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Professional Learning of Novice ESL Teachers: Peer Mentoring to Improve Novice Teachers' Reflective Practice

Norhaiza Hamdan^{1*} , Juliana Othman²  and Lo Yueh Yea³ ¹Language Department, IPGK Perempuan Melayu, Melaka, Malaysia^{2,3}Department of Language & Literacy Education, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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*Corresponding Author

Norhaiza Hamdan

E-mail: norhaiza@ipgm.edu.my

Co-Author(s):

Author 2: Juliana Othman

E-mail: juliana@um.edu.my

Author 3: Lo Yueh Yea

E-mail: janice@um.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

Background: Reflective practice is a crucial aspect of teacher development that enables educators to critically examine their beliefs, assumptions, and teaching methods. Schön's Reflective Model (1983) suggests that reflection during or after practical experiences, such as teaching, is essential for developing teachers' skills. However, novice teachers often struggle to engage in meaningful reflection without adequate support. Consequently, this study aims to investigate peer mentoring as a strategy to support reflective practice among novice English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. **Methods:** Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participants' reflections and weekly journal entries. Three novice ESL teachers with 3 years of teaching experience in public primary schools were recruited through purposive sampling to participate in a 12-week peer-mentoring partnership. **Results:** Thematic analysis of the three case studies revealed four main themes: (1) the role and value of peer mentoring partnerships in supporting reflection, (2) the aspects of reflection influenced by peer mentoring, (3) the evolution of reflective focus, and (4) the perceived benefits of enhanced reflection. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that peer mentoring shows promise as a means to support reflective practice among novice ESL teachers. Such partnerships can help novice educators expand their knowledge and skills, thereby fostering professional growth and learning.

Keywords: reflective practice, peer mentoring, professional learning, novice teachers

1. Introduction

The professional development of novice English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers is crucial to enhancing their instructional effectiveness and ensuring their long-term success in ESL education. Early-career educators often face challenges such as classroom management, cultural adaptation, and curriculum implementation, which can hinder their ability to engage in reflective practice, a key component of professional growth. Recent studies have highlighted the potential of peer mentoring as a supportive strategy to address these challenges.

Farrell (2024) emphasizes the importance of reflective practice for early-career language teachers, suggesting that structured support systems can help develop critical self-reflection skills. Similarly, Maxwell et al. (2022) found that mentoring relationships foster novice teachers' emotional and professional resilience, which is vital during the early stages of their careers. These findings align with Nguyen's (2022) research, which identified peer mentoring as a practical approach to promote continuous professional development and reduce teacher attrition rates.

This article explores how peer mentoring can serve as a vital mechanism for enhancing reflective practice among novice ESL teachers, contributing to their professional learning and improving teaching outcomes. In Malaysian public primary schools, novice educators must navigate the complexities of a CEFR-aligned curriculum while managing diverse classrooms where student proficiency levels and learning interests can vary significantly (Khair & Shah, 2021; Senom et al., 2016). By addressing the gaps in current mentoring programs, particularly for teachers who may have limited exposure to the revised curriculum or lack pedagogical expertise in rural settings, this study offers actionable insights for fostering effective peer mentoring partnerships. The professional development of novice English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers is a critical area of research, particularly in promoting reflective practice and building teacher efficacy. The following section reviews the existing literature on the challenges novice ESL teachers face, the role of reflective practice in teacher development, and the potential of peer mentoring as an effective strategy for enhancing professional learning.

One grand question guided this study: How does peer mentoring support novice ESL teachers' reflective practice? And, these questions guided the gathering and analysis of data: 1) To what extent does peer mentoring partnership contribute to novice ESL teachers' reflective skills? 2) In what ways does peer mentoring influence novice ESL teachers' reflection and reflective focus? 3) How does peer mentoring add to novice ESL teachers' improvement in teaching?

2. Literature Review

This section provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature on peer mentoring as a strategy to support novice ESL teachers' reflective practice.

Challenges Faced by Novice ESL Teachers

Novice ESL teachers often encounter significant challenges as they transition from teacher preparation programs to real-world classroom environments. Research highlights common difficulties, including managing diverse classrooms, addressing linguistic and cultural diversity, and developing effective instructional strategies (Parveen et al., 2024). Additionally, novice teachers frequently report feelings of isolation, stress, and a lack of confidence in their teaching abilities, particularly when faced with inadequate resources and the challenge of maintaining classroom discipline (Naqvi et al., 2024). Recent studies confirm that the transition from pre-service training to actual classrooms remains particularly daunting for novice ESL teachers,

who must navigate complex classroom dynamics while developing their pedagogical expertise (Hamdan et al., 2024). Contemporary research demonstrates that novice ESL teachers face dual challenges when enrolled in professional development programs, as they must balance their roles as both teachers and students while managing work-related stress (Ooi & Othman, 2023). Furthermore, teaching is increasingly recognized as a high-risk profession for mental health issues, with educators experiencing elevated levels of work-related stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout compared to other professions (Geletu, 2023). These challenges underscore the critical need for targeted support mechanisms, including peer mentoring programs and professional learning communities, that facilitate both professional growth and emotional resilience through collaborative approaches to teacher development (Kassim & Al-Mekhlafi, 2023).

Reflective Practice in Teacher Development

Reflective practice, as conceptualized by Schön (1983), involves critical self-examination of one's teaching practices to improve effectiveness. In the context of ESL teaching, reflective practice enables teachers to assess their instructional methods, understand learner needs, and adapt strategies accordingly (Guo, 2022). Numerous studies have established that reflective practice contributes to greater self-awareness, enhanced pedagogical skills, and improved student outcomes (Blomberg et al., 2013). However, developing reflective skills requires intentionality and ongoing support, particularly for novice teachers who may lack the experience to analyze their own teaching critically. Contemporary research emphasizes that reflective practice has evolved into a dynamic, participatory, and cyclical process that contributes significantly to educators' professional development and personal growth (Mohamed et al., 2022). Recent studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of systematic reflective models in enhancing teachers' reflective capacity and professional development through structured approaches to self-examination (Machost & Stains, 2023). Furthermore, evidence suggests that collaborative reflective practice can particularly benefit novice teachers by providing frameworks for deeper analysis of teaching experiences and creating space for the development of actionable improvement plans (O'Brien & McKeon, 2024). The integration of reflective teaching models with peer observation has been shown to enhance teachers' professional competencies and self-assessment capabilities. Communities of practice and professional development programs serve as excellent

avenues for supporting educators in developing reflective competencies through sustained engagement and mutual support (Thompson, 2021).

Peer Mentoring as a Professional Learning Strategy

Peer mentoring has emerged as a promising approach to support novice teachers. Unlike traditional top-down mentorship models, peer mentoring fosters reciprocal learning and collaboration among teachers with varying levels of experience (Kang & Toh, 2021). In ESL contexts, peer mentoring provides novice teachers with opportunities to share best practices, receive constructive feedback, and navigate complex teaching scenarios through collaborative professional relationships (Nguyen & Kieu, 2022). Recent studies suggest that peer mentoring can significantly enhance reflective practice by creating a safe space for novice teachers to articulate their thoughts, explore alternative teaching strategies, and gain insights from their peers (Bowen & Thomas, 2021). Furthermore, peer mentoring aligns with the principles of situated learning theory, emphasizing learning through social interaction and shared experiences (Williams et al., 2024). This approach not only supports the professional growth of novice teachers but also fosters a sense of community and belonging within the teaching profession. Contemporary research demonstrates that peer mentoring facilitates enhanced instructional practices, shifts in novices' mindsets, and collaborative interactions within professional learning communities, particularly through observational learning approaches (Hamdan et al., 2024). Studies indicate that structured peer mentoring programs create safe spaces where novice teachers can experiment, share experiences, and engage in collective reflection and problem-solving, while developing social capital that significantly influences their self-efficacy and sense of belonging (Gehreke et al., 2024). Moreover, effective peer mentoring requires a successful match between mentors and mentees based on value congruence, which enhances the perceived role-model function and promotes professional learning and growth (Fladerer et al., 2023). The integration of peer mentoring with professional learning communities has proven particularly beneficial for cultivating a sense of belonging and improving retention rates, while also supporting both academic performance and participants' emotional well-being (Pandey & Sharma, 2022).

Integration of Peer Mentoring and Reflective Practice

The intersection of peer mentoring and reflective practice offers a dynamic framework for professional learning. By engaging in structured mentoring

relationships, novice ESL teachers can refine their reflective skills while benefiting from their peers' collective wisdom. Literature highlights the effectiveness of collaborative reflection in addressing real-world teaching challenges, enhancing pedagogical decision-making, and promoting continuous improvement through systematic approaches to professional development (McKinney & O'Sullivan, 2024). However, the successful implementation of peer mentoring programs requires careful consideration of factors such as mentor selection, training, and the creation of supportive institutional structures (Mihaela, 2023). Additionally, research highlights the importance of cultivating a culture of trust and openness to maximize the benefits of peer mentoring through sustained collaborative relationships (Peens, 2022). Contemporary research emphasizes that collaborative reflection is a complex, nonlinear process in which identity-work plays a central role, challenging traditional assumptions about collective teacher reflection and highlighting the need for more nuanced approaches to professional development (Haniford et al., 2023). Recent studies demonstrate that effective peer mentoring requires trust, which can be enhanced when teachers are given autonomy to select their peers and maintain transparency about teaching challenges. The collaborative nature of peer mentoring also promotes cooperative cultures within practice communities (de Lange & Wittek, 2018). Furthermore, evidence suggests that successful mentoring should challenge traditional hierarchical relationships and adopt collaborative, co-produced, inquiry-oriented approaches that position early-career teachers as active participants rather than passive recipients (Thompson & Blake, 2023). The integration of reflective practice with action research in professional development contexts has proven particularly effective, with structured programs enhancing teachers' understanding of both reflective practice and classroom-based inquiry. Meanwhile, collaborative, friendship-based professional relationships provide sustained support for critical reflection and professional growth across diverse educational contexts (Lokker & Jezrawi, 2022).

The existing literature highlights the potential of peer mentoring to enhance novice ESL teachers' professional development, particularly by promoting reflective practice. While challenges remain in operationalizing such programs, integrating peer mentoring into teacher development initiatives holds promise for addressing the multifaceted needs of novice ESL teachers. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of peer mentoring on teacher efficacy and student outcomes, as well as strategies for scaling these programs across diverse educational contexts.

3. Methodology

This research employed a multi-case study approach to comprehensively examine the role of peer mentoring in supporting novice ESL teachers' reflective practices, with a particular focus on the learning mechanisms within the 12-week peer mentoring relationships. It applied Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of a Community of Practice as its framework. The case study method was well-suited to this research context because it enabled in-depth analysis of the specific circumstances to identify subtle processes and interactions occurring in peer mentoring partnerships. This methodology is also appropriate for educational research when investigating complex relationships. Analyzing multiple cases provided a thorough understanding of current teaching methods and policies, while also uncovering particular patterns and variations in mentoring dynamics. All three research participants continued their mentoring relationships through the study's conclusion.

Context and Participants

The study was conducted in three public primary schools in the southern region of Malaysia. The three schools were situated in three distinct settings: an urban school, a suburban school, and a small village school, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how school contexts contribute to the amount of support and learning that novices in this study experienced during their mentoring partnerships. Three novice ESL teachers, accompanied by their respective peer mentors, taught English as a Second Language (ESL) to pupils aged between seven and twelve years old, with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These three novice teacher participants, Maira, Feyra, and Alana (all pseudonyms) agreed to participate in this mentoring partnership, aware that their participation was voluntary. Central to these partnerships is the selection of peer mentors, who should possess at least 5 years of instructional experience and be ITE graduates who have received similar training. These mentors are expected to be reflective practitioners themselves, capable of establishing a non-hierarchical relationship that fosters professional learning (Ewing, 2021). Among their roles as mentors are assisting novice teachers by helping them plan lessons, monitoring their classroom activities, and providing constructive feedback through regular discussions. They also share their own resources and experiences, helping mentees identify personal strengths and develop a more progressive mindset toward teaching. Implementing such a mentoring intervention is of paramount importance, as it facilitates a smooth transition into the profession and directly affects

both teacher retention and overall instructional quality (Ewing, 2021).

The researcher initiated the study by submitting an application to the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC) to conduct the research. Once approval was obtained from the committee, the lead researcher contacted the State Education Department to obtain a list of ESL teachers in primary schools across the southern states of Malaysia. The three states specifically chosen were Melaka, Negeri Sembilan, and Johor due to their accessibility to the researchers in terms of travel and cost. After scrutinizing the list, potential participants were contacted via various channels, including phone, email, and text. The researchers explained the study's details. They invited the teachers to participate, ensuring that they were fully aware of their right to withdraw from the study without providing any justification. The researchers approached the participants after they had fully understood the study's procedure, allowing them to sign the consent forms.

The mentoring partnership between Maira, Feyra, and Alana, along with their peer mentors, lasted twelve weeks for data-gathering purposes. The twelve-week data collection timeframe for this study is methodologically grounded in established educational research practices. Creswell and Clark (2018) advocate for this duration as it effectively spans a typical academic term while providing sufficient time for observable changes in teaching practice and student outcomes. The researchers described the procedure in detail to ensure a smooth collection process. After 5 weeks of participating in the mentoring partnership, the first in-depth interview was conducted. The subsequent interviews were recorded according to detailed procedures, which were explained to the participants before data collection began. The experiences of the three novice participants in receiving support from their mentors provided insights into the role mentorship plays in novice ESL teachers' professional learning, particularly in improving reflective skills. Co-reflecting with mentors provided the novices opportunities to confirm their teaching approaches and strategies while also improving the mentors' theoretical practices. The mentoring partnership thus offers benefits in which both parties can professionally develop. Table 1 below shows the participants' demographic details.

Data Collection

The study employed in-depth interviews to explore and fully understand novice teachers' learning from improved reflections. To triangulate the interview data, supporting documents included the novices' post-lesson reflections and their weekly journal entries. A total of

Table 1. Summary of the Novice Participants' Demographics

Novice teacher (pseudonyms)	Education background	Years of teaching experience	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

Source: Authors, 2025

twelve in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately an hour, were conducted with the three novice teachers. Additionally, the novices and their mentors took turns observing each other's teaching to learn from one another. The in-depth interviews were recorded on Zoom at the end of the fifth, eighth, and eleventh weeks to identify outcomes from the mentoring partnerships.

Data Analysis

All qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Interview transcripts, journal entries, post-lesson reflections, and observation notes were transcribed and coded manually to identify recurring themes. For example, if several codes relate to different aspects of reflections, they might be grouped under the category "mentor-mentee reflective processes." Themes are typically developed through an iterative process of revisiting and refining the data, including the categories generated, ensuring they are coherent, meaningful, and aligned with the study's objectives. The analysis focused on key areas, including the role of mentoring in reflective practice development, the types of reflective activities facilitated, and the perceived benefits and challenges of the mentoring program. Triangulation of data sources ensured reliability and validity by cross-verifying themes across interviews, journals, and observations. Additionally, member checks were conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm accuracy and interpretation. The triangulation process in this study also ensures that disparities between what was described, what was observed, and what was perceived by the participants are resolved.

4. Findings and Discussion

Maira, Feyra, and Alana described their mentoring experiences through their own lenses, shaped by their unique contexts. From all the data sources gathered and analyzed, we generated four themes: 1) the role and value of peer mentoring partnerships in supporting reflections, 2) the aspects of reflection influenced by peer mentoring, 3) the evolution of reflective focus, and 4) the perceived benefits of enhanced reflection.

Findings

The Role and Value of Peer Mentoring Partnerships in Supporting Reflections

The findings underscore the vital role of peer mentoring in fostering a supportive, collaborative environment that encourages reflection. Consistent with prior research (Hamdan et al., 2024), the mentoring partnership provided a safe space for novice teachers to engage in open dialogue, fostering trust and encouraging honest self-assessment. These relational dynamics not only alleviated feelings of isolation but also created a reciprocal learning process that benefited both mentors and mentees. These findings underscore the importance of cultivating robust, collegial relationships within professional learning communities to support novice teachers' professional development.

Maira's interview data reflected the value she placed on her mentoring partnership. Peer mentoring provides her with a platform to reflect on her teaching without fear of being judged or perceived as incompetent.

I think this is the main purpose of having a peer mentor, because you can speak to each other comfortably without feeling like you're being judged or pointed out so severely. It's different if we ask any senior teachers, probably they have lots to say, which will hurt us. (MIT-1, p. 6)

Alana also described similar experiences being mentored by her peer. In the technological age, the novices in this study, who are millennials themselves, employed technology to assist their teaching, and peers of a similar age provided the necessary advice on online applications to use in their classroom teachings.

I think more of the activity, such as the one we need to use online right now, and then I remember Shaza (peer mentor) shared an activity using the Wordwall website. From that day forward, whenever I want to assign tasks to students, I will use that website. (AIT-2, p. 5)

These findings support Mohamad et al.'s (2022) proposition that reflecting together among novices

plays a crucial role in their professional learning and development.

Aspects of Reflection Impacted by Peer Mentoring

The study identified significant improvements in participants' ability to analyze instructional strategies, address challenges, and adopt student-centered perspectives. These findings align with Farrell's (2024) assertion that structured support systems can deepen teachers' reflective capacity by providing targeted feedback and alternative perspectives. Moreover, Nguyen (2022) highlights how peer mentoring fosters a culturally responsive approach, enabling novice teachers to better address the needs of diverse student populations.

The novice ESL participants reported that effective teaching resulted from better or broader reflection during the study. Co-reflection helped the novices to address their day-to-day challenges more efficiently. Alana reported,

I think it (mentoring) helps me because I have someone to guide me if I do not know, I can ask someone. She (peer mentor) will sometimes give me opinions about the school. (AIT-1, p. 5)

Not only did her mentor guide her in other school matters, but Alana also shared that the mentoring partnership contributed to several aspects beneficial to her as a novice teacher. She improved her lesson planning and management skills, becoming more independent and confident in making informed decisions about teaching and learning.

Feyra and Maira also reflected that they had enhanced their teaching skills through better reflection during the mentoring partnerships. Feyra shared,

I like this (mentoring) activity because I have someone to comment on me. It is not just that I go on with my teaching, and then at the end, my pupils do not understand anything I teach. This is a good way of discussing by having a peer mentor. I improved my teaching each time after our post-lesson discussions. (FIT-1, p. 5)

Maira, too, has experimented with numerous new teaching ideas since she began participating in the mentoring partnership. After discussions with her mentor, Maira would write her reflections in her teaching journal and refer to the entries regularly to check her progress. Maira explained,

I like the part where I must do a weekly reflection because it allows me to see the progress from the

first week. Because of that journal, I try to improve, maybe do things better since last week. It is a good experience. (MIT-1, p. 4)

These findings align with Lefebvre et al. (2022), who found that structured reflections, such as those employed in this study, helped novices develop actionable improvements in their teaching, leading to improved pupils' performance.

The Evolution of Reflective Focus

The shift from task-oriented to critical and student-centered reflection mirrors the stages of reflective development outlined in contemporary research on teacher critical reflection (Philp-Clark & Grieshaber, 2024). Initially preoccupied with immediate challenges, participants gradually expanded their focus to broader pedagogical and philosophical considerations. This progression aligns with research demonstrating how teachers develop from surface-level thinking to deeper critical reflection over time (Kim et al., 2016). This progression was facilitated by mentors' use of probing questions and scaffolding techniques, as supported by Maxwell et al. (2022), who argue that intentional mentoring strategies, including active listening and adaptive support, are pivotal for promoting deeper reflective inquiry. Recent studies further emphasize that effective mentoring involves scaffolding questions from simple to increasingly complex levels, enabling mentees to revisit and transform their understanding through structured guidance (Hunskar & Gudmundsdottir, 2023).

Interviews with the novices revealed a shift in focus in their daily reflections during the peer mentoring partnerships. Before the partnership, novices generally focused on their strengths and weaknesses during lessons, as well as on whether they had achieved the learning objectives set for those lessons. However, after participating in the mentoring partnerships, Maira broadened her reflection,

I can see that my area of reflection has become broader. Now, when I write my reflection, I try to include more areas to discuss. (MIT-3, p. 3)

Through broader reflection, she refined her teaching strategies, resulting in improved learning experiences for her pupils. Feyra and Alana also shared similar insights on their reflective skills. Feyra, for instance, shared her experience,

At first, I found it (her lesson) a failure. I felt down, but she (her mentor) gave me suggestions and encourage me. I think I am more aware of my lesson

flow from stage to stage now, I can prepare it well. (FIT-1, p. 5)

These findings align with Farrell's (2024) recent work on reflective practice frameworks for language teachers, which demonstrates how collaborative reflection sessions support novice teachers in developing systematic approaches to reflective practice that ultimately improve both their teaching effectiveness and student outcomes.

The Perceived Benefits of Enhanced Reflection

Enhanced reflective practices were associated with increased teaching confidence, improved classroom outcomes, and a stronger sense of professional identity. These findings align with studies that link reflective practice to teacher efficacy and resilience (e.g., Schön, 1983). Importantly, participants noted that reflection became a habitual part of their teaching routine, suggesting that mentoring can instill sustainable reflective habits. Maxwell et al. (2022) also emphasize that reflective mentoring contributes to a teacher's ability to navigate complex educational landscapes effectively.

The novice ESL participants in this study reported increased confidence and a sense of empowerment in conducting their teaching routines after participating in the mentoring partnerships. Feyra, for instance, mentioned that her habit of continuous reflection enabled her to identify her pupils' behavior patterns, leading to better decision-making about the instructional strategies to employ. This habit developed as a result of her participation in a mentoring partnership with her mentor, Nelly.

I always find ways to solve problems. Once I know I need to do something, I try to do it in a certain way. For instance, when giving instructions, I may struggle with long sentences in English. They do not understand, so they are unwilling to follow. They will not be interested in participating in the activity because they do not understand. I will use simpler and I will keep on repeating the exact words that they will be familiar or if I use the new words in the class, okay today I use the new words that I know pupils are not very familiar so I will give them meaning first then Malay words I give and then I try to give them the meaning in English so I try to use the words repeatedly, so they get familiar so tomorrow when I said the same word, I will ask them again "What is the meaning of it?" (FIT-2, p. 7)

Feyra elaborated at length on how peer mentoring has helped her develop professionally in terms of teaching

practices. Overall, all the novices in this study agreed that sharpening their reflective skills led to significant improvements in pedagogical aspects and other areas related to teaching their young pupils.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted ways in which peer mentoring enhances reflective practice among novice ESL teachers across four key themes: the role and value of peer mentoring partnerships in supporting reflections, the aspects of reflection influenced by peer mentoring, the evolution of reflective focus, and the perceived benefits of enhanced reflection. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature that emphasizes the critical importance of collaborative approaches to teacher professional development and their capacity to transform reflective practices in meaningful ways.

The first theme reveals that peer mentoring partnerships serve as catalysts for deeper and more systematic reflection among novice ESL teachers. This finding aligns with contemporary research that emphasizes the collaborative nature of effective reflective practice. Recent studies by Hamdan et al. (2024) demonstrate that peer mentoring facilitates enhanced instructional practices, shifts in novices' mindsets, and collaborative interactions within professional learning communities through observational learning approaches. The present study extends these findings by highlighting how peer mentoring partnerships create emotionally safe spaces where novice teachers can engage in vulnerable reflection without fear of judgment or evaluation.

The value of these partnerships lies in their reciprocal nature, which distinguishes them from traditional hierarchical mentoring models. As demonstrated by de Lange and Wittek (2022), trust can be enhanced when teachers are given autonomy to select their peers and maintain transparency about teaching challenges, while the collaborative nature promotes cooperative cultures within practice communities. This finding is particularly significant in the ESL context, where novice teachers often face unique challenges related to linguistic and cultural diversity that non-ESL educators may not fully understand. The peer mentoring model enables the sharing of specialized knowledge and experiences directly relevant to ESL teaching contexts.

Furthermore, the study confirms that peer mentoring partnerships move beyond simple problem-solving to encompass what Machost and Stains (2023) describe as communities of practice that support sustained professional growth. The collaborative relationships identified in this study align with the friendship-based professional partnerships described by Haniford et al.

(2023), which offer long-term support for critical reflection and professional growth across diverse educational contexts. These partnerships appear to be particularly effective because they combine professional support with personal connection, creating conditions conducive to honest self-examination and meaningful learning.

The second theme reveals that peer mentoring influences multiple dimensions of reflective practice, from surface-level technical concerns to deeper pedagogical and critical reflection. This finding supports the multidimensional nature of reflection, as described in recent literature. Segal (2024) emphasizes that collective reflection is a complex, nonlinear process in which identity-work plays a central role, challenging traditional assumptions about teacher reflection and highlighting the need for more nuanced approaches to professional development. The current study demonstrates that peer mentoring partnerships facilitate this complexity by providing multiple perspectives and encouraging novice teachers to examine their practice from various angles.

The influence of peer mentoring on reflective practice appears to operate through what recent research describes as scaffolded reflection. DeLuca et al. (2022) note that novice teachers may not have the necessary expertise to analyze or set goals from their reflective practices without support, stating that “reflecting is easy, but it is difficult to analyze.” The peer mentoring relationships in this study provide the necessary scaffolding by offering alternative perspectives, asking probing questions, and sharing relevant experiences that help novice teachers move beyond surface-level description to deeper analysis.

The study also reveals that peer mentoring influences the emotional dimensions of reflection, addressing what recent research identifies as the inherently vulnerable nature of reflective practices that require supportive mentor-mentee relationships to nurture expressions of uncertainty in workplace learning (Holt & Day, 2024). The emotional safety provided by peer relationships allows novice teachers to engage in the kind of critical self-examination that contemporary studies associate with deeper levels of reflective practice and professional growth (Holappa et al., 2021). This emotional dimension is crucial in ESL contexts, where teachers often work with vulnerable populations and may experience additional stress related to cultural and linguistic barriers, requiring enhanced emotional regulation strategies to maintain teaching effectiveness (Wulf, 2022). Recent research further emphasizes that teacher vulnerability and emotional experiences are integral to professional identity development, particularly during unexpected challenges, underscoring

the importance of peer support for sustaining reflective practices (Campbell et al., 2022).

The third theme demonstrates a clear progression in the focus of reflection as novice ESL teachers develop their partnerships and reflective skills over time. This evolution mirrors what recent research describes as the developmental nature of reflective practice. The study shows that novice teachers initially focus on immediate classroom management and survival concerns before gradually developing the capacity for more sophisticated pedagogical and ethical reflection.

This evolutionary pattern aligns with the work of Fuentealba Jara and Russell (2023), who emphasize the importance of “listening frequently and carefully for instances of reframing of assumptions about teaching and learning” as a central strategy for encouraging reflective practice. The peer mentoring partnerships in this study appear to facilitate this reframing process by providing ongoing opportunities for dialogue and perspective-sharing that gradually expand novice teachers’ reflective horizons.

The evolution from technical to more critical forms of reflection also supports recent findings about the complexity of collective reflection. As Segal (2024) notes, the process is non-linear and involves significant identity work as teachers develop their professional identities. The peer mentoring relationships provide a supportive context for identity development, allowing novice teachers to explore questions of purpose, values, and professional commitment, as well as to address technical concerns about classroom management and instructional strategies.

Recent research by Mohamed et al. (2022) suggests that reflective practice has evolved into a dynamic, participatory, and cyclical process that supports educators’ professional development and personal growth. The present study demonstrates how peer mentoring partnerships facilitate this evolution by providing the social interaction and shared experiences that support deeper learning and development over time.

The fourth theme reveals significant perceived benefits of enhanced reflection facilitated through peer mentoring partnerships. These benefits extend beyond individual teacher development to encompass improvements in instructional practice, student outcomes, and the formation of professional identity. This finding is consistent with recent research that emphasizes the multiple benefits of reflective practice for educators themselves, rather than focusing solely on student outcomes (Machost & Stains, 2023).

Participants in this study reported increased self-awareness, improved decision-making, and enhanced

confidence in their teaching abilities as key benefits of their reflective practice. These outcomes align with research by Machost and Stains (2023), who argue that reflective practitioners are deliberately cognizant of the reasoning behind their actions, enabling them to act with more confidence when faced with sudden or difficult educational situations, while also developing a more profound understanding of their teaching practices and their effectiveness in enhancing student learning experiences. Contemporary research further supports these findings, demonstrating that reflective practice fosters professional competence through systematic planning, implementation, and performance improvement by enabling educators to critically examine their strengths, weaknesses, and specific learning needs (Mohamed et al., 2022). Recent studies also indicate that self-reflection empowers teachers to take ownership of their professional development, leading to increased agency, motivation, and job satisfaction while helping them become more responsive and inclusive in their teaching practices (Juma, 2024).

The study also reveals that enhanced reflection through peer mentoring contributes to what recent research describes as professional agency. McKay (2024) demonstrates that collaborative networks play a crucial role in fostering novice teachers' sense of belonging and facilitating their transition into professional roles. The peer mentoring partnerships in this study appear to foster similar outcomes by providing novice teachers with the support and confidence needed to take ownership of their professional development and make meaningful contributions to their learning communities.

Furthermore, the perceived benefits extend to long-term career satisfaction and retention, addressing a critical concern in ESL education where teacher turnover rates are often high. The sense of professional community and belonging fostered through peer mentoring partnerships may contribute to the positive impact of peer mentoring on retention rates and emotional well-being, as described by Le et al. (2024). This finding has significant implications for ESL programs aiming to support novice teacher development and enhance retention rates.

The study's findings also suggest that the benefits of enhanced reflection extend beyond individual teachers to the broader professional learning community. As participants become more reflective practitioners, they contribute to collaborative learning cultures that support collective professional growth (Tonna et al., 2017). This collective benefit underscores the value of investing in peer mentoring programs to foster systemic improvement in ESL education.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that peer mentoring partnerships serve as powerful catalysts for enhanced reflective practice among novice ESL teachers, with benefits that extend from individual professional development to broader improvements in teaching quality and program effectiveness. The findings support recent calls for more collaborative, inquiry-oriented approaches to teacher mentoring that challenge traditional hierarchical models and recognize the complex, multifaceted nature of reflective practice in educational contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study reinforces the significance of peer mentoring as a strategic approach to fostering reflective practice among novice ESL teachers, demonstrating its transformative potential to shape professional identities, build instructional confidence, and promote culturally responsive teaching practices. The findings reveal how mentoring partnerships facilitate a meaningful shift from task-oriented reflections to broader pedagogical considerations, establishing peer mentoring as a cornerstone of effective professional learning frameworks. The evidence presented shows that when novice ESL teachers engage in collaborative reflection through peer partnerships, they not only develop greater self-awareness and improved decision-making skills but also contribute to the creation of supportive professional learning communities that benefit the broader educational context.

The study's contribution to the literature lies in its detailed examination of the mechanisms through which peer mentoring influences reflective practice, moving beyond simple descriptions of benefits to illuminate the complex processes of professional development in ESL contexts. By documenting the evolution of reflective focus and the multifaceted aspects of reflection influenced by peer relationships, this research provides valuable insights for teacher educators, program administrators, and policymakers seeking to implement effective support systems for novice ESL teachers. The findings align with contemporary theoretical frameworks that emphasize the social nature of learning and the importance of collaborative approaches to professional development.

7. Limitations of the Study and Future Recommendations

However, this study's limitations must be acknowledged to properly contextualize its contributions. The small sample size and focus on a specific educational context may limit the generalisability of findings to broader ESL teaching environments. Additionally,

reliance on self-reported data introduces potential bias, as participants may present their experiences in ways they perceive as socially desirable or professionally acceptable. These methodological considerations suggest caution when applying findings across contexts without appropriate adaptation and validation.

Future research should address these limitations while building upon the study's insights through several important directions. Longitudinal investigations are needed to examine the sustained impact of peer mentoring on teacher retention and effectiveness, moving beyond immediate perceptions to document actual behavioral changes and career trajectories over extended periods. Additionally, research should explore the relationship between enhanced reflective practices fostered through peer mentoring and measurable student learning outcomes, establishing clearer connections between teacher development initiatives and educational effectiveness. The integration of technology to facilitate virtual mentoring relationships represents another promising avenue for investigation, particularly given the increasing importance of digital platforms in educational delivery and the potential for technology to overcome geographical and scheduling barriers that may limit traditional mentoring arrangements. Furthermore, comparative studies examining peer mentoring across diverse educational contexts and cultural settings would enhance understanding of how contextual factors influence the effectiveness of mentoring relationships and reflective practices.

By addressing these research priorities, future investigations can further enhance understanding and application of peer mentoring in supporting novice ESL teachers while fostering cultures of continuous professional learning that ultimately benefit both educators and the diverse student populations they serve. The implications of this work extend beyond individual teacher development to encompass systemic approaches to educational improvement that recognize the interconnected nature of teacher learning, instructional quality, and student success in multilingual educational environments.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) did not employ any of the Generative AI and/or AI-Assisted technologies for Language refinement, drafting background section and did not perform any Task of the technology.

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Biographical Statement of Author(s)

Norhaiza Hamdan is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Teacher Education in Melaka, Malaysia, where she has been training novice ESL teachers for 15 years. She has recently completed her doctoral degree at the University of Malaya. Her research focuses on teacher education and



the professional development of novice ESL teachers, particularly through peer mentoring. She has published in a scholarly journal and presented her research at international conferences.

Dr. Norhaiza Hamdan

Senior Lecturer
Language Department
IPGK Perempuan Melayu
Melaka, Malaysia

E-mail: norhaiza@ipgm.edu.my

Juliana Othman, PhD, is a Professor of Education at the Department of Language and Literacy Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya. With over 30 years of experience in applied linguistics and teacher education, she has made significant contributions to shaping language policies, teacher training, and bilingual education in Malaysia. She has published extensively, and through her leadership, she continues to elevate language education standards and empower educators, making a lasting impact in the field.



Dr. Juliana Othman

Professor
Department of Language & Literacy Education
Faculty of Education
University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
E-mail: juliana@um.edu.my

Yueh Yea Lo, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Language and Literacy Education, Faculty of Education, Universiti Malaya, and the UM SDG 4 Champion, advocating for inclusive and quality education. As a researcher, her work focuses on teacher professional development, academic writing, identity, technology-enhanced learning, cross-cultural communication, and learner resilience. She has published in *SAGE Open*, *PLOS ONE*, and *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, earning awards for teaching innovation, research excellence, and community engagement.



Dr. Yueh Yea Lo

Senior Lecturer
Department of Language & Literacy Education
Faculty of Education
University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
E-mail: janice@um.edu.my