Chapter 12
It Sharpens My Brain: International Teaching Assistants Develop Communicative Competence

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ABSTRACT

In this case study, the author investigated how international teaching assistants in the U.S. learned English language and teaching skills within a course they took about teaching at an American college. Four participants from three different countries and three disciplines volunteered to participate in this study. The results suggested that by talking with a partner, all of the participants acquired communication and conferring skills and learned teaching skills by practicing, sharing, getting feedback, and reflecting with their peers. All participants contributed to this social learning environment and enjoyed the communication between each other no matter what backgrounds and disciplines they came from. Their conversations revealed their strengths and challenges and represented their various cultural backgrounds, disciplines, and personal goals. The findings from this study suggest that teachers in the international teaching assistant training program should encourage peer learning and provide opportunities for students to work in pairs or small groups. They should also plan meaningful activities for students through which students can learn language skills and cultivate communicative competence.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016-2017, 1,078,822 international students enrolled in schools and colleges in the Unites States (Institute of International Education, 2017). They constituted 21.2% of first-time graduate students (Council of Graduate School, 2017). The international students’ top three fields of study were engineering, business and management, and math and computer science (Institute of International Education, 2017). Many of these students play an important role in teaching and research areas in their disciplines. For most of the International Teaching Assistants (ITAs), English is not their first language and some of them struggle with communicative competence (Gorsuch, Griffie, Pickering & Meyers, 2012). Some U.S. institutions provide training programs such as the International Teaching Assistant Program (ITAP)
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to help ITAs learn the general teaching skills that they need for giving lectures, teaching seminars, and leading experiment-based courses in their disciplines. They do so because the ability to speak a second language does not guarantee that an ITAP will be able to use the language effectively in academic settings (Samway & McKeon, 2007).

The purpose of this case study was to explore how ITAs spoke in paired settings and how they developed communicative competence within an ITAP program. The major research question guiding this study was: How did ITAs learn language and teaching skills from each other by working together in pairs?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Knowledge is constructed socially and culturally (Prawat & Floden, 1994; Stake, 1995). Social constructivism (Creswell, 2003; Tracey & Morrow, 2006) argues that human beings construct their own conceptions and their own learning through human activity. In this study, the ITAs constructed their perceptions and knowledge based on their existing knowledge and backgrounds as they worked with their peers.

Language is a social tool (Rice, 2002) and has content (Johnston, 2004). Therefore, talking is used as a means of oral communication between people (Barnes, 1992) and speech is acquired in a social environment (Vygotsky, 1986). One’s speech functions as a means of guiding and interpreting the world (Vygotsky, 1986). In addition, the use of language regulates the behavior of others and the interaction between the self and others (Halliday, 2002).

Barnes (1992) stated, “a school in its very nature is a place where communication goes on: that is what it is for. Education is a form of communication” (1992, p.14). Talk can help individuals formulate learning, think, shape ideas, and reflect. Talk can be a way of clarifying and focusing ideas. Howe (1992) listed almost forty different kinds of talk that students might engage in, such as asking questions, explaining, informing, clarifying, analyzing, sharing, commenting, criticizing, and suggesting. Therefore, students learn the content and practice communication through talk (Pinnell, 2002).

When students talk in pairs, they talk and listen with a sense of privacy and security. Students are able to adopt various roles and build relationships. They learn more from paired exploratory talk, which is interactive and dialogic than from presentational talk which is non-interactive and authoritative (Barnes, 2009). Exploratory talk enables speakers to think aloud, take risks, and form ideas in a trusted and comfortable environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have detailed the challenges that both undergraduate and graduate international students face because of language and cultural differences, such as language learning difficulties, adjusting to American culture, having trouble understanding lectures, developing academic language skills, lack of academic support, and struggling to share their thoughts and opinions (Feng & Feng, 2013; Grayson, 2008; Lin & Scherz, 2014; Moglen, 2017; Perry, 2016; Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010).

Ashavskaya (2015), for example, used semi-structured interviews to investigate six ITAs’ perspectives. Besides the challenges that all international students faced, ITAs struggled with classroom management, languages, instruction, and cultural and social issues. Williams and Case (2015) examined how the ITAs viewed observation as professional development. They explored 20 participants’ noticing practices during
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