

Oral Academic Discourse Socialization of In-Service Teachers in a TEFL Program

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Abstract

Oral academic discourse socialization refers to a process through which students learn about the conventions and practices of their disciplinary fields while doing academic spoken practices. In this study, it refers to the interactions of the participant teachers with their peers and instructors as well as their engagement with academic texts. This paper reports on academic discourse socialization of several EFL teachers in a TEFL graduate program in Iran through oral discourse practices including small-group discussions and debates after microteachings over the first year of the program. It explores how the student teachers are initiated further into the values and practices of their EFL discourse community through collegial interactions with their peers. The active participation of the participant teachers in discourse socialization practices facilitated learning in a collaborative learning community. The participants shared their personal practical experiences, scaffolded their peers and engaged with assigned academic texts. Designing professional training programs that are likely to contribute to collegial interaction can be of great importance in teacher education programs.

Keywords: oral academic discourse socialization, collegial interaction, collaborative learning community

1. Introduction

Graduate study is a very important part of any academic discourse community as it can initiate students into their professional discourse communities by introducing them to topics under discussion, disciplinary language, and discourse community culture. It both introduces the community to the graduate students, and also revitalizes the discourse community by bringing new members. Graduate students are initiated into their discourse communities through engagement in their practices and interaction with their members. Their learning is a multilateral situated process in which they try to participate in discourse community practices through learning its discourse and prevalent conventions and practices. This is possible through undergoing the process of academic discourse socialization which initiates newcomers or less experienced members of a discourse community into its prevalent values and practices.

TESOL discourse communities, including EFL discourse community, can be seen as discourse communities where their members share the same concerns about how to teach English to the speakers of other languages. Like other graduate students in other fields, graduate students in the TESOL discourse community undergo the process of academic discourse socialization to become initiated into the discourse cultures of the community. The question is whether graduate programs can initiate these non-native English speaking (NNES) teachers into the values and practices of the TESOL discourse community through their engagement in oral discourse socialization practices.

2. Background of the Study

Academic discourse socialisation which is subservient to language socialization theory can be considered as an orientation to literacy development (Duff, 2010) in academic settings. During the process, novice learners learn how to participate actively in their discourse communities to develop their identity and agency (Duff, 2007) and it is not simply taking possession of academic knowledge, but it is multi-layered and can “involve struggles over access to resources, conflicts and negotiations between differing viewpoints arising from differing degrees of experience and expertise” (p. 577).

Academic discourse socialization has been the innermost core of many graduate study programs and refers to a

process through which newcomers become initiated into the discourse community's conventions to be more capable member of their discourse community. According to Duff (2010), Academic discourse is concerned with "specific disciplines or professional areas and is embodied both in texts and in other modes of interaction and representation... normally inculcated within academic communities such as school or university programs and classrooms" (p. 175). The underlying epistemologies of academic disciplines are mainly acquired when discourse community members are engaged in dialogical interactions with each other as well as their educational and sociocultural setting.

It was around the late 1980s when attention was shifted towards the relationship between cognitive and social aspects of language learning focusing on language socialization of learners in their natural settings (e.g., Firth & Wagner, 1997; Kasper, 1997; Lantolf, 2000). In the previous three decades, language socialization as a theory to explain first language acquisition was used by many scholars (e.g., Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Watson-Gegeo, 2004). Its use as a research paradigm in second language acquisition studies has also drawn the attention of second language researchers (Li, 2000; Morita, 2000; Willett, 1995). Studies on academic discourse socialization of graduate students have been carried out covering issues including the voice and identity of graduate students in their new academic settings (e.g., Ahmadi, Samad, & Noordin, 2013; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Ivanič & Camps, 2001), the relationship between the students' vernacular discourse communities and the communities they are socialized into (Canagarajah, 2002), their experiences in the process of academic disciplinary socialization through written discourse (Spack, 1997; Zamel & Spack, 1998) as well as socialization through oral presentation and interaction (e.g., Duff, 2003; Kobayashi, 2003; Morita, 2002; Zappa-Hollman, 2007).

The existing literature on the process of academic discourse socialization shows that researchers conceive two approaches investigating the issue: "product-oriented" and "process-oriented". The product-oriented approach deals with what newcomers need to learn to engage in the practices of their new communities and "what kinds of academic tasks are assigned in various disciplines and what academic and language skills are required to successfully complete those tasks" (Morita, 2004, p. 574). Studies based on the product-oriented approach (e.g., Swales & Feak, 1994) try to find out the "specific linguistic and rhetorical conventions of a disciplinary community" (ibid) to facilitate novice learners' acquisition of disciplinary terms and conventions. The process-oriented approach, however, is concerned with how novice learners are enculturated into discourse of their affiliated academic communities. The proponents of this approach (Belcher, 1994; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Duff, 2001, 2002; Morita, 2000; Prior, 1998; Spack, 1997) use qualitative research methodologies to uncover the sophisticated process of discourse socialization including "negotiating identities, cultures, or power relations in academic communities" (Morita, 2004, p. 575). The present study adopts the second approach to investigate the discourse socialization practices of graduate students in TEFL through a qualitative methodology.

Oral communication skills displayed in presentations, mini-lectures, group project work, and class discussions are now being stressed and assessed by instructors and peers more than before and are therefore being researched more by language socialization scholars as well (e.g., Duff & Kobayashi, 2010; Morita, 2000; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). This emphasis on orality reflects, in part, the amount and quality of collaboration and communication (and not just textbook knowledge or theory) that are now required in real-world knowledge building and knowledge sharing (Duff, 2010).

Research on spoken discourse socialization practices still proliferates. The multi-layered nature of spoken discourse socialization has been examined in various social and academic contexts by analysing the spoken discourse in real settings (Duff, 2010; Kobayashi, 2003; Morita, 2004). Early research carried out on spoken academic discourse was limited to findings obtained from surveys which, for the most part, examined spoken requirements of L2 students and their views towards spoken discourse practices (e.g., Ferris, 1998; Ferris & Tagg, 1996). Ferris and Tagg (1996), for example, examined the coursework requirements and spoken discourse practices in English for Academic Purposes classes at several educational centers in the U.S. The findings showed that interactional lecturing ways of class participation such as oral presentations and group discussions were prevalent in the classrooms. To investigate the challenges second language college students encountered, Ferris (1998) did a survey on a large number of students and found that spoken discourse presentations and participation in class discussions were among the most challenging coursework practices for them.

Despite the wide coverage of survey studies on spoken discourse practices in academic settings, they cannot reflect how situated learning happens through socialization practices based on the interactions in real scenarios (Morita, 2004). To overcome this inadequacy, several researchers have examined spoken discourse socialization practices by using a qualitative methodology (e.g., Duff, 2002; Kobayashi, 2003, 2006; Morita, 2000, 2004; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). Consequently, students' oral discourse activities in their academic communities take a significant role in their disciplinary socialization process. Since the current study is mainly concerned with the

context of disciplinary socialization through academic spoken discourse practices, the researcher focuses more on studies by Poole (1992), Kim (2006), and Morita (2000, 2004) as they have played an important role in inspiring the researcher to carry out the present study.

Undergraduate academic discourse practices in Iran do not make the participants ready to deal with spoken coursework practices such as group discussion, which is seen as a common coursework practice in a graduate study. Since the participants have been educated in a traditional education system, participating in student-centered group discussion activities was a new experience and certainly a new challenge for them considering the fact that they are non-native students and don't have the language skills of a native speaker. Most studies on discourse socialization of graduate students in academic settings have focused on their writing practices (e.g., Prior, 1998; Spack, 1997) and few have been carried out on spoken discourse practices.

Not until recently have the researchers recognized the significance of spoken coursework practices in academic settings (e.g., Duff, 2010; Duff & Kobayashi, 2010; Kobayashi, 2006; Morita, 2000, 2004; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). Most of these studies have focused on oral presentation of graduate students in their fields and little research (e.g., Ho, 2011) has been done on group-discussions as a spoken discourse activity in graduate courses. To uncover the socialization process of the participants in spoken discourse practices, more research is needed. Specifically, more studies should be done to examine the students' participation in academic coursework practices through small-group discussion practices.

3. The Study

The purpose of this study is to find out how TEFL graduate students socialize in their graduate discourse communities, and how the contexts of their discourse communities shape this process. However, this research does not limit graduate students to the terrain of their linguistic challenges, such as academic writing and oral proficiency. Rather, the main concern of this research is to explore graduate students' engagement in oral discourse practices including small-group discussions and debates after microteachings.

Since the present study is concerned with the academic discourse socialization of NNES students in their natural academic contexts, a qualitative study helps get closer to the viewpoints of the informants. A qualitative research design was also in conformity with the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study and could offer a more comprehensive image of the socialization process (Prior, 1998).

The study investigated the academic discourse socialization process of a number of student teachers in a TEFL graduate program as they were doing their coursework practices. The study covered the courses of Methodology of TESOL and Teaching English Skills, taught by a NNES university lecturer, in the first semester and second semester of an academic year. The data sources for this study included classroom field notes, individual interviews with student teachers and their instructors, small-group discussions, debates after micro-teachings and reflective writings. Each session, the researcher took field notes based on class observations which were used as a source of data. The observation could cover the non-verbal behaviour of students including their silence and backchanneling during small-group discussions which could be a supplement to make sense of oral practices done by the participants. Besides, other aspects of the courses were examined such as classroom management as well as teaching strategies of the instructor and student teachers' interest and reactions towards practices, their classmates and their teacher.

The researcher conducted three semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with the participants in the study. The first interview was conducted after the pilot study, focusing on previous learning and teaching beliefs. The second and third interviews which were carried out at the end of each semester focused on how they underwent discourse socialization and how their professional knowledge and beliefs were affected by coursework practices.

As for the group discussions, the instructor over the two courses provided the students with questions in connection with the assigned readings as well as pedagogical issues and challenges of EFL teachers and learners. Small-group discussions which followed the oral presentation were the main discourse practices where students were engaged. By providing the questions on pedagogical issues and challenges, the instructor encouraged student interactions in small groups. The whole process seemed to help the students initiate the discussions and was a motivation for interaction. To answer some questions, they were supposed to express their viewpoints on the issues mentioned in the reading texts and use their own personal practical knowledge. The small group discussions were audio-recorded and then transcribed for further analysis.

The student teachers were also required to do microteaching sessions in the second semester over the first academic year of their graduate programs and at the same time they had to start their teaching internship. The microteaching sessions were held for ten sessions and the student teachers were required to teach twice during

the practicum course. Each time, they were supposed to focus on a skill and choose one or two pages from a multi-skill English textbook series to teach to their peers. Their peers took the role of students to maintain interaction during each microteaching which took 15 to 20 minutes. Meanwhile, they could observe and take note during the teaching time for more reflective discussions after each micro-teaching. The supervisor didn't interfere during the teachings and gave comments during reflective discussions after the teachings. The interactions of the focal participants were audio-recorded and then matched with the field notes to make sense of them.

4. Findings and Discussion

The reciprocal interactions and dynamic cooperative learning in a warmer and rather informal atmosphere were the first things to be noticed about the group discussions. The primary purpose of the instructor for selecting such an educational approach was encouraging a less threatening atmosphere and more professional interactions. The purpose of group discussions as stated by the instructor were to make students more familiar with probable pedagogical challenges and come up with solutions suitable for their local EFL setting. The topic for small-group discussions were problem-solving tasks based on contingent pedagogical challenges faced by EFL teachers in their local context and the student teachers were supposed to devise practical solutions through analysing and discussing the issue in small-groups.

The student teachers also expressed more satisfaction about the way their learning practices was carried out. Their social relationship increased over the period as the people in the group shared more personal experiences and even sentimental attitudes towards their teaching experiences and contexts. The student teachers also reported how their stress level was alleviated gradually and they established trust over the subsequent sessions:

I really feel I have changed. I feel more confident now. You know we don't have enough opportunities to talk. I feel I have less stress now. Maybe, because I think not many people pay attention to what I say and check my grammar or vocabulary.

The small group discussions also helped students participate more actively in their learning process. They were no more passive recipients of information, but they were analyzing, intertextualizing, and most importantly making inferences during the activity:

We can conclude that such strategies can help students...

As we can all see the techniques which we can use to...

These small-group discussions provided more opportunities for the student teachers to share their own experiences including their prior learning and teaching activities with their peers. They could actively participate in professional practices and contribute intellectually in discussions to come up with solutions to the pedagogical challenges through sharing their own personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). As their instructor stated, it was an opportunity for them to reconstruct their professional identity and feel more committed to their professional community:

This is a very good opportunity for the students to discuss topics connected with their own profession. Many of them have teaching experiences, so it can be seen as a chance for them to share what they know. It can help them build new ways of thinking and looking at the pedagogical issues. They support the learning of others. Such opportunities, I think, can increase their professional knowledge, too.

Establishing more substantial professional connections with colleagues was one of the aims achieved through such a collegial atmosphere where they challenged the ideas of their colleagues to formulate new solutions to probable pedagogical challenges in their EFL settings. The following excerpt from a group discussion shows how their reciprocal interactions led to innovative pedagogical suggestions to improve speaking fluency:

I make the students learn some filler to fill their pauses when they speak. For example, they use fillers such as 'as you may know', 'let me think', 'as far as I am concerned', 'There are also fillers which are longer, for example, 'we must see the different angles of the issue, so we can see it through the viewpoint of a ...' However, they should know where to use them. It is a very good way to avoid long pauses, especially when you have no idea. It can sometimes help and make you start. At least, these long fillers can be seen as a start or even when you don't know how to continue.

Contributing innovative ideas was more likely to result in more professional learning. The idiosyncratic strategies proposed by the learners were meant to improve the pedagogical practices and deal with challenges posed by the instructor as stated by Glazer and Hannafin (2006, p. 161), "reciprocal interactions, in the context of a supportive community of practice, are needed to stimulate professional learning opportunities and overcome

professional development barriers". Dialogical interactions could be seen as active participation in the discourse community of practice (Wenger, 1998) as the student teachers were trying to achieve the common purpose of their EFL discourse community, which was contributing to the common pedagogical issues which were more likely to influence learning English as a foreign language in their settings.

Compared to the whole class discussions where a specific number of the students dominate the whole discussions and others remain rather silent, the small group discussions made all the students become involved in the discussions. In classrooms as discourse communities, students who exercised their agency could negotiate their legitimate position and shape their learning process much better than those who preferred to outside the margin. Based on the field-noted observations over the first weeks of the semester, only a few students tried to make a full adjustment to the oral practices in the classroom community and others preferred to act as attentive listeners in the periphery, who occasionally expressed their opinions on pedagogical issues relevant to their learning and teaching experiences.

The way they exercised their agency involved constant changes depending on the issues under discussion, the amount of enthusiasm expressed by the group members and their own mood. Some of the participants behaved like outsiders who preferred to remain at the margin. Those who could exercise their personal agency were able to experience some transformations in their beliefs and identities and even developed critical reflections on their own practices. Showing resistance to classroom discussions as the instructor said was likely to result from their lack of self-efficacy in expressing their beliefs and experiences in English:

Their English language problems seem to be the main reasons why some of the students were reluctant to participate more in interactions. Also they may think their ideas may not be useful or to the point. They sometimes think they may say something which may not be relevant or professional.

To support or justify their claims during the discussions, the participants made frequent associations between a variety of theoretical concepts in the assigned reading materials and their own learning or teaching experiences. Making intertextual connections between prior language learning and teaching experiences can be considered as another facet of discourse socialization process. The findings in this study are in line with other studies indicating that intertextuality is part of the socialization process in which knowledge and experience inform each other resulting in more enculturation (Zappa-Hollman, 2007). Throughout the process, the participant teachers were involved in different patterns of engagement with their assigned texts, trying to find a common ground between the ideas in the texts and their own experiences of learning and teaching a foreign language:

Highlighting the lexical collocations, as the text says, is very effective. It can get the attention and you know it raises the consciousness of the learners. I sometimes want the students to circle the words that collocate. Learning these combinations can affect their speaking or writing abilities.

The findings in this study can be assumed to be in line with other studies indicating that intertextuality and inter-contextuality are part of socialization process in which knowledge and experience inform each other resulting in more enculturation. As Duff (2010) puts it, academic discourse socialization "is often multimodal, multilingual, and highly intertextual as well" (p. 169).

Group discussions promoted their development of intellectual and professional abilities as they shared, analysed, and synthesized one another's language learning and teaching experiences. The student teachers also made inter-contextual connections between their own teaching experiences in various teaching settings and their academic texts:

One of the ways to improve the speaking fluency of the Adult EFL learners is using other skills. It means you can use other skills to improve the fluency of your students. For example, a story is divided into some segments and then you want others to ask questions to complete the story. It is very useful. Once I wanted my students to guess the end of a story. It was also interesting. I do it sometimes to help my students use their minds to imagine in English.

Apart from their instructors as a scaffolding source, the student teachers also sought assistance from more experienced peers so that they could better interpret their assigned disciplinary materials and the task at hand. Learning from more competent peers in a joint activity could create a construction zone Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1989) through which learning occurred through collaboration or in Vygotskian terms, through zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). The instructor was no longer a transmitter of information. He didn't act as a problem solver or an arbitrator when tension rises, but worked as a coordinator of class practices and facilitator of their learning. Over time, the instructor's role faded gradually and limited to triggering prompts by the instructor to initiate peer interaction and even scaffolding. The instructor's underlying philosophy of

social construction of learning could be easily recognized in the way he intentionally acted as the facilitator of interaction. As the instructor explicitly mentioned in an interview, the student teacher gradually took over the whole process of understanding the task and reaching a mutual adjustment of their ideas.

According to Exley and Dennick (2004), the role of the teacher in small-group discussions changes, from being that of “information giver to being one of facilitator and guide”. The role of the students also changes from “being one who is taught, to one who learns and helps their colleagues to learn (p. 8)”. Collaborative learning as Richards and Farrell (2005), state can provide scaffolding opportunities for peer teachers and improve their procedural knowledge to address the pedagogical challenges and issues. The interactions to do the pedagogical tasks which intrigued scaffolding in small-group discussion group acting as collaborative learning teams.

Self-initiated scaffolding of peers was more common in the second semester’s small group discussions as the student teachers had learnt to self-regulate the way they interacted in small learning groups and also established closer social relationships with their classmates. Such view of scaffolding can draw from Vygotsky’s (1978) ZPD, the learner’s zone of proximal development and learning in social contexts. As King (1998) suggests, the scaffolding is not only the appropriation of knowledge but it is also internalization of the whole process involved in doing a task. Negotiation and appropriation of various ideas helped learners socialize more into the underlying values and practices of TESOL discourse community and to deal with more specific challenges in their EFL discourse community. This is to some extent in line with the definition provided by Duff (2010) concerning successful programs initiating newcomers into the disciplinary culture of academic discourse communities:

Those who are most successful not only display, but also make explicit, the values and practices implicit in the culture and provide novices with the language, skills, support, and opportunities they need to participate with growing competence in the new culture and its core activities (Duff, 2010, p. 176).

The student teachers displayed more tendencies towards higher-order thinking skills by ascending Bloom’s Taxonomy (Elliott, 1993). This tendency also increased their opportunities to get engaged in life-long learning. Likewise, other researchers also prefer instructional strategies like promoting debates among learners to traditional-oriented teaching approaches in regard to their impact on encouraging and enhancing higher-order thinking skills.

The debates after the micro-teaching lessons also resulted in acquiring oral communication skills. The debates were a means of refining and reinforcing oral communication skills. During the debates after the microteaching lessons, the students learned how to enter a debate and how to talk professionally to defend their ideas. Even when the debates were sometimes heated, the students learned how to dominate a debate or settle the arguments. Such debates in some cases sparked off more disciplinary talk which finally made the student teachers more rational and sometimes persuasive in supporting their reasons for their teaching beliefs and practices:

When they have an argument about the reasons for their teaching practices, you can realize how they are determined to win the argument. I sometimes interfere to get them more involved in the arguments. This makes them more motivated and provokes more professional discussion.

There were factors facilitating or hindering the socialization process of the participants. Exercising agency was the most important factor in their engagement in the socialization process. Those who showed more willingness to participate due to either their positive attitude towards the practices or their personality type, were more passionate about involvement in coursework practices while others preferred silence or backchanneling. The second factor which possibly affected their socialization process was their prior academic socialization. Since their traditional educational background did not prepare them for collaborative learning, the participants were unprepared to take part in the practices at the beginning of the course practices. Making incoherent discussions and having difficulty initiating the discussions were among the problems of the new experiences for the participants. However, their engagement in the practices over the period familiarized them with the discourse practices so that they showed more interest to take part in the discussions over the period. Little departmental support in the graduate programme was an important reason why the participant did not show much tendency towards participating in writing for publication or presenting at conferences. As there was no writing support centre, the participants were to a large extent unfamiliar with disciplinary practices beyond their local EFL community except for reading disciplinary text.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Through undergoing a collaborative learning process, the participants of the study were no longer passive recipients but they were actively engaged in their coursework practices which were aligned with their socialization into their discourse community conventions and practices. Through sharing their personal practical

experiences, analysing assigned texts and intertextualizing between their own experiences and the content of the assigned texts, the participants tried to find answers to the questions on teaching issues and contingent pedagogical challenges in their EFL context. Besides, engagement with assigned texts also made the participants familiar with the current issues in TESOL.

During the group interactions, the participants tried to scaffold the learning process of their peers. The agency of the participants were triggered by the non-threatening atmosphere where the instructor's role faded gradually throughout the process and the participants established trust so that they could share their own experiences more freely resulting in more engagement and generating more passion about finding solutions to probable pedagogical challenges in their EFL context. The collaborative discussions provided a social network where the participants could actively engage in the disciplinary practices of their classroom as a discourse community. Having dealt with a wide range of questions concerned with contingent pedagogical issues and challenges, the participants' awareness as for the teaching challenges in their EFL contexts were raised. The reflective writings particularly made them think independently about the probable challenges. These opportunities were likely to prepare the participants to face various settings and devise resilient strategies to deal with them.

The group discussions as well as the discussions after microteachings resulted in improving communication skills. The participants learned how to initiate a discussion, how to defend their ideas or settle an argument. The higher thinking skills of the participants such as analysing, synthesizing disciplinary concepts and evaluating them also showed improvement both in their oral and written texts.

Opportunities for collegial interaction can contribute to the formation of a community of learners among EFL teachers. As teachers get involved in reflective practices, they establish a support network and scaffold peer learning to develop their knowledge base that informs their teaching challenges. For EFL teachers, this learning community and the support it provides are of great significance as it helps them to reconsider their pedagogical beliefs and practices.

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