COLLABORATIVE VIDEO INQUIRY IN MA TESOL COURSEWORK: "WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE OURSELVES"

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Introduction

Perhaps the most critical task of teacher learning takes place after a lesson is taught, in the process of deconstructing the classroom events that have transpired. This "reflection-on-action" (Dewey 1938; Schön 1987) is key to subsequent lesson planning and more effective in-the-moment decision-making while teaching. To support pre-service teachers' capacity for reflection, teacher educators, supervisors, trainers, and mentors spend time in post-observation conferences attempting to guide the teacher candidate into clearer and deeper understandings of instructional practices. However, research on the nature of these post-observation conferences has shown that they are inherently an interaction of two unequal parties, with the supervisor tending to dominate the conversation and therefore "doing" most of the reflection (Copland 2008; Farr 2011; Vasquez 2004). As a TESOL teacher educator, I have been curious about how reflective practice can be more fully directed by teacher candidates themselves, and at the same time stay focused on key aspects of teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL). In this paper, I describe a project designed to capitalize on two professional development tools that can support teachers' autonomous reflection: video analysis of teaching and teacher collaborative inquiry. This project took place with pre-service teacher candidates enrolled on an MA TESOL course at a university in the north-eastern U.S. The goal of this initiative was to move teachers towards investigation of their own practice using video-mediated collaborative inquiry.

Teacher collaborative inquiry

Teacher collaborative learning has shown great promise as a means for practicing teachers to facilitate their own professional learning. Vescio, Ross & Adams (2006) have identified several forms of school-based teacher collaborative learning, such as the Japanese lesson study (Lewis, Perry & Murata 2006), cognitively-guided instruction (Kazemi & Franke 2004), and teacher-as-researcher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999). Several structures have emerged to support collaborative teacher-led inquiry, and range from peer coaching to *Critical Friends Groups* (CFG) and *Teacher Collaborative Inquiry* (TCI). These structures all involve teacher-led discussions, and emphasize

the need for critical conversations about student learning as essential in school reform. TCI consists of a group of several teachers who meet regularly to pursue a common professional learning goal, but may or may not be involved in inter-class visitations, and within which multiple perspectives (more than in a dyadic relationship) will be shared.

TCI holds great promise for the professional learning of pre-service teachers as a way to avoid inculcating new generations of teachers into the habit of reflecting on practice in isolation (Ball & Cohen 1999; Little 2003). TCI can yield rich and long-lasting results if teachers are active participants and provided with opportunities to deepen understanding of their own practices, explore content-specific pedagogy, and attempt new approaches to their teaching in their own classroom contexts (Borko 2004). This teacher learning best evolves when it is "inquiry conducted *by* teachers (as opposed to *on* or *with* teachers)" (Nelson & Slavit 2008: 100). Johnson (2009) found

> …striking evidence that sustained participation in inquiry-based approaches to professional development, such as cooperative development, can lead to changes in teachers' beliefs and practices, and supports the wider claim that the mediational space and dialogic processes that inquiry-based approaches to professional development create are effective in promoting teacher-learning. (p. 139)

In TCI, close investigation of classroom practice can occur through inter-visitation, collaborative learning visits, or review of video-records of teaching.

Video-mediated teacher reflection

Since the invention of video recording, teacher educators have harnessed its power to improve teaching skills. Video has been used to (1) demonstrate teaching methods, usually presenting exemplary teachers in semi-staged or staged episodes; (2) present professional dilemmas that trigger discussion (Skiera & Stirling 2004); (3) evaluate teaching competency, often used in the framework of assessment (AACTE 2010); (4) provide an opportunity to analyze pupil behavior (Kersting et al. 2010); and (5) help teachers build a realistic picture of their own performance (Baecher & Connor 2010; van Es & Sherin 2010).

Video is a tool uniquely suited to support teacher reflection, growth, and change, as it provides teachers with a direct view (not processed via a supervisor) of their teaching performance. Frequently, a review of video generates a sense of disequilibrium between what teachers believed to have occurred in their lesson and what really occurred, which can lead to new ways of thinking. Complacency is jarred, so opportunities to newly encounter one's practice unfold (Chan & Harris 2006; Hennessy & Deaney 2009).

Additionally, video review supports teachers' understanding of their lesson during post-observation conferences. Instead of the supervisor referring to notes to point out aspects of the lesson to the teacher, both parties can rely on the video rather than memory-based recall. It is therefore an essential medium to contextualize practice in these supervisor-teacher conferences because it leads to "configurational validity" (Goldman-Segall 1995: 163).

Video analysis has consistently proven to support the development of teachers' independent reflection skills as well, but only when direction and scaffolding are provided (Harford & MacRuairc 2008; Lazarus & Olivero 2009; Rosaen, Lundeberg, Cooper, Fritzen & Terpstra 2008; Welsch & Devlin 2007). In discussing teaching with a supervisor or a peer group, video serves as a platform for mutual understanding, enabling teachers to view the same lesson together. In these video-based discussions, teachers develop "a discourse for analyzing video...focused on making sense of what occurs in classrooms and using evidence from classroom events to support their analyses" (van Es & Sherin, 2010: 172).

The purpose of this research was to explore how these two potentially rich teacher development practices, video analysis of classroom instruction and teacher collaborative inquiry, could be combined to support pre-service TESOL candidates in reflecting on their teaching. Guiding the study were three key questions:

1. What did teacher candidates attend to in reviewing their own videos of teaching and preparing their inquiry letters to their peer group?
2. What was the nature of peers' responses?
3. What did participation in the collaborative inquiry group mean to the teachers?

The last two questions are the focus of this paper.

Project Design

Context

At our institution of higher education, teacher education candidates have been systematically using video recordings of their teaching as part of their practicum coursework, which takes place in their final semesters of the MA TESOL program. Teacher candidates capture a video of a complete classroom lesson and upload it to an in-house video server. Once online, the video is viewed by a supervising faculty member, who then discusses the lesson with the teacher candidate. Teacher candidates then excerpt a 5-8 minute clip of their choosing to post to a video library of teaching used within our institution. During seminar sessions, teacher candidates are usually asked to present their clips to their classmates and instructor.

It was noted, however, that this solo presentation of video was not as fruitful a learning experience as had been hoped for, owing to a few factors. First, many teacher candidates suffered a great deal of anxiety in presenting their clip, and therefore other candidates present in the seminar avoided any "critical" feedback, in an attempt to preserve face. Second, since the candidates were both new to teaching and to the analysis of teaching, the depth of their observations was limited. Third, there was a lack of focus on ESOL specific pedagogical concerns and a tendency to focus more generally on classroom management. Last, the video clips were only viewed once, live in the seminar session, and thus the affordances of video (stopping, rewinding, and replaying) were lost as candidates only interacted with peer video clips once.

Self-Directed Learning

In the process of considering ways to improve candidates' learning around the video clips and looking to the research on teacher development in TESOL, Brandt's (2007) proposed model for a "learning-based approach" (p. 7) proved to be a helpful heuristic to guide the project's design. In her framework, teacher-led professional learning would form the basis for teacher's individual growth and development. Criteria such as: (1) collaboration and feedback; (2) self-direction; and (3) critical reflection proved to be particularly relevant for this project.
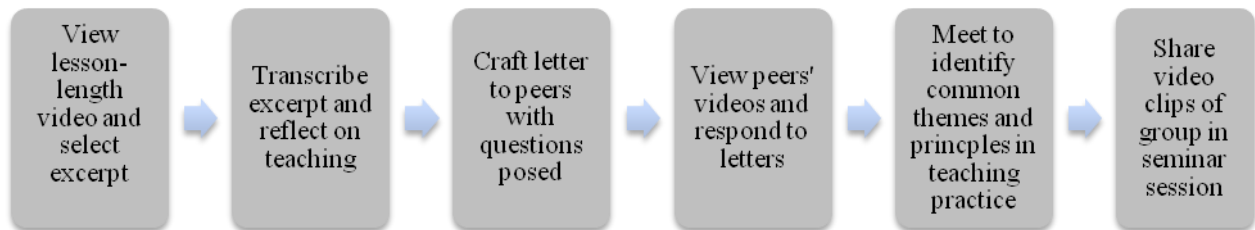
Figure 1. Stages of collaborative video inquiry project

With these principles as a framework, this video-mediated collaborative inquiry project was designed (guidelines for this assignment can be viewed at: http://dl.dropbox.com/u/19873389/Guidelines%20for%20Video%20Collaborative%20Inquiry%20Assignment.pdf). Small groups of three to four teacher candidates were formed around the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. After candidates had reviewed their full-length lesson video and selected and transcribed their clip, they drafted a letter to their peers stating what they noticed in their clip related to the teaching of the skill, seeking input from the group. The other members of the group then viewed one another's clips and responded via email. Teachers then participated in an online exchange, to discuss the similarities of their clips, and what the clips indicated to keep in mind when teaching that skill. Then, the group presented their clips in seminar to their classmates. Each member of the group showed their video and the rest of the class took notes or completed a tally sheet provided by the presenting group, as outlined in Figure 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Over the past four academic semesters, practicum TESOL candidates were invited to participate in this project. Early experimentation with this assignment and review of teacher candidate feedback led to a gradual refinement of the task (Baecher & Tuten, 2011). For this research, data were collected from the most recent implementation of the project, Fall 2011, involving a total of 15 teacher candidates enrolled in an MA TESOL degree program. These teachers were all engaged in practicum teaching of ESOL, but across 11 schools and from grades K-12. Three were employed as full-time teachers, while the other 12 were student teachers. They ranged in age from 25-38, 1 was male and 14 female, and had between 0-6 prior years of teaching experience.

Particular data reviewed for this paper include: (1) teacher candidates' reflections on their video with questions posed for their peers to address; (2) archived email exchanges between teacher candidates; and (3) teacher candidates' written reflection papers on their experience in the project. While video records of lessons were used as material in the peer inquiry sessions, their teaching itself was not part of the data itself, whereas their reflections on the videos were.

Data were coded and categorized according to the principles and procedures of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Categories emerged and teachers' comments were placed into concept categories in an iterative process.

Findings

A review of the archived email exchanges between teacher candidates within their peer groups, as well as of their reflections on the collaborative inquiry experience revealed several consistent themes. These are separately described below.

Themes present in the email exchanges

Structurally, peers tended to begin with a compliment or praise, followed by suggestions related to their peer's inquiry questions. These suggestions contained frequent reference to TESOL-specific strategies covered in the program's coursework. Finally, peer feedback tended to conclude with a statement of solidarity or understanding for the teaching challenge being discussed. These themes are described below.

Praise and recognition. Every peer response included several compliments, sometimes in the opening text of their response and always at some point woven into their suggestions and responses to the inquiry letter. While these comments appeared to fall in four categories, the first three were much less prevalent than the fourth. The first three categories constituted approximately 25% of the praise, and included comments related to (1) teacher's personal style (e.g. "I think you have a nice way of speaking to your students as if they are your equals"; "I really liked your energy"); (2) choice of materials or content (e.g. "I thought you had the students discuss a very relevant and interesting topic"); and (3) student engagement (e.g. "It was a nice open conversation between your students and they seem very comfortable expressing themselves in front of you"). The

fourth category of praise from peers constituted the remaining 75% of the praise and was related to teacher's instructional practices. This was likely a direct outcome of the format of the inquiry letter, which provided the peer with a series of questions related to the instruction in the lesson. Some examples of this praise include:

> I love that you modeled what you expected from them by reading aloud a writing sample you had written.

> The use of technology was great for your beginner group to see the pictures.

> I liked how you made reference to a story the students had already read.

> When it comes to the letter writing activity, I think that the chart, which you prepared for your students, was brilliant.

> I also noticed the use of different modalities to promote students' comprehension; you gave instructions and you showed them the handout.

Use of discipline-specific terminology. Teacher candidates were grouped according to a particular language skill (listening, reading, writing, or speaking), and within that skill area had to focus on what they learned from watching their video, as well as pose two to three questions for their peers to answer. In creating these questions, teachers focused on a variety of relevant topics in teacher development ranging from adapting their discourse for the age-level of learners in the class. Particularly noticeable was their use of terms relevant to the field of TESOL. For instance, in their initial letter to their peers, teachers formed questions such as (terminology italicized):

> Is it useful to use a *structured* activity such as this one to help prepare students for a *communicative function* such as discussing preferences?

> Should *explicit and direct error correction* be used with beginners in a speaking activity like this one, or is it better to use *recast* and praise?

> How could I have cut down on my *teacher-talk* time to allow for more conversation among the students?

> How could this *jigsaw* have been adjusted for students who have a *lower proficiency* in speaking?

In their responses, more than half of the teacher candidates used TESOL specific terminology in phrasing their replies. They made statements such as:

> You implemented *differentiated instruction* for the assessment by creating the various *graphic organizers*.

> I think that it would be considered *talk as transaction* because there is a specific message

you are looking for—to find out what food the partner likes.

> It is important to address the mistake because if you don't then your student wouldn't know that it was a mistake and may continue to pronounce the word in the same way (*fossilization*, SLA class ☺)

> While posting the question, I would try to *activate their prior knowledge* and perhaps tell them two or three adjectives about myself.

> After I reviewed the excerpt I noticed I did a lot of *teacher talk* and did not give my students an opportunity to give me what they knew. It's something I need to work on. It's hard to NOT talk. That *wait time* is so crucial to give to students, especially ELLs.

Since researchers have found that a shared use of terminology indicates that teachers are converging on similar understandings in their collaborative work (Davison, 2006), this was another way to explore their interactions around the video inquiry project.

Themes present in reflection papers

In their reflective writing, in which they shared their perspectives on participation in the video-mediated collaborative inquiry project, teacher candidates reported that the assignment was very valuable to them, as both a window onto the teaching of others, and as a means to become more comfortable with allowing others a window onto their own teaching.

Opportunity to view other ESOL classrooms. One theme that emerged from participants' reports centered on finding collaboration with peers useful, both when their peer's teaching context was similar and when it was different from their own. Several teachers, in observing their peers through the video clips, expressed a sense of "relief to know that no class is perfect". One teacher described the affirmation she gained from viewing similar teaching issues in a peer's classroom:

> I think that having someone at your same level of experience in teaching (or in the same stage of the TESOL program) view and critique your clip is a good idea. It seemed that we were all having similar experiences and issues in our classrooms so it was beneficial to give each other feedback and ideas based on our similarities.

On the other hand, some teachers commented on how they felt they had a chance to learn more about teaching through the opportunity to view a teaching from a more experienced classmate. One teacher shared:

> Watching L's video proved incredibly helpful. Watching another teacher, in this case one with much more experience than myself, provides the

opportunity to really reflect on what is or is not occurring in my own classroom. The opportunity was valuable and informative.

Others commented on the value of viewing classroom teaching scenarios distinct from their own. One teacher stated:

> I enjoy observing other teachers…In watching [my peer's] lesson I was able to experience what it is like teaching ESL in a small group instructional setting. I do not get much experience with this model…I really enjoyed analyzing his interactions with his students during his instruction, as they are so much different from my own.

Becoming comfortable with peer feedback. While still anxiety producing, having their peers watch their video was perceived as serving to ready teacher candidates for presenting their video of teaching in front of the whole class, or even for this activity in their career. As one teacher put it:

> The group collaboration experience helped me practice letting down my guard and openly accept positive or negative criticism. It was a bit hard, emotionally, to post the videos up…I had to remember that we are a group and the purpose of a group is to be supportive and give feedback. More importantly, I will have more collaborative feedback experiences in the future…so why not start getting comfortable now?

The act of providing feedback to each other in response to the questions they set helped mitigate the sense of vulnerability caused by showing one's teaching on video, and teachers mentioned that creating their own guidelines through the questions they developed for their peers provided them useful and needed feedback. The following is a typical statement:

> Collaborating with my classmates on this speaking skill presentation helped me view my activity with a new perspective. By having two peers look at my clip and comment on strengths and weaknesses, I was able to go back and find in what area I could have made my lesson more effective…I thought it was helpful to dissect my lesson and explain myself to group members and have them respond to specific concerns I had…Even though sharing a clip of myself made me a bit anxious, it was good to know that we were all working together to improve ourselves as

teachers and to create language lessons that were effective.

Recommendations for teacher educators

Three areas are likely to be of concern when implementing video in teacher professional learning. First, the sense of vulnerability and discomfort that it is likely to cause may make for limited analysis. To compensate for this, de-sensitizing the teacher through frequent use of video-recording, sharing of smaller segments of a lesson with a particular focus, and initially viewing the videos of others rather than of self may be useful. Second, since the amount of data present in a lesson-length of video footage can overwhelm the viewer, "excerpting" techniques are generally recommended. With a smaller segment of video to review, the use of viewer's guides, directed viewing by a facilitator, and narrow viewing techniques, such as tallying, checklists, etc. can be supportive. Third, since the novice teacher will likely be limited to "seeing" in video those aspects of teaching that are salient to them at their particular developmental point, the use of collaborative inquiry has been utilized with great success. In small groups, teachers have been able to move towards deeper reflection on features of lessons.

Implementing collaborative video inquiry

The results of analyzing the written exchanges between peer teachers, teacher's personal reflections, and their resultant presentations on the four skills suggest the potential richness of video-mediated inquiry. As discovered in this project some affordances of collaborative video-based inquiry include: (1) causing candidates to take a detailed view of their teaching through the creation of transcriptions; (2) encouraging self-reflection through the process of excerpting and analyzing one's own teaching; (3) generating inquiry into one's own practice through the posing of questions in crafting the letter to peers; (4) providing the opportunity to view other's classrooms; and (5) seeing common themes in teach through collaborative conversations.

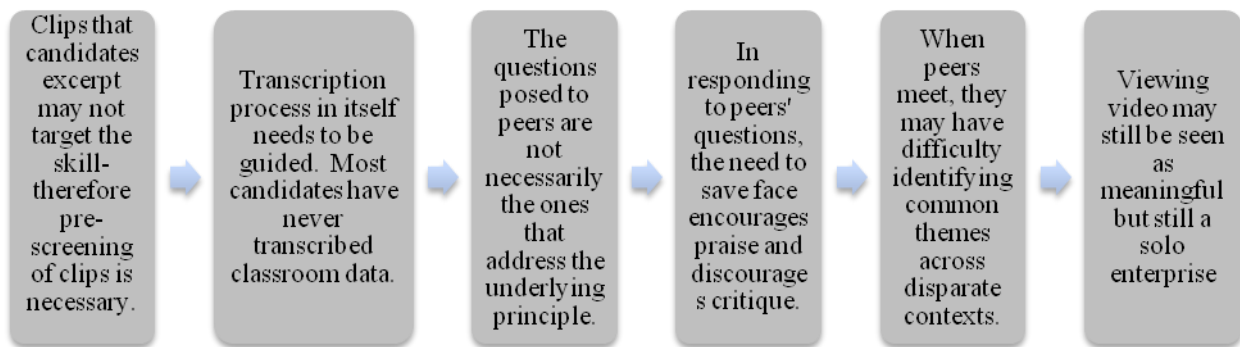| Clips that candidates excerpt may not target the skill-therefore pre-screening of clips is necessary. | → | Transcription process in itself needs to be guided. Most candidates have never transcribed classroom data. | → | The questions posed to peers are not necessarily the ones that address the underlying principle. | → | In responding to peers' questions, the need to save face encourages praise and discourages critique. | → | When peers meet, they may have difficulty identifying common themes across disparate contexts. | → | Viewing video may still be seen as meaningful but still a solo enterprise |

Figure 2. Concept map of collaborative video-based inquiry process with implications for teacher educators

,At the same time, a number of deliberate scaffolding moves must be the responsibility of the teacher educator, because novice teachers will need to be directed to analyze their teaching for key pedagogical principles. As outlined in Figure 2, at each phase of the process the teacher educator will need to actively facilitate the video analysis of candidates. Potential areas that cause candidates to struggle are in selecting a clip that is valuable as a critical incident to explore through intense analysis; how to transcribe and use that transcription in a way that deepens understanding; and how to gain from collaborative investigations of teaching practice, even when colleagues are in different teaching contexts.

Conclusion

For teacher educators in the field of TESOL, much more research is needed regarding the quantity, quality, and type of targeted observation tasks that are linked with language learning in classrooms. Follow-up on teachers who have used video analysis in their training could be conducted to explore the extent to which video analysis may foster an awareness of TESOL practices that support student learning. How does a teacher's ability to analyze video translate into their ability to teach more effectively? Considering the high interest in quality English teaching around the world, investment in video as a component of clinical supervision should be more fully understood in TESOL.

In sum, the adaptability, affordability, and portability of digital video lend it to fostering conversations about teaching, using key video excerpts to ground the dialogue. Just as with all tools, however, the key is their appropriate use. Video is a tool uniquely suited to the in-depth analysis of teaching by the teacher as well as outside observers. Video-mediated teacher inquiry show great promise as a low-cost initiative for site-based, sustained, meaningful professional learning--learning that can and should be constructed by teachers themselves.

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