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Mentoring as a Factor of Professional Adaptation among Early-Career Foreign Language Teachers in Higher Education

The present study examines the role of mentoring in the professional adaptation of early-career foreign language teachers working in higher education institutions. Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered to 90 early-career foreign language teachers from Russian universities. The online questionnaire was used to explore the early-career foreign language teachers' mentoring experiences and measured several aspects of their professional adaptation which include teaching confidence, understanding of institutional requirements, workload management, relationships with colleagues, and overall satisfaction with their professional adaptation. Descriptive statistics and an independent-samples Student's t-test were used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that only 21 participants had had mentors during their first years of university employment. They demonstrated significantly higher levels of professional adaptation ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.51$) than those without mentors ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.11$); the difference was statistically significant. The largest differences were observed in teaching confidence, understanding institutional requirements, integration into the university community, and satisfaction with professional adaptation. The results highlight the importance of mentoring as an effective mechanism for supporting the successful adaptation of early-career foreign language teachers and suggest the need for strengthening mentoring practices in higher education institutions.

Keywords: mentoring, professional adaptation, early-career faculty, foreign language university teachers, higher education, professional development, job satisfaction, dimensions of professional adaptation.

Introduction

The successful adaptation of early-career university teachers is a critical factor influencing the quality of higher education and the professional development of academic staff. Entering the academic profession involves not only mastering teaching responsibilities but also adapting to institutional expectations, engaging in research activities, fulfilling administrative duties, and establishing professional relationships within the academic community. The transition from graduate student or novice instructor to independent university teacher is often accompanied by professional, organizational, and psychological challenges that may affect job satisfaction, performance, and long-term career commitment [1], [2].

These challenges may be particularly pronounced for foreign language teachers working in higher education. In addition to general academic responsibilities, they are expected to teach through communicative and student-centered approaches, assess language proficiency, integrate digital resources, and continuously develop their own linguistic and intercultural competence. Early-career foreign language teachers must also adapt to rapidly changing educational environments and increasing demands for innovation in language teaching. As a result, the first years of academic employment often represent a crucial period of professional socialization and identity formation [3].

Previous studies have identified mentoring as one of the most effective mechanisms for supporting novice teachers during the adaptation process [4], [5]. Mentoring provides opportunities for professional guidance, emotional support, knowledge sharing, and integration into institutional culture. Research conducted in various educational contexts has demonstrated that mentoring can enhance teaching confidence, facilitate professional learning, reduce occupational stress, and improve retention among early-career educators. In higher education, mentoring has also been associated with increased research productivity, stronger collegial relationships, and greater career satisfaction [6].

Despite growing international interest in mentoring practices, limited attention has been paid to the role of mentoring in the professional adaptation of early-career foreign language teachers in higher education, particularly within the context of Russia. Existing studies have primarily focused on school teachers or university faculty in general, while the specific experiences and adaptation needs of foreign language instructors remain underexplored. This gap highlights the need for further empirical research examining how mentoring contributes to the successful professional adaptation of early-career foreign language teachers and their integration into academic environments.

The aim of this study is to examine the role of mentoring in the professional adaptation of early-career foreign language teachers working in higher education institutions. In particular, this study identifies the challenges that early-career foreign language teachers face, determines the forms of mentoring support provided by mentors, as well as presents the analysis of adaptation levels that teachers who have experienced mentoring and those who have not demonstrated. These findings are expected to contribute to the understanding of mentoring practices and their role for early-career foreign language teachers working within higher education institutions.

The research question is the following: How does mentoring support the professional adaptation of early-career foreign language teachers in higher education?

The hypothesis is that early-career university teachers who received mentoring support demonstrate significantly higher levels of professional adaptation than those who did not receive mentoring support.

Literature Review

Mentoring in Higher Education

Mentoring has become an increasingly important component of professional development in higher education, particularly for early-career academics who are required to navigate complex teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities. Although mentoring is widely implemented across universities, researchers note the absence of a universally accepted definition and a lack of conceptual consistency in the literature [5; 3], [7], [8], [9]. A systematic review conducted by Nuis et al. analyzed 106 studies and concluded that mentoring in higher education encompasses both professional and psychosocial support aimed at facilitating personal and professional growth within academic environments. The authors also emphasized the importance of structured mentoring relationships, mutual trust, and knowledge sharing for successful mentoring outcomes [5; 4].

The significance of mentoring for novice academics has been highlighted across various disciplinary contexts [10], [11], [12], [13]. Reviewing studies on early-career researchers, Boeren et al. found that mentoring contributes to career development, professional identity formation, academic productivity, and psychosocial well-being [14]. Mentoring relationships provide access to institutional knowledge, professional networks, and informal guidance that may not be available through formal induction programs [15].

Similarly, Dahlke et al. demonstrated that mentoring plays a crucial role in supporting novice faculty members during their transition into academic teaching. Their integrative review identified two major functions of mentoring: socialization into academic culture and assistance in navigating institutional expectations. The authors concluded that formal mentoring programs can facilitate professional integration and enhance confidence among newly appointed faculty members [4].

Professional Adaptation of Early-Career University Teachers

Professional adaptation refers to the process through which novice academics acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors necessary for successful functioning within higher education institutions. The transition into academic employment often involves multiple challenges, including mastering teaching responsibilities, understanding institutional procedures, balancing research and teaching obligations, and developing collegial relationships [13; 1302], [15; 29], [4; 207].

Recent research indicates that early-career faculty frequently experience difficulties associated with workload management, role ambiguity, and professional identity development [6; 355, 362, 367]. Studies on novice university teachers have shown that adaptation is influenced not only by individual competencies but also by organizational support, collegial relationships, and institutional culture [15; 29]. Effective support mechanisms are therefore considered essential for successful integration into academic communities [5; 4].

In the context of higher education, adaptation is increasingly viewed as a multidimensional construct involving professional, organizational, and social dimensions [5; 5]; [4; 208]. Successful adaptation has been associated with higher job satisfaction, stronger professional commitment, and improved teaching effectiveness, whereas inadequate support during the early stages of an academic career may contribute to stress, dissatisfaction, and turnover intentions [4; 208].

Specific Challenges of Foreign Language Teachers in Higher Education

While novice academics across disciplines encounter common adaptation challenges, foreign language teachers face several additional professional demands [6; 354, 363]. Their work requires continuous development of linguistic, intercultural, methodological, and digital competencies, alongside the implementation of communicative and learner-centered teaching approaches. Foreign language instructors are also expected to create authentic learning environments and integrate innovative technologies into language education [6; 354, 363].

Research on the professionalization of university foreign language teachers suggests that the initial stages of academic employment are often characterized by methodological uncertainty, difficulties balancing teaching and research responsibilities, and challenges related to professional self-development. Young language instructors frequently report the need for guidance in curriculum design, assessment practices, classroom management, and academic publishing [6; 356, 363], [4; 208].

Recent studies in language teacher education further emphasize the importance of supportive mentoring relationships. Montgomery et al. argue that mentoring contributes not only to professional learning but also to teacher well-being by providing emotional support, fostering reflective practice, and helping novice educators navigate institutional demands. Their findings suggest that mentoring may be particularly valuable in language education contexts where professional identity and interpersonal interaction play a central role in teaching practice [6; 356, 365–367].

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature on mentoring and faculty development, empirical studies examining the role of mentoring in the professional adaptation of early-career foreign language teachers remain limited. Existing research has primarily focused on school teachers, pre-service teachers, or university faculty in general, with relatively little attention devoted to foreign language instructors working in higher education institutions. Furthermore, studies conducted in the context of Russia are scarce, despite ongoing reforms in higher education and increasing expectations placed on university faculty.

Taking these gaps into account, there is a need for further study of how mentoring influences the professional adaptation of early-career foreign language teachers and which forms of mentoring support are considered to be the most beneficial. In order to reduce the gap, this study presents the results of examining the correlation between mentoring experiences and professional adaptation of early-career foreign language teachers working in Russian universities.

Methods and Materials

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. Its aim is to examine the role of mentoring in the professional adaptation of early-career university foreign language teachers. A survey method was selected because it allows for the collection of standardized data from a relatively large group of respondents and facilitates the analysis of adaptation-related factors across different institutional contexts.

Participants

The participants were early-career university foreign language teachers employed at higher education institutions in Russia. For the purposes of this study, early-career foreign language teachers were defined as academic staff with up to five years of teaching experience in higher education. Participants were recruited through purposive and voluntary sampling. The survey link was distributed via professional networks, institutional mailing lists, and social media platforms used by university teachers. The study collected demographic information including gender, age, academic position, and teaching experience.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using an online questionnaire developed specifically for this study. The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section gathered demographic information about the respondents. The second section explored participants' mentoring experiences, including the availability of mentors, the frequency of interaction, and the types of support provided. The third section measured professional adaptation using nine statements evaluated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree"). The statements assessed various dimensions of adaptation, including teaching confidence, understanding of institutional requirements, workload management, collegial relationships, integration into the academic community, and professional self-confidence. The fourth section included open-ended questions that allowed participants to describe challenges encountered during their first years of university teaching and to provide their perspectives on effective mentoring practices. Prior to distribution, the ques-

tionnaire was reviewed by experts in higher education and educational research to ensure content validity and clarity of wording.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected electronically using Google Forms during the spring semester of the 2026 academic year. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire. No personally identifiable information was collected.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics, including percentages, means, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize participants' demographic characteristics, mentoring experiences, and adaptation levels. To evaluate professional adaptation, a composite adaptation score was calculated by averaging responses to the nine Likert-scale items. To examine the role of mentoring, respondents were divided into two groups: those who had experienced mentoring and those who had not. Differences between groups were analyzed using an independent-samples Student's t-test. The calculated t-value (3.63) exceeded the critical t-value (1.98), indicating a statistically significant difference at $p < 0.05$. This indicated the effectiveness of mentorship for the professional adaptation of early-career university foreign language teachers.

Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. Similar responses were grouped into categories representing common challenges and perceived benefits of mentoring.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical principles of educational research. Participation was voluntary, respondents could withdraw at any time, and all collected information was treated confidentially. Data were used exclusively for academic research purposes.

Results and Discussion

Participant Characteristics

A total of 90 early-career university foreign language teachers participated in the study.

Among the respondents, 58 were female and 32 were male. The majority of participants were aged between 24–29 years. Regarding teaching experience, 18 had less than one year of experience, 49 had between one and three years, and 23 had between four and five years of experience. Most participants held the position of lecturer (67), followed by senior lecturer (23) and assistant professor (0). Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	58	64.4
	Male	32	35.6
Teaching Experience	Less than 1 year	18	20
	1–3 years	49	54.4
	4–5 years	23	25.6

Among the respondents, 21 reported having a mentor during their first years of university employment, whereas 69 indicated that they had no mentoring support. Regarding the frequency of interaction, 7 communicated with their mentors weekly, 9 monthly, and 5 only a few times per semester.

The most frequently reported forms of support included teaching and instructional guidance (14), research-related assistance (9), and emotional support (4), as demonstrated in Table 2. Participants who had mentoring experience generally evaluated mentoring positively — more than 80 % of respondents assessed mentoring as effective or very effective.

Table 2

Types of Mentoring Support Received

Type of Support	n	%
Teaching support	14	66.7
Research guidance	9	42.9
Emotional support	4	19
Administrative support	3	14.3
Career advice	1	4.8

Professional Adaptation Levels by Mentoring Status

To examine the role of mentoring in professional adaptation, respondents were divided into two groups: those who had experienced mentoring ($n = 21$) and those who had not ($n = 69$). Overall, participants who had mentors reported higher levels of professional adaptation across most indicators. The highest scores in the group who had a mentor were observed in confidence in teaching (4.52), understanding institutional requirements (4.48), and integration into the university community (4.43). The lowest scores were for balancing teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities (3.95) and workload management (4.00), which may be due to lack of experience. The group without a mentor demonstrated the highest scores for the ability to seek support when needed (3.90), workload management (3.77), and communication with colleagues (3.70), which were still lower than the corresponding scores in the group with a mentor. The lowest scores were observed for satisfaction with professional adaptation (2.80) and balancing teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities (2.91). Table 3 presents the mean score and standard deviation (SD) for each adaptation indicator.

Table 3

Professional Adaptation Scores by Mentoring Status

Adaptation Indicator	Group	With mentor		Without mentor	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Confidence in teaching		4.52	0.51	3.01	1.16
Understanding institutional requirements		4.48	0.51	3.32	1.14
Workload management		4.00	0.55	3.77	1.05
Communication with colleagues		4.24	0.54	3.70	1.06
Integration into university community		4.43	0.51	3.42	1.09
Professional future confidence		4.33	0.58	3.17	1.19
Ability to seek support when needed		4.10	0.62	3.90	1.02
Balancing teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities		3.95	0.50	2.91	1.17
Satisfaction with professional adaptation		4.10	0.30	2.80	1.13
Overall adaptation score		4.24	0.51	3.33	1.11

Differences between Teachers with and without Mentors

The comparison of professional adaptation scores revealed notable differences between early-career university foreign language teachers who had mentoring support and those who did not. Overall, respondents with mentors demonstrated a substantially higher level of professional adaptation ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.51$) than their counterparts without mentors ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.11$). In particular, the largest gaps were observed in confidence in teaching ($M = 4.52$ vs. 3.01), satisfaction with professional adaptation ($M = 4.10$ vs. 2.80), confidence in professional future ($M = 4.33$ vs. 3.17), understanding institutional requirements ($M = 4.48$ vs. 3.32), and integration into the university community ($M = 4.43$ vs. 3.42). These findings suggest that mentoring plays a significant role in helping early-career teachers adapt to the university environment and to their new professional role, because the different forms of mentoring they received enhanced several aspects of professional adaptation.

Although positive differences were observed across all adaptation indicators, the smallest gaps between the two groups were found in workload management ($M = 4.00$ vs. 3.77) and the ability to seek support when needed ($M = 4.10$ vs. 3.90). This may indicate that some aspects of adaptation are influenced not only by mentoring but also by broader institutional and organizational factors. In addition, respondents without mentors consistently demonstrated higher standard deviations across most indicators, reflecting greater variability in their adaptation experiences. In contrast, teachers who had mentors reported more homogeneous responses, which may imply that mentoring contributes not only to higher adaptation levels but also to a more stable and predictable adaptation process during the first years of their academic careers.

Qualitative Findings

Analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire revealed three major themes related to adaptation challenges.

Challenge 1: Dealing with Many Professional Responsibilities. The majority of the participants reported difficulties in balancing teaching, research, and administrative tasks during their first years of work.

Challenge 2: Managing Institutional Requirements. Most of the respondents mentioned that they felt uncertain due to numerous university procedures, documentation, and performance requirements.

Challenge 3: Lack of Emotional and Professional Support. The participants emphasized that they needed someone's help in reducing stress, increasing their confidence, and facilitating their adaptation to the academic community.

Altogether, both the qualitative findings and the quantitative results correspond to each other as they highlight the practical value of mentoring in supporting the professional adaptation of early-career teachers within the university work environments.

The findings of this study confirm the hypothesis that mentoring plays an important role in professional adaptation of early-career foreign language teachers working in higher education. Respondents who had mentoring support demonstrated higher levels of adaptation across all measured indicators, particularly in teaching confidence, understanding institutional requirements, integration into the university community, and confidence in their professional future. These results are consistent with previous studies emphasizing that mentoring facilitates professional socialization, enhances self-efficacy, and supports novice academics in navigating institutional and professional challenges [14; 69], [4; 206]. The findings also support the view that mentoring serves not only as a mechanism for transferring professional knowledge but also as a source of emotional and psychosocial support during the early stages of an academic career.

The results are particularly relevant for foreign language teachers, whose professional responsibilities extend beyond general teaching duties and include the development of communicative competence, the integration of innovative teaching approaches, and continuous professional self-improvement. The relatively large gaps observed between teachers with and without mentors suggest that mentoring may help early-career foreign language teachers develop confidence in their pedagogical practices and adapt more effectively to the requirements of higher education institutions. At the same time, both groups reported lower scores related to balancing teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities, which indicates that workload management remains a common challenge for any early-career foreign language teacher — with or without a mentor. This may imply that mentoring should be complemented by broader institutional support measures aimed at reducing adaptation-related stress and facilitating the professional development of early-career foreign language teachers.

Conclusions

This study examined the role of mentoring in the professional adaptation of early-career foreign language teachers working in higher education institutions. The findings revealed that teachers who had mentors demonstrated higher levels of professional adaptation than those who did not. The most substantial differences were observed in teaching confidence, understanding institutional requirements, integration into the academic community, and overall satisfaction with professional adaptation. These results indicate that mentoring is an effective mechanism for supporting novice academics during their transition into university teaching.

The study highlights the need for higher education institutions to strengthen formal mentoring programs and provide systematic support for early-career foreign language teachers. Universities should encourage experienced faculty members to participate in mentoring initiatives and create opportunities for professional collaboration and knowledge sharing. Although the present study contributes to understanding the relationship between mentoring and professional adaptation, it is limited by its sample size and reliance on self-

reported data. Future research could involve larger samples from different regions and employ longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effects of mentoring on professional development, job satisfaction, and academic performance.

CRedit Author Statement

The author confirms that they are the sole creator of this work and bear full responsibility for its content.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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