators and researchers alike. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on mentoring in educational research by elucidating challenges, successes, and lessons learned from experiences. Furthermore, it underscores the significance of collaborative inquiry and supportive relationships in fostering professional growth and advancing educational practices. Overall, this study serves as a valuable resource for educators, researchers, and policymakers aiming to enhance mentoring practices and promote meaningful professional development in educational contexts.

Keywords: Critical Friend; Exploratory Action Research; Mentoring; Reflective Practices

บทคัดย่อ

ภาพรวมการวิจัยด้านการศึกษานในประเทศไทย ยังขาดการสำรวจการวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการในห้องเรียน ภาษาอังกฤษ อีกทั้งประเด็นการให้คำปรึกษาเพื่อการพัฒนาวิชาชีพยังไม่มีการศึกษามากนัก การศึกษาค้นคว้าครั้งนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษากระบวนการให้คำปรึกษาสำหรับการวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการเชิงสำรวจ โดยผู้เขียนมีส่วนร่วมในการให้คำปรึกษาเป็นเวลาหนึ่งปี ร่วมแบ่งปันประสบการณ์ที่ได้รับการเสริมสร้างคุณค่าจากการสนทนากับเพื่อนร่วมวิชาชีพในการสอนภาษาอังกฤษ แนวทางการทำงานร่วมกันนี้จะทำให้เห็นถึงพลวัตและประสิทธิผลของการให้คำปรึกษาในบริบทของการวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการ ด้วยการบันทึกประสบการณ์ของการเป็นผู้ให้คำปรึกษาในการวิจัยเชิงปฏิบัติการเชิงสำรวจ การศึกษานี้ให้ความเข้าใจอย่างละเอียดถี่ถ้วนเกี่ยวกับกระบวนการให้คำปรึกษาและผลกระทบที่มีต่อผู้ให้คำปรึกษาและผู้รับคำปรึกษา ผู้เขียนได้สำรวจความซับซ้อนของการให้คำปรึกษาผ่านการโต้ตอบและการฝึกไตร่ตรอง โดยเสนอคำแนะนำเชิงปฏิบัติและข้อมูลเชิงลึกทางทฤษฎีสำหรับนักการศึกษาและนักวิจัย การศึกษาค้นคว้าครั้งนี้มีส่วนช่วยในการสร้างวาทกรรมอย่างต่อเนื่องเกี่ยวกับการให้คำปรึกษาในการวิจัยทางการศึกษา โดยชี้แจงความท้าทาย ความสำเร็จ และบทเรียนที่ได้รับจากประสบการณ์ นอกจากนี้ผลการศึกษายังเน้นย้ำถึงความสำคัญของความร่วมมือและความสัมพันธ์ที่สนับสนุนในการส่งเสริมการเติบโตทางวิชาชีพและการพัฒนาแนวปฏิบัติด้านการศึกษา โดยรวมแล้วการศึกษานี้ทำหน้าที่เป็นทรัพยากรที่มีคุณค่าสำหรับนักการศึกษา นักวิจัย และผู้กำหนดนโยบายที่มีเป้าหมายที่จะยกระดับแนวทางปฏิบัติในการให้คำปรึกษาและส่งเสริมการพัฒนาวิชาชีพที่มีความหมายในบริบททางการศึกษา

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Introduction

Classroom action research is important because it helps teachers improve at their jobs. It allows them to look closely at what's happening in their classrooms and find ways to make things even better. This means they can come up with special solutions to problems they face, like making lessons more interesting or helping struggling students. When teachers do action research, they feel more in control of their work and can make decisions based on what they see happening in their own classrooms. This is good for students too because it means teachers are always trying to find ways to help them learn more effectively. So, action research is not just about fixing problems; it is regarded as a robust professional attempt aimed at enhancing teachers' professional growth (Berger, Boles, & Troen, 2005; Lytle, & Cochran-Smith, 1992).

However, doing action research can be time-consuming and challenging for many teachers. That's why having a mentor to guide them through the process is essential. A mentor can provide support and expertise, making it easier for teachers to navigate the complexities of action research. With a mentor's help, teachers can overcome obstacles more efficiently and achieve better results in their professional development.

Accordingly, Burns (2009), a scholar in English language education discusses the importance of using action research in teacher training programs in her book called "Action research in second language teacher education". Burns stresses how action research helps second language teachers think deeply about and improve their teaching methods. She believes that through action research, teachers can investigate issues in their classrooms systematically, find solutions to challenges they face, and grow professionally. Moreover, Burns emphasizes the importance of teamwork and guidance from mentors in supporting teachers as they conduct action research. She suggests that this approach can lead to transformative learning experiences. Overall, Burns highlights how integrating action research into second language teacher education can help teachers become more reflective and confident in their teaching practices. Then, this idea has been widely carried out in language education.

In Thailand's educational research, there's only a small amount of information about language classroom action research and the effectiveness of mentoring for professional or personal development (Rainey, 2000). Similarly, Akcan, Büyükgümüş, Mor, & Çoban, (2019) discuss exploratory action research, which is a type of action research. In action research, teachers actively engage in investigating and improving their teaching practices. Exploratory action research specifically focuses on exploring new ideas and methods in teaching, energizing teachers to enhance their skills and teaching approaches. This differs from traditional action research by emphasizing the exploration of innovative strategies rather than solely focusing on problem-solving or improvement within existing practices.

The current study aims to provide valuable insights into the process of mentoring for exploratory action research. The first author, who has been involved in this process for a year, will share their experiences, supported by dialogues with critical friends, the second and third authors. This will allow readers to better understand the mentoring process and its impact.

Understanding mentor education requires questioning how mentoring and mentor education are defined. The challenge arises because there is no universal agreement on what mentoring entails. Different scholars offer varying interpretations, and mentoring is often debated (Aspfors, & Fransson, 2015). It overlaps with other practices like coaching and supervision. For example, some see coaching as a type of mentoring, while others view mentoring as a form of coaching. Mentoring happens in various settings, serving different purposes and following different theories. It occurs under diverse circumstances, with varying durations and intensity levels.

In the context of teaching, mentoring is commonly associated with pre-service education, focusing on training new teachers and their mentors (Ballantyne & Mylonas, 1991; Hudson, 2014; Sundli, 2007). However, in this article, the discussion concentrates on mentoring for experienced teachers. This distinction is made because mentoring in initial teacher education and for experienced ones involves different practices with distinct contexts and effects. Additionally, most research focuses on preparing mentors for student teachers rather than experienced teachers. Therefore, this article focuses on mentoring specifically tailored for teachers doing their exploratory action research.

The first author has been helping as a mentor in a type of research called exploratory action research. This research method has been used in projects in South America and Africa since 2017. It involves studying and trying out new ideas to see what works. This type of research has shown that teachers gain many advantages from this approach. They get to improve their skills and knowledge (Smith, 2015). The training is done through a method called mentoring, where experienced teachers guide and support newer ones. She has been a mentor for almost a year, and during this time, she has faced many doubts, confusion, and challenges. However, the conversations between the second and third authors have been helpful. They have discussed how to give advice to others, both on professional and personal matters. This exchange of ideas aims to help teachers create action research projects and achieve their goals. To illustrate these points, the steps in mentoring exploratory action research is shown in the following table;

Exploratory Action Research steps	Activities	
Exploration	Plan to explore	Topic identification
	Explore	Defining exploratory research questions
	Analyze and reflect	Data collection tools design
Action	Plan	Action plan design
	Act	Implementation & Evaluation of action plan
	Observe	
	Reflect	Analysis and conclusion
Sharing	Poster design & oral presentation	

British Council (n.d)

Scholars seem to come with the consensus that dialogic reflection can be utilized to explore the issues relating to human lives and interpretation through dialogue. Reflection has been recognized as a crucial analytical tool in the examination of language teaching, acknowledging the socio-political nature of teaching. Dialogic reflection proves valuable in unraveling the intricate dynamics of individuals and elements present in narratives (Loo, Trakulkasemsuk, & Zilli 2017). This aligns with Bakhtin's (1984) perspective, viewing dialogue as relational and a means of critically engaging with one's environment, where "to live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth" (293). Similarly, it resonates with Freire's (1998) notion that dialogue holds significance because the participants uphold their identities while mutually evolving (117). Thus, dialogic reflection can be fostered through collaboration with a critical friend, enabling the examination and critique of ideas to gain insights into ethically significant moments (Loo and Ching 2018). Involving a critical friend can mitigate the risk of overlooking particular agendas in storytelling, as some narrators may be hesitant to take risks (Wennergren 2016). This approach promotes the de-essentialization of the teaching profession by posing complex questions concerning the processes of 'becoming' and 'performance'. Such critical inquiry is vital in education, where conventional teaching and schooling paradigms are dismantled to avoid promoting "minimalist, impoverished pedagogy" that reinforces oppressive hierarchies through control and surveillance (Stremmel et al. 2015, 170). Furthermore, Freire (1998) suggests that dialogue

with a critical friend offers both emotional support and analytical perspectives sensitive to personal and professional comfort, while also encouraging risk-taking to address concerns that might otherwise be ignored.

There have been attempts to promote mentoring as a way to improve teachers' skill. However, the previous studies mainly focused on teaching ability rather than ability to conduct classroom action research. For example, the study by Asanok, M., & Chookhampaeng (2016) attempting to develop a coaching and mentoring model and assess its effectiveness by surveying 100 teachers in Thailand. The model involved planning and several phases of development, including training, sharing, and coaching. Initially, teachers lacked confidence in implementing the model, particularly in creating professional learning communities and using video resources. However, after follow-up sessions, their confidence increased. They showed positive attitudes towards collaboration and were able to apply the model in their classrooms. By the end, teachers demonstrated improvement in various aspects of teaching competency, including classroom management, knowledge, teaching methods, and diagnosis. Another example is from Thipatdee, Chaichana, & Kamsanor (2019). The study aimed to improve teachers' skills through coaching and mentoring, alongside modern teaching methods like project-based learning, problem-based learning, and research-based learning. They selected 96 teachers from schools in Thailand with lower-than-average test scores. After the training, teachers showed significant improvement in their understanding of teaching concepts. Their performance was rated as pass with distinction, indicating a high level of satisfaction with the training. Additionally, their lesson plans were considered fair.

Previous research has discussed using mentoring skills to enhance teachers' competency in teaching. However, the main difference in this current study is the emphasis on using mentoring to guide teachers in conducting exploratory action research. This approach requires each teacher to think, observe, and take action for change in their individual classrooms. Therefore, this study records and discusses the mentors' experiences in this process. Overall, integrating mentoring skills into exploratory action research empowers teachers to drive meaningful change, foster continuous improvement, and ultimately enhance the quality of education in their respective classrooms and beyond.

Research Objective

To investigate the effectiveness of implementing dialogic reflection with critical friends in language teaching contexts, focusing on its impact on teacher professional development and classroom practice.

Research Methodology

1. Data collection

1.1 Observe the dialogues between language teachers and their critical friends in two distinct steps:

1.1.1 Informal Conversations: Participants engage in non-formal conversations resembling a Professional Learning Community (PLC), where they discuss working processes and relevant issues.

1.1.2 Summarization via Google Docs: Each participant summarizes the points made in the conversation using Google Docs, allowing for online collaboration and idea-sharing.

Whenever the first author encounters an issue, an informal meeting is scheduled to briefly discuss it before jotting down notes in the Google Doc. The example of the dialogue are presented as follow;

Jariya	Taweewat	Lamyai
When helping with exploratory action research, I'm not sure if I should do the work for them or only ask them to do it themselves. I think the supervisor's job is to give orders. Maybe being a mentor means working together, especially in making exploratory data.	In my experience, mentoring isn't about giving orders or doing the work for them. It's about fostering independence and self-reliance in the younger generation. As a mentor, your role is to share wisdom and provide guidance, but ultimately, they need to do the work themselves to	In Buddhism, we believe in guiding others towards self-discovery and growth. Your role as a mentor is not to do the work for them but to encourage their own exploration and learning. Like a guide on a spiritual journey, you're there to provide support and guidance, allowing them to

Jariya	Taweewat	Lamyai
	truly learn and grow. Think of it as a partnership, where you work together to uncover new ideas and approaches in exploratory action research.	uncover insights and develop their skills independently.

1.2 Document Analysis: the three authors review documents produced during the exploratory action research process, such as lesson plans, reflections, and research journals. They were analyzing these documents to identify themes and patterns related to the dialogic interactions.

2. Data analysis

2.1 Coding: Code the collected data from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Use simple codes to categorize the data based on recurring themes and topics related to the dialogic interactions. The authors look at each mentoring principle and compare the previous perception with the current idea after critical friend analysis.

2.2 Theme Identification: Identify key themes and patterns emerging from the coded data. The authors were looking for commonalities and differences in the experiences and perspectives of language teachers and their critical friends. Then, we grouped the changes into categories based on the mentoring principles. For example, changes related to emphasis on process vs. results, building rapport, respecting others' time, and pair work style.

Results

The results of the critical friends' analysis revealed significant insights into various aspects of teacher development. This section presents a detailed overview of the key findings, highlighting the transformative impact of critical reflection and feedback on teachers' perceptions and practices. From emphasizing process over results to building rapport and respecting others' time, the analysis provided valuable insights into the nuances of effective professional development strategies.

Furthermore, the shift from a directive to a collaborative pair work style underscores the importance of fostering a culture of mutual learning and support among educators. The following subsections delve into each of these findings in depth, shedding light on their implications for enhancing teacher effectiveness and promoting a culture of continuous improvement within educational settings.

A table comparing previous and current ideas about being a mentor for school teachers:

Issues	Previous perception	Ideas after critical friends' analysis
Emphasis on Process vs. Results	Following the steps carefully. There's right and not-so-right ways to do.	Results are not as important as the process; exploratory research for insights. Focusing on the process for a deeper understanding and improvement.
Building Rapport	Understanding teachers' communication styles and life duties; crucial for trust.	Building a strong rapport by understanding teachers' styles and responsibilities.
Respecting Others' Time	Unsure: Should I call for meeting when I think my teachers should complete their task?	Only suggesting available time and not pushing for meetings. Let them choose the methods of communication and length. Providing clear agenda for each meeting with visuals information. Respecting teachers' time and commitments professionally. They know their duties and constantly contact me.
Pair Work Style	Leading vs. mentoring	Collaborating as a team, not a supervisor; creating comfort and partnership. Collaborating as equals to foster mutual learning and support.

Discussions

Theme 1: The Role of Dialogic Reflection in Education

Reflection is seen as an essential tool in examining language teaching, acknowledging its socio-political nature. The results agree with Wennergren (2016) that dialogic reflection is helpful in mitigate the risk of interpretation in a specific issue through dialogue.

Dialogic reflection helps in understanding the complex dynamics of individuals and elements in narratives. The results in this study are in line with Freire's (1998) perspectives highlight the relational nature of dialogue and its significance in critical engagement and identity evolution.

Theme 2: The Importance of Dialogue with Critical Friends

Dialogue with a critical friend offers emotional support and analytical perspectives sensitive to personal and professional comfort. It encourages risk-taking to address concerns that might otherwise be ignored as described by Loo, Trakulkasemsuk, & Zilli (2017).

The results have confirmed Loo and Ching's (2018) idea that collaboration with a critical friend helps in posing complex questions and avoiding minimalist pedagogy that reinforces oppressive hierarchies.

It can be seen that critical friends play a crucial role in mentoring exploratory action research by providing constructive feedback, challenging assumptions, and offering alternative perspectives. They help mentors and mentees critically reflect on their practices, identify blind spots, and explore new possibilities. In this study, the first author, Jariya, is a mentor for language teachers which is a lengthy process. She has to deal with each teacher starting from brainstorming ideas, creating possible research questions, designing data collection tools and giving moral support. Through dialogues with critical friends, the mentor can deepen their understanding of the research process, refine their research questions, and strengthen their methodological approach. Additionally, critical friends offer emotional support and encouragement, helping to navigate challenges and stay motivated throughout the research journey. Overall, critical friends contribute to the rigor and validity of exploratory action research by fostering a collaborative and reflective learning environment.

New Knowledge

Through this research, we aim to provide insights into the benefits of using dialogic reflection with critical friends in language teaching. We anticipate discovering how this approach can enhance teacher professional development and improve classroom practices. Additionally, our findings may reveal the importance of collaborative dialogue in addressing educational challenges and fostering a supportive learning environment. Overall, this study seeks to contribute valuable knowledge that can inform and enhance teaching methodologies in language education.

We suggest that future studies look at the effectiveness of dialogic reflection with critical companions in a range of educational contexts outside of language instruction. Researchers can better understand how this method affects teacher professional development and classroom practices across various topic areas and grade levels by broadening the scope of their investigation. It would also be advantageous to look into the long-term impacts of cooperative discussion on resolving enduring academic difficulties and creating a positive learning environment. These studies can offer important insights into the wider applicability and durability of dialogic reflection as a strategy for improving instructional strategies and encouraging ongoing educational improvement.

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