Chapter 5

Contextual Factors of Online Teacher Education in TESOL: An Activity Theory Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The chapter introduces a case study of online language teacher education in a TESOL master’s course. Drawing on sociocultural theories, it aims to investigate the patterns of interactions among students and the instructor in online teacher training, and factors that shape the efficacy of quality online language teacher education. Various domains of data were collected and analyzed using analytical codes such as employed tools, participation patterns, rules of interactions, divisions of labor among participants, and goals. The findings suggest that the teacher trainee participants increased active participation among themselves, promoting mutually supportive relationships. The students’ participation and learning outcomes were shaped by the learning communities they built, along with diverse pedagogical interests and different perceptions of collaborative work.

INTRODUCTION

Along with the ever-growing use of computer technologies in education, a significant number of online programs are offering academic degrees and professional development credentials in foreign and second language teacher education (England, 2012; Murray, 2013; Pawan, Wiechart, Warren, & Park, 2016; White, 2014). The proliferation of online language teacher education programs reflects the benefits that distance education via computer-related technologies offers in terms of delivery mode. In particular, the increased accessibility allows not only students to afford education beyond time and place constraints, but also language teacher education programs to recruit students widely around the globe in a relatively economical way. The increased accessibility of online education has brought about an expanded diversity in the pedagogical context of online language teacher education, given that more students are enrolled in such programs from various parts of the world (Pawan et al., 2016). Students bring diverse cultural and
educational backgrounds into computer-mediated class interactions, in addition to providing a variety of professional experiences and aspirations.

Research has yet to show, however, how the contextual factors of online second language teacher education influence interactions among all class participants, including students and the instructor, as well as class activities and tasks. There are few studies that investigate online second language teacher education, compared to a plethora of studies of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and computer-mediated communication (CMC). The lack of research on online programs is due to concerns regarding copyright, intellectual property, and competition in recruiting students among institutions (Hall & Knox, 2009). Even the small number of existing studies tends to focus primarily on how to manage an online course using computer technologies (Murray, 2013; White, 2014). Therefore, there is a need for more studies that critically examine curriculum and instruction of online language teacher education and learner participation in course activities.

This chapter introduces a case study of the effectiveness of learning activities, modules, and tools of online language teacher education in order to identify ways in which online language teacher education can successfully be implemented. Focusing on students’ learning experience and agency, it investigated the patterns of interactions among students and the instructor in online teacher training, and it explored the contextual factors that shape the quality of online language teacher education. This investigation addresses the following questions:

1. How do teacher trainees interact with each other and participate in learning activities of an online TESOL course?
2. What kinds of contextual factors shape their learning activities?
3. What kinds of constraints and benefits do the teacher trainees configure regarding an online learning environment?

Drawing on social and cultural perspectives of language and learning, this chapter first reviews studies of online language learning and teaching by referencing relevant studies of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) due to the lack of studies on online language teacher education in the field of second language teacher education. Next, it presents the methodology used in the current study. After presenting findings based on qualitative data analysis, it concludes with a discussion of issues and suggestions for promoting quality online teacher education in teaching English as a second language.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Grounded in sociocultural theories of learning (Engeström, 1987, 2001; Leonti’ev, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998), this study understands online language teacher education as comprised of human activities in social and cultural contexts. From this perspective, online mediums of instruction have brought pedagogical, social, and cognitive changes to language teacher education. Those changes are related to affordances of online education, “the possibilities for action which people identify in relation to specific recourses” (Barton & Potts, 2013, pp.186-187). The foremost change is associated with accessibility unhampered by constraints on a user’s location, technology mediation, and learner agency. Online teacher education programs allow those who would normally be unable to obtain higher education