

# FACILITATING THE TRANSITIONING OF AN EFL TEACHER FROM TEACHING OLDER LEARNERS TO TEACHING YOUNGER CHILDREN THROUGH MENTORING

Yasemin Kırkgöz

Çukurova University, Türkiye

✉ [ykirkgoz@gmail.com](mailto:ykirkgoz@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

This paper reports the professional journey of an English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher from teaching older learners to teaching younger children at a primary school, and the impact of mentoring on the teacher in facilitating the transitioning process. The participant is a Turkish native-speaker male English teacher with 23 years of teaching experience. He participated in the mentoring programme, which was organized as a collaborative action research teacher development project, and implemented by the author of the present study. During this process, the participant completed three cycles of action research. For each cycle, he identified a problem and/or any aspect of teaching he wished to improve, designed an action plan, applied it in his Grade 2 English classes, reflected upon his action, and documented his action research. He was also interviewed to gain additional insight into his experiences. Qualitative inductive analysis was used to analyse the interviews and reflective writings. The findings suggest that the mentoring process led to an increase in the teacher's self-efficacy in young learner pedagogy and teaching performance, helped him socialize into the community of young learner teachers, and gain teacher-researcher identity, which is perceived to smooth his transition into teaching a younger age.

## KEYWORDS

**Collaborative action research (CAR), mentoring, professional development, reflective writing, teaching adult learners, teaching English to young learners, transitioning**

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## Highlights

- Transitioning from teaching older learners to younger children is a challenging process.
- Mentoring can smooth the transitioning process.
- Mentoring process can change an adult English teacher's self-efficacy in young learner pedagogy, teaching performance, professional socialisation, and teacher-researcher identity.
- Teachers need to be supported through mentoring following educational change.

## INTRODUCTION

'Transition' has become a subject that should not be considered as 'a manageable or quickly adaptable period of time' (Phan and Pham, 2022: 1). Examining this *movement* or a *transfer* for novice teachers into the school environment has been a topic of investigation for researchers. It has been argued that any transition is 'problematic' (Ecclestone et al., 2010: 4), involving an 'inevitable shock' (Stokking et al., 2003: 331) because 'the school-work transition might make graduates realize what they are taught at school is not exactly the same as what is expected from them in the new school environment'

(Phan and Phamb, 2022: 1). Experienced English teachers are no exception when they need to transfer into a new teaching context to teach a different age group from the one they had been acquainted with.

Mentoring between a new teacher and an experienced one is a common strategy used in teacher professional development programmes to address such a crucial transition period (Ewing, 2021; Morettini et al. 2019). This strategy can be a type of therapy to help teachers who are going through a transitional stage in their careers. While experienced teachers may think that they are fully acquainted with teaching one specific age,

such as adults, classroom practices of a different age group that they are required to teach, such as younger children, may actually reveal more challenges than they anticipated previously (Onat-Stelma, 2005).

In Türkiye, in response to the recent curriculum change, which was put into implementation in the 2013-2014 teaching year, the starting age of learning English was lowered to the second year of primary children around the age of seven (Kırkgöz, 2015). Consequently, many English teachers who had been teaching in secondary or high schools moved to primary education with no experience in teaching young learners. The present study investigates the professional journey of a Turkish native-speaker English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher from teaching older learners to teaching younger ages at a state primary school. The study also investigates how a mentoring programme, offered as part of a collaborative action research (CAR) teacher development project, assisted the process of transitioning into teaching young children in his new school context.

Relatively few studies have examined the impact of mentoring on teachers or used a university-school CAR to help teachers tackle their daily emerging issues, particularly following a curriculum change (Kırkgöz, 2016, 2019; Onat-Stelma, 2005). The present study is based on a single participant study, which was carried out by the author as well as one mentor who was also a university teacher educator working on the project. The research is also a response to a call for further research into teacher professional development following such curricular reforms to investigate how best to facilitate the teaching of English in primary schools (Onat-Stelma, 2005).

The paper continues with an overview of the existing literature related to the research area, followed by providing a description of the research context before moving on to the results and discussion of the study. The paper ends with a conclusion section giving a brief summary of key findings of the study.

## Transition

Transition is described as ‘the major shaping event in the professional life’ (McDonal 1980: 22). Different stakeholders, comprising beginning teachers, teacher educators as well as experienced teachers can have different perceptions of this stage (McDonal, 1980). The transition from initial teacher education to the classroom is one of the most critical phases of a teaching career (Zuljan and Pozarnik, 2014). Empirical studies show that during this transition period, new teachers, in many countries face common challenges such as ‘feelings of inadequacy in terms of their skills and knowledge, leading to decreased self-efficacy and increased stress; uncertainty regarding their role and position as newcomers in the education community; and threats of job loss due to precarious employment conditions’ (Heikkinen et al., 2018: 1).

Phan and Phamb (2022) conducted a qualitative case study to investigate how a mentoring programme facilitates the transition of two newly qualified teachers, working in a higher education institution. The results demonstrate changes in the teachers’ teaching beliefs, self-efficacy, teaching performance

and professional development, and the socialisation process into the profession, facilitating the transition process. Self-efficacy refers to ‘beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given actions required’ (Bandura, 1997: 3). Teachers’ self-efficacy serves as the foundation for their core belief in their capacity to use a variety of tasks arising from context-specific demands to support student learning (Wyatt, 2010). As stated by Bandura (1986), none of the forms of beliefs that influence action is more important or pervasive than people’s assessment of their capacity to deal effectively with various actions.

While the experience of first time or novice teachers who are making the transition from pre-service training to their first year of teaching during the transition period has been investigated extensively (e.g., Farrell, 2003; Harfitt, 2015; Hebert and Worthy, 2001; Phan and Phamb, 2022), a gap exists in the literature describing the experiences of teachers making a transition from teaching one age group to another, particularly in the Türkiye context. One earlier study that focused on this issue was by Onat-Stelma (2005), who investigated the experiences of four English language teachers who were previously teaching adults in high schools or language schools, and moved to teach English to young learners. The study was conducted following the educational reform, which introduced English into the primary curriculum to grade four students (aged 9) in 1997, in Türkiye. These teachers were followed in their first year of teaching in primary school to identify changes they experienced in their approach to teaching English to young learners, and what influenced these changes. In-service training through one-off seminars and workshops organized by publishers, and textbooks, as well as emotional and professional support from colleagues were found to have a positive influence on teacher change during the transitioning process. In adjusting to teaching children, the main issue the teachers focused on was developing effective classroom management strategies.

## Collaborative Action Research (CAR) Professional Development Programme

Action Research (AR) is conceptualized as the process by which practitioners study problems systematically to increase their knowledge of the curriculum, teaching, and learning (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982). AR has been widely used as a viable professional development approach for classroom teachers to bring about change in their instructional practices, and to promote teachers’ professional competence (Atay 2008; Gao, Barkhuizen, and Chow 2011; Kırkgöz, 2017). The process of AR includes action cycles of planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation. In some AR projects, the approach adopted is individualistic in nature in that practitioners conduct their AR with little or no external contact with others (Burns, 2009). Although such an approach can help teachers improve their teaching practice, teachers may still face various challenges, such as a lack of professional isolation (Gao, Barkhuizen and Chow, 2011; Wallace 1998). Burns (2010) maintains that AR becomes far more productive when teachers collaborate with others, rather than working in isolation to get support so that they can deal with potential challenges.

## Mentoring

Mentoring has generally been associated with school-based support for pre-service or in-service teachers' professional learning or decision-making. It involves 'sharing knowledge, skills and experience in order to encourage and empower another person' (Smith, 2020: 14). Mentors are experienced teachers or colleagues having the necessary knowledge and assume certain roles (Dikilitaş and Wyatt, 2018; Malderez, 2009). Roberts (2000: 162) reports that during the process of mentoring 'a more knowledgeable and experienced person actuates a supportive role of overseeing and encouraging reflection and learning with another less experienced and knowledgeable person so as to facilitate that person's career and personal development'.

Stories of mentoring via teacher AR conducted in various forms have been reported in many countries around the world. One example is exploratory action research of the teachers in Nepal, supported by the British Council as an Action Research Mentoring Scheme. It is a teacher research-mentoring project, which supports teachers to bring about change and improvement in their instructional practices and develop confidence in teaching through teacher research (Negi, 2019). Another example is the Champion Teachers Project in Chile, which began in 2013 as a British Council/Ministry of Education initiative to bring about an alternative to the top-down in-service teacher education system in the country (Rebolledo, Smith and Bullock, 2016).

Common findings of these studies show that teachers find it valuable to explore problematic issues in their classrooms prior to planning a change to bring about improvement in their teaching practice, and they become aware of a teacher researcher perspective. All these positive outcomes result in an increase in the quality of learning.

Recently, the university-school partnership has been proposed to enhance teachers' professional development through AR (Day and Hadfield, 2004; Kırkgöz, 2015, 2017; Yuan and Lee, 2015). Within a university-school partnership, teachers can receive mentoring from university teacher educators to help enhance their research knowledge and skills and to enable them to embrace new ideas about language teaching and learning through AR (Wang and Zhang, 2014). Yuan and Lee (2015) investigated two EFL teachers' AR experiences in a university-school collaborative project in China. A team of university researchers collaborated with 15 English teachers from five high schools in Beijing, China to provide mentoring to the teachers in conducting their own AR, assisting them as facilitators and collaborators. It is found that 'university-school collaboration can yield great benefits for teachers by developing 'their reflective abilities and research competence helping teachers resolve contextual problems with the support from the university researchers' (Yuan and Lee, 2015: 8).

Another study (Kırkgöz, 2017) reports mentoring AR experiences of two teachers participating in a CAR project. The teachers working in the same school were experiencing problems in their Grade 2 classes related to children forgetting what they learn quickly. One of the characteristics of young learners is that they learn quickly and forget quickly. Teachers were facilitated to use such real objects or images as colourful

balloons and a poster of a rainbow in their instructional practices. It was found that using real objects enabled young learners to make an association, namely, to link certain concepts with those objects, which enabled children to retain knowledge more effectively and for a longer period. Findings of the studies reported above show that the mentoring provided by an external facilitator, i.e., a university researcher can help teachers gain teacher researcher identity when teachers are involved in researching their own instructional practice through AR. Teacher researchers are teachers who take ownership of their professional development, and have the ability to cope effectively with classroom issues by taking necessary action and they are interested in developing professionally.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### The Research Context

The research context for this study is an in-service teacher development programme, through which three teacher educators, including the author of the present study, from the same university, collaborated with ten English teachers teaching Grade 2 classes to young learners (aged around 7) in different state primary schools in a province, in Turkey. The fundamental aims of this collaboration were to provide teachers with mentoring to facilitate their implementation of the new ELT curriculum through AR, and to help teachers achieve a smooth transition in terms of not only professional development, but also professional socialisation into teaching a younger age. The study, lasting over a year, was conducted following the first critical years of the curriculum change, which was executed in the 2013-2014 teaching year, one main impact of which was to lower the starting age of learning English to the second year of primary school in Turkey (Kırkgöz and Yasar, 2020). Consequently, many English teachers who had been teaching in secondary or high schools moved to primary schools with no experience in teaching young learners.

### Background to the Research Participant

The participant of this study -*Sahil*- (real name) is a male Turkish native-speaker EFL teacher with 23 years of teaching experience. Consent was obtained from him to use his real name. He is a qualified English teacher as he graduated from an ELT department of a state university in Türkiye. During his university education, *Sahil* received various courses including teaching language skills, literature, and language testing to prepare him for the teaching professions, except for the *Teaching English to Young Learners* course, which was introduced into the pre-service teacher education programmes after his graduation. Nor had he received any professional training to teach young learners.

Having taught English to adult learners (aged 15-18), for 23 years *Sahil* decided to teach younger children to gain experience in teaching a different group of students. His application to the Provincial Directorate of National Education was accepted, and he was appointed to teach English at a state primary school to Grade 2 students. Despite being experienced in teaching adults, things did not go well as he anticipated

at the commencement of teaching second graders with 35 and 34 students in each class. Second graders were different from adults in terms of classroom management, the use of methodology, and classroom materials. The curriculum (See MNE, 2013) promoted activity-based teaching. He had great difficulty in having student-centred classes. Nor was he familiar with the young learner's pedagogy to be able to design appropriate lesson plans. Soon after beginning to teach this new student demographic, he had difficulty adjusting to the primary English curriculum and teaching English to young children. As a result, he felt dissatisfied with the quality of teaching and learning in his classrooms, which gave him an impetus to participate in the CAR project.

Overwhelmed with such problems, one day he received a call for an invitation to join the CAR project supervised and directed by the author of the present study. As reported earlier, the project aimed to provide second-grade English teachers with the mentoring needed to help them effectively implement the new ELT curriculum and achieve a smooth transition into teaching young children. This project was a perfect opportunity for him to be supported by academics, and to be a part of a community of teachers having similar problems in their classes.

### The Positionality of the Author

The author of this article is a teacher educator (specializing in young learner pedagogy, AR, and teacher development), and the project coordinator who organized and supervised all the project activities, collected and analysed data. She collaborated with two additional university teacher educators, working as mentors on the project, both of whom were specialists in young learner pedagogy, drama, and AR. Each English teacher was assigned to one of the mentors in the project team, including the author, herself. Unlike the traditional position of 'experts' adopting a prescriptive approach and dictating what was right or wrong, (Harrison, Lawson and Wortley, 2005), the role of each mentor was to act as facilitators, co-researchers, and senior colleagues who would support teachers in their professional development. Furthermore, each mentor agreed to have "the responsibility of gaining teachers' trust and creating an environment that cultivates reflection, exploration and change" (Bailey, 2009: 271). The subsequent section will detail how mentoring has been provided.

### Data Collection and Analyses

To investigate the experiences of the participant more deeply during the process of transition from teaching young adults to teaching young learners, a qualitative case study research was adopted (Creswell, 2006). The data collection instruments include a series of interviews I held with him, reflective writings of the participant after each AR cycle and documentation of his AR project (ARP, 2020), which was included in the final project book (Kırkgöz and Yaşar, 2020) to disseminate CAR project to a wide community of language teachers. The collection of data from multiple sources was intended to enrich the data source and reinforce the validity of the study.

Three semi-structured interviews, each lasting 15 minutes were conducted (in English) at the end of each AR cycle.

The interview questions focused on the participant teacher's actual AR experience; namely, how each AR cycle helped him to resolve his initial problem or concern, thereby contributing to his professional development; whether the participant teacher perceived any changes in his teaching practices in young learner classrooms, the potential effects of mentoring and focus group discussions on the transitioning process, and his acclimatization into a new school environment. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Through reflective writing, the participant wrote a reflection on his teaching practice and action research experiences.

A qualitative inductive process was applied to analyse the interview data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). First, the interview transcripts were reviewed to identify the themes in relation to his professional learning in teaching young learner classes and his development through AR. These themes were then compared, confirmed, and modified with data from his reflective writings leading to the final interpretation of the data. The teacher's own AR report was used to triangulate with the interview and reflective writings. During the process of data analysis, the author of the study conducted the coding along with a project researcher independently. Inter-rater agreement was over 92.2 percent. Finally, member checking was carried out with the participant teacher himself to ensure that the views of the participant has been accurately interpreted when reporting the findings.

### The Mentoring Procedure

The participant completed three cycles of AR, which was a 'cyclical or spiral process' of reflective teaching, involving a continuous evaluating and revising of one's own practice' (Pollard et al., 2008: 17). During this cyclic procedure, the participant was assigned a mentor (a male teacher educator working on the project). This was in addition to the mentoring he was also receiving from the project's author. The detailed procedure of the mentoring activity for each AR cycle is described below:

First, *Sahil* identified a problem and/or any aspect of teaching he wished to improve. In the planning stage, after conducting research, he took the initiative in designing an action plan. *Sahil* and his mentor communicated via e-mail, phone, or in person. The process of collaboration between them was initiated by the mentor meeting with *Sahil* to discuss the lesson plan. This pre-lesson encounter was used as a golden opportunity for the mentor to listen to his thoughts about his lesson, and be acquainted with the teacher's beliefs about activities to be used in young learner classes. During this process, the participant gained considerable support from his mentor who acted as a facilitator and a counsellor offering advice, recommendations, and suggestions rather than dictating what is right or wrong, and supporting his transformative development into teaching a younger age group.

The mentor listened to *Sahil's* description of the lesson and the reasons for his choice of activities, scaffolded him by asking encouraging questions, and offered suggestions or possible alternatives when needed, while at the same time allowing space for *Sahil* to develop his own judgment. Randall and Thornton (2005) state that the need to 'effectively listen



(attend) to the teacher at this stage, and try to understand his/her actions in the context of the intended aims, the developmental perspective of the teacher, and the classroom situation' (p. 90). Similarly, by having a pre-lesson conversation, the mentor and the teacher agreed on the lesson objectives, type of activities, and their suitability for young learners. An interview I held with the mentee reported that

*"The dialogue I held with my mentor has always been productive. Although he was an expert on young learner psychology, he valued my ideas and asked my opinions through his questions. This made me think more critically. He was always patient and a very good listener."*

Following this, *Sahil* put the lesson plan into action in his Grade 2 English classes, and observed the effectiveness of his action in addressing the initial problem in relation to children's learning. Finally, he wrote a reflection on his own experiences of the AR process. In his reflective writing, he expressed whether there were any adjustments in his teaching practices and beliefs toward teaching a new age group. Reflection was important for the participant to assess how his transition from teaching older learners to younger children was eased by the mentoring program. Through reflection, he was supported to enrich and construct professional knowledge and gradually acquire new insights for practice (Mena Marcos, Sanchez and Tillema, 2009). Finally, he was guided to write an AR project (ARP), which was included in the final project book (Kırkgöz and Yaşar, 2020) for project dissemination.

The above process is repeated in the three AR cycles fulfilled by the participant.

## The Action Research Cycles

### Action Research Cycle 1

In the first AR cycle, *Sahil* sought answers to the questions: My students are not engaged with activities in the classroom. How can I increase young children's engagement with class activities? How can I create real-life experiences for my students?

*Sahil* consulted related literature and read some articles to address these issues, working collaboratively with his mentor. In the planning stage of the AR, he collaborated with his mentor. To give young learners a real-life experience, he decided to use real objects and to increase children's engagement with class activities he prepared some games.

The topic of the Unit was "Pets" so using live or toy pets would make the lesson more productive and increase the love of animals in children. In his pre-lesson conversation, his mentor agreed with him to teach this unit with his four-month-old Golden Retriever puppy, called *Buffy* to give children a real-world experience. As *Sahil* reports in his reflective writing: *"My mentor never judged my lesson plan saying that this is right and that is wrong. Instead, he made me think more deeply about the kind of activities I was planning to use by asking me questions. He asked me why I should bring Buffy to school. My reply was to teach the topic more efficiently with real materials and living things and to instil a love of animals in children"*.

Along with this, he mentions another dialogue he had with his mentor as leading him to think more deeply and revising his lesson plan upon the mentor's suggestions: *"Another dialogue*

*we had was about where to have the lesson whether in the class or in the garden. We decided to have the class in the school garden"*.

Collaboratively, they decided that children with pets such as a bird, a rabbit, and even a fish, would bring them to the lesson; those who did not have live pets would bring toy pets instead, or even those who are interested would make a pet album and bring it to the lesson. In addition, *Sahil* prepared a list of relevant activities and games, and added them to his revised lesson plan.

The lesson took place in the school garden during the allocated two lesson hours (each lesson 40 minutes). The children were very happy to see *Buffy* and the other pets. First, they petted *Buffy*. Then, they showed their pets to each other while *Sahil* was teaching the names of the pets. The lesson continued with children playing games with *Buffy* by giving him instructions using English words on the syllabus/unit such as *jump/walk/sit down*, which *Buffy* performed.

*Sahil* evaluated the effectiveness of this action/practice in his ARP (2020: 94) as a 'productive, enthusiastic, and well-attended lesson'. He believed that 'students participated more and enjoyed it a lot'. He was convinced that when topics are supported with real materials and actions, children retain their knowledge better.

When he asked the students' opinions on his using real objects (pets) and games, all students agreed that they learned the name of pets, and action words easily, they could remember them well and at the same time, they got entertained. Their overall response to the lesson was very positive as evidenced by the children's use of the words such as 'excellent, entertaining, and unforgettable'.

### Action Research Cycle 2

In the second cycle of AR, *Sahil* focused on resolving classroom management difficulties he was facing in his lessons. He expressed concerns about children's lack of attentiveness to activities in the classroom. His lesson plan involved using *the drawing a picture of two faces* activity to capture children's attention.

He drew two faces on the board: a smiling face on the right corner of the board, and an unhappy face on the left corner. When he was happy with the children's behaviour, he was standing under the happy face and when unhappy he was standing under the drawing of the unhappy face. Surprisingly, using these activities did not go as planned because when he stood on the unhappy side, waiting for the class to be quiet, the opposite happened. The class got up and started pushing him to the happy side.

At this point, he sought advice from his mentor and discussed using the *six thinking hats* method to resolve classroom management issues. In fact, this method was already applied by one of his peers, and was proven an effective strategy in capturing children's attention on the intended activity (Kırkgöz, 2018). *Sahil* became familiar with this activity during a focus group meeting and was inspired by it and decided to apply it in his classes.

Accordingly, he prepared six coloured hats, each corresponding to a different activity such as the blue hat represented *game*

activity, the yellow hat *speaking activity*, and the black hat symbolized *quiet time*. He first explained to the students what each hat symbolized, and then he started wearing the coloured hat during the relevant activity. Switching to a different activity involved wearing a different coloured hat. He observed that using the different coloured hats had a positive effect on engaging students in the related activity. As he reported in his reflective writing, “*Children associated each coloured hat with the intended activity and they could better engage themselves in that activity. When I was wearing the yellow hat, they immediately remembered that the yellow hat meant song time and they got ready to sing songs*”.

### Action Research Cycle 3

*Sahil* continued exploring classroom management issues more in order to take the control of the whole class, one of the critical issues in young children’s classrooms. He wanted to investigate the effects of using engaging games on classroom management. He prepared different age-appropriate games, supported by his mentor. *Guess what* and *lip-reading* were the two activities that he was particularly interested in using. To apply the *guess what* activity, first, he introduced the names of all the fruits to the students, in the Fruits Unit. Then, he blindfolded the children, put a piece of fruit in their mouths, and asked the child to say the name of the fruit he tasted. He observed that each child in the class was engaged in the activity and followed it excitedly.

He applied a *lip-reading* activity with the words *strawberry, orange, melon*, and asked the children to guess what the word he was saying would be by his lip movements. Then, he used a drama activity, asking the children to show him the lip movement of the word he showed and then say it. His reflection on the effectiveness of this activity demonstrates that students showed full interest in this activity, the class did not disperse, and classroom management problems were minimised. He decided to continue using it in his subsequent teaching practices.

### Focus Group Meetings

As McLaughlin and Talbert (2001: 22) indicate, ‘a collaborative community of practice in which teachers share instructional resources and reflections in practice appears essential to their persistence and success in innovating classroom practice’. Likewise, an important component of CAR was to hold focus group meetings after the completion of each AR cycle (lasting 1.5 hours) where teachers presented their AR projects, reflected upon their experiences, exchanged ideas, and received comments from the mentors. *Sahil* attended three focus group meetings where he also presented his AR project, learned useful strategies his peers/colleagues’ were applying in their young learner classes, and received comments on his AR.

## RESULTS

In this section, the results of data analysis are presented under three main themes; the first theme is self-efficacy in young learner pedagogy, under which two related subthemes are identified: (1) implementing child-appropriate activities, and

(2) classroom management, the second theme is professional socialisation, and the third theme is teacher-researcher identity.

### Self-efficacy Beliefs in Young Learner Pedagogy

The fact that the participant collaborated with his mentor and peers promoted growth in self-efficacy beliefs in relation to young learner pedagogy. *Sahil* had low self-efficacy and felt less confident in the initial days of his teaching young learner classes. He was well aware of his shortcomings, which he sincerely reflected in his ARP (2020: 91): ‘I couldn’t work with drama, I couldn’t teach student-centred lessons, and I had problems in classroom management due to not knowing the age group’. He felt dissatisfied with the quality of teaching and learning in his classrooms.

After participating in the CAR, he increased his self-efficacy and began to feel more confident in teaching a younger age group. Particularly, he perceived himself as more confident in using age-appropriate games, and drama activities, as can be understood from AR cycles presented earlier, thanks to the favourable effects of the mentoring and peer support. Additionally, his teaching beliefs in young learner classes showed significant change from a teacher-centred to a student-centred pedagogy, after receiving mentoring. He enjoyed using child-centred methodology, and he was significantly influenced by the experience of his colleagues in focus group meetings. He started using innovative age-appropriate techniques, which led him to gain self-efficacy and improved his teaching practice. He described the atmosphere in the three focus group meetings he attended as motivating, fruitful and so effective. In brief, the mentoring programme did lead to a significant change in self-efficacy of *Sahil*, as a first-time young learner teacher, to be more efficacious in his own teaching practices. This support assisted in facilitating the transition of the adult-experienced teacher into teaching young learners and making adjustments in his teaching practice. As understood from his reflections, *Sahil* created an environment where all students were actively engaged in the activities, and observed a great change in the quality of his teaching.

### Implementation of Child-appropriate Activities

Students’ engagement in activities is highly prioritised in young learner classrooms. *Sahil* admitted in the interview that he was not well acquainted with setting games, and drama activities that satisfied students’ needs and interests. However, he showed a great change in the way he prepared for his students’ learning thanks to the mentoring programme. Although he had never used games in his previous teaching with adults, he now believed that lessons should be entertaining and fun for children. Therefore, there were many exciting games in his lessons in line with lesson objectives, as illustrated in AR cycles. In planning his AR, he ensured that the games are closely related to the objectives of each unit, made sense to children, and were engaging for them. As he mentioned in the interview “*I made sure that children could be involved in the games and use new knowledge and vocabulary learnt during the lesson to those games*”. Thanks to mentoring, he became aware that the activities should be meaningful and relevant to the needs and interests of children, and they are thought in a logical order.

In addition, the project team organized drama training; the teachers displayed their AR projects and shared useful activities they used in their Grade 2 classes in focus group meetings. These were learning opportunities for *Sahil* to embrace different ideas and use them in his classes. As he reports in the Unit on Pets, he had an opportunity to use drama. Students tried to explain a pet they identified to their friends with gestures. As a result, they did not get bored.

### Classroom Management

Classroom management is another significant area in which *Sahil* gained confidence. With the help of mentoring and the good practices of his peers/colleagues, he could explore useful strategies to take management problems under control. The conversations that he had with other teachers during focus group sessions provided learning opportunities for him to consider what he could do better to facilitate his students' learning and inform his instructional decisions in his lessons. There were some useful classroom management techniques that he was acquainted with such as applying the six thinking hats activity to handle management problems. Overall, receiving comments from the mentors and his peers/colleagues offered *Sahil* an opportunity for improvement in and refinement of his professional practices from teaching older learners to younger children. As he reported in his reflective writing: *"I also changed the language I used from 'naughty children' to 'more active children' to be a model teacher who is 'more fun' and 'less strict' to them, which proved to create more friendly relations with my students"*.

### Professional Socialisation

An additional finding of this research is professional socialisation. Undoubtedly, experiencing feelings of isolation and uncertainty when one starts teaching first time to young children can mark a dramatic professional transition for a mid-career teacher. Initially, *Sahil* felt isolated and left alone as he expressed 'I felt the lack of a group of friends with whom I could exchange views. I needed to see the work of my colleagues and share the work that I did or will do'. (ARP, 2020: 91). Joining focus group meetings helped *Sahil* establish a collegial relationship with other young learner teachers, whom he describes as 'friendly and approachable' helping him overcome his feelings of isolation.

To sum up, thanks to the guidance provided by the mentoring and the support of his peers/colleagues, *Sahil* was able to cope with challenges arising from his initial sense of isolation as the only young learner teacher in his school, and manage the transition process more effectively. In addition, the seminars and workshops that were provided as part of the CAR project helped him learn the objectives of the young learner curriculum, and enhance his understanding of the methodology of AR.

### Teacher Researcher Identity

The final benefit of the mentoring programme was that it had an encouraging effect on *Sahil* to gain a teacher-researcher identity. From the beginning of the programme, he emphasised his desire to be more professional, and be open to learning new ideas on young learner pedagogy. He was ambitious to

do research and complete AR cycles successfully. In his ARP, he underlines *the teacher researcher* dimension of the CAR project stating that in this process, he learned how to research, produce ideas, apply, and ultimately do an evaluation. His remark is that 'no matter how senior you are in teaching profession you need dynamism'. (ARP, 2020: 92). He believes that gaining a *teacher researcher* identity has been one of the fundamental takeaways for him.

Overall, with the mentoring he received, *Sahil* formed a better understanding of young learner pedagogy and learned how to integrate AR into his practice, which led to his emerging role as a *teacher researcher* identity. *Sahil* can be considered an exemplary case demonstrating that learning is a life-long process. He clearly admitted that through the project, he improved his understanding of AR, and how to teach English to children. He expressed his hope that in the future, more teachers can collaborate with university researchers to form an AR community to bring about change in their instructional practice (ARP, 2020).

### DISCUSSION

Three themes were identified emerging from the participant's reflections on this transitioning journey. The first theme was about increasing self-efficacy in young learner pedagogy, under which two related subthemes were identified: (1) implementing child-appropriate activities, and (2) classroom management. The second theme was professional socialisation, and the final theme focused on teacher researcher identity.

The findings of this study show that undertaking AR supported by mentoring and peer-support during the transitioning process can enhance the mid-career first-time young learner teacher's self-efficacy beliefs in young learner pedagogy, particularly in using child-appropriate activities and handling classroom management issues.

In relation to using child-appropriate activities, this study confirms previous research (Kırkgöz, 2017) that using real objects increases children's retention of learning and that adapting the six thinking hats activity contributes significantly to fostering children's engagement thus managing young learner classroom more effectively (Kırkgöz, 2018).

Additionally, as in the study of Onat-Stelma (2005), who investigated the transitional experiences of English teachers who were previously teaching adults and moved to teach English to young learners in Turkey, the participant of this study found classroom management issues particularly challenging in young learner classes. The present study differs from Onat-Stelma's research (2005) in that while the in-service training provided in the former study was a one-shot seminar, the present study took over a period of one year using CAR teacher development model, in which the participant teacher received continuous mentoring and peer support and the use of AR, which provided him an opportunity to be reflective, critical and a problem solver in resolving his classroom challenges. In this respect, this study makes an important contribution to the literature on a mid-career English teacher's professional development.

The findings from the present study resonate with previous research (Kırkgöz, 2016, 2017; Wang and Zhang, 2014; Yuan and Lee, 2014), which shows that mentoring programme, as part of

a university-school collaboration, can enable a teacher to combine his/her practical knowledge with the academics' expertise in managing emerging challenges from his/her classroom.

Although mentoring has been acknowledged to provide effective support for prospective/new teachers, and ample studies exist on mentoring through AR, not much has been done to explore mid-career language teachers' transitioning experiences. In relation to this, this study provides a unique contribution to the literature by offering a useful framework demonstrating how effective mentoring, using CAR as a valuable professional development model, should look like. Transition is a critical period in the professional life of a mid-career first-time young learner teacher, and as revealed by the findings from this study such teachers have specific needs: informed understanding of young learner pedagogy, child-appropriate activities, and managing young learner classroom effectively. It is mainly through a well structured mentoring programme, such as the one described in this study, that the specific needs of those teachers can be addressed and the transitioning period can be facilitated.

Another important finding of this study is the need for mentoring programmes to give teachers opportunities to socialize with others, who have similar transitioning challenges. Teachers often feel alone at schools and being unsupported naturally creates a need for teachers to seek actions for their professional development, as in the case of the participant teacher in the present study. Although there are numerous in-service programmes and workshops, their efficiency in relation to creating teachers with socialisation opportunities are doubtful. As such, this study gives important insight into incorporating focus group discussions into mentoring programmes.

The participant of this study completed three cycles of AR and he gained *teacher researcher* identity, a finding echoed in other studies (Kırkgöz, 2017; Malderez, 2009). It is observed that he gained the ability to continue exploring further the benefits of AR in his classes, experiment with new teaching techniques, and resolve emerging problems. The participant's written reflections on the impact of his AR engagement at the end of the 3-cycle process clearly confirm this: 'I have seen very clearly that I have improved myself, the quality of my lessons has increased, which is reflected on the children'. (ARP, 2020: 97).

During this process, I was the project supervisor, a collaborator, and a facilitator, which was an invaluable experience for me. I was able to follow the developments and changes in the participant's thinking, observe the whole transitioning process, and how he managed to cope with problems as a first-time young learner teacher through CAR. I have gained useful insights that I can practice in my future mentoring experiences. I have learned that an effective mentor should identify the teacher's needs and

provide scaffolding, use appropriate questioning techniques, adopt a non-judgemental approach, and be a helper, a supporter, a co-constructer of knowledge with the mentee, plus create a trustworthy environment that leads to nurturing reflection, development, and change (Bailey 2009; Randall and Thornton, 2005). This is important information that will serve as a guide in the design of future mentoring programmes for first-time young learner teachers, particularly those in the transitioning process.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the transitioning experiences of a teacher who previously taught older learners and moved to teaching younger children as a first-time primary ELT teacher, following a curriculum change. It has been found that the mentoring process helped the participant grow in self-confidence, increase his awareness of using new and innovative age-appropriate techniques, led him to improve his teaching practice, socialise with colleagues, and gain 'teacher research' identity, thus facilitating the transitioning process into teaching English to a younger age group. The study contributes to our knowledge by revealing the impact of mentoring on a mid-career EFL teacher, who is experienced in teaching adults; yet lacks the pedagogy to teach younger children. It may have useful implications for EFL teachers who are undergoing such transitioning and thus need support for their professional development. Transition is hardly considered an easy process due to a number of challenges a first-time young learner EFL teacher may encounter in his new school environment. As demonstrated in the present study, mentoring and peer-support can ease the transitioning process by providing the needed support in terms of professional learning and socialisation. As such, the study by presenting a transitioning journey of an adult-experienced teacher into teaching young learners as a first-time young learner teacher in a state school, contributes to the literature. Finally, the present study investigated the experiences of one English teacher working in a state school. Future research with teachers having similar transitioning experiences in different contexts around the world may be valuable in uncovering the more context-specific challenges of teaching young learners.

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