

Collaborative teaching reflection: insights into a globalized partnership

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When collaborating remotely and cross-culturally, negotiating control, navigating ambiguities in context, and recognizing one's own cultural influences require immense amounts of self-awareness when positioning oneself within a project. This is of particular relevance to the field of TESOL as the ever-expanding realm of English language education brings with it an increasing number of partnerships between organizations and individuals from a diverse range of countries and contexts. In this study, two US-based TESOL graduate students, from Senegal and the United States, collaborated on a lesson plan to be implemented by an American university EFL teacher stationed in Timor-Leste. Through the process, the importance of fostering equity amongst Western and non-Western teaching philosophies and traditions, as well as grounding all decisions in a relevant cultural context, became imperative. Complicating measures, however, were resolved by accommodating diverse perspectives, building flexibility into lesson delivery, and trusting the intuitions of the teacher implementing the lesson.

Introduction

The present study focuses on a cross-continental collaborative teaching enterprise where two TESOL master's students studying in the United States partnered with a Western-trained teacher in Timor-Leste to implement a lesson plan. The project, which constituted the service learning component of a graduate course on language identity and ideology in multilingual settings, afforded the two TESOL students the opportunity to investigate a teaching and cross-cultural collaboration. Through this partnership, the students examined how their differing teaching backgrounds impacted on the way they interacted with each other and the partner teacher, as well as how well their experiences and interests in materials development could be transferred into planning a lesson for a relatively unfamiliar context. Though the conclusions highlighted here are based solely on one collaboration, the themes found through this process yield insights for future teaching endeavours involving cross-cultural collaboration.

Although TESOL teacher-training programmes are prevalent across the globe, the findings of this project are pertinent to the language-learning

community as a whole, as the movement of teachers between the contexts in which they were trained and where they teach tends to be relatively common, with many teachers shuttling between ESL and EFL environments. In addition, the results of this study raise implications for materials development and adaptation in light of context-specific, sociocultural realities that impact the effective implementation of decontextualized lesson plans. Overall, the insights gleaned from this study serve to illuminate how individual teachers and their institutions can forge productive collaborations. Such collaborations are increasingly important today in light of the growing demands placed upon many institutions to initiate and sustain global partnerships in order to both foster intercultural communication ([Crowther and De Costa 2017](#)) and establish the soft power of more affluent countries ([Nye 2005](#)).

Background Context

Timor-Leste's independence in 2002 led to a major restructuring of its educational system. In its National Education Strategic Plan for 2010–2015, the Timor-Leste Ministry of Education laid out a plan for structuring its higher education system. Some of the five-year plan's broadest goals included improved teacher education and national curriculum development, to be monitored by a National Qualifications Framework ([Timor-Leste Ministry of Education 2011](#)). To improve its emerging educational system, the Ministry of Education began to engage with international partners, such as the United States Department of State's English Language Fellowship Program (<http://elprograms.org/>), who could aid curricular and professional development. Subsequently, a specific role of American English Teaching Fellows in Timor-Leste has been to enhance the quality of teacher education and to serve as a cultural ambassador in the local community.¹ And it was into this role that our partner teacher, whose collaboration is elaborated on shortly, stepped.

Collaboration

In recent years, partnerships in education have been mediated through collaborative teaching and collaborative action research within an institution ([Yuan and Mak 2016](#); [Waller, Wethers, and De Costa 2017](#)). [Barfield \(2016\)](#) offers practical advice to ELT educators looking to collaborate with overseas partners, highlighting the importance of honest dialogue and shared decision-making. Power imbalances embedded within collaborative arrangements and the need to collaborate being imposed by an outside force (for example Ministries of Education) undermine the efficacy of such relations, ultimately resulting in disenchanted participants and less than ideal results. [Achinstein \(2002\)](#) introduced micropolitical theory in order to investigate conflict in community collaboration within a school system. According to Achinstein, micropolitical theory uncovers 'power, influence, conflict, and negotiating processes between individuals and groups' (*ibid.*: 423) that must be recognized in order to account for individual differences in the collaboration process. Achinstein also maintains that conflict is neither unprofessional nor dysfunctional; rather, she views conflict as having the potential to uncover social dynamics and contribute towards growth. Building on Achinstein's understanding of tensions that emerge as a result of collaboration, we explore how such complicating measures can be successfully managed to produce positive language-learning outcomes. With this arrangement comes the need for

practitioners to critically reflect on such partnerships both in light of their current context and opportunities for personal and professional growth resulting from such collaboration.

Initiation of collaboration

During the 2015–2016 academic year, Jane, a US-based Teaching Fellow, was stationed at a major university in Timor-Leste to teach English and became actively involved in the teacher education process for pre-service and in-service teachers in the surrounding area. Although she had previously taught ESL in a variety of domestic and international contexts, Jane had just arrived in Timor-Leste to teach when this research project started. Our project sought to connect graduate students studying in a US TESOL programme with a teacher working abroad in order to better understand collaborative lesson planning, intercultural collaboration, and the context-driven realities of teaching in unfamiliar locations. The two US-based TESOL students involved in the project were of different nationalities and possessed different amounts of teaching experience in both EFL and ESL university environments. Aida was from Senegal and had 14 years of teaching, while Laura was from the United States and had only been teaching for 2.5 years at the time of the study.

Method

In September 2015, Aida and Laura first contacted Jane to invite her to participate in the project. In an effort to learn more about collaborative teaching and lesson planning between contexts (Barfield op.cit.; Yuan and Mak op.cit.), the two communicated with Jane through email to learn about which courses she was currently teaching in Timor-Leste and discussed the possibility of writing a lesson plan to be used in one of her courses (see [Table 1](#) for a timeline of the collaborative project).

Time	Task	Data collected
1 September 2015	Initial contact Discussion of task	Email correspondence
2 October 2015	Collaboration in lesson design Lesson plan sent to Jane	Lesson plan materials and explanations
3 November 2015	Jane taught lesson Debrief of lesson Reflection of process with Jane	Jane's feedback on lesson Student feedback Recorded debrief of lesson between the three participants; further discussion of the local context
4 December 2015	Individual reflections (Aida and Laura)	Reflection essays by Aida and Laura Comments from MA TESOL course instructor

TABLE 1
Timeline of collaboration

It was decided that the two MA TESOL students would create a skimming and scanning lesson plan for a reading and writing class, based on the areas Jane expressed as objectives of the course. Over the next several weeks, the group of three exchanged ideas about some of the challenges that were present in the Timor-Leste university environment that would impact the design and execution of the lesson plan. These included the wide range of linguistic competencies within the classroom, limited classroom resources, and the differences between typical Timor-Leste pedagogical styles and the more Westernized approach brought in by many international teachers over the years (Appleby 2010). Such challenges closely resembled those Aida had encountered while working in Senegal.

In October, Aida and Laura jointly designed a two-hour lesson plan that Jane had offered to deliver in one of her classes. Initially, the range of obstacles (in terms of resource availability and language levels), as well as two distinct teaching styles coming together, yielded some challenges. However, with further dialogue, the two TESOL students created a reading lesson plan that required minimal printouts, drew on local topics and resources, and was designed to reach students with varying levels of language skills. Understandably, Aida and Laura approached the lesson planning stage differently based on their prior teaching experiences in their respective contexts and their TESOL education thus far. Their respective approaches reflected the differing ways in which they perceived Jane's role in her new teaching context and what constituted a successful lesson as a result of their collaboration. Their varied perspectives will be addressed further in subsequent sections of this article.

Jane implemented the lesson plan, as it was originally drafted, with her class of pre-service Timorese EFL teachers. Soon afterwards, all three participants spoke for the first time using the Google Hangout app. During this online discussion, Jane shared her reflections of the lesson plan and extensive comments from students, and further detailed her impressions of her context, which she had come to understand better upon arriving in Timor-Leste. Aida and Laura also shared some of their teaching experiences in relation to how they had dealt with similar obstacles, although neither of them had any specific experience working within the Timor-Leste education system.

For our research, we used content analysis (Saldaña 2011) to examine the data: the notes, transcripts, lesson plan, and written reflections were analysed to extract relevant themes relating to teaching collaboration and lesson plan appropriacy. In doing so, it quickly became clear that the two TESOL students emerged from the project with distinctly different views as to the foci of the collaborative project, and differing insights into both the context and practice could be interpreted. The following findings highlight the recurring themes with their respective excerpts from the data.

Complexities in collaboration

Despite the extensive reflection with Jane and the feedback from Jane's students in the form of comments written immediately after the lesson was delivered, it was difficult to ascertain which comments were indicative of shortcomings in the lesson plan. The students' feedback varied greatly;

for example it was not uncommon to find the same student describing the lesson as ‘confuse, happy, [and] boring’ [sic] or ‘interesting, difficulty, easy, [and] bored’ (student feedback on lesson). This was simply an unavoidable element within the data, and the comments had to be taken with a grain of salt without further information being made available. Importantly, the realities of collaboration made it clear that context is not the only driving force in lesson planning within this project. Arguably, the most difficult aspect of the collaborative teaching hinged on Laura and Aida’s efforts to negotiate control as they attempted to plan a lesson in line with their personal teaching styles and philosophies, while Jane also had to establish and preserve her authority and give the lesson a personal stamp.

Planning for an unfamiliar context

As noted, one challenging aspect of this project entailed the difficulties in planning a lesson for an unfamiliar context. To create a dichotomy between ESL and EFL environments in general would be a gross oversimplification of the complexities surrounding them. The linguistic-, social-, financial-, educational-, and school-level realities of a classroom influence countless components of lesson planning in layered and subtle ways. Thus, without personally knowing the specific class for which they were planning a lesson, Aida and Laura relied on the reports from Jane. Although an undoubtedly reliable source, each of Aida and Laura’s decisions in preparing the lesson plan were based on interpretations of a context they had not witnessed themselves. They relied on Jane’s interpretations to make lesson planning decisions, rather than relying on their own observations, interpretations, and instincts.

Negotiating control

When collaborating on the lesson, Aida and Laura were faced with a situation that required negotiated control. Each was in possession of very different teaching experiences in both ESL and EFL settings, meaning that they both approached teaching English in different ways. Specifically, while both drew on experiences from their TESOL programme, Aida also tapped into her teaching experience in Senegal, and Laura from her present experiences teaching at the US university where the two were studying. Yuan and Mak (op.cit.) point to diversity in backgrounds as a major challenge to successful collaborative action research. Relatedly, both students had different teaching styles. In order for the collaboration to succeed, several accommodations (for example how explicit to make the skill instruction) were made, and the final hybridized lesson plan was not something that either of them might have planned on their own. According to Barfield (op.cit.), learning to trust and have faith in another educator’s pedagogical content knowledge base and techniques is (a) a crucial skill in a contemporary educational climate, and (b) key to ensuring a successful collaboration in education. Having diversity in the research team did, however, enhance the collaboration because both the MA TESOL students interpreted the context of the lesson differently, a point to which we turn next.

Aida: grounded in equity

While Aida drew on her familiarity with under-resourced EFL contexts with large Senegalese class sizes in developing the lesson plan, the effects of her past experiences shined through her evaluation of the lesson. Focusing on some of the negative feedback from the students in the

class, Aida attributed the feedback to a mismatch in the EFL community of practice (Wenger 1998) for which the lesson was planned, the way it was taught, and with what the students in the Timor-Leste context were most familiar. As Aida put it, ‘To me, students’ comments on the lesson highlighted a big mismatch between what Jane thought they needed and what their real needs and expectations were’ (Aida’s reflection essay). As observed by Wenger (*ibid.*), communities of practice include people who possess a mutual interest in improving a certain practice, and function on both local and global scales. Aida addressed, in her reflections, issues on how different communities of practice are given different amounts of value and prestige in the TESOL community, which often creates division between countries in inner, outer, and expanding circles of English language prevalence (Kachru 1997). Countries such as Senegal or Timor-Leste, where English is not the primary home language, reside on the periphery in the TESOL world and are located within Kachru’s expanding circle. Consequently, the teaching techniques arising from their communities of practice are often assigned less prestige and value compared to many inner circle Western, ESL environments.

With these paradigms in mind as well as her familiarity with similar EFL contexts, Aida saw the students’ reflections as more accurate accounts of the success of the lesson as compared to Jane’s reports on the lesson’s efficacy. As explained by Aida, ‘it was not by pure coincidence that ... “bored/ boring” and “confused” appeared in total 22 times in 33 [student] responses’ (Aida’s reflection essay). Although Jane described the ways in which she came to understand the students’ needs, cultural learning styles, and language levels, Aida interpreted the students’ comments to mean that there was a discrepancy between what the students needed or preferred and what was delivered, despite the fact that there was also a lot of positive student feedback to balance the negative comments. Aida, who was sensitive to the micropolitical processes that characterized teacher collaborations (Achinstein *op.cit.*), found this experience to represent an imposition of Western-based teaching ideologies on EFL settings, resulting in an unfair power balance within the global TESOL community of practice. To remedy this, Aida subsequently (a) recommended greater emphasis on context-awareness for Western-educated language teachers moving abroad, to help them adapt their teaching styles to local existing approaches and (b) suggested that the issue could be mitigated by Jane taking ‘some distance from her American perception of “good teaching” and try[ing] to understand what it meant in the context she was in’ (Aida’s reflection essay). Only through this reflexive approach, Aida argued, can equity within communities of practice be addressed and students’ needs most appropriately met. It is important to note, however, that this was something that Jane had expressly been working on since her recent arrival in Timor-Leste, and something of which she was well aware.

Laura: grounded in context

While Laura also valued the feedback from Jane’s students and acknowledged the potential realities of imposing Western teaching philosophies in TESOL, she interpreted the success of the lesson quite differently than Aida. Most specifically, Laura relied on the feedback from Jane and her explanation and interpretations of the local context and

classroom situation to evaluate the lesson. As another Western-educated, American teacher who had taught in both ESL (the US) and EFL (Hong Kong) contexts, Laura recognized the ways in which Jane was positioned in her new context, how ‘her actual community and reality was not the same as the imagined community she likely had before being onsite’, and how this affected the way she was supposed to function within that context. [Bucholtz and Hall’s \(2005\)](#) ‘Relationality principle’ can be applied here, in that one’s identity is not autonomous but is discursively constructed. Put simply, one’s identity evolves as a result of the relations between various individuals within a given context.

In accordance with Bucholtz and Hall (*ibid.*), Laura recognized that Jane did not maintain an isolated, unchanging identity as she entered her new role in Timor-Leste. Rather, she was brought into a dynamic educational context that sought help from outside education providers, and she was positioned as an expert based on a unique set of circumstances. As a result of that positioning, it was expected that she would bring with her some of the Western-based teaching techniques that had worked for her in the past to help meet the high standards the institution had begun to set for itself in its quest to receive international accreditation. However, Jane also made a point to describe ways in which she was trying to situate herself in the context and move towards what [Samimy, Kim, Lee, and Kasai \(2011\)](#) describe as a transition from legitimate peripheral participation (given that she was still a newcomer and an outsider) to fuller participation. Through fuller participation, she would become an active, engaged, and influential member of the local English teaching community of practice. To do this, Jane had made connections with other stakeholders at the institution, got to know her students better, started working on ways to adapt her teaching to meet local norms without losing central elements of her teaching style, and initiated many other actions to make a positive impact through her teaching and mentoring. In her reflective essay, Laura recognized ways in which Jane seemed ‘to want to first understand the institutionalized realities before she interpreted her position within them’, instead of attempting to be a superimposing force clinging to and enforcing Western standards (Laura’s reflection essay). While there was sometimes pushback from the institution on what she had tried, Jane also knew that her position at the institution was designed to bring fresh perspectives to an educational context that had itself expressed the need and desire for outside assistance.

Thus, to assert that a historical power imbalance in TESOL can fully account for issues that arise in classroom teaching is too unidimensional. It is also important to recognize the reason *why* a given educator has entered a context and *how* she was subsequently positioned within it. In the current case, Jane came as part of an international partnership promoted by the Timor-Leste Government with an expressed purpose of helping to bring fresh pedagogical insights to the local educational system. Without disregarding the political and social realities of the Timor-Leste context, we argue that such partnerships have the potential to infuse both the local and global communities of practice with richer, more dynamic pedagogical practices.

Aims revisited

The present study seeks to better understand context-driven lesson planning and cross-cultural collaboration. The difficulties in context-driven lesson planning were most apparent in the ways in which Aida and Laura struggled to negotiate control in planning a cohesive lesson based solely on context as it was communicated to them through another person, Jane, who was still getting to know the local context herself. As seen from Jane's experience, it takes time and serious commitment to adequately understand an educational setting and then to create effective lesson plans that fit into the customs of the local community of practice.

Despite the inherent difficulties in cross-cultural collaboration and, in fact, any form of collaboration, having a diversity of perspectives is hugely beneficial to keeping a lesson rooted in sound pedagogical principles (Celce-Murcia 2014; Yuan and Mak op.cit.). Aida's commitment to professionalism and the wider teaching community helped the lesson and post-lesson reflection remain grounded in equity between all parties (i.e. the teachers involved in the project). Simultaneously, Laura's understanding of Jane, based on similar experiences and positioning, provided other perspectives, especially when it came to the lesson and feedback on it. Together, these two perspectives meant that Aida and Laura not only approached the lesson based on their own experiences in teaching and learning, but also gained insight throughout the process to apply to future lesson plans, recognizing and accommodating the complexities surrounding ELT.²

Teaching implications

Often in English language education, a teacher will borrow a lesson plan from a co-worker, get ideas from the internet, or take something directly out of a textbook and try to use it in the classroom. In spite of the wealth of resources available to teachers today, there is no one-size-fits-all in lesson planning, given the vast sphere that EFL occupies (Celce-Murcia op.cit.). Even lessons contained within the most widely used textbooks require a critical eye and adaptation by the teacher. When writing lesson plans for others to use, Aida and Laura found that they needed to develop a more flexible lesson plan and place trust in their own teacher intuitions, rather than create overly rigid instructions that may not function as well outside of their intended context. Such a pedagogical stance is consistent with Kumaravadivelu's (2012) post-method approach and Barfield's (op. cit.) assertion that teachers need to trust their professional instincts. Significantly, anyone adopting a lesson plan must immediately evaluate it with a critical eye as it applies to their individual students' profiles. In retrospect, uncertainties in planning the lesson coupled with reflections on how it could have been improved require a lot of time and first-hand observations.

When planning a lesson, then, there are multiple intrinsic and extrinsic components that need to be taken into consideration. Beyond simply relying on pedagogical philosophies that one has acquired either through training or experience, teachers must also account for *how* their own cultural biases may impact their pedagogical practices, a point to which Aida was particularly sensitive (Waller *et al.* op.cit.). Acknowledging one's own culturally based styles and philosophies without recognizing

and incorporating the local culture and educational styles is not only an ethical concern but can also result in a detrimental mismatch in a lesson's execution. In that respect, Jane's attempts to better understand the Timor-Leste educational context and her students are decidedly commendable and worthy of emulation.

In relation to other teaching contexts, the implications of the findings from this single act of collaboration are twofold. First, collaboration and the sharing of materials are only valuable insomuch as all parties (a) can acknowledge their cultural and/or pedagogical biases that may play a role in their decision-making processes and affect both the collaboration and product; and (b) are willing to create a product that can be adapted to suit users' unique contexts. Further, in consideration of these biases and context, teachers adopting the products of such collaborations must also evaluate the role that they themselves play in that context and consider how they might challenge the educational norms in an institution, why they are doing so, and whether such intervention will have a positive or negative impact. In the case of the present study, it is also possible that, despite Aida and Laura having had teaching experience, their current status as students may have created a further distancing and power imbalance in relation to their collaboration with Jane that may have affected the efficacy of the project's implementation.

Conclusion

Understandably, crossing boundaries and collaborating with different communities of practice in an age of globalized TESOL can broaden perspectives and enhance educational practices that are mediated through international partnerships. As illustrated in our article, the three partners in this study found that the scope of possibility in collaborating between contexts is dependent on the level of negotiation among involved parties and the degree of cultural sensitivity exercised by them. For this reason, as English language teaching professionals, we should neither be blinded by the cultural norms and paradigms of our respective teaching contexts nor assume that they can be applied in any context and by any educator. Finally, we must also critically examine not only the teaching materials we produce, but also the ones we use from other sources when attempting to enhance language-learning outcomes.

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Notes

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- 1 One criticism resulting from educational policy changes aided by international organizations in non-Western contexts is that it is culturally biased in favour of Western pedagogy and policy. In such cases, some agencies approach educational reform under the impression that 'the only workable paradigm for development is the normative, externally established, Western model of advanced, globally integrated market economies' (Appleby op.cit.: 23). These forms of Western-based

developmental aid, in particular those related to English language education, can sometimes be found to be problematic in that their reliance (or perceived reliance) on Western values and models may be inappropriate fits for non-Western contexts (Kumaravadivelu op.cit.). They can also cause tensions between national hosts and international foundations that result in ineffective partnerships. This issue is not the focus of this study. However, it is something that must be acknowledged in light of the reflections of one of the participants, Aida.

2 Admittedly, this isolated lesson, while paying heed to teaching or planning for unfamiliar contexts and creating a product tailored to the context, must not overlook structural forces such as the need to use commercial teaching materials—sometimes mandated by local governments—that are produced by the ELT industry. Furthermore, even with the negotiation between Aida and Laura in this study, the end product was still subject to adaptation by Jane that was beyond their control. This discursively negotiated arrangement in turn necessitated some degree of flexibility on everyone's part.

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