

## **The road to empowerment: Teacher mentoring in the context of *Ceibal en Inglés***

This paper aims to explore the nature and challenges of mentoring in *Ceibal en Inglés*. In order to fulfil this aim, firstly the theoretical grounds upon which the meaning of mentoring in the context of *Ceibal en Inglés* will be unfolded; and secondly a more practical view of the mentors' task will be presented: how mentors witness classroom teachers experiment the expected shock of having to teach English, and how little by little the same classroom teachers find their comfort zone has widened, as they regain confidence and feel a greater sense of empowerment.

### **Mentoring in Ceibal en Inglés**

In the first steps of the implementation of the programme, back in 2012 the administrators clearly noticed that the success of the plan depended entirely on giving enough support to classroom teachers, all of them graduate teachers. For this reason the idea of building the role of the mentor began to take form, always in the belief that mentors were to be teachers of English. There lied the first atypical aspect, as in the case of *Ceibal en Inglés*, mentors' task is not that of the more experienced professional who works to bring a newcomer into the main circle of a profession, but to keep the classroom teacher in her own role, albeit accepting the challenge of leading a lesson in a field for which she was never prepared. The expectation is not therefore to turn a classroom teacher into a teacher of English, but to help the classroom teacher gain empowerment to embrace the challenge.

Many and varied have been the obstacles found in this endeavour. It is not common for teachers working in the Public System to receive external figures in the schools, whether in the form of teachers, as remote teachers, or in the form of mentors. An agreement between Public School Administration and Plan Ceibal was mandatory. This enabled mentors to visit schools and observe lessons, as well as hold interviews with classroom teachers and the head team. It is for this reason that mentors not only support classroom teachers, but they have also become a link among all the members

of the project, by being the voice of the classroom teachers, who resort to them not only for guidance in the linguistic-didactic area of teaching a foreign language, but also for issues related to the process of assuming their new role.

For teachers to assume this new role, *Ceibal en Inglés* works with the following theoretical tenet inspired by Malderez & Wedell, 2007. The following statements about teacher's knowledge may appear simple but they have proved essential for mentors to understand that the first step towards empowerment lies in classroom teachers being aware of all the knowledge they possess:

**Teachers know about:** *their subject*, their aims and the role of the wider curriculum; how the subject is learnt, the existence of strategies to support learning; the school and its policies, accepted norms and procedures within the education system; the students, their backgrounds, their needs; strategies for managing their own ongoing professional learning, *the existence of professional organizations and support networks, and journals in their subject area.*

**Teachers know how to:** use strategies to support pupils and their own learning; notice important features in classroom and organizations; promote conditions which support the learning process; assess learning; relate to students, other professionals, parents and colleagues; fulfil other professional obligations; assess and use new ideas and/or theories to think, plan and/or assess.

**Only some however, are able to:**

Intuitively and instantaneously use what they know (whether it is knowing about or knowing how type of knowledge) at just the right moment, and in just the right way to support the learning of their particular learners, in their classrooms

The greatest barrier for classroom teachers in *Ceibal en Inglés* is clearly depicted in Malderez & Wedell's model, as the first element teachers "know about" is subject matter. Classroom teachers then simply naturally freeze because as a teacher I do not subject matter. If this obstacle were not enough, *Ceibal en Inglés* has just now begun to forge professional organizations and support networks, which are essential for identity building.

It is the mentor's main mission to help classroom teachers understand that their key role in the students' learning process is based on the knowledge they already have as professionals in education and teachers of the group, and what is needed is for them, with the aid of the mentors, to acquire what did not come to them "intuitively", but needs to be elaborated with efficient support.

For *Ceibal en Inglés*, there are two forms of classroom teachers: empowered and those in the process of empowerment. The difference between the two lies in how far they have managed to face the many challenges the project brings to their professional activity by using their knowledge and available tools, which are: work with the remote teacher as the other member of the didactic pair, work with students as young individuals capable of learning and teaching, use lesson plans, create conditions for learning, forget the threat of not being an expert on the subject matter. Classroom teachers in *Ceibal en Inglés* are all at different moments in a continuum, with "empowered" set at one end and "disempowered" set at the other. The mentoring process is aimed at helping classroom teachers move away from *disempowerment*, and the sense of despair, natural to all teachers when we do not know our subject, towards *empowerment*.

The role of mentors in *Ceibal en Inglés* is hence highly challenging, as it implies excellent social skills, and most importantly a great capacity to listen attentively. The main ingredient for gaining the chance to listen is to persuade the classroom teacher that the mentor is trustful. Classroom teachers must trust their mentors, and mentors need to empathize with classroom teachers, but not identify with their needs and frustrations.

Since the success of the project relies on a strong pedagogical pair, mentors must also suggest strategies to the classroom teachers that will foster positive rapport between remote teacher and classroom teacher. The success of the mentors' role can be measured according to how dispensable she has become for the classroom teacher.

## **Mentors in the field**

In order to support classroom teachers and help them move towards empowerment, mentors have implemented a number of strategies that are summarized in the following lines.

#### Open all Means of communication

It is fundamental for the mentor to leave open as many forms of communication as possible, whether synchronous or asynchronous, virtual or face-to-face, ensuring that the mentor appears available and reachable. Classroom teachers see their mentors either in the form of school meetings, or when the mentor sees a B-C lesson. Meetings are held when there is not enough time to see all classroom teachers in their classrooms, or when the classroom teacher is far from empowerment and feels too self-conscious to accept a visit. However, in all meetings lies the hope that the classroom teacher will allow observation of lessons B-C, as the mere fact of permitting the participation of the mentor inside her classroom is evidence that the classroom teacher is on the road of empowerment, and it allows the mentor more precise action.

Group interviews with classroom teachers are especially favoured when there are time constraints. These promote sharing good practices as well as hopes and fears about being in the programme, which generally create a sense of relief and community building.

#### Giving feedback

Mentoring is a process where feedback has a vital role. The Ceibal en Ingles mentors have naturally adopted different forms of giving feedback, favouring constructive approaches and always protecting the mentor-mentee relationship as well as the classroom teacher –remote teacher relationship. Mentor's feedback focuses on praising good practices and suggesting alternatives rather than telling classroom teachers exactly what they should do.

Face-to-face meetings are the most desirable context for feedback, as instant and close interaction gives mentors the chance to build rapport with their mentees. Feedback is a

cycle that repeats itself several times during a meeting with classroom teachers and can continue afterwards through virtual communication. The following are the steps identified by Ceibal en Ingles mentors when giving oral feedback to classroom teachers:

#### A. Listening actively

The first step to give proper feedback is being ready to listen. Listening helps to break the ice with the mentee and lower anxiety levels. Listening is also the best way to collect information and identify a problem. Frequently, teachers will display a large array of problems and situations that concern them. It is important to pay attention and go beyond the teachers' discourse in order to identify the core problem.

#### B. Asking questions:

Mentors have developed strategies to promote self-reflection in classroom teachers and offer support in return to their commitment to the project. The first question a mentor should ask is *How are you feeling?* This deceptively simple question is enough to break the ice and offer the classroom teacher a chance to unveil her feelings towards the project. The answer will also portray what is actually happening inside the classroom, as the way the classroom teacher feels will affect the students' level of motivation and commitment.

Other kinds of questions include those intended to discover coordination or communication issues between the pedagogical pair, such as: *How do you keep in touch with your remote teacher? Is your remote teacher responsive to your questions and suggestions? Does coordination help you in leading lessons B and C successfully? Do you feel you are part of a pedagogical pair?*

During individual meetings with classroom teachers mentors can sense her level of empowerment by asking questions along the lines of: *How are you dealing with this new role in teaching? Has it been difficult to lead a lesson outside your subject matter? How do you feel about learning alongside your students? How do you feel about your students correcting you? Do you think you are a model for your students?*

The most valuable aspect of feedback is that powerful questions like the ones mentioned above, allow classroom teachers to put into words for someone else what is happening, and thus gain perspective and reflect about their practices. This will become fertile ground for improvement and therefore, empowerment.

#### C. Giving suggestions:

Mentors' feedback focuses on positively reinforcing good practices, which can be given in form of questions or straightforward tips to be shared and discussed with remote teachers; the questions intend to give classroom teachers the opportunity to take control of their own professional development, whereas giving tips is a more practical approach to boost classroom teachers' confidence. Some examples are: *How do your students learn best? What do you think about using flashcards/peripheral learning? Why don't you open a discussion on the platform for students to ask questions to the remote teacher? You could share your insights on this matter with the remote teacher and agree on a strategy to overcome this issue.*

#### Benefits of mentoring

By paving the way towards classroom teachers' empowerment, by showing that good teachers teach above and beyond a subject matter, mentors at Ceibal en Ingles believe some contribution has been made to the learning community. Visits, conversations, attitudes, all clearly demonstrate that classroom teachers have been able to expand their comfort zones, that due to their didactic and pedagogical capacities they have managed to make their students learn a foreign language. The Ceibal en Ingles programme, radically modern and barrier breaking, has proved that classroom teachers still are the central actors in education. In Uruguay they have also become the bringers of news and hence with the mentors, the propagators of a new educational paradigm, one that includes interaction and alternation in a teacher between her own teacher and learner roles.

## References

Malderez, A. and Wedell, M. (2007). *Teaching teachers: Processes and practices*. London, UK: Continuum.