

An Online Cultural Exchange in Pre-service Language Teacher Education: A Dialogic Approach to Understanding

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A dialogic approach to teaching and learning is not a new phenomenon. However, using technology as a mediated platform (email, Skype and blackboard) to allow pre-service teachers in two culturally and linguistically diverse countries to openly communicate and share ideas about teaching and learning is somewhat unique. The present study reports on a 10-week electronic exchange between students in an undergraduate EFL (English as a foreign language) methods course in China and students in a graduate ESL (English as a second language) methods course in USA. Results indicated that not only did the participants learn a great deal about each other, but also they shared more similarities than differences with regard to what they learned from such a cultural exchange; why they wanted to become teachers; and what they will contribute to the teaching profession.

Keywords: teacher preparation, cultural exchange, technology applications

Introduction

The present study examined pre-service teacher candidates who were enrolled in coursework at two public universities—one in the PRC (Peoples Republic of China) and the other one in the US. The participants of the study were enrolled in coursework in which they were training to become ESL (English as a second language) teachers in the US and EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers in China. Students in both countries were enrolled in methods courses during the fall semester of 2011. The idea for conducting this study grew out of an interest in forming global learning communities using multimedia platforms, such as the World Wide Web (email), blackboard and Skype. Students in the US were enrolled in a graduate methods course the author taught, EDCI (Education in Curriculum and Instruction) 519, “methods of teaching in multilingual settings”. It is a three-credit course that is required for ESL licensure in the state of Virginia. The course description states: examines approaches, methods and techniques for teaching ESL in bilingual and ESL classrooms, as well as resources available in the field. Participants critically analyzed and demonstrated teaching approaches based on the second language acquisition research, including teaching language through contents. In contents, the fall semester of 2011, there were 16 students enrolled in the course, 15 of whom agreed to participate in the study. The study took place over the course of approximately 10 weeks. The goal of the study was to create an online learning community in which Chinese and US pre-service teachers would be able to learn from each other and share cultural experiences about becoming educators.

Binzhao (pseudonym) University in China was established in 1958. The university offers 38 diplomas, with 19 undergraduate majors. It operates a number of research centers and institutes in diverse areas including

ecology, military science, history and ancient books. The university hosts a student body of approximately 18,000 full-time students, with a teaching faculty of over 700.

Traditional Teacher-Centered Methodology in China

In China, English teaching programs in primary and secondary education are intended to focus on improving students' abilities in listening, speaking, reading and learning autonomy. Furthermore, English teachers also strive to nurture students as human beings, showing their concerns for students' emotional well-being and cultivating students' self-confidence. Teachers also try to encourage their students to cooperate with their peers. English teaching programs in many schools also focus on shaping students' cultural awareness. However, concerns for enhancing students' abilities to translate and write are a matter of lesser importance. Most Chinese language teachers focus their teaching objectives on improving students' abilities in coping with examinations. They focus on the transmission of information about grammar and vocabulary, and the provision of examination-related notes and exercises. In order to achieve this goal, teachers frequently ask students to read textbooks, organize their writing, assign translating activities and various other communicative activities. In English classes, activities are usually centered on listening to stories and retelling them, or memorizing grammar and practicing sentences following certain drills. Foreign language teaching in China is largely dependent on teachers' transmitting knowledge to students. Instruction is teacher-centered where teachers are the center of the class and control the class from the beginning to the end, although a lively atmosphere is attempted as are a range of learning activities to relate to real life.

Foreign language teachers in China use a traditional grammar-translation method, with an exam-oriented teaching approach. However, with the changing demographics, the traditional Chinese way of teaching second/foreign languages is no longer sufficient and appropriate. During the past two decades, the trend of teaching has shifted to a more communicative and interactive approach (Lee & Vanpatten, 2003). According to Widdowson (1998, p. 712), language instruction for communicative approaches must "come to terms with the learner's reality and somehow create contextual conditions that are appropriate to them and that will enable them to authenticate it as discourse on their own terms". Thus, it has become a challenge for second language teachers to develop a wider array of competences (Velez-Rendon, 2002). Before making decisions regarding methodology, teachers have to ascertain specific standards and goals and ensure that they are appropriate for the particular age of the students. If the goal of teaching EFL is proficiency, full-immersion education is required (Genesee, 1994). In addition, other effective ways for teaching a foreign language for older students include direct teaching, systematic practice and ample chances for conversation (Resnick, 2006). No matter what kind of methods teachers use, they have to find a balance between structure (e.g., knowledge of grammar and language structure) and meaning (e.g., student's motivation). A student's foreign language learning outcome is affected by age and type of exposure to the language.

The Study

As a language methods professor, the author is always interested in methodological/pedagogical practices that are used around the world to train teachers. There are very few professional fora at which opportunities are available for dialogic conversations established for sharing research, ideas, resources and challenges and/or opportunities for collaboration. On the rare occasion when there is an opportunity for rich discussion and collaboration across universities, states and countries, these occur only sporadically.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary in both countries. All participants gave written informed consent. Students were invited to participate with the assurance that there were no inherent risks, and opting out at anytime was perfectly acceptable, which would in no way influence or affect their course grade. The author's contact in China was a former Chinese scholar who had studied with the author in the US two years ago and upon returning home maintained an ongoing dialogue using email. Ping (pseudonym) was the instructor of the undergraduate methods courses. She and the author were excited to undertake this project and looked forward to this unique cultural exchange between our students. We exchanged course syllabi and shared these with their students in order for them to see what requirements were expected in the two programs/countries for training language teachers.

The author began to introduce her students to Binzhao University. This was done electronically with a map of where the university is located in China and a brief description of the geographic area. Next students were randomly matched with the Chinese students. Since there were twice as many enrolled in the Chinese methods course, the author's students were able to communicate with two students, sometimes sharing the same email account. Once the emails and Skype sessions began to occur, students found commonalities to share, i.e., family life, pets, pastime activities and a typical day's activities. The author's students were shocked to learn that the Chinese students often took as many as 10 courses in one semester! They exchanged photos and shared their mutual acknowledgements that they really knew very little about each other and that most of their preconceived notions were based on stereotypes gleaned from anecdotal stories, movies, music or the Internet.

Procedures

The following describes the three tasks and questions asked by both groups. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the answers to the final questions given by the participants.

Tasks

Task # 1—Contact your new e-pal and introduce yourself. Share what you are studying at XXX, where you are in your program, and what your future goals are in education. You may ask what they are studying and what a typical day is like at Binzhao University. Remember, they are studying English, so keep the language simple;

Task # 2—Ask them what they are currently studying in their methods class, and then share what we are studying. You should mention your upcoming technology project and ask what kinds of technology they may currently be using (ipod, flip camera, Skype, etc.);

Task # 3—These questions will be posed to both groups:

- (1) What must a teacher consider when planning a lesson?
- (2) What are some current methods that can be used when teaching ESL and/or EFL?

Final Questions

The final questions are as follows:

- (1) What have you learned from this cultural exchange?
- (2) Why do you want to become a teacher?
- (3) What will you contribute to the teaching profession?

Results

An analysis of the answers to the final three questions revealed that most of the participants agreed that

this brief cultural exchange increased their awareness of the multiple similarities that they share. Many students were surprised at the extent to which they share similar hopes, thoughts and passion for education. Students were also surprised to see that those similarities exist despite of the many differences between the two countries. However, one interesting phenomenon that stood out in this exchange was the fact that many Chinese students admitted that this brief communication with the American students made them realize the importance of challenging the traditional role of the Chinese teacher as the center of the learning process.

The following illustrates the answers to the final three questions which were answered by all student participants.

Question 1: What Have You Learned From This Cultural Exchange?

In their answers, Chinese students expressed great joy, happiness and motivation to participate in the exchange and wished that there will be future opportunities similar to this. Some students described this exchange as a window to the world. Moreover, a group of students wrote that before the exchange, they were afraid of talking with the American e-buddies, because they feared that they might make many grammatical mistakes in their emails and that could hinder the reader's comprehension. However, after participating, they felt much more relaxed in writing English. One student said, "At first, I was afraid of expressing my ideas to foreign students, because I feared I may make some grammar mistakes in my emails. But after a period of time, I felt he was very friendly and modest which gave me more confidence to keep on our communication".

On the other hand, the American students learned that education was global, and there were many effective ways as well as ineffective ways to teach. American students also realized that they should not label people or form stereotypes, just because they are from a certain country or culture. One student said, "I also hope to influence others in becoming more aware of other people's background, and to not be so quick to label or judge someone".

Question 2: Why Do You Want to Become a Teacher?

There were three emerging themes in response to this question: Teaching is worthwhile and rewarding; there are many values in education; and one can relate their personal experiences to becoming an educator.

"It is a privilege!" was one of the answers a participant wrote when asked about the reason why she/he wanted to become a teacher. After analyzing the answers the participants gave to this question, it was interesting to see how many similar reasons the participants gave to explain the reason why they wanted to become teachers. Almost all of the participants agreed that teaching is one of the few jobs that challenge and reward one at the same time. One American student commented, "I want to become a teacher to help students learn and achieve their highest potential, academically and in their overall lives". The Chinese participants also shared the same point of view in regards to teaching EFL. Many Chinese participants mentioned a desire to help children from China's rural provinces. According to the Chinese participants, the countryside children are often underrepresented and through teaching them English, they will have better futures. One student said, "I come from the countryside of China. I know how poor the education is in some parts, so I want to change this phenomenon through my (teaching) contributions".

Question 3: What Will You Contribute to the Teaching Profession?

Similarly, to Question 2, there were three emerging themes that resulted from Question 3: being a high quality teacher; demonstrating effective teaching skills; and exhibiting a multicultural awareness.

When asked what they will contribute to the teaching profession, many students mentioned the terms

“knowledge”, “patience”, “energy” and “equality”. After spending some time, on communicating through emails and Skype, both American and Chinese students became convinced that teaching should not be passive. Participants articulated for several times that teaching should be student-centered and that students should be “free and not scared in the classroom”, as one Chinese student mentioned. Participants also made it clear that even though teachers possess the knowledge in the classroom, they should be able to deliver this knowledge in an interactive way that appeals to the students and creates life-long learners.

Moreover, by the end of the exchange, American students became much more aware of the strong role that technology can play in today’s classrooms. One student stated, “Technology allows teachers to connect the students’ classroom experience to the experiences from real life which is full of devices, applications and programs”. This positive awareness corresponds with what Haley and Austin (2004) stated in their book *Content-Based Second Language Teaching and Learning*. They wrote, “Using instructional technology with a pedagogy more oriented toward project-based learning, (for example, the cultural exchange experience), has been documented in case studies as highly successful”.

Discussion

One crucial characteristic about the results that emerged out of this cultural exchange is that they are authentic. During the exchange, students sent emails, received information and held conversations without the supervision of their teachers. The answers that the students submitted to the questions reflect their own learning and the role of teachers as the primary second language input sources, which totally vanished in this experience.

Another important feature of this exchange is the fact that the three final questions that were asked at the end of the exchange were authentic tools for self-assessment. In 1996, O’Malley and Pierce (1996) described authentic assessment as “assessment tools that reflect student learning and attitudes, among other factors, of and towards instructionally relevant activities” (p. 4). The three questions posed at the end of the cultural exchange experience are authentic, because they helped the students evaluate the usefulness of the learning experience.

In their answers to the questions that concluded the cultural exchange, the Chinese students showed great joy and happiness for participating in the exchange. Many of them felt that this exchange was a great opportunity to interact with American students and practice their English. Based on this positive attitude that the Chinese students have and Baker’s (2006) notion that motivation provides the main impetus to initiate second language learning, one could argue that these students have an advantage in learning ESL.

The Chinese students’ reticence about writing in English with native English speakers is understandable. They entered this experience with lower English language proficiency than their American counterparts. However, what is really impressive is that not only did the students’ anxiety levels decrease after spending some time on communicating with the American students, but also they wished for more cultural exchanges to come. According to Bandura’s (1991) theory of self-efficacy, when a situation is observed as frightening, the resulting anxiety is dependent on an individual’s perception of his/her ability to positively deal with that fear (Pappamihel, 2002). Even though the Chinese participants were anxious before conducting a first conversation with native speakers of English, one could argue that in the future, they will not feel “threatened”, when they are engaged in conversation with native speakers of English. This, in effect, would increase their abilities to successfully learn English (Pappamihel, 2002).

The cultural exchange examined in this study combines both what Vygotsky and Cummins believed about the importance of collaborative learning in optimizing language acquisition and the role of technology in

today's classrooms. While Vygotsky (1978; as cited in King & O'Donnell, 1999) believed that when humans interacted with each other, they gained mastery over cultural tools, such as language. Cummins (2000; as cited in Haley & Austin, 2004) pointed out that technology had a considerable potential to promote language learning. Likewise, Haley and Austin (2004) believed that appropriate incorporation of computer technology could facilitate second language instruction. The cultural exchange that the students participated in is a great example of an appropriate implementation of computer technology to facilitate second language acquisition and a great way to incorporate collaborative learning. The results of the exchange show that not only did the students enjoy the experience, but also they learned from it and wished for more future exchange opportunities. These pleasing results provide a base for more incorporation of technology devices as tools to facilitate second language teaching and learning.

Conclusions

The goal of this study is to create an online learning community in which Chinese and US pre-service teachers would be able to learn from each other and share cultural experiences about becoming educators. Using this dialogic approach that connected the study's participants using email, Skype and Blackboard provided multiple pathways for communication. Clearly, there were many to be learned on the parts of both countries' participants. The data sources were rich and full of culturally relevant information. As a methods professor, the author's horizons have been broadened and deepened, as this study has enabled her to think more globally about the intricate nuances of language teaching and learning. Further, it is very evident that we must continue to grow and learn from one another. Sharing views and perspectives, such as in this experiment, will provide more conduits into the realm of co-constructing new knowledge. Finally, as a teacher education researcher, this study is particularly relevant in light of its attempt to advocate for an ethical culture of professional development.

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