



# How to communicate as a mentor

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describes putting the theory into practice.

**M**y preparation for taking the new role of mentoring a group of 11 experienced Chinese high school English language teachers, led me to read up on conducting classroom research. I came across a book titled *Mentoring Teachers to Research their Classrooms: A practical handbook* (Smith, 2020). In this article I focus on ways of communicating as suggested in the second chapter of the book: ‘What does mentoring involve?’. I will first share with you ‘the ways’ summarised in the book and my initial impression, then proceed with the story of my actual mentoring sessions, my reflections of this experience and the new understanding. Finally, the article ends with the lesson I have learnt from this experience and some thoughts on developing ways of communication for mentoring, which may have implications for a wider audience of teacher educators around the world, offering more effective ways of communicating to support teachers doing research in their classrooms.

## Ways of communicating and initial impressions

As a novice teacher-research mentor, I was curious about how to make the most out of every mentoring session I had with my mentees, to accomplish the goal of supporting their research in their own classrooms. Specifically, I was interested in learning how we, as mentors, could successfully encourage

teachers to talk about their issues and fully explore the details and possible ways of coping with such issues together – to finally get them to take action. My curiosity, to some extent, was satisfied when the book proposed the following ways for a mentor to develop their communication; the majority of which are accompanied by corresponding real-life examples and a short exercise to distinguish the ways mentioned, as summarised in Table 2.

At that moment, the proposed ways of communicating seemed to be very sound advice to me and I was quite impressed by smart replies in those given examples, showing how a mentor could utilise the way of communicating to steer the mentoring for a positive outcome. I felt quite confident, as well, about my coming mentoring sessions. However, what I did not realise at that time was the communication in real mentoring sessions could be really messy, never a clear-cut division of different question-and-answer sessions as the examples shown above.

## The actual mentoring process

As I mentioned before, I set out with the illusion that I knew what would be expected during the mentoring process and what I was supposed to do to direct the communication for a fruitful goal for my mentee teachers. However, it did not turn out quite the way I imagined. First, three of my mentee teachers were experienced researchers. Therefore, our mentoring process was more of a plan-sharing session dominated

by their talk. Second, I did the majority of the talking in another three mentoring sessions, since the teachers were still very confused about a key concept which they needed to get the hang of as a starting point to carry out the research in the classroom. Third, for many other mentoring sessions, the conversation happened in a sudden flash, leaving me no time to distinguish which one of the ‘ways of communication’ was the best for a specific moment during the mentoring.

After all the 11 mentoring sessions finished, I felt a bit at a loss although, despite the messy processes, for each session we seemed to accomplish our goal for the mentoring: to find a research topic and to make a plan for it. However, I was very concerned about my ways of communicating during those sessions. Was I doing what I was supposed to do as a good mentor, who elicits, who probes, who asks for clarification, who presents alternatives, who guides mentees to action?

In order to have a clear idea of my ways of communicating during the mentoring sessions, I went over the 11 mentoring recordings once again and analysed the transcription of the dialogues. I found that although I felt I did not have time to think about the best ways of communicating during the chatting with my mentees or felt the mentoring sessions were dominated by one person in some cases, all the ways of communicating could be found in each mentoring dialogue. In other words, although I failed to identify the exact moments for the best way of communicating, I was just doing what felt right at that moment, which happened to be what was advised.

Table 1 shows the examples of all the ways of communicating proposed in the book as they appeared in mentoring sessions with one of my mentee teachers.

## Reflections and new understanding

Looking back, I still feel grateful that I came across the advice on ways of communicating from the book before embarking on my new role as a teacher-research mentor. The reason I managed to unconsciously maintain the proposed ways of communicating during my own actual mentoring sessions could be explained by the underpinned belief behind this advice: my own envisaged image of a good mentor and the desire to make things work for my mentees.

First, the proposed ways of communicating are underpinned by the belief that mentoring shall be ‘non-judgemental’ and ‘supportive’ (Smith, 2020:14) and a mentor is suggested to develop these ways of communicating apart from listening ‘actively, attentively and encouragingly’ (page 16). My every move during the mentoring sessions was thus guided by this belief, which contributed to my unconscious efforts to provide nonjudgemental support during the communication.

Second, there has always been an ideal image of a good mentor in my mind, and I was striving to be near that ideal image at my every attempt. Personally, I think an ideal mentor could provide nonjudgemental support by creating an equal, safe and comfortable atmosphere for their mentees to express themselves freely without concerns. The necessity for such an

atmosphere could also be explained by the power differential between my mentee teacher in need of help and my role as a mentor, a subject specialist for them (Dikilitaş & Wyatt, 2018).

Last, according to Kalbfleisch (2002), taking the significant time and resources invested in a mentoring relationship, a mentor is also more likely to direct the communication with mentees to maintain the relationship and to help reach the mentoring goal. I conducted all my mentoring sessions with great effort and therefore, although unconsciously, I was applying all the advised ways of communicating during the mentoring sessions, since I reckoned that it would bring about a good mentoring result.

What I did not realise and did not get from the book before the actual mentoring practice was that every mentoring session could be totally different from any other and dialogues happening there could be messy instead of clear-cut ones as the example shows. Plus, the ‘messy’ issue of real mentoring sessions could be exacerbated by the idiosyncrasies of each mentee. The image of the mentee teacher in the given example

Ways of communicating	Example
Eliciting (getting someone to talk) [E]	<b>Teacher:</b> I don't feel as if I have any control over the class. <b>Mentor:</b> <i>Could you give me an example? Is there something in particular you don't feel you have control over?</i> [E]
Questioning – asking for clarification [Q-C]	<b>Teacher:</b> Well, I suppose what I'm most concerned about is that I just can't seem to get the students to listen to me. <b>Mentor:</b> <i>When you say they don't listen to you, what do you mean? That they never listen to you or at particular times?</i> [Q-C]
Questioning – probing (asking for deeper meaning) [Q-Pr]	<b>Teacher:</b> Yes, particularly when I give instructions. I end up repeating myself over and over, and shouting sometimes. <b>Mentor:</b> <i>Oh, I see. Do other teachers teach this group?</i> [Q-Pr]
Paraphrasing (also known as 'reflecting back') [Para.]	<b>Teacher:</b> Mostly when they should, otherwise they don't know what to do. <b>Mentor:</b> <i>You mean when you give instructions?</i> [Para.]
Presenting alternatives [A]	[no example given in handbook]
Structuring / guiding to action [S]	<b>Mentor:</b> And do they have the same problem? <b>Teacher:</b> Oh, I don't know. <b>Mentor:</b> <i>Perhaps you could ask them, and also find out what they do?</i> [S] <b>Teacher:</b> I could do that – good idea.

**Table 1:** Ways of communicating and examples (Smith, 2020)

Ways of communicating	Example
Eliciting (getting someone to talk) [E]	<b>Mentor:</b> I saw that you just sent me a screenshot, it seems that many teachers have talked to you, and they were talking about their research topic and plan. <i>But have you talked to them about yours?</i> [E]
Questioning – asking for clarification [Q-C]	<b>Teacher:</b> In fact, I plan to give them other topics and then ask them to express, so the process of students solving their puzzles is actually a process for me to solve my puzzle. <b>Mentor:</b> <i>So, regarding how you will solve your puzzle, you will ask your students to talk about something that interests them and then they would be more willing to speak, right?</i> [Q-C]
Questioning – probing (asking for deeper meaning) [Q-Pr]	<b>Teacher:</b> Yes, yes. My understanding of the theories for doing the research has been furthered through my discussion with them. Besides, the questions they asked me also prompted me to think deeply. <b>Mentor:</b> <i>What were the main questions they asked?</i> [Q-Pr]
Paraphrasing (also known as ‘reflecting back’) [Para.]	<b>Teacher:</b> In the process of talking to other teachers, I felt that some of my own ideas were also shaped in a better way, so I found these discussions helped us to complement each other. <b>Mentor:</b> <i>You mean you have a clearer idea when you tried to help others understand the theories?</i> [para]
Presenting alternatives [A]	<b>Teacher:</b> Well, I think, there may be no way, to let my students speak right away. That is to say, to solve this problem directly. Well, I feel now my plan is just to explore, I’m taking the first step, I feel if students can take it... <b>Mentor:</b> What you just said, I think it’s particularly good. Here is my opinion. <i>Maybe you can also carry out the second step, comparing the two classes.... What do you think?</i> [A]
Structuring / guiding to action [S]	<b>Teacher:</b> I think it’s a good step, I didn’t expect it. You have just enlightened me, and I should... This reminds one of my best students... <b>Mentor:</b> Great. What you just shared with me sounds interesting. <i>Probably it is a good idea to note your current thoughts down, which can be good data for writing on your own reflection when you finish your research.</i> [S]

**Table 2:** Ways of communicating and examples from an actual mentoring session

in the book seems to be a green hand in doing research and in need of a lot of guidance from the mentor. However, as I mentioned before, the situations of my mentee teachers vary greatly with some of them dominating the mentoring sessions. In this sense, the experience kind of took me aback.

Nevertheless, all the ways of communicating appeared in every mentoring session. In this aspect, this experience helps to validate the proposed ways of communicating, its existence in real mentoring sessions and how this knowledge could contribute to a fulfilled mentoring experience for both the mentor and the mentee.

## Developing ways of communicating as a teacher-research mentor

From this theory to practice, my journey with ways of communicating for mentoring has provided some insights that I would like to share with other teacher-research mentors. I do believe this will have implications for teacher-research mentors around the globe. The main thoughts are listed below:

1. It is vital that teacher-research mentors equip themselves with some suggested ways of communicating which could help them to achieve the goal of providing nonjudgemental and supportive guidance to their mentee teachers, although how and when to employ the ways during the mentoring session will depend on mentors’ own judgement and understanding of the situation at that moment.
2. It is essential for teacher-research mentors to reflect on their own mentoring sessions, from which they could consolidate their own understanding of the effective ways of communicating and to avoid some unproductive or unnecessary directive ways. All this effort will contribute to mentors’ growth, as well as better mentoring experiences for their mentees.
3. It is crucial that teacher-research mentors pay attention to the idiosyncrasies of each of their mentees and not assume every mentoring session to be the same. Familiarising themselves with the background of their mentees could help mentors avoid or lessen moments of shock and to more effectively direct their conversational goals and communication strategies during mentoring sessions.

## References

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