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Teachers' Lived Experiences on Collaboration in Online Teacher Education: A Phenomenological Study

Indra Kumari Oli*
indraoliskt@gmail.com

Abstract

This research aimed to explore the English language teachers' lived experiences of collaboration in teacher education via online mode. This study embraced a phenomenological qualitative research design and involved four English teachers purposively to gather their lived experiences on the phenomena.Informal discussions and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data. Using the Hermeneutic phenomenological method, the data were analyzed. This study used Vygotsky's Social Constructivism as its theoretical foundation (1978). The findings demonstrate that English language teachers have positive perspectives and collaboration experiences in online teacher education.The collaboration develops their confidence, critical analysis, technological skills, and rapport building. The participants expressed that collaboration in teacher education reduces the workload and stress if all the members are equally responsible for the completion of their tasks. However, the division of work constrains the membersintotheir parts only resulting the less exploration and knowledge construction in others' portions.

Key Words: Collaboration, teacher education, online mode

Introduction

One of the significant benefits of science and technology in the 21st century is that it has created avenues for collaboration and communication among global citizens. People around the world have been connected and practising collaboration in the digital era of globalization. Collaborative learning is based on the constructivism theory of Piaget and Vygotsky and the critical pedagogy of Freire (Yang, 2023).The term 'collaborative learning' was theorised by American Professor Bruffee in 1984 (Yang, 2023, p.722). Collaboration is the process of working together, aiming to achievie common goals to a greater extent. Similarly, Kuper & Kapelle, (2012 as cited in Bush & Grotjohann, 2020(p.1) defined collaboration as a process in which people cooperate to produce a greater overall result than they could have done separately. Collaboration takes place in every field, like education, health, business, social service, etc. Collaborative

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* Indra Kumari Oli is a lecturer of English at Sahara Campus, Surkhet.*

learning thus means learning through interaction, which is related to representation, discourse, and model (Tang et. al., 2014 as cited in Hernández,2020). Some examples of collaborative learning tasks are pair work, group work, teamwork, discussion, project work, etc.

Collaboration gives lots of opportunities and benefits to learn from each other and complete challenging tasks with ease. Therefore, Bush & Grotjohann (2020) suggest that institutions should begin early to instruct students on the values and methods of collaboration. It is because collaborative learning allows students to incorporate new and old information into their curriculum and significantly improves learning.

Collaboration is the most sought-after in teacher education and professional development, therefore, Musanti & Pence (2010) argue the when professional development programs are designed, interaction, communication, and cooperation play a significant role. Professional development opportunities that encourage professional interaction and cooperation can also improve teachers' job satisfaction (Martson, 2010, cited in Yang, 2023). Therefore, education and learning are fundamentally collaborative processes of re-acculturation (Bruffee, 1984, 1986, 1999, as cited in Yang, 2023).

I am interested in this area because I have also experienced collaborative learning in my professional and academic career. When COVID-19 hit the world, shutting down everything physically for some time, the educational institutes remained closed, inviting the virtual mode of instruction. For the first time, I was introduced to virtual training and online classes in my life. I could participate in collaborative tasks even in online meetings, workshops, and webinars. Such types of professional development and online training allowed me to communicate and collaborate with strangers both synchronously and asynchronously. Being impressed with such a method, I assigned collaborative tasks to my students as well. They learned the content explicitly, besides having fun in collaboration on both virtual and physical platforms. I have been doing my M.Phil. in blended mode and have experienced collaboration in my education as well.

I wanted to explore more in this area, so I went through the studies done at the national and international levels. There are studies done on online collaboration in an international context, but I could not find studies concerning online teacher education in the context of Nepal. Therefore, I have selected this area to explore with the phenomenological design. I would like to explore the lived experiences of the teachers in the collaboration in their education via online mode. Therefore, the following guiding questions were formulated to meet the purpose of my study:

How do English language teachers perceive the lived experiences of collaboration in teacher education?

How do English language teachers work collaboratively in teacher education via online mode?

Significance of Collaboration in Online Teacher Education

Collaboration relates to teacher education and professional development. The collaboration seeks the construction of knowledge through meaningful interaction and communication among the teachers. Subsequently, the objective of collaborative learning is notjust "knowledge acquisition" and "participation," (Doolittle, 2001; Sfard, 1998), but "information building" emphasising knowledge creation (Paavola, Lipponen, and Hakkarainen, 2004 as referred to in An et. al., 2008, p.67).Richards (2008) concluded in his study that Vygotsky's ideas of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) are crucial in a collaborative approach to learning in which students engage in social practices with teacher educators, mentors, and critical friends to enhance their relationships with peers and fellow students.

A study by Subedee et al. (2022), which investigated whether online team-based learning in medical ethics has been an effective teaching tool in medical education, demonstrates the significance of collaboration in education. The students gave the learning strategy a positive review and were pleased with the learning process.

In addition, Tusyanah et al. (2023) found that the behavior of online collaborative learning (OCL) as an independent variable had a direct positive and significant effect of 65.8% on interpersonal communication (IC) and a 74.7% effect on cognitive performance (CP). This implies that OCL can be elective in figuring out how to build CP and IC. OCL can be used in the classroom by teachers to boost students' AP and IC scores. In this study, students talked with each other and listened carefully. They worked together without being afraid of making mistakes. Thismade it easier for everyone to participate and be engaged, even when learning in online classes. In the importance of collaborative learning in education, Pollard (2006) stated, "Reflective teaching, professional learning, and personal fulfillment are enhanced through collaboration and dialogue with colleagues"(p.21) as cited in Musanti & Pence, 2010).

The empirical studies done in the international context concluded that it is essential to create a sustainable online communication environment with elements of cooperation, interaction, and communication that enable participants to share their experiences and knowledge of technological advancements as suggested by Sandra & Luticia (2010).

Theoretical Perspectives

The constructivism theory (1978) of Vygotsky aligns with my research as it claims that learning results from the interaction between peers or collaboration in class. The meaning is co-constructed when the learners, teachers, and concerned people share their ideas and perspectives. Constructivism suggests that the learners should be ready to take the new information shapie it to their understanding rather than just observing the information like a sponge (Aljohani,2017). The learners are independent and proactive in their learning through constructivism. In his phenomenological study, Bhandari (2021) reasoned that the interactive exercises that are focused on the students keep them connected consistently and permit them to advance effectively at their own speed. In a similar vein, the study conducted by Rohmah (2017) investigated the fact that learner-centered activities like group work encourage students to converse unprompted, ask questions to one another, and act in a way that feels natural. Interactive and communicative teaching and learning activities that involve a greater number of students in interaction are essential for the educator.

Social constructivist teachers should ensure that every student collaborates to construct new understandings. When students work together, they learn how to learn from both themselves and their peers. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) plays a crucial role in peer collaboration (Sardaresh & Saad, 2012).The ZPD is at the point where a learner can succeed with the help of a mentor or by working with peers who are more capable and can provide the necessary support and constructive feedback.

Learning, according to constructivism, is a process in which students actively participate in the creation of new ideas through cooperative group settings. With regards to e-learning, constructivism and connectivism appear to be the speculations that most recognize the effect of innovation on learning. (Kwiatkowska, 2018; referred to in Kwiatkowska & Winiewska-Nogaj, 2021). Constructivism is a decent hypothetical system for e-learning since it guarantees that learning and sharing happen among every one of the students associated worldwide through internet-based modes.

Methodology

I adopted the qualitative method to explore the lived experiences of the experiencers on the phenomen on of collaboration in online teacher education. The focus of qualitative research is on delving deeper into the meanings that people or groups attach to a social or human issue (Creswell, 2006). I used the phenomenological qualitative design since this entails selecting individuals or groups of individuals who have experienced an intriguing phenomenon (Creswell, 2006). I purposively selected two universities in Nepal that deliver their courses in online mode as the sites for data collection.

Similarly, I purposively selected two male and two female teachers who had lived experiences of collaboration on teacher education at the post-graduate level. I used semi-structuredinterviewsand informal discussions emphasizing open-ended questions to get in-depth information on the phenomenon.

First of all, I informed the participants about the purpose of the study and I obtained their consent before recording their voices on their phones. I assured them of no risk or harm from the study. I maintained ethical considerations like confidentiality by giving pseudonyms to the universities and the participants, like U1 Tej and U1 Bibek for the student teachers from University 1, and U2 Sita and U2 Arati for the student teachers from University 2 in Nepal. Similarly, I tried to maintain the authenticity of the study by directly quoting the participants. They were told to withdraw their names at any time without any negative appraisal. All the participants were well informed about the purpose of the study, and after taking consent, their voices were recorded. The privacy and confidentiality of the selected universities and participants were maintained with pseudonyms. The participants were quoted directly in the findings.

I analysed the information by applying the hermeneutic cycle that comprises reading, reflective writing, and interpretation in a thorough style (Laverty, 2003). Above all else, I deciphered the information word for word, coded it, and gathered it into themes (van Manen, 1997). After carefully analyzing the transcriptions, the themes emerged. The Hermeneutic cycle of reading, reflective writing, and interpretation was incorporated to analyse the data(Laverty,2003). The themes emerged out of the coded transcriptions (van Manen, 1997).

Results and Findings

This section discusses the results and findings from the analysis of the transcriptions of the participants who had lived experiences of collaboration in online teacher education. The themes were presented inductively, relating to the previous studies (Barun & Clarke, 2006).

Teachers' Lived Experiences

Teachers' lived experiences of collaboration in online teacher education included their perceptions, beliefs, or understanding of collaboration for meaning-making. It dealt with how post-graduate teacher students perceived collaboration from their perspectives. The researcher asked how they perceived collaboration in their studies. The respondents said that collaboration was beneficial for knowledge sharing. All the participants, Tej and Bibek from U1, and Sita and Arati from U2, opined the same: "*Collaboration helped me discover the knowledge in depth, get updated with the technology, and reduce my*

workload despite some challenges in the online mode." Their lived experiences reveal that collaboration tasks are essential for teacher education in online mode but still, there are some challenges. Similarly, Higley (2018) presumed that collaborative exercises assist with preparing students for the 21st-century working environment, including figuring out how to share thoughts, offer viewpoints, and oversee time. Implementing collaborative activities in an e-learning course has both advantages and disadvantages, despite the generally positive outcomes.

In this regard, Bibek from U1 shared, "*Collaborative tasks facilitate the below achievers to move together with other colleagues.*" Sita from U2 and Tej from U1 also shared the same opinion, "*I can know my position in the class and get emotionally supported by the group members, my stress is relieved.*" Similarly, the study by Johnson (2000, as cited in Richards,2008) affirmed that whether the cohort groups take place in face-to-face or computer-mediated exchanges, collaboration helps strengthen the sense of community among professionals and lessen the loneliness and irrelevant feeling that is frequently associated with professional coursework taken at universities. A correlated view of collaborative effort can be deduced from the reaction by Arati from U2 and Tej, who shared, "*When I am working together with my colleagues in pair or groups, I can know my position in group and collaborative tasks save my time also*". Likewise, Bibek from U1 expressed, "*Research becomes explorative when we get a chance to work in groups for presentation.*" Richards (2008) argued that modern pedagogies place a strong emphasis on collaborative learning strategies in Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE), collective knowledge, experience, and thinking of participants, along with the course material and objects from the classroom, provide them with the necessary resources to learn.

From the above explanations, it can be concluded that collaboration in teacher education, even in online mode is more demanding as it connects people globally and empowers them with innovative ideas from multiple socio-cultural communities. The participants revealed their positive perceptions of collaboration in teacher education. They also expressed some challenges connected with technology and irresponsibility of collaborators in group work. Therefore, to increase individual responsibility, An et al. (2008) suggested that collaborative assessment should be planned to include both group and individual performance-based tasks for group work. Along these lines, Johnson & Johnson (2004, as referred to in An & et al., 2008, p.66-67) identified five fundamental components necessary for productive group collaboration: a) positive interdependence; b) constructive interaction; c) individual accountability; d) the appropriate application of social skills; and e) group processing. This is also associated with the theory of social constructivism.

Ways of Collaboration in Online Teacher Education

The teacher students reported that they were asked to collaborate in pair work and group work. Tej and Bibek from U1 shared that they are asked to join a group of 8-10 in break-out rooms for discussion during class time. The group generally consists of 3-5 members, including both male and female students, for PowerPoint presentations on any topic. The contents are related to the research, philosophy, theory, and critical review of any research paper.

All the participants agreed that they were generally provided with a week /two weeks to prepare for a group presentation on a topic. They relied on the online sources and PDF files sent by the course facilitators for the exploration and preparation of the assigned topics. They explore other tools available freely online for meeting and preparing the group assignment. In this regard, Tej said,"*I mostly rely on Google Scholar for more authentic data and easy citation."* Another participant, Bibek, explained, "*We meet on Teams as it is free and accessible to record, we chat on Messenger and emails also".*
All the participants shared the same methods for work division and preparation of the slides. They divided the work and prepared the slides from their parts only. On presentation day, they presented from their parts only. If any presenter remained absent, then the rest had to present on his or her behalf. They had meetings onthe online platform to plan for the preparation. On the presentation days, they presented on their assigned topics.They agreed the work division reduced their workload and became more confident and competent when they got more exposureto in-depth discussion and knowledge construction. Bhandari (2020) explored the teachers' positive perceptions of classroom interaction and collaboration in his phenomenological study. The teachers agreed that students gained more autonomy, self-assurance, and ultimately new knowledge through classroom collaboration. As a result, the opportunities they have in class to interact with their teachers and classmates help them increase their confidence as well as their knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that learning occurs through peer interaction and collaboration, so this concept is similar to constructivism.

Strengths of Collaboration in the Online Mode

Collaboration in teacher education brings teachers together and shares their insights and experiences. Collaborators' hard work for the better performance of the group develops a sense of team spirit and ownership. The participants of this study believed that collaborative learning developed their critical thinking and communication skills. Similarly, in this regard, Zygouris (2019) affirmed that collaborative learning can support online teaching learning goals and objectives by promoting critical thinking, perspective-taking, information sharing and decision-making, content knowledge, and reflection.

Besides, collaboration allows the collaborators to be active listeners and judgmental for improvements while respecting the values of individualities, subjectivities, and socio-cultural norms.They accept constructive feedback from the commentators: course facilitators and colleagues. Bibek responded positively to the critical comments made by the professors and colleagues after their collaborative presentation. He said, *"The commentator speaks with evidence; that's why I don't mind being criticized as it helps in truth-seeking and knowledge discovery."* The consequence of the study by Sardaresh and Saad (2012) was that in an evaluation for learning class, students collaborated and received constructive feedback on their work from their teacher and class mates through peer examination and user input information.Similarly, all four participants agreed collaborative tasks have developed some other skills as well. Tej and Bibek shared in harmony that they could practice critical thinking, argumentation, knowledge discovery, and construction by talking politely and humbly with collaborators. Tej further stated, "*As a teacher, I can transform collaborative skills in my real classroom and my students can interact and learn the language better*." Their perspectives are highly connected with social constructivism, which contends that communication the job play role in information development through dynamic support and a feeling of responsibility in a gathering. In this regard, Kwiatkowska (2018, as referred to in Kwiatkowska & Wiśniewska-Nogaj, 2021), displayed in his examination that a few students thought accomplishing learning results relying upon their contribution. As a result, they were able to take a more active and responsible role in their education thanks to online collaboration.Besides, online collaboration fosters rapport-building among the collaborators. They have more intimacy with their collaborators than other colleagues in the class. Arati expressed, "*We sit and celebrate our accomplishments after our collaborative tasks. We feel refreshed and attached*."

Challenges of Collaborative Tasks in Online Teacher Education
The respondents have reported some difficulties with collaborative work in the online mode of the teacher education program. All of them had experienced glitches in technology, connectivity, and power cut, which discouraged them from working uninterruptedly and completing their tasks on time. They meant to say that because of the technical issue, collaborative assignments get delayed and colleagues should maintain the workload of others in the eleventh hour.

They viewed the division of the work as not always beneficial. Bibek from U1 shared, "*When I focus more on my tasks, I lack the depth of knowledge in other contents. I don't focus on the sources but depend on others.*" Similarly, Arati also shared "*We prepare our part so no confidence in other's parts and it is always rush to change and take charge of others in the last moment.*" Tej from U1 also experienced a problem with

collaborative tasks: "*We have a problem presenting the high-level books in a limited time. Some people don't receive the phone for fear of preparing and presenting.*" His expression revealed that they are asked to do tasks beyond their level and the colleagues do not respond for fear of working on them.He further stated, "*Some partners are not interested in group work, they say just put my name in the slides; I will just be present. I feel bored if all the members are not equally accountable.*" It reveals that the purpose of the collaboration is not achieved if all the collaborators don't work together and participate in meaning construction. Such an unfavorable situation in collaboration can't meet the essence of the constructivism theory of Vygotsky (1978).

Besides, it is not comfortable to collaborate with opposite genders because of familial responsibilities and the socio-cultural phenomena of the Nepalese context. In this regard, Bibek expressed:

Comparatively, it is quite difficult to collaborate with lady friends. We are all busy during the day, and we have to work late hours at night. But it's not sensible to make phone calls to them at midnight. Similarly, the babies are attached to the women, so it's not so practicable to work in the disturbance.

He meant to say that some sociocultural constraints are still prevalent even in the higher levels of study. Similarly, even a female respondent, Aarti, held a similar opinion as Bibek. She said,"*I feel easy to work with male collaborators than females because they are free from their house chores and children. And they are available at any time to prepare for the group work*".

Conclusion

This study succeeded in discovering the lived experiences of the student teachers in post-graduate studies via online mode. The phenomenological study provides a forum for discussion of progressive pedagogy in Nepal and contributes to a better understanding of English teachers' perspectives and experiences with online collaboration.Whatever the teachers learn in their course, they are supposed to embrace it in their classroom. Therefore, such kinds of post-methods approaches and techniques can be implementedby the teachers and students of the 21st century. This study explored that collaboration can take place in both synchronous and asynchronous modes, giving the best result provided that all the members of a team are equally responsible and willing to learn, share, and contribute more to the teamwork. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that there is no better choice than collaboration in teacher education and the professional development of teachers. It is more effective in the online modality since it connects people both nationally and internationallyto get updated with new ELT trends and research.

It is a small-scale phenomenological qualitative study examining the perspectives of English teacher students on collaboration in teacher education, its findings may not apply to a wider context. Therefore, a comprehensive study involving teachers, students, and the concerned authorities as well as a larger population, is required for greater applicability of the findings. Future researchers can get a better understanding of teachers' and students' perspectives on collaboration through observation techniques.

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