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Valuing the local within the global: A discourse analysis of professional development in a U.S.-Kurdish transnational university partnership

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Valuing the Local Within the Global: A Discourse Analysis of Professional Development in a U.S.-Kurdish Transnational University Partnership

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Abstract

In an effort to support higher education in developing countries, partnerships between U.S. and international universities have surged, raising questions concerning the social equity of such linkages. Using a New Literacy Studies approach to discourse analysis, online transcripts from one such university partnership were analyzed to determine how language was used to negotiate a more equitable partnership through the adaptation of the social context of professional development activities. Discourse analysis of three relevant linguistic markers in the data suggests that cultural perspectives on professional development influenced the language choices made by university partners, reshaping the power structure toward greater social equity, and aiding in the completion of joint professional development goals. Findings underscore the importance of drawing on local knowledges in planning for and conducting transnational university partnerships.

Keywords: transnational university partnerships, discourse analysis, professional development, local knowledge

Introduction

Partnerships between universities in the West and the developing world have surged in recent years, based on assertions that such linkages have the potential to improve the quality of higher education in developing nations (Haq, 2012; Snodgrass et al., 2021; Sutton & Obst, 2011; Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). While proponents of transnational university partnerships extol the benefits of internationalizing higher education, concerns have been raised regarding the appropriateness of wholesale exportation of Western knowledge (Altbach, 2004; Altbach et al., 2009; Bizzell, 1992; Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009; Fairclough, 2006; Gee et al., 2018; Miller-Idress & Hanauer, 2011). Of particular concern is the use of these partnerships as a vehicle for disseminating U.S. perspectives on higher education, as this perspective tends to overlook the value of local knowledge in developing countries, diminishing

the possibility for meaningful interaction, and limiting pluralistic modes of thinking (Canagarajah, 2002; Donahue, 2009).

Resonant with these concerns, this study examined two years of online transcripts from one transnational university partnership to determine how culturally diverse faculty partners used language and what difference this made in negotiating social equity in the pursuit of mutual professional development goals. An examination of transcript data underscores the importance of local knowledge in planning for and conducting transnational university partnerships.

Background on the Partnership and the Study

The partnership examined in this study is one of several university linkages established between U.S. and Iraqi universities following the fall of the Baathist regime. Funded by grants from the U.S. State Department and overseen by the funding agency FHI 360, the partnership objectives were to improve the academic competitiveness of Iraqi universities and create opportunities for transnational collaboration and research and foster stability in the region. Having secured one of the grants, a team of faculty and doctoral students from a large midwestern university were invited to participate. The U.S. participants were then paired with faculty from a leading university in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The involvement of the U.S. partners' School of Education arose from meetings with leadership from the Kurdish university's College of English. Steered by the Kurdish department chair, several professional development goals were jointly crafted with the intent of updating approaches to content and pedagogy in the English literature and language programs. These goals were driven, in large part, by a 30-year gap in access to quality higher education, as the Kurds had been singled out for oppression under Baathist rule. After the regime's fall, a U.N.-protected autonomous region was established for Iraqi Kurds, allowing thousands to resettle in Northern Iraq. This laid the foundation for cultural cohesiveness and language reclamation, building a sense of national sovereignty. This climate of progress and stability was a relatively new feature for academics. However, as a result of the region's turbulent past, classroom textbooks were decades out of date, instructors lacked access to ongoing professional development and scholarship, and Internet access was intermittent and undependable.

Based on this reality, Kurdish leadership focused on revising English literature curricula by adding multi-cultural contemporary works to their study of classical and Shakespearean texts. Additionally, the partners wanted to incorporate more current uses of technology into their pedagogy, including social media and online asynchronous discussion forums. The final goal sought to implement student-centered pedagogies, emphasizing teacher facilitation and social learning to enrich teacher-centered lectures.

Utilizing the U.S. university's Blackboard infrastructure, monthly online discussions were set up to accomplish the goals of the partnership. To provide a shared focal point for the online discussions, the U.S. partners established a reading list, focusing on the history, theories, and instructional practices stemming from literacy studies. Based on this format, monthly discussions were conducted between the U.S. and Kurdish university participants.

In preparing for the partnership, a review of relevant research studies was conducted by the U.S. partners, revealing that little scholarship existed regarding higher education in Iraq; almost no studies were found addressing the Kurdish context, particularly regarding faculty partnerships and professional development (Lawrence, 2008; Mazawi & Sultana, 2010; Ninnes & Hellsten, 2005; Suárez-Orozco, 2007). This lack underscores the importance of this study, as it focuses on a region often discussed but little understood. To better understand how academics from differing cultures use language to negotiate equity, discourse analysis (Gee, 2011) was employed to address the following research question: How do university partners use language to negotiate social power in the context of transnational professional development? Furthermore, the study sought to understand what, if any, difference these negotiations made in achieving the goals of the partnership. Analysis of the data suggests that choices in language use among U.S. and Kurdish participants negotiated a more equitable partnership by adapting the social context of the professional development activity, making it more "socially recognizable and culturally normed" (Gee, 2010, p 17). Findings from this examination inform understandings on the influence of language use on social power as well as the role local knowledge plays in developing more equitable university partnerships.

Literature on Social Negotiation in Transnational Partnerships

As this study sought to understand how culturally diverse groups of faculty use language to negotiate social equity with transnational partners, the literature review, likewise, focused on aspects of influence and equity in previous partnerships. While studies on this topic are limited, findings from this review do inform understanding of the interplay between social power and local knowledge in transnational partnerships, revealing that faculty partners are greatly influenced by the broader discourse of their own academic institutions. In contrast, the value institutions place on the local knowledge of partner universities is often diminished.

Influence of Home Universities on Partnership Success

Studies examining transnational partnerships found that the influence of the participants' university was the most salient factor in partnership success, even among smaller groups (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2011; Canto & Hannah, 2001; Palvetzian, 2005; Pfotenhauer et al., 2013; Tedrow & Mabokela, 2007). In one study of experienced international university partners, faculty commitment to the home university's mission was asserted as the most influential factor in the partnership, exerting influence on the constituent divisions, departments, and linkages under the university's umbrella (Palvetzian, 2005). Though the authors noted the importance of faculty interest in sustaining partnerships, the dominant social context of the partners' academic institution was established as the driving force behind successful international academic collaboration.

Similar findings were reflected in a study of internationalization involving the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and educational institutions in Portugal (Pfotenhauer et al., 2013). The authors asserted the most essential factor for the long-term sustainability of faculty partnerships was a commitment by the partners' academic institutions. This finding resonated with another qualitative case study, conducted among senior directors from four universities in the United Kingdom. (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2011). Their findings from 24 interviews suggested that successful negotiations of social power must occur between the broader academic institutions of the partner universities as they negotiate responsibilities and accountability (2011).

One study did contradict assertions that social influence from academic institutions was most influential on individual participation in transnational partnerships (Wilson, 2012). An examination of a U.S.-East African university partnership found that the power exerted by individuals was most influential on the success of transnational partnerships. As opposed to the influence of identity affiliation with home universities, faculty participation stemmed from the promise of personal benefits, such as promotion, increased salary, and reduced workload. Furthermore, participants used language to contest authority as a means of shaping the power structures within the discourse community. Though seemingly contradictory, these findings align with Gee's (1990) theoretical stance, viewing social power as fluid, at once influencing and being influenced by the individuals within the group.

Perceptions of Local Knowledge as a Valuable Resource

The salience of local knowledges to the success of transnational linkages was addressed in the study of one multinational university partnership (Tedrow & Mabokela, 2007). In examining the motivators and obstacles to participation among several academic institutions from the West and South Africa, the study asserted that weak communication and a lack of cultural understanding among leadership produced individual resistance from the participants (Tedrow & Mabokela, 2007). Conflicting cultural contexts between the universities were highlighted as a hindrance to communication, supporting the importance of local knowledge as a valuable resource in transnational university partnerships.

Another study addressed the danger of disregarding local knowledge (Canto & Hannah, 2001). In a case study involving a partnership between universities from the United Kingdom and Brazil, an application of applied linguistics found that partners from the United Kingdom exerted dominance over their Brazilian partners by establishing the parameters for participation, including the establishment of English as the central language of the partnership. Brazilian participants were further subordinated by the absence of opportunities to teach and supervise students in the United Kingdom, whereas British partners were allowed to engage in student supervision activities in Brazil (2001). Although the authors considered the linkage productive, the inequity built into the foundations of the partnership limited participation and ignored contributions of local knowledge from the Brazilian faculty (2001).

In sum, studies on transnational university partnerships assert the influence of the participants' home academic institutions in dictating both how their faculty interacts with international partners and what knowledge they value in relation to professional development. This provides significant context for the current study, as the U.S. and Kurdish university partners were influenced by the context of their home university's institutional commitments and priorities, while acknowledging the value of their partners' local knowledge. These factors required significant negotiation in pursuit of their jointly constructed professional development goals.

Theoretical Framework

New Literacy Studies as Theoretical Lens

The findings from the studies above align with the tenets of New Literacy Studies, the theoretical lens used for this study. Several studies reported the dominance of institutional power on faculty

identity (Ayoubi & Massoud, 2011; Palvetzian, 2005; Pfotenhauer et al., 2013), corresponding with the influence of discursive social power on the individual, as outlined in New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1990). Canto and Hannah's (2001) findings also echo the tenets of New Literacy Studies, in which proficiency in the primary use of language enhances status in the group (Gee, 1990). Wilson's (2012) findings also relate to this theory, as social power is viewed as fluid in nature, at once influencing and being influenced by the social group.

New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1990) explores the numerous social contexts people occupy, as well as how language is used within these contexts and for what purposes. Furthermore, the theory emphasizes a multileveled understanding of literacy, where all identities are socially situated and, as such, are always influenced by the social groups, or discourses, they occupy (Gee, 1990).

In New Literacy Studies, the term discourse is differentiated into micro- and macro-structural aspects of language. Micro-structural aspects of discourse include grammar and word combinations, identified with a lowercase *d*; macro-structural aspects, referred to as big *D* Discourse, refer to the larger social contexts that shape our individual identities and use of language:

> A Discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language…thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network," or to signal …a socially meaningful role. (Gee, 1990, p. 131)

According to big *D* Discourse, all aspects of our identities are socially influenced, limiting space for the performances of divergent individual identities. The Discourses we inhabit influence the way we speak, the language we use, and the way we respond to others within the discourse community (Colyar & Stich, 2011; Gee, 2011).

Big *D* Discourses are further separated into primary and secondary types, emphasizing proficiency with secondary Discourses as most vital in establishing identity and gaining insider status (Gee, 1990). Though the theory acknowledges the importance of the primary Discourse we acquire from our home culture, the theory also asserts that the social power of the multiple secondary Discourses we inhabit throughout our lives shapes much of our individual identity (Gee, 1990). Since proficiency in secondary Discourses determines status within the group (Gee, 1990), a power imbalance often results, favoring those who are native to the dominant Discourse and marginalizing the less proficient. The theory does contend, however, that dominant secondary Discourses can be reshaped by those occupying marginalized Discourses, although mastery of the secondary Discourse is required (Gee, 1990).

The tenets of New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1990) aligned closely with certain realities in the U.S.-Kurdish university partnership. Since the online discussions were conducted in English, the Kurdish partners, though fluent in English as a second language, were required to occupy a non-dominant secondary Discourse. Beyond language proficiency, Kurdish partners were further marginalized by the secondary Discourse of professional development. Since the U.S. partners established the parameters of the online discourse community, expectations for what counts as professional development were initially U.S. dominant. However, efforts within the partnership to seek social equity are consistent with Gee's (1990) call to use language to reshape unequal power structures in secondary Discourses. Given these parallels, Gee's (2011) approach to discourse

analysis, drawn from the sociocultural foundations of New Literacy Studies, provides a relevant theoretical base for analyzing the data.

Discourse Analysis as Research Methodology

Discourse analysis was chosen as the methodology for this study to examine the interplay of social power in language use. Based on Gee's (2011) sociocultural understanding of literacy, this method proved useful in interpreting the influence of language on the negotiation of social equity within the U.S.-Kurdish partnership. As this framework examines broad applications of language to determine the influence of social power, it is a relevant approach given the study's scale and cultural dynamics (Gee, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Data were collected by separating monthly discussion threads into distinct clause length idea units, or lines, and related line groupings, or stanzas (Gee, 2011). Data within the stanzas was then analyzed for evidence of the linguistic markers of register, inclusive and exclusive *we,* and the use of questions.

These three linguistic markers were chosen for their utility in uncovering social power within the online discourse community. As formality in language use has been recognized as an indicator of social power in linguistic exchanges (Reyes, 2010; Joos, 1967), register was chosen as a marker. Clusivity, or the "phenomenon of inclusive-exclusive distinction" (Filimonova, 2005, p. 9) in the use of first-person plural pronouns was also chosen, as the use of *we* determines the degree of solidarity and resistance present between speakers, as in the examples *We have to stick together* or *We don't agree with you* (Filimonova, 2005). The presence of questioning is also relevant to studies of social power, identified as a means of overt control in institutional discourses, constraining the participation of less powerful participants (Fairclough, 1989). Having identified both U.S. and Kurdish use of the markers in the transcripts, their uses were charted into sub-categories relevant to each marker.

The three markers were next examined through the conceptual tool of activity (Gee, 2011), revealing negotiations of social power between the U.S. and Kurdish university partners. The activity building task, one of 14 possible conceptual analysis tools used in Discourse analysis, was employed to analyze the linguistic markers in the data, as it considers how language is used to create a "sequence of actions" that carry out a "socially recognizable and institutionally or culturally normed endeavor" (Gee, 2010, p. 17). The activities analysis tool asks, "What ritualized activity is this piece of language being used to enact?" (Gee, 2010, p. 18).

Analysis of the linguistic markers suggests that local knowledges influenced the language choices made by individual participants within the online discourse community, reshaping the power structure in the university partnership. This assertion aligns with findings from the literature review and echoes the theoretical stance that social contexts shape our individual identities and use of language, while allowing for the reshaping of secondary Discourses by marginalized participants (Gee, 1990).

Participants in the Study

Data for the study was collected from two years of online discussion forum transcripts. Participants for the study were selected purposefully (Hatch, 2002), based on their involvement in the

university partnership. The two U.S. participants included Candice, a tenured faculty member in the department of literacy, and Todd, a doctoral student. The Kurdish participants were all professors in the English literature department of the partner university. Salam, the head of the English literature department, acted as gatekeeper in the online discourse community, regulating the participation of his colleagues. The other participants were professors of English literature and drama, including Muqdad, a regular contributor, Asan, a professor of literary criticism and one of the most frequent contributors, Nassan, a master's level English literature instructor who posted intermittently, and Hozan, a literature professor in the evening college. It should be noted that the gender of the Kurdish participants was somewhat homogenous. While Tanya and Hana were the only female Kurdish professors who participated, Tanya's participation was limited, and Hana dropped out due to family issues.

Findings From Discourse Analysis

The findings from the Discourse analysis are organized deductively below, first presenting warrants drawn from the use of each linguistic marker, followed by a description of the evidence of regular marker usage and significant anomalies in the data. An analysis based solely on the frequency of linguistic marker usage infers that U.S. participants used language to control the partnership. However, deeper analysis of anomalies in the data revealed that the intersection of local knowledges between U.S. and Kurdish participants influenced the use of language within the online discussion group, reshaping the power structure toward greater equity and facilitating progress toward collaborative professional development goals.

Although the U.S. partners initially established the boundaries for the group, differing uses of register, clusivity, and questioning by the Kurds established greater levels of formality, more exclusive cultural context, and heightened resistance to questioning than those established by the U.S. participants, resulting in a more blended, equitable, and adaptable partnership. Examples drawn from the data are presented below in their raw form. Specific data pertinent to the analysis of each marker will be emphasized in bold face print.
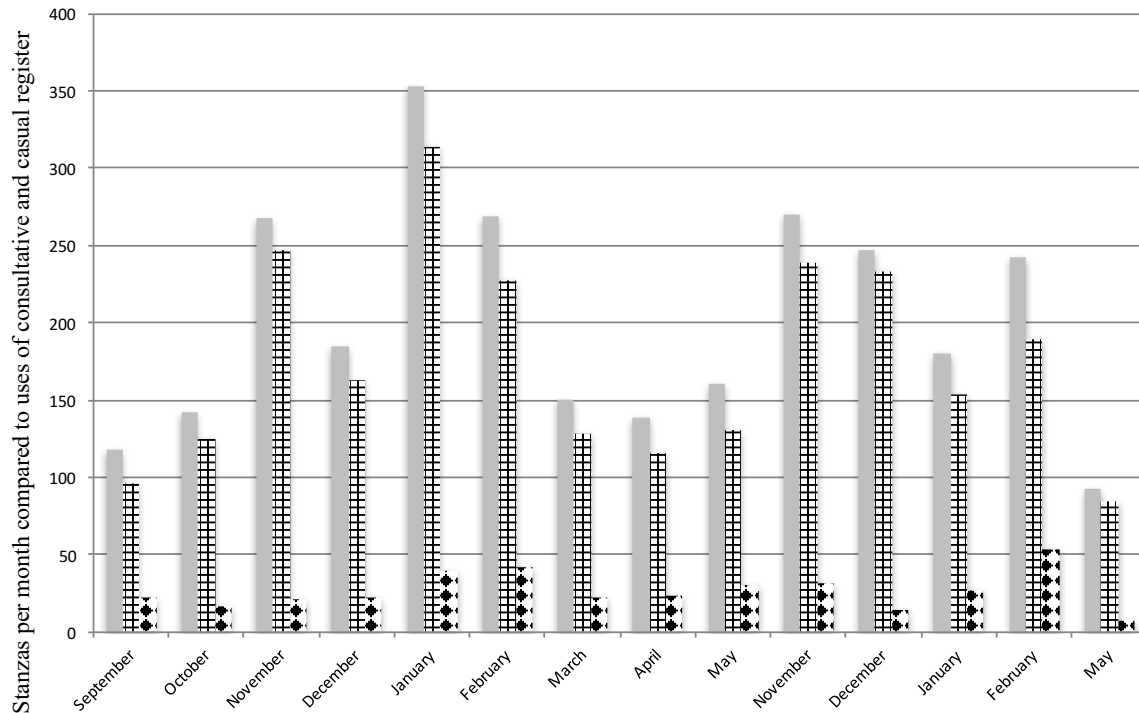
Cultural Contrasts in the Use of Register

Although five levels of register have been identified (Joos, 1967), register in the partnership was limited to the casual and the consultative levels. The casual register, marked by informality common to insiders in a social group was rarely used. Conversely, the consultative register was most dominant, typical among relative strangers who may speak a common language but do not share a personal stock of information, (Joos, 1967).

Analysis of the data revealed an overwhelmingly consultative register. Of the 2814 total stanzas analyzed in the data, 2448 stanzas reflected use of consultative register among both U.S and Kurdish participants. Figure 1 shows that Kurdish participants used casual register less than half as much as the U.S. participants over the two-year period, as only 366 stanzas reflected more informal casual register among the Kurdish faculty. This equates to a 5.2% usage of casual register among Kurdish participants across all 2814 stanzas, illustrated in Figure 2.
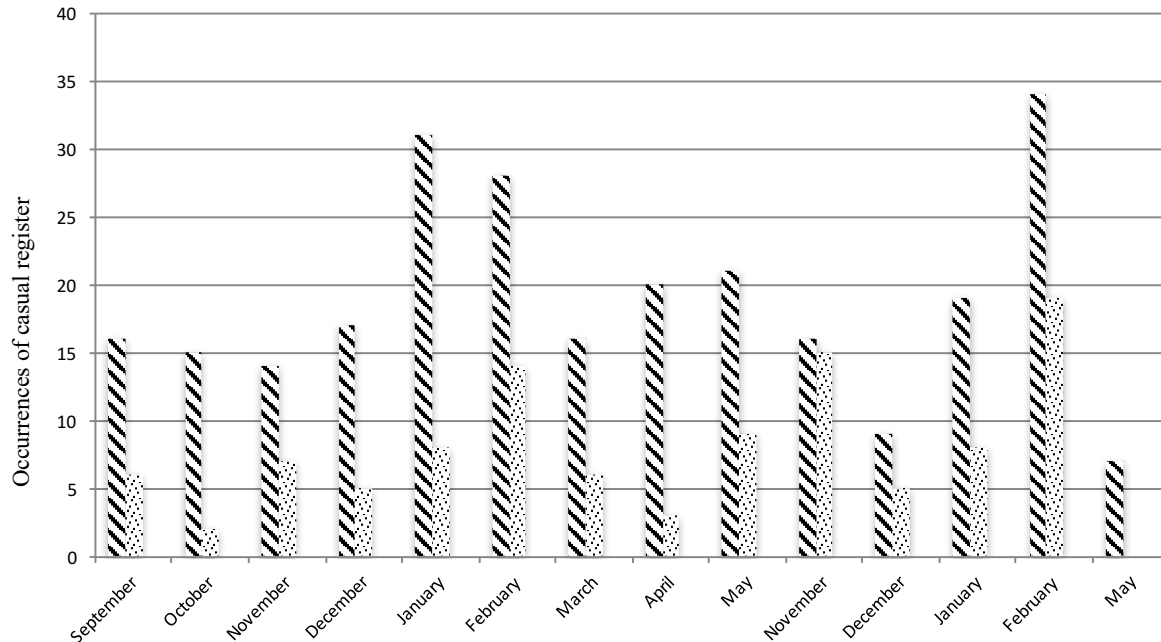
Figure 1. Monthly Use of Consultative and Casual Register

Note. Solid Grey = Total number of stanzas for month; Black Grid = Total monthly number of consultative stanzas**;** Black Diamonds = Total monthly number of casual stanzas

Figure 2. Monthly Use of Casual Register by U.S. and Kurdish Partners

Note. Black Stripes = Monthly uses of casual register by U.S.; Black Dots = Monthly uses of casual register by Kurdish

Although the use of consultative register was dominant, the data reflects significant spikes in the use of casual register among Kurdish participants in February and November. In fact, shifts from

consultative to casual tripled in those months among Kurdish faculty. This increase in casual register accompanied attempts to build rapport and share frustrations.

Responding to a chapter describing the rereading approach for improving reading comprehension (Blau, 2003), the February discussion ignited a much stronger use of casual register among Kurdish participants, highlighting their frustrations with the difficulty of the assigned reading. As Muqdad noted,

> 5a For the second chapter,
> > 5b it is truly unfortunate that *I could not understand it.*

Hana echoed Muqdad, writing,
> 16b Frankly speaking, *I didn't understand this chapter too,*
> > 16c *maybe I hadn't enough time* to read it carefully.

This use of casual register differed from the U.S. participants, who primarily used the casual register at the beginnings and endings of posts to acknowledge and praise participation. A good example of this can be found in Candice's reply to Salam:

> 28a *It's a real pleasure to be in conversation with such fine teachers ...*
> > 28b *I learn something with every exchange.*

Another spike in casual register within Kurdish faculty occurred in November. As before, U.S. shifts from consultative to casual register in November were used to welcome, praise, and empathize with the posts of Kurdish participants. However, shifts from consultative to casual by Kurdish participants focused on sharing their frustrations with teaching. Noting the weak preparation and participation of his students, Hozan wrote,

> 2d I *feel disappointed and work in vain...*

This frustration with student effort was shared by Muqdad, who wrote,
> 11d Many people I encounter
> > 11e whether in my classes or in other circles
> > 11f aim at obtaining a degree *even though they do not earn it.*

Beyond the university, other frustrations were evident in November. Unreliable access to Internet programs prompted the department head Salam to write,

> 2a I don't know what is happening tonight.
> > 2b *It is been a crazy time for me.*
> > 2c I have been trying for four hours now to post a thread.
> > 2d I have no problem with e-mailing or Facebook, but *this [Blackboard] Bb*
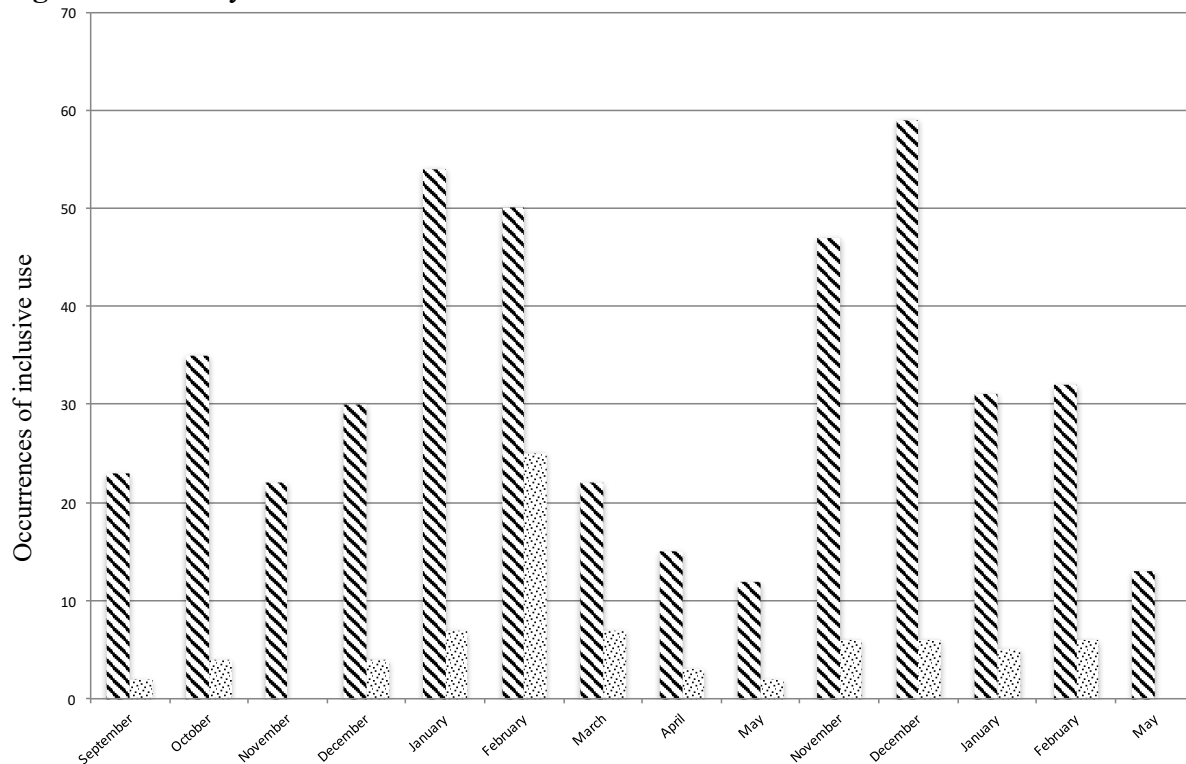> > 2e *Has almost killed me.*

Analysis suggests that although consultative register was most dominant throughout the two-year partnership, rare uses of casual register were used to build rapport and share frustrations. This seems to indicate that the Kurdish faculty held a more formal perception of professional development, perhaps drawn from the British educational system established in Iraq during colonialism and still in place. This infers that the online discussions made little progress in leveling the inherent power structures in the partnership. However, further examination of the linguistic markers of clusivity and questioning complicates this assumption.

Professional Distance in Kurdish Clusivity

Analysis of the uses of the first-person plural pronoun *we* and its possessive forms, *us* and *our* revealed distinct differences regarding participation. The inclusive use of *we* was far more prevalent among U.S. participants, while Kurdish participants made more use of exclusive *we*. As shown in Figure 3, U.S. participants used the inclusive form of *we* 82% more than their Kurdish partners, totaling 445 uses by the U.S. partners as compared to 79 uses by the Kurds.

Figure 3. Monthly Use of Inclusive *We*

Note. Black Stripes = Monthly uses of inclusive we by U.S. faculty; Black Dots = Monthly uses of inclusive we by Kurdish faculty

The high percentage of inclusive *we* usage by the U.S. partners was primarily due to Candice's attempts to engage the Kurdish faculty. Although Todd, the other U.S. participant, occasionally used forms of inclusive *we,* Candice's usage far outnumbered her U.S. colleague. Still, across the 14 monthly discussions, U.S. participants recorded an average of 32 uses of inclusive *we,* compared to an average of 6 monthly uses of inclusive *we* by Kurdish faculty.

Though the use of inclusive *we* by U.S. participants outnumbered Kurdish use, a significant spike occurred in February of the first year. Although rare among Kurdish faculty, occurrences of inclusive *we* peaked at 25 during the February 2011 discussion. This was six times more than the monthly average of 4 in all other months. An examination of the content of that month's discussion sheds light on the possible cause of the usage spike.
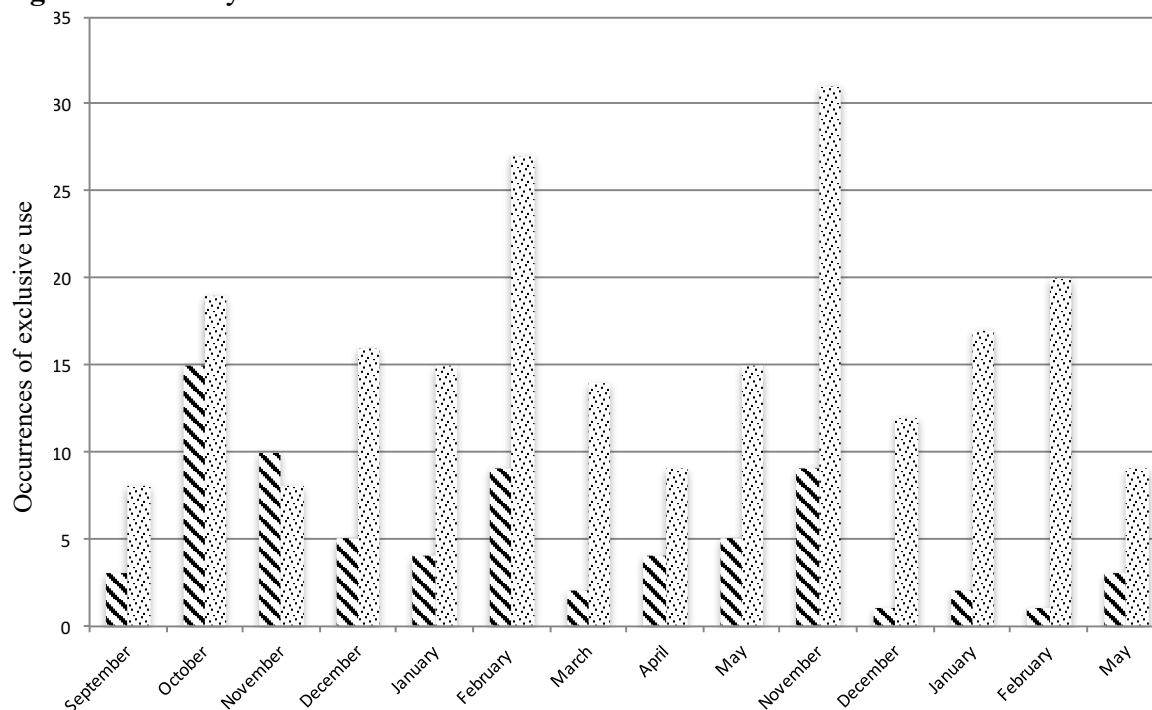
As mentioned in the register analysis, the February discussion centered on Blau's (2003) rereading strategy as a means of improving student comprehension. The use of inclusive *we* in Kurdish participant responses established solidarity with the experience of their U.S. partners:

49a One thing that bothers me is that
      49b *we teachers seldom admit shortcoming…*
      50d There are teachers and teachers, as we know,
      50e yet *we need to examine our different techniques and tactics…*
52a *… we may know a lot of mechanisms and strategies for teaching…*
      52b but the real question is which one is practicable…

Although participation was generally high in the February discussion, it was the emphasis on the common experience of university professors that drove the spike in inclusive language among the Kurdish faculty.

Although U.S. participants made frequent use of inclusive *we,* Kurdish participants made extensive use of exclusive forms of *we,* emphasizing the uniqueness of their local context. Marker analysis reveals that the Kurds used the exclusive form of *we* 68% more than the U.S. participants over the two-year period (See Figure 4).

Figure 4. Monthly Use of Exclusive *We*

Note. Black Stripes = Monthly uses of exclusive we by U.S. faculty; Black Dots = Monthly uses of exclusive we by Kurdish faculty

In 13 of the 14 discussions, the Kurdish use of exclusive *we* exceeded use by the U.S. partners. Excluding the peak months of February and November 2011, the Kurds used exclusive *we* 14 times per month on average. In contrast, the average use of exclusive *we* by U.S. participants was five per month, one third as much as the Kurdish average.

Although usage of exclusive *we* dropped in Year 2 among U.S. participants, Kurdish usage increased. In fact, after relatively balanced usage in the first three months, Kurdish participants used exclusive *we* 56% as much as U.S. participants in Year 1 and jumped to 82% as much in Year

2. As shown in Figure 4, from December of the first year to May of the second, the Kurds used the exclusive *we* at least at least twice as much as the U.S. participants.

The analysis of clusivity did reveal anomalies. In October 2010, data reflected a fairly even use of exclusive *we,* with U.S. participants employing the exclusive 15 times as compared to 19 for Kurdish faculty. In this instance, exclusive *we* was used by the U.S. participants as a means of sharing the context of the Western literacy experience discussed in Pearson and Stephens' (1994) overview of the last 30 years in literacy theory. Todd, who posted the initial summary, emphasized the Western perspective:

> 6h Again, these ideas reflect the broader cultural questions
> 6i *we are asking ourselves as a society…*
> 6l how can we honor the plurality of our society
> 6m *and develop the literacy level of our general population?*

Candice's response to Todd's question, using the possessive form of *we* also addressed local knowledge from the U.S. context:

> 38o Interestingly enough**,** this is a debate that has been ongoing
> 38p at least since *our nation's inception (c. 1776).*

Although U.S. use was higher than usual, exclusivity among Kurdish participants still exceeded use by the U.S. participants. Their use of exclusive *we* addressed the challenge of balancing Western influence with the need to do what is appropriate in the Kurdish context. Quoting the reading through a Kurdish context, Muqdad continued,

> 6g … I hope it is still not to too late for teachers
> 6h to make the right decisions
> 6i a*bout the kinds of futures we want*
> 6j f*or ourselves, our students, our educational systems,*
> 6k *and our community*

Hana also used exclusivity to emphasize the importance of the Kurdish context in adopting contemporary approaches to literacy instruction:

> 23e *Today what we see dominant literacy*
> 23f *tomorrow will be subject of change or shift.*
> 23g That is why *we have to accommodate teaching language…*
> 23h *according to the progresses of our society.*

Exchanges in this first discussion made it clear that the discourse community was not culturally homogeneous and that diverse contexts would have to be considered in discussing culturally appropriate pedagogies.

Given that the inclusive use of *we* suggests solidarity between the speaker and their audience and the exclusive use of *we* creates a sense of separation (Joos, 1967), the disparity in clusivity among U.S. and Kurdish partners highlights the importance of local knowledge in transnational university partnerships.
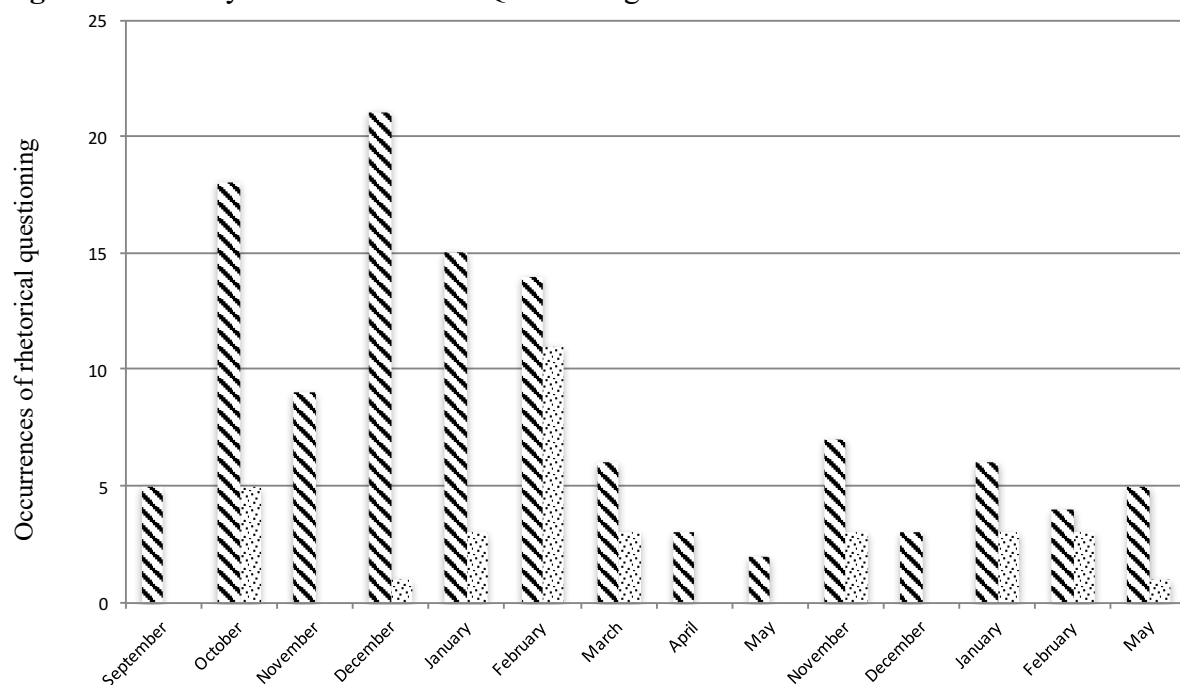
One-Sided Questioning From the U.S.

U.S. participants often used questions as a means of engagement in the online discourse community. By examining the frequency, direction, and types of questions posed in the data, regular patterns of usage and significant anomalies point to a one-sided use of questioning by U.S.

participants. However, the data also points to significant agency among Kurdish faculty.

Most frequent types of questioning. Three types of questions were discovered in the data: rhetorical, open ended, and factual. Used to make assertions or establish agreement (Wang, 2006), rhetorical questions were most evident among the U.S. participants, who asked 118 rhetorical questions over the two-year partnership contrasted with 33 rhetorical questions asked by the Kurds. In fact, while U.S. participants posed monthly rhetorical questions, Kurdish participants only asked such questions in 9 of the 14 discussions. However, use of rhetorical questions by the U.S. participants declined significantly, from 93 uses in Year 1 to 25 uses in Year 2, a 73% drop (see Figure 5). Excluding the anomaly in February 2011, rhetorical use remained the same for the Kurdish participants.

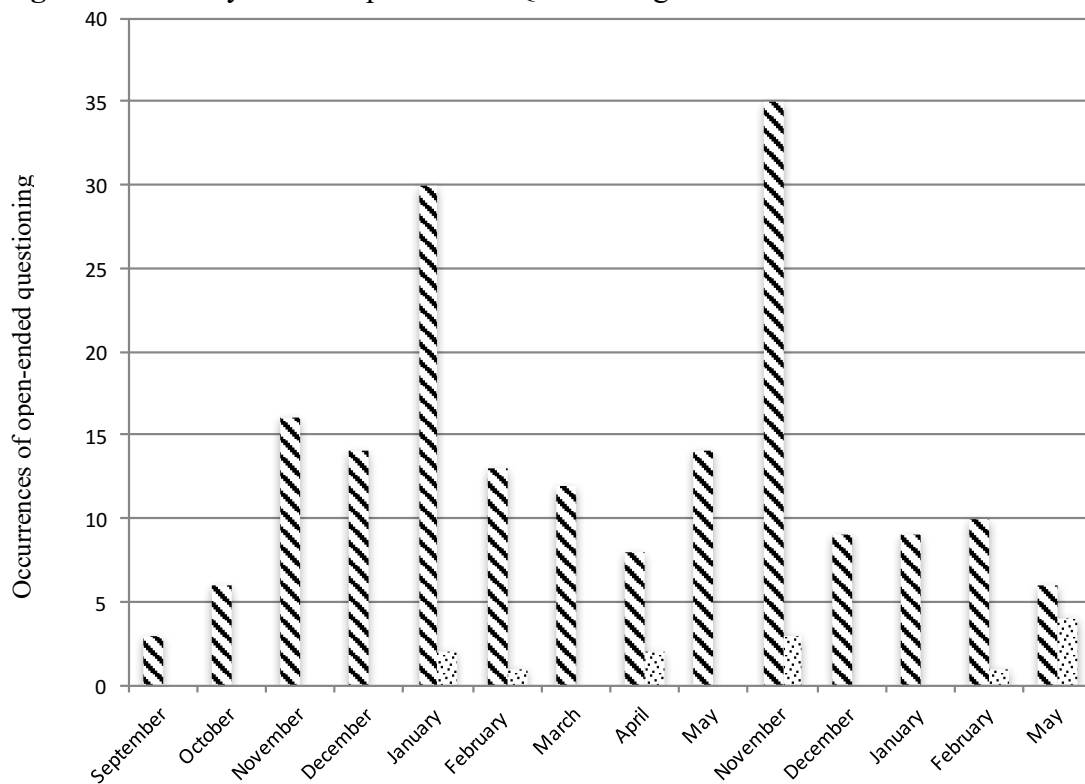**Figure 5.** Monthly Use of Rhetorical Questioning

Note. Black Stripes = Monthly uses of rhetorical questioning by U.S. faculty; Black Dots = Monthly uses of rhetorical questioning by Kurdish faculty

Seeking to invite participation and prompt discussion, U.S. participants made greater use of open-ended questioning, as well (See Figure 6). U.S. participants used open-ended questions 93% more than Kurdish participants in the two-year partnership, numbering 185 uses to 13. Although the use of open-ended questions by the U.S. participants dropped in Year 2, this use confirms the status of the U.S. participants as controllers, using questioning to control both the structure and the direction of the discussions (Wang, 2006).
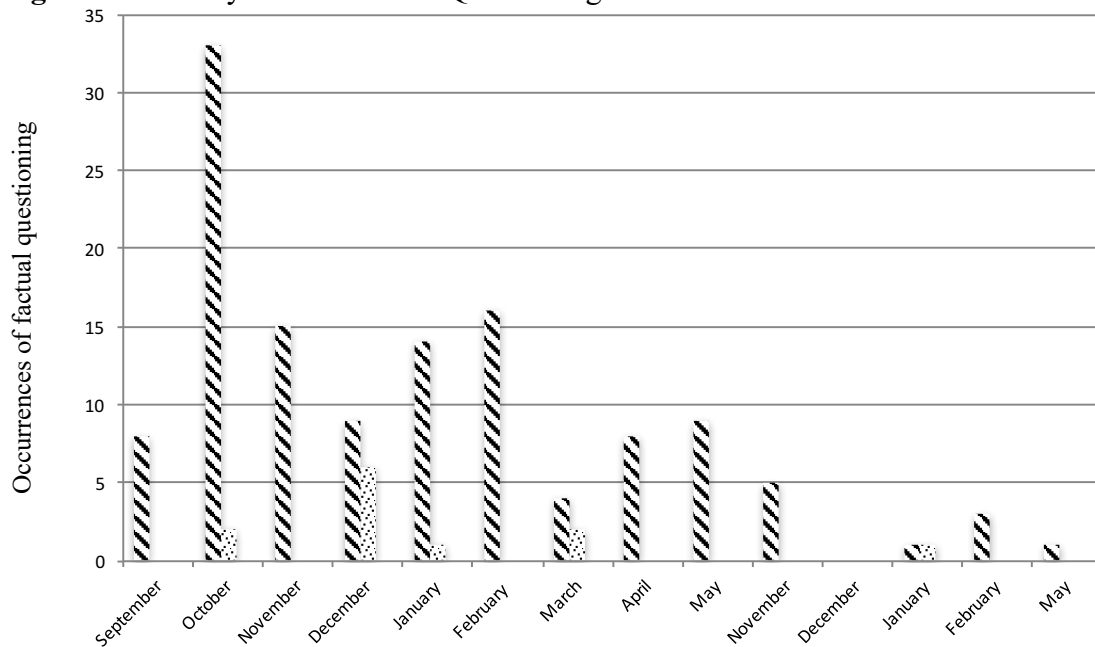
Factual questioning was used to solicit specific answers to straightforward questions about the assigned readings and teaching strategies discussed. Again, Kurdish faculty recorded far fewer factual questions than U.S. participants. While U.S. participants asked 126 factual questions over the two-year period, Kurdish participants asked only 12, 1% as many (See Figure 7).

Figure 6. Monthly Use of Open-Ended Questioning

Note. Black Stripes = Monthly uses of open-ended questioning by U.S. faculty; Black Dots = Monthly uses of open-ended questioning by Kurdish faculty

Figure 7. Monthly Use of Factual Questioning

Note. Black Stripes = Monthly uses of factual questioning by U.S. faculty; Black Dots = Monthly uses of factual questioning by Kurdish faculty

As in the examination of register and clusivity, there were anomalies in the data on questioning. Focusing on rhetorical questions, Kurdish participants asked 11 rhetorical questions in February 2011, nearly tripling their regular use. However, the greatest number of these came from one participant.

In his response to Todd, Asan used numerous rhetorical questions to highlight the difficulties Kurdish faculty face in making contextually appropriate pedagogical decisions:

> 50c *How can we select the right method in the right place to be used?*
>> 50f are they fruitful?
>> 50g Student-centered?
>> 50h Can we develop different means for teaching same lesson
>> 50i and then select the best methodological practice?
> 51c Are we always prepare and plan before we go to class?
> 52a Do we teach the same texts (Novel, Poem, Play) over several courses,
> 52b or we have variety?
> 53a Have we allocated time
>> 53b for quizzes for at-home exams and in-class exams?
>> 53c Have we tested the students and got their feedback (obliquely)
>> 53d for the teacher's self-evaluation?

His concerns were summed up his final broad rhetorical question:

> 54b but *the real question is*
>> 54c *which one is practicable for certain class situations*
>> 54d *or college subjects,*
>> 54e *and which ones we should avoid.*

In his rapid-fire presentation of rhetorical questions, Asan makes the point that contextual factors must be considered in incorporating student-centered teaching strategies into the Kurdish university classroom.

Another anomaly occurred in the use of open-ended questions. Considering the absence of any open-ended questions from Kurdish participants in 8 of the 14 discussions, it is interesting that the final May discussion generated the greatest use of open-ended questions, although the discussion involved only two Kurdish participants.

Tanya, an infrequent participant in the monthly discussions, was individually responsible for this spike in open-ended questions. Responding to Candice's suggestion that ungraded assignments might stimulate student participation in literature circles, Tanya noted,

> 23c I wish I could have the luxury of not having to grade all activities.

She then asked Candice for her advice on the topic:

> 25a *What would you do, Candice?*
>> 25b Should a student stay in the same role repeatedly
>> 25c until he gets it right?
>> 25d Or, do you think it better to assign students roles
>> 25e in which they feel more comfortable?
>> 25f Or, let the group decide that amongst themselves?

Tanya's questions resulted in a suggestion from Candice to rotate literature circle roles, to which Tanya agreed. However, questions regarding the implementation of specific student-centered strategies were seldom asked before. The lack of these questions often resulted in a one-sided

conversation.

Conclusions

The research question at the heart of this study asks how university partners use language to negotiate social power in the context of transnational professional development. Using the lens of the activities building task as outlined in New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2010), some possible answers emerged. Discussed previously, the activities building task asks, "What practice (activity) or practices (activities) is this piece of language being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as going on)?" (Gee, 2010, p.18). An examination of the linguistic markers through the lens of activity revealed significant levels of negotiation among the partners, reshaping power within the university partnership.

Theoretical Implications

Register Through the Lens of Activity

U.S. and Kurdish participants consistently used consultative register when writing summaries of readings to share background, to validate or critique participation, and to clarify concepts. This "sequence of actions" carried out the "socially recognizable and institutionally normed" (Gee, 2010, p. 17) activity of schooling, implying a teacher-centered power structure. It could then be assumed that the U.S. partners established a slanted power structure in the professional development activity. However, occasional shifts from the consultative to the casual register could indicate efforts by U.S. participants to alter the power structure of the schooling activity. U.S. participants made more use of the casual register by validating, praising, and encouraging Kurdish participants. As the casual register is used to bring outsiders into a social group (Joos, 1967), this could reflect an attempt by the U.S. partners to promote equity by diminishing the perceived activity of schooling.

The lack of casual register use by the Kurds also complicates assumptions of a dominant power structure in the activity of schooling. Resistance to the use of the casual register may represent agency from the Kurdish participants, exerting control of discussions by maintaining a professional distance from the U.S. participants. This is supported by Joos (1967), who suggests the consultative register assumes that (a) the listener will not understand what you are discussing without background information and (b) the listener will attend continuously. That said, the avoidance of the casual register by the Kurdish participants indicates a movement in the power structure, emphasizing the importance of local Kurdish knowledge. Their emphasis on the consultative allowed the Kurdish faculty to participate according to their own terms, based on the assumption that the U.S. participants lacked adequate background information to understand the academic context of the Kurdish university setting.

Clusivity Through the Lens of Activity

Mentioned previously, the inclusive use of *we* suggests solidarity between the speaker and their audience, whereas the exclusive use of *we* creates a sense of separation (Joos, 1967). The disparity in clusivity use among U.S. and Kurdish partners highlights the importance of local knowledge consideration in transnational university partnerships.

Participants made use of inclusive *we* to highlight commonalities as university instructors, while the exclusive *we* was used to highlight differences in local knowledge, including culturally defined practices and constraints, personal beliefs, and institutional differences. This "sequence of events" seems to embody the "socially recognizable and culturally normed" (Gee, 2010, p. 17) activity of a debate, as attempts by U.S. participants to build inclusiveness in the discourse community were countered by an emphasis on cultural difference, enacted by the Kurdish use of exclusive *we.*

A good example of the debate activity can be seen in an exchange between Candice and Tanya. Emphasizing the inclusive *we,* Candice noted that Kurdish professors were *not alone* in feeling students resisted studying literature they felt was irrelevant to their lives:

> 25a This is definitely something teachers in the U.S. also confront
> 25b and, as you say, *can become quite a challenge for us.*

Tanya's response emphasized the exclusivity of the Kurdish situation:

> 37a … *you all said…*
> 37c *that you too face this problem.*
> 37d But *I don't think that the situations are the same*

The Kurdish response makes it clear that cultural contexts separate the U.S. and Kurdish participants in ways that inclusive language cannot overcome.

Once again, the debate activity highlights the negotiation of social power within the partnership, as the extensive use of exclusive *we* by the Kurds enacted a distinct separation between the academic cultures of Kurdish and U.S. institutions, thus realigning the power structure. The debate activity may also reflect the institutional norms surrounding professional development at their Kurdish university. Again, negotiation of language between the partners reshaped the context of professional development to value and include local knowledges.

Questioning Through the Lens of Activity

The use of rhetorical, open-ended, and factual questions was most evident in the posts of the U.S. partners, as they controlled the direction and structure of the online discussions (Wang, 2006). Viewed through the analytic lens of activity, this *sequence of actions* again reflects the activity of schooling. Although this seems to reflect an imbalance of power, anomalies reveal agency on the part of the Kurdish participants. The Kurdish faculty realigned the power structure by questioning the relevance of readings, as well as the appropriateness of student-centered pedagogies in the Kurdish academic context. This use of questions rejected the activity of schooling, asserting the local expertise of Kurdish educators. Further, the lack of questioning by the Kurds could be interpreted as passive resistance to the schooling activity, preserving their identities as academic professionals through silence, rather than assuming a student identity through questioning.

In either case, their approach to questioning shifted the power structure towards equity. Adapting their approach to professional development in Year 2, the U.S. partners reduced the amount of rhetorical and factual questions used, making room for more open-ended conversation. This approach proved more effective in generating participation.

Practical Implications

In essence, the assumption that U.S. approaches to education should be disseminated through international university partnerships misses the point. Transnational university partnerships should consider where the U.S. perspective fits within local contexts, rather than how the work of "other" local knowledges fit into the U.S. perspective (Donahue, 2009, p. 214).

Donahue's perspective provides a timely counterpoint to the assertion that the global export of knowledge by American universities will improve higher education in developing nations, arguing that efforts to export U.S. knowledge are misdirected. In an age where political rhetoric emphasizes an *America first* stance, Donahue's words could not be more relevant. Aligning with extant scholarship on transnational university partnerships (Altbach, 2004; Altbach et al.,2009; Bizzell, 1992; Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009; Fairclough, 2006; Gee et al., 2018; Miller-Idress & Hanauer, 2011), this study echoes assertions that efforts to export U.S. knowledge through global university partnerships must not overlook the value of local knowledge (Canagarajah, 2002; Donahue, 2009; Wiens, 2018).

Although findings from this study are not generalizable to all transnational university partnerships, they do support the importance of adapting partnership activities to acknowledge and draw on local expertise. Analysis suggests that Kurdish cultural perspectives within the online community influenced the specific language choices made by the U.S. and Kurdish participants, allowing the partners to reshape the power structure into a more socially equitable framework that recognizes the value of local knowledges and contexts. These findings resonate with the theoretical stance at the heart of this study, which acknowledges that nested and intersecting social contexts shape us and our use of language (Gee, 1990).

Limitations and Future Research

While these findings are intended to add to the existing scholarship on transnational university partnerships, several factors limit the implications of the study. The small number of participants and the sole focus on written transcripts restricts the interpretation of the findings to the specific online setting of the U.S.-Kurdish partnership. Also, as English is a second language for the Kurdish participants, potential errors in English usage may have resulted in errors in data interpretation. Finally, although crosschecking with colleagues was used to mitigate bias in describing the data, cultural misconceptions may have influenced interpretations.

Understanding the role language plays in the intersection of local knowledges is vital to the success of transnational university partnerships. Given its importance, more research on the interplay of social power in transnational university partnerships is needed. Future studies might employ other approaches to critical discourse analysis to explore the interplay of identity and social power within transnational partnerships. Since language use can act to either synthesize or stratify participation, studies of this sort would be of great benefit in planning for and conducting such partnerships. Further in-depth consideration of the discursive practice and roots of local language should be considered comprehensively in future research. Overall, more studies should be conducted regarding the pursuit of international partnerships among institutions of higher education, whether West to East or North to South, as such research would provide international researchers with a broader base within which to situate their studies and engage with existing critiques.

Improving the equity and productivity of transnational university partnerships requires an ongoing awareness of power and dominance as Western universities partner with universities in the developing world. Communication and collaboration should invite and acknowledge resistance and agency among international partners, drawing on their local knowledges to develop contextually appropriate opportunities for professional development. Further, Western partners should mutually seek to plan professional development activities together with international partners, built on a foundation of mutual respect for both their academic and cultural identities and their local expertise.

As partnerships continue to grow between U.S. and international universities, it is important to remember where U.S. knowledge fits in the world. As Canagarajah (2002) pointed out,

> The assumption that one's knowledge is of sole universal relevance does not encourage conversation. It is possible to develop a pluralistic mode of thinking through which we celebrate different cultures and identities, and yet engage in projects common to our shared humanity. (p. 257)

Given the growth of higher education in developing countries, it is more important now than ever to consider the relevance and appropriateness of U.S. knowledge and participation within the context of established international institutions. In doing so, perhaps more equitable and relevant partnerships may emerge.

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