



The social organisation of talk-in-interaction at work in a language teacher professional community



Yongcan Liu*

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge CB3 8PQ, England, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how a group of language teachers negotiated their practice through 'talk at work' in the context of language teaching reform in China. The data is derived from the teachers' interaction in joint lesson planning conferences, and has been subjected to ethnomethodological analysis. The findings show that the participants employed a wide range of structural procedures to accomplish the interaction, as well as performing different identities in talk. The interplay between interaction and identities produced an asymmetric power relationship that limited the participants' equal access to discourse resources, hence constraining their opportunities for learning. The research attempts to provide a new way of theorising teacher learning in the workplace by offering a bottom-up solution to social orders. Such theorising suggests the possibility of talking the democratic social institutions into being through changing the way we interact with and relate to each other in professional practices.

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1. Introduction

Joint lesson planning is a widely practised activity in schools and universities in East Asia. Teachers meet on a regular basis to discuss problems that have arisen in their teaching, and to develop joint lesson plans for communal use. Through mutual engagement in discussion and collective interrogation of the problems raised, teachers in the same community have an opportunity to construct professional knowledge collectively. This shared practice is considered as a sustainable model for teacher professional development, and meshes well with established literature on teacher collegiality and professional community (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Horn & Little, 2010; Hurd & Lewis, 2011; Lieberman & Miller, 2001, 2008; Little, 1992, 2002, 2003; Little & Curry, 2008; Little & Horn, 2007; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, 2006).

Joint lesson planning conferences have a unique role to play in the course of educational change, as they are often where reform documents are distributed and ideas disseminated. Yet, teachers may not necessarily agree with each other at the conference, which necessitates negotiation through talk. This paper is situated within the context of a language teaching reform in a university department of English education in China. As a university-wide strategy to transform the existing pedagogical system, critical pedagogy was introduced to the BEd English Teacher Education programme in the department, aiming to harness education in a process of progressive social change (Norton & Toohy, 2004). The initiative, however, met with resistance from the tutors on the programme (or simply 'teachers' hereafter, in line with the literature in teacher learning and the cultural convention in China to use the term to refer to all types of educators in the country) who embraced the traditional knowledge-transmission approach to education. In this instance, joint lesson planning conferences had a pivotal role to play, as they provided an opportunity for the tutors to negotiate teacher training practices through talking to one another. Yet, as Horn and Little (2010: 183) point out, 'the research to date has made relatively little headway in examining the nature of the

* Tel.: +44 1223 767692; fax: +44 1223 767602.

E-mail address: yl258@cam.ac.uk.

interactions by which professional community is forged, sustained, and made conducive to learning and improvement.' This paper thus aims to make a methodological breakthrough in this respect, and advance the debate about the role of professional communities in teacher learning and professional development. In particular, the paper examines the moment-by-moment revelation of the processes through which practice is negotiated at a conference and seeks to illuminate how opportunities for teachers to participate in talk can be opened up or blocked off, depending on the available styles and organisations of interaction. The research contributes to recent developments in ethnomethodology, focusing on 'institutional talk' or 'talk at work' (Antaki, 2011; Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage & Clayman, 2010), and has implications for language teachers to engage in meaningful interaction and to foster instructional innovation.

2. Teachers' talk-in-interaction at work

In education research, there exists an established body of literature which looks at student-to-student and teacher-to-student interactions in formal instructional contexts (Cazden, 2001; Mercer, 1995; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). However, there has been relatively little research to date that has used a micro approach to study informal encounters among teachers in the workplace. As Little (2002, 2003) argues, although teachers in the same community talk to one another all the time, what they talk about and how they talk are barely known. Teachers' joint lesson planning conferences, instances of a special type of 'institutional talk', provide an ideal setting for understanding spontaneous, naturally-occurring interactions among teachers in the workplace.

This emerging field of study on teachers' workplace encounters mainly evolves from Little's research on professional communities (Horn & Little, 2010; Little, 1990, 1992, 1993, 2001, 2002, 2003; Little & Horn, 2007; Little & McLaughlin, 1993; Siskin & Little, 1995). Over the past two decades, Little has explored different ways of understanding how organisational and interactional conditions enable and disable teachers' learning in the workplace. The series of studies conducted by her and her colleagues has fallen in line with the holistic school improvement movement since the 1990s, bearing headings such as 'school-based management', 'organisational structuring' and 'teacher empowerment' (e.g. Grossman et al., 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001, 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007). A review of Little's research spanning two decades reveals the disposition of her inquiry over the years – 'what constitutes the capacities and resources in communities of practice, when teachers collectively question and examine teaching and learning, find generative means to acknowledge and respond to difference, and engage actively in supporting professional growth' (Little, 2002: 917). This avenue of research has highlighted the role of teacher collegiality in educational change, and has opened up a new research agenda for understanding teachers' work and professional learning.

A major finding of this line of research is that teachers do indeed talk about teaching in workplace encounters. This is evidenced in various threads of teaching-based talk in informal conferences. In her seminal article, for example, Little (2002) notes that teachers talk about various things in meetings, ranging from student learning to problems in teaching and classroom management. These teaching-related threads have been conceptualised as 'the problems of practice' (Horn & Little, 2010; Little & Horn, 2007), providing justification for an analytical focus on representations of teaching in talk. A further significant finding is that teachers talk differently in different teacher communities. In their study of two groups of teachers – one of mathematics, the other of literacy – Horn and Little (2010: 181) found that although the teachers in both communities were committed to teaching improvement, 'their characteristic conversational routines provide different resources for them to access, conceptualise and learn from problems of practice'. In other words, teachers' talk at work is context-bound, depending on individuals' dispositions as well as the collective orientation of the group (Horn & Little, 2010). Another major finding that comes out of this body of research is that different organisations of interaction regulate how teachers participate in talk, and the 'norms of interaction' (Little, 2002: 935) may create or limit opportunities for professional learning. From a methodological point of view, therefore, there is a need to conduct fine-grained analysis of how normative talk is organised and accomplished.

In addition to Little's works, there has been a small body of research that also uses a micro approach to understand teachers' informal encounters in the workplace. These studies, though limited in number, have strengthened the area of research in three ways. First, they establish a more concrete unit of analysis. Horn's research (2005, 2007, 2010), for example, focuses on 'episodes of pedagogical reasoning' (Horn, 2005: 215) during which teachers exhibit their reasoning about an issue in their practice. This analytical focus has made the inquiry into locating teachers' learning in talk more explicit. Second, the studies in question tended to strengthen their attention to linguistics, thereby providing analysis even more fine-grained than the microanalysis used by Little. For example, Carroll (2005) reported on a longitudinal study of collaborative professional learning in a mentor/teacher study group on a teacher education programme. A major contribution of his research is that he drew on the linguistic notions of 'participant frameworks', 're-voicing strategies' and 'conversational floor', and constructed a framework that enabled him to examine in detail different actions in talk. Finally, the concept of 'identity in talk' (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998a) has been integrated into analysis. Morton and Gray (2010) studied the lesson planning conferences of a mentor and a group of student teachers on a language teacher education programme. They argued that teacher professional identity should be incorporated into the analysis of talk, as student teachers, through talk, accomplished not only the action of constructing professional practical knowledge of language teaching, but also that of developing an identity as a language professional.

To summarise, four critical themes derived from previous research have laid the groundwork for researching teachers' talk at work in this paper. First, teachers do relate their teaching in workplace encounters, which can be represented in talk. In other words, through analysing what they talk about, we will be able to understand what resources they draw upon for professional learning. Second, these encounters are context-bound, as evidenced in different norms of interaction in different teacher communities. Thus in this paper the teacher community under investigation is treated as a unique professional community which has its own norms of interaction. Third, how teachers participate in talk is regulated by an 'interactional architecture' (Seedhouse, 2004: 1) which can create or limit the opportunities for professional learning. Last but not least, the methods for analysing the

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