

Asynchronous online forum discussion as an aid in helping teacher-learners perceive themselves as EFL teachers

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Abstract

Many researchers (e.g., Wright, 2010) point to the need for teacher education to allow opportunities for pre-service teachers to draw on their past learning experiences and develop critical reflective skills. This study explores the use of peer-moderated asynchronous online forum discussions in a master's level class on EFL teaching methodology to afford teacher-learners the opportunity to confront and debate new ideas. Using discourse and corpus analysis the research investigates how the teacher-learners and moderators refer to themselves and others. Teacher-learner perception of the use of the online forum mode is evaluated. Some evidence was found that such collaboration contributed to the teacher-learners perceiving themselves as teachers.

Keywords: asynchronous CMC; teacher-learners; formation of EFL teacher identity

1. Introduction

Over recent years the concept of the identity of the language teacher has increasingly drawn the interest of researchers. Understanding of the process of language teaching has moved from initial interest in teacher cognition (e.g., Woods, 1996; Borg, 2003), through studies of how teachers deal with the challenges of

teaching (e.g., Nunan & Lamb, 1996) and research on specific teacher competences, such as course design (Graves, 1996) or the design of language teaching tasks (Johnson, 2003), which aim to make explicit the unseen theories and knowledge used by teachers in their practice and, through study of expertise, which aims to uncover the competences the effective teacher needs to develop (e.g., Peck, 1988). However, over a similar period of time, questions were beginning to be raised about language teacher education, as research was found to show a lack of correspondence between what was included on teacher education programs and how graduates of those same programs subsequently taught (see Richards, 2008, for a comprehensive analysis). Initially, fault was thought to be in the content of such programs. Debate on the balance between theory and practice ensued, but gradually came an understanding that it was perhaps the pedagogy of teacher education that needed consideration. Johnson (2006), in a seminal article, drew attention to “the sociocultural turn”, indicating that the organization of teacher education programs into discrete subjects based on a model of transmission of learning from “experts” to passive recipients was out of step with prevailing views on how learning takes place.

2. Teacher learning

Let us now turn to the concept of teacher learning and trace how it is believed to happen. Leading on from work on the beliefs of language teachers, research has studied beliefs of teacher-learners (i.e., those participating in initial or in-service courses leading to qualification) as they engage in educational programs. Beliefs are seen here as “implicit assumptions about students, learning, the classroom and the subject matter to be taught” (Kagan, 1992, p. 66). Phipps and Borg (2009, p. 381) underline the fact that the beliefs of teacher-learners about education are formed by their learning experience (Holt Reynolds, 1992; Lortie, 1975) and that this may prove stronger than subsequent university learning (Kagan, 1992; Richardson, 1996), may color the participants’ perception of the learning process (Pajares, 1992) and have an influence on how they teach language (Freeman & Richards, 1996).

In a study of six teachers on an in-service teacher education course Borg (2011, p. 378) found that teacher beliefs could be “strengthened and extended” and that teachers could “develop links between their beliefs and theory” (p. 378). Yuan and Lee (2014) also demonstrate that teacher-learner beliefs undergo a process of change, particularly during the teaching practicum. By contrast, Lamb (1995, p. 79) claims that transmission based courses have no impact on teacher-learner beliefs. Mattheoudakis (2007), tracking pre-service EFL teacher beliefs across a four year program, found there was a statistically significant difference in

some areas of belief (as measured on Horwitz's [1985] BALLI questionnaire) between the start and the final year of the course. Following Malderez and Bodóczy (1999), she suggests that learners use incoming information in order to reconstruct their existing internal knowledge and recommends designing the teacher education course to promote the raising of awareness of beliefs held, help teacher-learners reflect on these and on their past experience and to critically evaluate them. This is echoed by Phipps and Borg (2009, p. 389), who hold that teacher learning takes place through discussion of practices and beliefs.

For teacher-learners to make sense of experiences social constructivist theory suggests that opportunities are needed for them to actively engage in discussion and dialogue, most effectively with peers (Jonassen et al., 1995). Knowledge construction is an active process where information and ideas from multiple sources are fused and transformed, moving from the external social space to the internal psychological place (Vygotsky, 1986). Language, and most importantly dialogue, is the tool through which higher order thinking takes place, as by making ideas explicit in words, expanding, defending or modifying our point of view and incorporating or restructuring ideas of others we reach new knowledge and understanding. When dialogue is in written form, this process is deepened, as the fact that there is time for deliberation, exploration, or verification of new information, enriches the process, while having to share ideas in print, removed from the immediate feedback obtained in face to face communication, focuses participants on conveying their thoughts as clearly and unambiguously as possible, a process which in itself builds reflection (Pena-Schaff, Martin, & Gay, 2001, p. 65).

3. Becoming a teacher: The process of identity formation

Barkhuizen (2017) collected the views of 41 different teaching professionals on language teacher identity, building a composite picture of complex, multiple and dynamic identities which evolve and change through contact with others in discussion and social interaction and through "material interactions with spaces, places and objects in classrooms, institutions, and online" (p. 4). He concluded that "language teachers constantly strive to make sense of themselves; reflectively, they work towards understanding who they are and who they desire or fear to be" (p. 4).

Danielewicz (2001, p. 3) sees "'becoming a teacher' as an identity forming process whereby individuals define themselves and are viewed by others as teachers". Someone becomes a teacher by "learning to see themselves that way" (p. 4). At the start of a teacher education program teacher-learners see themselves as students, whereas by the end they need to consider themselves teachers (p. 9). Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2016, p. 318) consider that the development of

teacher identity is “investment in becoming and being a teacher”, a process during which the teacher-learner exercises agency, “the capacity to participate and be responsible for their own learning” (p. 318). In studying the development of pre-service language teacher-learners they believe that the process of identity formation requires the teacher-learner to actively strive to develop a professional identity. Professional teacher identity, however, does not exist in isolation but is embedded in the dynamic and complex context of school. Varghese et al. (2005, p. 39) propose that during language teacher education we are concerned with *identity-in-discourse* where “agency is discursively constituted mainly through language, focusing primarily on critical reflexivity” and *identity-in-practice* which is concerned with action in a given context during activities on the course.

4. The pedagogy of teacher education and identity formation

Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2016) argue that the process of development of identity can only take place in the context of teacher education if the experience allows the individual to exercise agency. Thus, the type of task needs to allow for the taking of responsibility and afford the participants autonomous action, while acknowledging that the pre-service teacher carries with them all past and current experience as learner, language learner and teacher, together with their aspirations for the future. Singh and Richards (2006, p. 152) hold that language teacher identity is “‘woven’ through the ideologies, discourses, contents and approaches of the [teacher education] course, and the individual teacher’s own desire to find meaning in becoming a teacher”. They see the language teacher education course as a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which all participants engage and share to collaboratively construct knowledge. Varghese et al. (2005) propose that the language teacher education course needs to incorporate three levels of activity: collaborative tasks in a community, tasks aimed at raising “meta-awareness” of how knowledge is created through shared experience, and tasks to promote “critical reflexivity” (p. 39). Johnson and Golombek (2013, p. 2) argue for what they describe as narrative activity as key in helping teacher-learners “make sense of their teaching and learning experiences”. They hold that through talking or writing about experience the participant exposes their inner processes, confronts them and has the opportunity to analyze and understand them. Narrative, produced by the teacher-learner, they claim, “makes explicit the interconnectedness between *what is learned* and *how it is learned*” (p. 2), thus it is an important mediational tool for learning.

A common thread running through all of these views is the central importance of discursive activity. Johnson (2006, p. 241) points out that language teacher education needs to address how to accommodate this in order to allow

teacher-learners the opportunity for meaning-making and co-development of knowledge, while Ruohotie-Lyhty (2013) claims that language teacher education programs fail to give space for the development of identity.

5. The role of computer mediated communication in teacher learning

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is used here to refer to dialogue and discussion in the written form which takes place synchronously (such as chat) or asynchronously (such as discussion forums, blogs and wikis). Asynchronous forms have been found to be of most benefit for educational purposes as they offer participants time to deliberate and consider before responding. In addition, the second or foreign language learner has the opportunity to monitor and edit their writing before posting, a fact which may encourage even less confident learners to participate. Newman, Webb and Cochrane (1995) found that in a computer based seminar discussion interaction differed from that in a face to face seminar, with more higher-order thinking evidenced. In CMC discussion forums communication is symmetrical, with all participants having equal rights to engage and initiate, as opposed to the traditional course room where asymmetrical communication is prevalent as a result of the often hierarchical position of the teacher educator, and educator-led communication. The increased democracy afforded by CMC may be motivating for learners. For the purposes of research CMC offers an accessible database for analysis of teacher learning (Lucas, Gunawardena, & Moreira, 2014).

Several factors influencing the quality of interaction in CMC have been identified. Scardamelia and Bereiter (2003), and Wegerif (1998) point to the fact that the relationship between participants has a powerful influence. Where members know each other well there appears to be more disclosure and greater engagement when compared with discussions among participants who have never "met". Wang, Woo and Zhao (2009) indicate the importance of the choice of topic. Learners should be able to exercise agency and have the right to choose. They also recommend that the topic should be "challenging and controversial enough to trigger different opinions" (p. 102). Thus, it is not enough to include CMC on a teacher education course, but care must be taken in its design, purpose and use.

In sum, CMC has been found to provide a vehicle for discursive activity of the type called for by Johnson (2006), Varghese et al. (2005) and Singh and Richards (2006). CMCs have been used in many contexts in teacher education such as discussion of student-generated case studies (Bonk et al., 1998); journaling and peer observation (Lord & Lomicka, 2007); discussion and reflective on the teaching practicum (Liou, 2001).

Arnold and Ducate (2006) used asynchronous CMC to link the teacher-learners from two different US universities studying foreign language teaching methodology

within a program for future teaching assistants in a semester-long study. The aim was to engage the teacher-learners in reflection on the course content through providing the possibility for interaction. It was found that asynchronous CMC led to deep processing and that teacher-learners actively engaged in the discussions which they evaluated as useful and interesting. This engagement led them to create their own community of learning and they claimed that they would make use of CMCs in the future in their own teaching.

Johnson and Golombek (2013) researched the use of blogs during the teaching practicum. Teacher-learners blogged on their experience during the teaching practicum in a private setting where only their teacher-educator had access to their writing. Through targeted questioning the teacher educator could also push the teacher-learners into reflective thinking about critical incidents occurring during lessons. The process was also found to help the teacher-learner deal with their emotions during teaching practicum.

A small number of studies have explored identity formation within teacher education courses with the use of CMC. Riordan and Murray (2012) examined data taken from three cohorts of teacher-learners on an MA in English Language Teaching who engaged in both face to face and CMC sessions (blog, chat and discussion forums). The discourse was analyzed using corpus-analysis software for three aspects of Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice, "namely, mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998; Davies, 2005; Clarke, 2008)" (p. 94). For the purposes of seeing if teacher-learners considered themselves as teachers (i.e., as having a teacher identity) within examination of *joint enterprise* the authors produced concordances for the word *we*, which were then examined for referents. *Shared repertoire* was perceived as language referring to the practice of teaching and frequency counts were used to identify most commonly occurring words. Of the top 50 a large number were shown to be related to teaching and learning. The authors conclude that there was some evidence of "identity formation within the teaching community" (Riordan & Farr, 2015, p. 99). Riordan and Farr (2015) made use of Labovian narrative analysis and discourse analysis on data from the same study. They found that the participants exhibit "novice identities", positioning themselves on the outside edge of the teaching community, demonstrating that although they have levels of understanding and pedagogical content knowledge they do not yet feel fully professional.

Kitade (2014), in the context of a teacher education course for native speaker teachers of Japanese, examined CMC between the teacher-learners and L2 speakers of Japanese in other countries. In place of a more conventional practicum the teacher-learners acted as online tutors over a period of one semester. Using written tasks set by the teacher educator, pairs of teacher-learners

were asked to work together and respond to the writing received from 2-3 college level learners, both in terms of task completion and language. The discussion and feedback took place in the course room, with the pair of teacher-learners sharing one computer. Their discussions were recorded and served as additional data to the CMC transcripts. Kitade (2014) concluded that this kind of experience played a role in helping the teacher-learners develop teacher identities.

6. The study

6.1. Research design

English language teaching methodology is taught by the author in the second year of a two-year MA program leading to a qualification in English language teaching at a Polish university. It is an integrated hybrid course, comprising lectures (30 hours), face to face classes (15 hours), and an online component (15 hours). The course consists of a number of thematic modules, with 2 hours of lectures, one face to face class and an online component (on Moodle) on each. Each online module includes a selection of reference materials, both academic articles and links to articles, films, materials or websites for teachers. Accompanying each theme there is a discussion forum, containing three-four threads, each with starter questions. To get a credit for the online component, participants are required to obtain a specified number of points. These are obtained by taking an active part in discussions (i.e., contributing a minimum of three posts in a weekly forum in order to score points), completing online written feedback on a module, and contributing to the setting up and moderation of a discussion and completing three accompanying assignments, two individual and one collaborative.

The online forum task was designed firstly to give participants the possibility to refer to their personal learning experience, their experiences from their practicum (which was running concurrently) and to clarify any issues arising from the lectures or online materials. In addition, it was to give them first-hand experience of a collaborative task, running an online discussion of academic and teaching/learning issues, with the aim of widening their repertoire of possible teaching methodology. The accompanying assignments aimed to covertly model possible procedures for assessment of collaborative tasks, incorporating reflection and self-evaluation. From a social perspective, the task aimed to build skills of cooperation, problem-solving, time management and communication, all of which comply with the national qualifications framework for higher education. In other words, the task aimed to force a shift from a lecturer-centered transmission model to a participatory, learner-centered focus, by removing the lecturer from the central role altogether. Clear instructions, a robust framework and

time schedule; and the gamification aspect of credit through points (for which I thank my colleague Anna Turula) ensured that course aims could be met, while allowing for experimentation. It is one of these thirteen asynchronous discussion forums which is the focus of this study.

6.2. Research questions

The project set out to investigate whether taking part in asynchronous CMC assisted in the development of teacher identity. To this effect the following research questions were posed:

- (1) Is there evidence in the CMC of the teacher-learners identifying themselves as teachers?
- (2) What is the teacher-learners' perception of the use of CMC?
- (3) How do the moderators of the chosen forum perceive the experience?
- (4) Is there evidence that the moderation experience assists in the formation of teacher identity?

6.3. Participants

Participants in the study described here were 30 students (5 male and 25 female), ranging in age from 23 to 45, with the majority in their early 20's. The MA program is English-medium and this was a foreign language for 28 of the participants and the second language for two of them, who were bilingual. The teacher-learners were required to reach level C2 (CEFR) in English by the end of the second year of the program.

6.4. Instruments

A variety of sources were used for data, the main being scripts from a selected CMC Discussion Forum, which ran from 18-24 November, 2017. Also used were: teacher-learner feedback forms completed at the end of the whole course; teacher-learner online forms giving feedback on the selected module (four closed questions and two open questions, one of which asked "What was the most interesting part of this topic for you?"); individual assignments and a collaborative evaluation assignment completed by the teacher-learner forum moderators (described in the section below).

In order to choose one forum as a case study, teacher-learner feedback forms on the course as a whole were examined for evidence of reference to the CMC. Teacher-learner perception of the CMC was gauged partly on this basis. Next, teacher-learner feedback forms for each module were examined to see if

any of the forums received particular mention. On the basis of this, two forums emerged as popular: the forum on motivation (week 9) and the forum on focus on form (week 7). The focus on form forum was chosen as a case study as it occurred in the middle of the course. It was moderated by a team of three female participants, who produced starter questions for three themed discussion threads on Moodle. Teacher-learner feedback forms on the module also served to gauge teacher-learner perception of the CMC.

6.5. Procedure

Teacher-learners were instructed to form small groups of 3-4 people and were then given a list of the topics for forums which could be included in the course, together with the dates these would take place. Where possible, participant groups chose the topic they wanted, although some topics were over-subscribed and second choices had to be made. Each small group had the responsibility of proposing 3-4 starter questions for the discussion of one topic (dependent on the number of members in the group), organizing how they would run the forum, and then moderating the discussion. The stated goal for each small group was “to get as many people as possible engaged and discussing aspects of the topic with the aim of helping them to understand it better”. The discussion forum was open to all participants for a set time, which was usually seven days, after which it locked down, precluding further contributions. Participants were given general instructions in how to post the threads, but complete freedom in how they chose to moderate.

After the closure of their discussion the members of the moderating group had seven days to write three short pieces of work. The first asked them about their learning and for practical information on the course content. In 300-500 words they were asked to answer the following questions.

- (1) What have you learnt about the topic as a result of what was written on the forum? Did you change your perception of the topic? Did you learn something new? Did something surprise or puzzle you?
- (2) Did you refer to the source materials for the topic? What did you use and how?
- (3) Please make any suggestions you like about the source materials for the topic. Should they be changed? Should something be added?

Assessment criteria were stated and the number of possible points (5-10) given. The criteria were as follows: your ability to reflect critically on your experience – 70%, clarity of argumentation, supportive use of examples, justification – 25%, and language – 5%.

The second assignment asked participants to reflect in 250-300 words on task performance: what they did personally, how they coped, what went well,

what could have been done better, what they would change next time and what they learnt from the experience. The criteria for assessment were "ability to give a clear description and explanation" and 1-5 points could be obtained.

The final assignment (300-500 words) was to be done as a group, with one collaborative piece of work submitted, for which each member would receive the same number of points. They were asked to evaluate how their little group had managed the task of setting up and running the forum. Again, the assessment criteria and possible number of points (1-5) were stated.

During the fifteen week course the teacher-learners took part in thirteen asynchronous discussions, all of them obtaining a credit on the online component. The discussion forums were conducted in English. Once the discussion forum for analysis had been selected quantitative and qualitative analysis was conducted. First patterns of engagement on the chosen forum were investigated, by producing a dated and timed log for each teacher-learner, with the aim of assessing the length of time each teacher-learner spent on the task and how often they visited the forum. This was then compared with their overall activity on all the forums. The number of moderator posts for each thread was counted and then calculated as a percentage of the total number of posts for that thread.

The three discussion threads of the chosen forum of the CMC were then analyzed using a modified version of methodology employed by Riordan and Murray (2012), that is searching the corpus of all the posts on each thread of the forum separately using the words *we* and *teacher* as prompts. It was hypothesized that *we* could be used to signal membership of the community of teachers (Lave & Wenger, 1991), while *teacher(s)* could signal that the teacher-learners felt apart from the profession. The Microsoft Word document search function was used and examples found were then highlighted for further analysis. Each thread was treated separately so as to check if there were any factors which appeared to impact on the findings. Examples of the target words were then analyzed in context, within the post, in the sequence of posts, and in the discussion thread as a whole. Teacher-learner moderator posts were treated separately. The whole thread was then read iteratively and further samples of text which did not fit the categories but which were felt to be indicative of expression of teacher identity were also highlighted. In this way the study differs from that of Riordan and Murray (2012) which analyzed a much larger corpus obtained from a large number of posts across a period of three years with three separate cohorts of teacher-learners. By contrast, this is a small-scale, fine-grained study using both corpus and discourse analysis of posts within the context of selected discussion threads. In this way it was hoped that more could be discovered about the impact of the moderator and the questions on the discourse and on identity formation.

The final stage was to read the three assignments written by the three moderators after the end of the discussion forum. The moderation experience was

hypothesized as a first-hand experience of what could be conceived as teaching, given the stated aim of the forum task ("to get as many people as possible engaged and discussing aspects of the topic with the aim of helping them to understand it better") and teacher-learner moderator responses were considered with this in mind. The assignments were investigated from two perspectives: for evidence of critical reflection in order to discover the teacher-learner moderators' perception of the CMC exercise, and for evidence of emerging teacher identity.

6.6. Findings

Across the thirteen forums included in the course there were a total of 1044 posts. Teacher-learners contributed between 16 and 95 posts each, excluding moderation posts. The mean number of participant posts was 34.8 and the median 31. A number of individuals ($N = 7$) emerged as more "verbal" than others, systematically contributing well above the average number of posts. A similar number ($N = 6$) were economical in their posts, or failed to take part in some forums altogether. This indicates that despite the fact that this was a credit-bearing course teacher-learners exercised agency in the extent of their engagement, with some choosing the minimal response needed to obtain a credit. Quantity, however, is only part of the picture. Qualitative analysis shows another perspective.

The discussion could be considered highly cohesive, with a large number of discourse markers linking comments to earlier posts. As posts in the forum on Moodle do not always appear in sequence (despite clicking on the Reply button to a particular message the response does not always appear underneath that message), teacher-learners often used nomination in their responses to make clear to which post they were responding. Thus, even though most individuals were posting only once, the whole can be considered a discussion. It includes numerous examples of the posing of a point of view, followed by justification or explanation; statements of agreement, or disagreement also with justification or explanation; expansion of ideas posed by the writer, or of those posed by another writer. In addition, synthesis or re-statement in summarized form of earlier posts with further expansion were found. There are also calls for clarification of ideas directed to nominated participants.

RQ1: Is there evidence in the CMC of the teacher learners identifying themselves as teachers?

To investigate for signs of teacher identity each discussion thread was investigated separately. Of the three it was Thread 3 that seemed to elicit the largest number of statements which could be considered to express membership of the teaching community. 14 of the 27 teacher-learners taking part (including moderators)

seemed to affiliate themselves in this way. By contrast, 8 of the teacher-learners distanced themselves, referring to “teachers” as apart from themselves. The following Extract 1 illustrates the use of *we* to denote the identity of a teacher. Underlining in this extract and all that follow is added here as highlighting. It was not present in the original posts. All posts have been reproduced verbatim, including mistakes in language and spelling.

Extract 1:

I think that with young learners, teachers should focus more on the meaning. Firstly, it's more important that they understand what we're saying and they reply to what we're saying. It's not really important whether they're using the right grammar. Secondly, learners might feel discouraged if we keep correcting their mistakes

This can be contrasted with a more distanced response provided in Extract 2:

Extract 2:

I would agree with that statement. I think it may be due to the way the teachers themselves were taught, therefore they use the same methods as they see them as most effective. However, they may not be aware of the fact that drilling may become boring for the students, therefore it would be beneficial for pupils to take part in a lesson which is enriched by the songs and fun activities.

Here the teacher-learner appears to view teachers as “other” and in describing a possible alternative to drilling uses an indirect form, “it would be beneficial for pupils (...)”, thus avoiding expression of involvement. Note that in Extract 1 the writer moves from “teachers” in the first sentence to “we” in the second, while in Extract 2 no such shift is made.

An interesting sequence was identified in this thread. A teacher-learner begins by making a post which may be interpreted as a “outsider” view, using “teachers” and “they”, although an example activity is suggested. The moderator responds positively, thanking the teacher-learner for their “excellent” contribution of an example task and then asks directly: “would you use this kind of an exercise with children aged 10 and above or does it apply to the younger learners only?” In this question the moderator uses the word *you* to position the teacher-learner in the role of the teacher. In the response the teacher-learner shifts their stance and replies as a teacher:

Extract 3:

Probably only with the learners around 7-8. With the older learners I would probably practise short dialogues where a specific form is used.

The moderator here appears to have taken on the role of mediator in the Vygotskian sense, helping the teacher-learner to view the situation from a new perspective through modelling. They demonstrate in this way that they see themselves as having teacher identity and consider their teacher-learner colleague as part of the same community.

It may be, however, that other factors are at play which may affect the teacher-learner responses. In each of the three threads there is some evidence of contingency in sequence appearing to affect the language used. In other words, if one teacher-learner starts to position himself/herself as a teacher, there may be a mirroring effect in the following posts. This is illustrated in the following sequence from Thread 1. It should be pointed out that this sequence of posts was not contingent in time, but occurred over a period of two days. Prior to the first teacher-learner's post there had been a run of 9 posts referring neutrally to theory.

Extract 4:

Teacher-learner 1. I'd say that it is good to start with focus on form and then move to the meaning. A class designed strictly to the form can help students understand the form better and gives us base to work later on. Gradually there should be more emphasis on meaning than on form but starting from the form seems okay.

Teacher-learner 2. What about younger learners? I think you focus more on the meaning first, it's not really important how they communicate their ideas, it's important that they understand what we're saying to them and they can reply, even though often it's not grammatically correct.

Teacher-learner 3. I think these two approaches are equally important and needed in the FL classroom. It's also essential not to neglect/or overuse one of them. And when it comes to teaching, I guess it's better to have both planned and incidental learning tasks, so a learner can effectively grasp and improve both grammatical and communicative skills.

It should be stressed that although there is some evidence of such clusters, there are also lone posts where a teacher-learner responds with a teacher stance even though the preceding and subsequent posts are neutral or distanced.

In Thread 1 also noted were cases when teacher-learners appear to shift their position. In the following extract we see suggestions of this within one post.

Extract 5:

I agree with (name). In my experience as a teacher I've met a lot of students who didn't want to talk because they were afraid of making mistakes. I think it is mainly because too many teachers put too much focus on form instead of meaning. It is hard to say whether one is more important than the other, yet, I think that teachers should encourage students to try to express their thoughts. If students' level is not too

advanced, and they are still in the process of learning, it is important for them to try to talk, since not the grammatical correctness is so important here, but the fact whether they can communicate what they want to communicate.

In the first sentence the teacher-learner makes a clear statement of affiliation as a teacher. The second sentence may be considered a generalization and so will be ignored, but in the third sentence the teacher-learner places themselves outside the “circle” by stating that “teachers should (...)”, apparently excluding themselves. Alternatively, it may be that this is an expression of agency, with the teacher-learner seeing themselves as a teacher, but not the sort of teacher who puts “too much focus on form”, rather, set apart from that type of teacher. If we accept this interpretation, then the final sentence could be seen as a statement from the teacher-learner-as-teacher about their own praxis. The difficulty of interpretation here clearly indicates the limitations of using CMC text without recourse to follow up interviews with participants, or the limitations of this particular study which lacks other data on identity for triangulation.

RQ2: What is the teacher-learners’ perception of the use of CMC?

For each module on the course teacher-learners were asked to complete an electronic questionnaire on an online platform. Feedback included both the lectures, face to face classes and the online component. In response to the question “What was the most interesting part of this topic for you?” referring to the selected Focus on Form module 50% (11 out of 22) of the responses specifically referred to the discussion forum. Of these several appeared to be written from the perspective of a teacher, as in the following examples taken from teacher-learner responses in the feedback form on focus on form module:

Extract 6:

Teacher-learner 1. I think the most interesting for me was the discussion of form-focused instructions when running a lesson with young learners. Almost everyone has the same views concerning the issue and suggests that this method would be useful for older students.

Teacher-learner 2. The part in which we discussed whether we should pay attention to FonF or FonM when it comes to young ss.

Teacher-learner 3. I liked the discussion thread about focus on form with young learners. Many people had interesting ideas on how to implement grammar into the lesson so that children learn grammar but are not bored with it.

In feedback on the whole course, written by hand during the final lecture, the teacher-learners ($N = 13$) were asked to respond to the following two

statements relating to the online component on a five-point Likert scale from 1 ("I totally disagree") to 5 ("I agree absolutely"). It should be noted that only 43% of the teacher-learners completed the feedback, so this information should be treated cautiously (see Table 1). Some additional comments were added such as the ones below:

7. It is a good idea to have an online component in the Didactics course.

8. I would prefer to have 30 hours of face to face classes and no online course

Table 1 Teacher-learner responses to end-of-course feedback

Question number	Values on a five-point Likert scale					No response	Mean
	5	4	3	2	1		
7.	8 (61.5%)	4 (30.7%)	0	0	1	0	4.3
8.	1	1	0	4 (30.7%)	6 (46.1%)	1	1.8

It can be seen from the feedback that those who completed the form were in generally in favor of the online component. One participant was strongly against, commenting "the opinion is dictated by a preference to have face to face contact with the lecturer". The same person suggested that lectures should be more in the form of discussions, "perhaps based on reading assignments given before the lecture". This would suggest that the opportunity for discussion is needed, but perhaps the comment expresses a covert request for more participation from the teacher educator, rather than only with peers and for a more theoretical discussion.

RQ3: How do the moderators of the chosen forum perceive the experience?

Data was taken from assignments completed by the three moderators responsible for the forum on focus on form. The three moderators decided not to be individually responsible for separate discussion threads (which was the most common choice on the course), but to work together and moderate the whole forum collaboratively. Two of the teacher-learners reported that in preparation for running the forum they thoroughly studied related material on the topic, both the resources on the Moodle, lecture notes and internet sources.

Extract 7:

First of all, you need to prepare yourself, refresh knowledge on the topic in order to be able to provide a relevant answer to participants' responses. This is quite challenging, since you may not agree with their answers, even though these may be right. Also,

as a person running a forum, you need to go beyond basic knowledge in, to be able to elaborate on your answers.

This comment seems to suggest that the teacher-learner perceives the moderator as a “knower” as they feel expected to “provide a relevant answer to participants’ responses” and need to be able to demonstrate knowledge through being able to “elaborate on” their answers. This appears to contrast somewhat with the view of another teacher-learner-moderator, who writes: “I have learned that you need to be very open minded and ask thought provoking questions if you want to sustain the interest in the forum”. Here the teacher-learner appears to view moderating as management of interaction, rather than being concerned with their own levels of knowledge.

When commenting on what they learnt from the moderation experience, two of the three teacher-learners point to the value of gaining new perspectives. The following teacher-learner extract indicates a relationship with the other members of the group, referring to them as “your respondents”. While this could be taken to indicate a hierarchical relationship with the other participants, it is not clear that this was the writer’s intention.

Extract 8:

Additionally, I realized that you can overcome your subjectivism on the topic once you read various opinions of your respondents - this is very fascinating since sometimes they come up with such things you would have never realised which definitely give food for thought. In general, it was very educative experience since it enables you to look at things from different perspectives (taking into considerations perspectives of your respondents).

The third moderator firmly placed themselves in the role of the teacher and reflected on the content of the forum rather than the process.

Extract 9:

I have learnt that it is not always advisable to introduce focus on form to young learners. Of course, most of us agreed that it has a positive effect on the second language proficiency of young learners, but in this level of their learning they do not pay much attention to it, as they are not able to fully understand it. As a teacher I would try to manipulate tasks to suit learners at primary school level, in a way that they would be (even a bit) aware of the focus on form. Of course this is challenging to implement it in an interesting way, thus some teachers just prefer to skip it.

Interestingly, the teacher-learner moderator appears to place the other forum participants in the same teaching community, using “most of us” apparently to refer to “us teachers”, positioning themselves as a peer.

RQ4: Is there evidence that the moderation experience assists in the formation of teacher identity?

In addition to perspectives already revealed in the previous section, the final evidence that was used to trace for signs of teacher identity were the posts made by the moderators during the discussion. It was already indicated that one of the moderators addressed another teacher-learner from a teacher stance. Across the three discussion threads the moderators asked a total of sixteen questions, ten of which were in response to teacher-learner statements and were directed to nominated teacher-learners. All of these questions were from the stance of the teacher and tended to ask for information about classroom practice, as in the example below.

Extract 10:

[Name of teacher-learner] you said that you would implement focus on form gradually, so, how would you start? First, would you focus on form a bit when teaching tenses or something different?

The remainder of the questions addressed theoretical aspects and were posed in a more neutral way.

7. Discussion and conclusion

At this point it should be stressed that the data discussed above comes from a case study of one discussion forum with a small number of teacher-learner participants in a specific context. For this reason, generalization cannot be made to a wider population. In addition, analysis of the data has been done by one researcher and is consequently open to charges of subjectivism. This is compounded by the fact that there is little data on teacher identity available, other than the content of the CMC, which is a design flaw, as it precludes corroboration of the findings. These limitations aside, it would seem that the use of CMC in this context appeared to have some benefits for the teacher-learners and to be perceived by many of them as a positive experience. According to Golombek and Doran (2014), the role of teacher education is to help the teacher-learner theorize what they do and there appears to be evidence in the CMC discourse that this is what was happening. Interestingly, in contrast to Johnson and Golombek (2016), who propose diverse ways in which the teacher educator through dialogue can mediate narrative produced by the teacher-learner and in this way assist their professional growth, the CMC described here is peer-mediated, with an absence of overt teacher educator presence. Despite this, it seems

that there is some evidence that the teacher-learner moderators were able to carry out the mediating role successfully, as illustrated in one of them managing to encourage their colleague to take a teacher stance. This use of the CMC, as a collaboratively run, peer-moderated discussion forum, could therefore be seen as an example of the type of task called for by Varghese et al. (2005), and Singh and Richards (2006), where the teacher-learners are challenged, given autonomy and the possibility to exercise agency in the choice of topics. There were a minority ($N = 2$) of teacher-learners who seemed to feel the absence of the teacher-educator in the discussion, but this appeared to be individual personal preference, rather than a trend. The strength of the CMC as used here seems to lie in the fact that it is one element of a hybrid course, composed of both face to face and online elements and thus satisfies Richards's (2008) call for teacher-learners to be afforded a diverse variety of discourses and tasks within the teacher education program.

Within the discourse observed there is evidence that some of the teacher-learners are exhibiting teacher identities. No attempt has been made to investigate the nature of these more deeply because of lack of space. It has been noted, however, that there seems to be evidence of the impact of others in the discourse on how the individual views themselves and that their stance can be shifted through targeted positioning. This suggests that the choice of materials used on the course and the language and stance modelled by the teacher educator can indeed act as powerful mediators, as many of the researchers mentioned in this paper propose, a fact which should be considered when planning such a course.

Leading on from this work, several suggestions can be made for further research. As indicated, such CMC activity needs to be accompanied by other tasks if teacher identity is to be investigated more fruitfully in this context. This could take the form of follow-up interviews with moderators and/or selected forum participants, with targeted questions relating to how the teacher-learners see themselves, relating specifically to posts made in the discussion. Apart from this, the topic of learning, illustrated by teacher learning in particular, could be incorporated early in the methodology course with the purpose of opening a discussion on how a person becomes a teacher, which could continue throughout the course. For research, related written assignments and/or discussions (CMC or transcripts of recorded face to face) could provide data for triangulation of discourse from CMC on the course modules as described here. Final course feedback could also be re-designed to address the question of teacher identity formation more specifically. Such course design could prove a bridge between course room and classroom practice, in addition raising teacher-learner awareness that becoming a teacher is a continuing process, especially if students realize that the teacher educator they are working with is investigating how to develop and improve the course experience for the participants.

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