

A STUDY OF THE TRAINER-COLLABORATOR ROLE IN COLLABORATIVE INTERACTION BETWEEN TEACHER TRAINERS AND TRAINEE TEACHERS: THE CASE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

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Introduction

A traditional perspective on second language (L2) teacher education

In traditional L2 teacher education programs, teachers learn to teach by accumulating theoretical knowledge about the language and how it should be taught, chiefly in the form of university-based lectures (Johnson, 2009). This approach to L2 teacher education has been grounded in the positivist epistemological perspective that knowledge about learning and teaching is objective and represents generalizable truths which can be transmitted to teachers by teacher educators and transferred from one context to another (Johnson, 2009). The positivist epistemological perspective has, however, been criticized for its oversimplified, depersonalized and decontextualized nature (Johnson, 2009). It embeds a simplistic assumption that the disciplinary knowledge teachers are provided with is the same as the knowledge that they use to teach the language. It also ignores teachers' role in constructing their own knowledge about L2 teaching. Moreover, it does not take into account the contexts in which L2 teaching and learning take place.

A sociocultural perspective on L2 teacher education

An alternative perspective to L2 teacher education is a sociocultural perspective which is grounded on the epistemological assumption that knowledge is constructed through the social activities that humans take part in. From a sociocultural stance, the knowledge that L2 teachers need to teach the language is constructed from participating in the social practices of learning and teaching in specific classroom contexts (Johnson, 2009).

According to Vygotsky, the father of sociocultural theory, social interaction is fundamental to the construction of knowledge, and interaction with someone

more capable is more beneficial to a person's cognitive development. This idea is clearly stated through Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development which is referred to as "the distance between what a person can achieve independently and what he or she can achieve working in collaboration with others or with someone more expert" (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Johnson, 2009: 19).

Research purpose

In the light of the sociocultural perspective discussed above, it is necessary to provide L2 trainee teachers with opportunities to participate in teaching practices and collaborate with teacher trainers, so that they can construct their own understanding of L2 teaching on that basis. In principle, these opportunities are assumed to foster teacher learning. However, with regards to the hierarchical relationship between teachers and learners in many Asian countries, the productivity of collaborative interaction between teacher trainers and trainees teachers (hereinafter referred to as trainers and trainees) should be questioned. There is the likely possibility that trainees might position themselves as passive listeners, thus reducing their productive engagement in interaction with trainers. In such a case, the way in which trainers control interaction and engage trainees in their interactions becomes an issue of concern.

In order to explore the characteristics of the trainers' role in interaction with trainees, a collaborative activity was piloted in the context of pre-service English language teacher education in Vietnam, a country where teacher-learner relationship remains hierarchical. The trainers and the trainees were asked to collaborate with each other to complete an educational task in pair. This collaborative task was expected to change the relationship between them into a

collaborative one. Therefore, the trainers were referred to as trainer-collaborators, the trainees as trainee-collaborators, and the interaction during their collaborative work was referred to as collaborative interaction.

The present study investigated the trainer-collaborator role by looking at how the trainer-collaborator role was manifested in trainer-trainee interactions and comparing it with the trainee-collaborator role in peer interactions. In order to gain more insights into the trainer-collaborator role, the study also took into consideration the participants' perspectives on the trainer-collaborator role. More specifically, it attempted to address the following questions:

- How did the trainers and the trainees differ in their collaborator roles?
- How did the trainers and the trainees perceive the trainer-collaborator role?

Literature review

This section provides a brief review of studies on educational interaction, which point out the research trend of investigating the influence of participant relationship on interaction. It also reviews studies involving the role of participants in interaction in the context of general education. From this review, it is reasoned that the present investigation into the role of teacher trainers in interaction with trainee teachers is urgently required.

Research on promoting productive interaction from a sociocultural perspective

According to sociocultural researchers, the key factor of productive interaction lies in the joint engagement. Mercer and Littleton (2007, cited in Littleton & Mercer, 2010: 276) place emphasis on the important role of engagement with the notion of “exploratory talk”, which is referred to a kind of talk “in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other’s ideas”. However, as Littleton and Mercer noted, their typology of talk is “not designed to deal with many other important ways that the forms of talk reflect a variety of purposes, such as maintenance of social identities, expression of power and solidarity, emotional ties between speakers” (Littleton & Mercer, 2010: 278). This means that their notion of “exploratory talk”

looks at collaborative interaction from a purely cognitive perspective, and ignores emotional and social aspects of interaction.

According to Hakkinen, Arvaja and Makitalo (2004), the important role of affective and social factors in collaborative learning has also been emphasized in recent research trends. For example, Faulkner and Miell (2004) have observed that the efficacy of collaborative work promoted and constrained by the nature of participants’ relationship with each other. They have found that for young children, best friends make better collaborators than acquaintances or socially isolated partners. This finding implies that collaboration might be affected by the factors underlying the relationship between participants.

Lefstein (2010) goes further, to generalize the potential sources of tensions between participants from four dimensions of communication, namely, meta-communicative, cognitive or ideational, interpersonal and aesthetic dimensions. He claims that “communication, including dialogue, involves tensions between participants, between ideas, and between the concerns raised by each dimension” (Lefstein, 2010: 171). In this view, the nature of the relationship between participants is an important factor affecting the effectiveness of collaborative interaction.

Research involving participants’ role in educational interaction

Bachmann and Grossen (2004) investigated different modes of interaction between tutor-tutee in a context of mathematic tutoring at a secondary school. It was found that both of the degree of control by the tutors and the participation by the tutees were essential to the construction of the tutors and tutees’ roles. On the one hand, the low or high degree of control by the tutors might provide more or less space for the tutees to participate in the interactions. On the other hand, the tutees’ participation might also contribute to position themselves as active help seekers or passive recipients as well as position their tutors as legitimate tutors or authoritative tutors.

Solomon and Black (2008) dealt with interaction between teachers and students in the context of mathematics learning at

primary schools. They observed that some forms of teacher-student interaction may allow more space for students to present their own ideas; whereas in other forms of interaction, teachers exert a higher degree of control and give little space for students to jointly construct understanding with the teacher.

In Bachmann and Grossen (2004), roles were negotiated by both participants – the tutors and the tutees. But it is noted here that these tutors and tutees have the same social status as schoolmates. In the case of greater social distance between teachers and students like in Solomon and Black (2008), the space for students to actively engage in interaction with teachers may be less a matter of negotiation but more of teachers' authority.

Thus far, there has been no research answering the questions how teachers take control over and engage students in collaborative interaction. This question might be irrelevant in schooling settings, where teacher-learner collaboration is not feasible, but is extremely significant in the context of L2 teacher education where collaborative interaction between trainee teachers and their trainers is supposed to benefit teacher learning.

One-to-one collaboration between trainees and trainers might be also unfeasible in university-based L2 teacher education. However, teacher education worldwide has been under the pressure of restructuring from university-based to more school-based, where trainee teachers may learn to engage in their profession by collaborating and interacting with school teachers, who act as their mentors or teacher trainers (e.g. Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Zeichner, 2010; and Lovett & Cameron, 2011). A study of collaborative interaction between trainees and trainers is thus helpful in preparing for this future trend. For the time being, however, insights into teacher trainers' role in collaborative interaction may be helpful for training novice teachers during their apprenticeship years, when they are supposed to be working under the mentorship of an expert, who normally has a higher social status.

Research methodology

The Vietnamese context of English language teacher education

In pre-service English Language teacher training programs in Vietnam, trainees learn their profession mainly from lectures delivered by trainers who are supposed to transmit all the necessary knowledge that trainees need to know in order to teach English. The relationship between trainers and trainees can be described as a one-way relationship, where trainers act as knowledge transmitters and trainees as passive receivers. This approach to teacher training emphasizes the role of trainers in providing knowledge and ignores the active role of trainees in constructing their knowledge.

This approach to teacher education is partly rooted in the Vietnamese tradition of worshipping knowledge and teachers. The Vietnamese generally show a great respect towards teachers for their role in providing knowledge as a proverb goes "one word by the teacher is worth tons of gold". The tradition of worshipping teachers and their knowledge has positioned teachers in a powerful role as implied by the following proverbs "without teachers, one cannot succeed in doing anything".

The Vietnamese culture has long been influenced by Confucianism, and is thus referred to as one of the Confucian Heritage Culture nations (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). According to Hofstede & Hofstede (2005), Confucian Heritage Culture nations generally place strong emphasis on hierarchical relationships. In Vietnamese modern society, social relationships are generally becoming less distanced; however, the teacher-student relationship remains hierarchical. The hierarchical relationship between teachers and learners is reflected in the language used to denote teachers and the language used to address them. In the past, the word "thầy" (teacher) in Vietnamese referred to those who work in respectful professions such as medicine, law and education. However, this word has lost its use in medicine and law as an exchange for its increasing popularity in education. Furthermore, when addressing their teachers, learners have to add an honorific term of address, "thưa", before "thầy" (teacher). In the past, the term of address "thưa" was used to address any

people in higher social status, but now it is mainly used to address teachers.

The participants

The present study involved the participation of three trainers and nine trainees from a university which is responsible for training pre-service teachers of English who are supposed to work as teachers of English at secondary schools after their graduation.

The nine trainees were chosen randomly from a group of 32 trainees who were about 20 years old. Eight out of nine trainees were female. The proportion of female and male trainees sampled reflected the proportion in reality. The trainees were at the end of their third year of the four-year training program, which consisted of 210 credits (with each credit equal to 15 lecture periods of 50 minutes). The largest proportion of time (73 credits) was allotted to developing English language skills (including Speaking, Listening, Writing and Reading skills). Linguistics course (including Grammar, Semantics, Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics) accounted for the second largest amount of time (14 credits). English Language Teaching Methodology course (10 credits) and Practicum (9 credits), which are considered the most important in terms of learning how to teach English, represented the third and fourth largest proportion of time (Dai Hoc Su Pham, 2006).

Three teacher trainers were between 33 and 39 years old. They were all female, had MA degrees, and delivered the English Language Teaching Methodology course. At the time of data collection, the trainers who were in charge of this course started working on the project of restructuring their training course with a view to reducing theoretical learning and introducing more practical elements. The trainers therefore welcomed the innovative idea of promoting collaborative interaction between trainees and trainers, and were enthusiastic to participate in the present study.

Research design

A qualitative approach was believed to be suitable to address the research problems investigated, for three reasons. First, the study sought to provide an in-depth understanding of features of the teacher-collaborator role in interactions between

teachers and students. Second, the study also inquired as to the participants' interpretations of their own practices. Third, the social and cultural contexts in which the participants learned and taught were taken into account to gain insight into the participants' collaborative interactions as well as their perceptions about the teacher-collaborator role.

By working within a qualitative research approach, the study also involved some experimental elements, in the sense that it purported to test against the researcher's expectations. First, it was expected that trainers would play an important role in controlling the interactions as well as engaging their trainee partners in the interactions. The second expectation was that some trainees might cling to their role of passive receivers. Thus, they did not engage much in interactions with trainers.

The experiment dealt with two different forms of collaboration i.e. between trainers and trainees, and between peer trainees. It was not a true experiment taking place in a controlled condition with a randomly assigned control group and an experimental group. Instead, it occurred in a naturalistic environment and involved one focus group of trainees who were assigned to do the same collaborative task with two different types of collaborators – peer partners and trainer partners; at the same time the trainers also worked on the same collaborative task with two different trainees in two rounds. This setting allowed the differences in the collaborator roles that the trainers and the trainees played to be uncovered in two types of interaction. In addition, letting the trainees work with two types of collaborators helped to reveal the differences in their perceptions of two types of collaborators.

The collaborative task

The participants worked in pairs in two rounds to discuss how to employ English songs in English language teaching and design teaching activities basing on English songs.

The collaborative task was expected to empower the trainees by putting them in a new relationship, in which the trainees and the trainers were supposed to be collaborators, as opposed to engaging in the

traditional teacher-student relationship. Furthermore, the task was also expected to lessen the trainers' assumingly powerful status, which is associated with their knowledge privilege in the sense that it was a task in which the trainees might know more than the trainers, given that it was about English songs. With this feature, the collaborative task would be likely to provide a favourable condition for trainees to engage in interaction with trainers.

Each participant was assigned to do the task twice with two different partners in two rounds. The pairing was done as follows. When the participants entered the classroom, each was given a code card. The codes for the three trainers were A1, A2, A3; and the codes for nine trainees ranged from B1 to B9. Then the pairing scheme for the first round was written on the blackboard and the participants had to find their partners accordingly. In the second round the participants had to change their partners according to a new scheme of pairing.

Data collection

The study used the following data collection methods: recording of collaborative interactions; interviewing the trainees; and open-ended questionnaires for the trainers.

The interviews with the trainees were of a semi-structured type. The interview questions focused on their perceptions of the two collaborative works in two rounds and two types of collaborators. The interviews were conducted on the same day with the collaborative activity. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes and was recorded with a small mp3 recorder.

Three open-ended questionnaires were used to inquire about the trainers' perceptions. The first questionnaire, which aimed to inquire the trainers' perception of the role they should play in collaboration with their trainees, was done by email. The questionnaire was sent to each trainer three days before the collaborative activity, and their replies were received one day before the collaborative activity. The second questionnaire was conducted on the data collection day between two rounds of the collaborative activity. Each trainer was given a handout with questions inquiring how they perceived the role they played in the

first round and what they intended to change in the second round. The third questionnaire was again done by email. The questionnaire was sent right after the collaborative activity had finished and replies were received within seven days. The objective of this questionnaire was to inquire as to how the trainers perceived the role they played in two rounds of working with two different trainees.

Data analysis

The collaborative interactions were employed on the basis of a deductive coding procedure; however, the analysis of the trainers' questionnaires and the trainees' interviews was inductive in nature.

The analysis of collaborative interactions began with two broad themes which were anticipated before the data collection. The two broad themes were about the trainers' role in controlling the interactions and their role in engaging the trainees in interactions. Answering the question of how the participants controlled the interactions then led to the emergence of sub-themes such as discussion leading and decision making, which referred to how discussions were led from one topic to another and how decisions were made. Answering the question of how they engaged the trainees in their interactions led to two emergent sub-themes: encouraging participations and engaging with the other partner's contribution.

The coding of the questionnaires and the interviews was of an inductive type. The participants' answers were scanned line by line and any issues related to the teacher-collaborator role were highlighted. After this, the highlighted issues were categorized under broader themes.

Summary of research findings and discussion

This section summarizes the major research findings, discusses several problems arising from the data analysis and draws out implications for improving the productivity of trainer-trainee interaction.

From an analysis of the collaborative interactions, it was found that interactions with trainers might be more beneficial to trainees' learning than interactions with peers. The first reason is that the trainers

were found to provide opportunities for their trainee partners to take the lead and participate in decision making processes; in contrast, in peer interactions, it is seen that the trainees who led the interaction did not engage their partners in decision making. Second, the trainers were found to succeed in encouraging their partners' participation in collaborative interactions; however no cases of encouragement of participation were evident in peer interactions. Third, the trainers were found to scaffold the trainees to develop their own solutions to the task, whereas no trainees played such a scaffolding role.

However, there are three problems that emerge from the study. First, it was found that one trainer was still keen on knowledge presenting and five out of six trainees still wanted to listen to the trainers because they appreciated the teachers' knowledge and experience. Second, one trainee complained about her trainer partner's lack of control because she expected to be guided by her teacher, while another trainee complained about their trainer partner's over-control. Third, two trainees reported that they did not make many contributions to the collaborative work, although their teacher-partners provided them with opportunities to participate in discussions. On the basis of what the participants revealed, these problems may be associated with the Vietnamese tradition of worshipping teachers and knowledge.

The following extracts provide good illustrations of the trainees' over respect for their trainers' ideas.

"I thought the teacher's (trainer) ideas were too good, very appropriate to the song and very useful, so I only listened,"

"I thought she (trainer) was more experienced so surely she could have better ideas; when thinking, I could not create any new ideas."

"As a student (trainee), when discussing disciplinary knowledge with my teacher (trainer), right at the beginning I thought the teacher's ideas were always good, so my critical thinking was constrained [...] yes, I think teachers' ideas are always good, in reality they were very good ((laughing)), but how to say, I mean... I

did not attempt to find any weaknesses in her ideas".

The above problems have raised a number of questions, which can be worded as follows:

1. Should teachers continue to present knowledge if students still appreciate the knowledge presented?
2. How much control is appropriate?
3. How much participation encouragement is appropriate?

In the following passages, these three questions are addressed respectively.

1. Should teachers continue to present knowledge?

Littlewood (2000) has raised a question 'Do Asian students really want to listen and obey?' He did a survey of 2307 students at senior secondary and tertiary level in three European countries and eight Asian countries, including Vietnam. One interpretation of the survey results is that on average, Vietnamese students are no more willing to listen and obey their teachers than an average European student.

As evident in the present study, most trainees (five out of six) still wanted to listen to the trainers because they appreciated the trainers' knowledge and experience. The respect towards trainers' knowledge even turned some trainees into passive listeners who solely listened and did not make contributions to the collaborative task. The question is whether trainees should continue to let trainees listen and obey when trainees find it useful and necessary to listen to knowledge presented by trainers. From the sociocultural perspective discussed earlier, the answer is clearly that they should not. Instead, trainers and trainees who cling to the belief that knowledge should be passed on to trainees by trainers should change their attitude and practice.

2. How much control is appropriate?

The trainer A2's intentional reduction of control is based on her belief that students need to develop "independence and autonomy". However, her low control might be appropriate with her first trainee partner, but inappropriate with her second trainee partner. Learning from this

experience, one might suggest that the degree of control should be adjusted in accordance with trainees' level of competence. Cooper, Hinkel and Good (1980, cited in Black, 2004) have found that teachers' control over interactions with students is normally related to their expectation of students' ability. A question raised here is whether there are any dangers in determining the degree of control based on teachers' expectation of students' level of competence. According to Black (2004), and Solomon and Black (2008), teachers' expectation of students' ability may marginalize some students by taking away their opportunities to engage in productive interactions. The relationship between teachers' expectation of students' ability, teachers' level of control and students' level of competence may become a vicious circle. If teachers perceive some students as less competent than their peers, they may take more control over the interactions, which may then deprive these students of opportunities to be exposed to productive interactions, thus reducing opportunities to improve their abilities. In order to avoid such a vicious circle, it is suggested that while exerting some degree of control over interactions with trainees who are perceived as less competent, trainers should also encourage participation from these trainees. If the degree of control is balanced with the degree of participation encouragement, trainees' exposure to productive interactions could be enhanced.

3. How much participation encouragement is appropriate?

The above argument has emphasized the importance of participation encouragement, especially in cases of less competent trainees. The question of how much participation encouragement is appropriate has the same answer with the question of how much control is appropriate. The degree of encouragement should also be adjusted according to trainees' level of competence.

Nonetheless, there is a possibility that some trainees might not be engaged much in interaction with trainers, regardless of how much encouragement is made. For example, both trainees B4 and B5, who were encouraged by their trainer partners to

participate in the collaborative task, reported that they could not produce many ideas when working with their trainer partners because they were suppressed by the thought that trainers' ideas were always better than their own ideas. It was likely that B4 and B5's respect towards teacher's knowledge derives from the Vietnamese tradition of worshipping teachers and knowledge; therefore, it is more challenging to change their beliefs.

Conclusion

It is evident that the trainers played an important role in controlling the collaborative interactions and engaging the trainees in collaborative work. First, by reducing their control over the interactions, the trainees succeeded in engaging the students in leading interactions and making decisions. Second, the trainers were found to engage the trainees in contributing to collaborative work, either by encouraging the trainees to engage with the trainers' contributions or by scaffolding the trainees to elaborate their own contributions.

However, three problems related to the trainer-collaborator role and the trainees' engagement emerged from the present study. The first problem is concerned with knowledge presenting. One trainer was found to be keen on presenting her knowledge instead of giving space for her trainee partners to contribute to collaborative work, and most trainees wanted to listen to knowledge presented by their trainer-collaborator rather than giving their own ideas. The second problem involves trainers' control. One trainee expected to get more guidance while another trainee preferred to have more freedom. The third problem arises from the trainees' over respect towards teachers' knowledge and experience. It was found that some trainees did not engage much in the interactions with their trainer partners and positioned themselves as passive receivers of the knowledge presented by the trainers due to their over respect for teachers' knowledge.

The present study has shed light on the trainer-collaborator role in collaborative interaction between trainers and trainees in the context of pre-service English language teacher education in Vietnam. Knowledge

about the features of the trainer collaborator role in collaborative interaction might also be helpful for teacher trainers in similar contexts, where they wish to organize educational activities involving trainee-trainer interaction. As suggested from the present study, teacher trainers should take into consideration the degree of control and encouragement when interacting with trainees. Giving trainees too much freedom to take control is likely to cause a shock because some trainees might not expect such freedom. However, over-control might take away opportunities for trainees to engage in productive interaction. Therefore, the degree of control should be balanced with the degree of encouragement. Trainers should be aware of the importance of their role in encouraging trainees to participate in interaction with trainers. Encouragement is especially necessary to trainees who position themselves as passive receivers waiting for knowledge to be transmitted from trainers. There is a likely possibility that trainers' encouragement might not work for some trainees, due to their embrace of the tradition of worshipping teachers and teachers' knowledge. If trainees believe that trainers' ideas are always better than theirs, they may not dare to speak up about their own opinions and may reduce themselves to passive listeners. In such a case, it is more challenging for trainers to engage trainees in collaborative interaction; therefore there is still a great amount of work to do on the way to promote trainees' active engagement in productive interaction with trainers.

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