

THE DISCOURSE OF PEER MENTORING: FROM MENTORS' PERSPECTIVES

Nguyen Thi Thu Ha, Dang Thi Phuong and Ngo Quynh Trang

Faculty of English, Hanoi National University of Education

Abstract. Peer mentoring has been used as a tool to ensure students' success in higher education (Husband & Jacob, 2009; Yomtov et. al., 2015). This study investigated the discourse of university-level peer mentoring from a sociolinguistic perspective. The participants were first-year Linguistics undergraduates at a university in Vietnam, who were invited to join a peer mentoring program in which four or five student-mentees work with one student-mentor to improve their English listening and speaking skills. Mentoring activities consisted of both face-to-face meeting and email correspondence and were designed with support from the course instructor. We examined the students' peer-to-peer interactions in the mentoring activities, their in-class interactions as well as interview transcripts in order to gain insights into the mentors' and mentee's views of the peer-to-peer relationship vis-à-vis student-instructor relationship and how these dynamics influenced the participants' identities and the mentees' perceived performance. Discourse analysis and narrative analysis are employed as our frameworks because people reveal their identity in their language choice (Gee, 2011) and narrative analysis allows us to observe the identity construction and reconstruction through people's stories (Coast, 1996; Lind, 1993). The findings reveal that mentors regarded mentees as help-receivers while mentors saw themselves as experts, authorities, leader apprentices and contrasted themselves with the mentees. They were aware of their role and power and exerted them differently in different situations.

Keywords: Peer mentoring, mentors, mentees, narrative analysis, discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

To date, most studies investigating peer mentoring and collaborative activities focus on their benefits (Johnsons 1989, Pantiz, T., 1999, Panitz 1999, Bradley et al., 2008, Laal & Ghodsi 2011). Over fifty benefits for this learning model are categorized by Laal & Ghodsi (2011) into four groups namely social benefits, psychological benefits, academic benefits, and alternate student and teacher assessment techniques. However, not much has been done on the relationship between participants and their identities in a collaborative activity. Bryce, N. (2014) conducted a qualitative study of teacher candidates' collaborative writing, which was constructed as an online discussion in which candidates read and respond to colleagues' written messages, and therefore showing their identities as professional teachers. Caviedes et. al. (2016) looked at the identities of pre-service teachers in an editing project of their thesis. As a result, we conducted this research to closely look into the mentors' identity in collaborative learning at university to fulfil the gap.

Our participants are all first-year students at an anonymous pedagogical institution. They

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Contact Dang Thi Phuong, e-mail address: dangphuong@hnue.edu.vn

are all at the age of nineteen to twenty and are studying in the same class. In the beginning of their first semester (of eight-semester course), the course instructor/teacher provided them with a pretest. The test itself consisted of Speaking and Listening skills and was taken from PET database. Five students with the highest marks in the Speaking and Listening tests were nominated five leaders/mentors of five separated groups. Their names were put in an online file (Google Drive) and the other students/mentees could freely sign up for the group of their favorite leader. The maximum number of each group was six students including the group's mentor. The student-mentors were short-term trained by the course instructor/teacher with sources of information and exercises; required difficulty level of the course; expectations of the course instructor and methods of training or working with others in the position of a mentor. The student-mentees were asked by the course instructor/teacher to change the groups to work with different leaders and different mentees every few weeks at their will.

Research questions

1. How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the event of peer mentoring?
2. How do the mentors position themselves to the audience?

2. Content

2.1. Literature Review

2.1.1. Peer-mentoring

The first-year experience at university and college has raised a plethora of awareness among both academic researchers and educators (Harvey, Drew, and Smith 2006) due to an important phase so-called "student transition" (Bradley et al., 2008). Consequently, various institutions have implemented an assisting scheme named Peer-mentoring with a view to promoting success among freshmen (Collier, 2017). As defined by National Academy of Sciences, "Mentoring occurs when a senior person or mentor provides information, advice, and emotional support to a junior person or student over a period of time" (as cited in Lev, Kolassa, & Bakken, 2010). This definition is echoed by a number of authors who suggest that a university peer-mentoring program is an intervention strategy that pairs one or more students (i.e., mentees) with a more experienced student (i.e., peer mentor; Terrion & Leonard, 2007) who provides both practical guidance and social support to the mentee(s) (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Nora & Crisp, 2007). In this case, a peer mentor is a person who provides guidance, support, and practical advice to a mentee who is close in age and shares common characteristics or experiences (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012; Kram, 1983). Colvin & Ashman (2010) adds that peer mentors have a variety of titles (e.g. peer tutors, peer educators, peer leaders), but commonly serve as connecting links, role models, learning coaches, student advocates, and friends.

2.1.2. Benefits of peer-mentoring program

Peer-mentoring program has proved beneficial for first-years students in various ways. As mentioned above, during the transition, it has assisted first year students to "successfully transition to university and be retained, to gain a sense of belonging, and to develop communication and organizational skills" (Glaser, Hall & Halperin, 2006). Sharing the same argument, Glaser, Hall, & Halperin (2006) adds that this program can help students "feel more connected and integrated to the university." Especially, it is emphasized that programs with an academic focus "have positively influenced achievement and approaches to learning" (Dearlove, Farrell, Handa & Pastore, 2007; Fox, Stevenson, Connelly, Duff & Dunlop, 2010). Research also shows that such programs not only benefit mentees; there is evidence that they

also benefit the university, coordinating staff and particularly the mentors (Elliott, Beltman & Lynch, 2011). Mentors stated that they had a “sense of achievement and satisfaction,” developed both interpersonal and professional skills and at the same time “expanded their social network” when they had chances to get to know more mentees and meet with staff coordinators (Beltman & Schaeben, 2012).

2.1.3. Collaborative learning

Collaborative learning (CL) is a term firstly rooted in the work of Sir James Britton and others in the 1970s (Britton, 1990). Its definition varied in different authors' views, for example, Dillenbourg (1999) saw collaborative learning as “a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together.” He further argued that the terms “two or more”, “learn something”, and “together” have certain ambiguity (Dillenbourg 1999). In their work, Johnson & Johnson (1999) defined collaborative learning as “the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning.” Vygotsky, L. (1997) contributed the root of collaborative learning to ‘zone of proximal development’, which is a category of things that a learner can learn but with the help of guidance. Vygotsky also highlighted the importance of learning through communication and interactions with others rather than just through independent work (Vygotsky, L. 1997).

2.1.4. Social identity

The core of social identity theory is the idea that individuals' identities consist of both “personal and social components” (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Bettencourt, 1999; Cote & Levine, 2002; Fearson, 1999; Turner, 1982). Gergen (1971) structurized identity by two classes of self-conceptions: “an individual's membership of various social groups” and “an individual's specific personal attributes.” Turner (1982), later, defined these two classes of self-conceptions as “personal identity” and “social identity”. Brewer and Gardner (1996) described two levels of social identity, “those that derive from interpersonal relationships and interdependence with specific others, and those that derive from membership in larger, more impersonal collectives or social categories.” That is, “social identity could be further divided into relational identity and collective identity” (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Kashima & Hardie, 2000; Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Given together, researchers claimed that an individual's self-conception is composed of three aspects: individual, relational, and collective identity. Stryker and Burke (2000) suggested that “an individual's identity has multiple role-related identity components”. These components are “organized in a hierarchical order, and they should not be at the same salient level at any given time, otherwise it would result in distress and conflict” (Burke, 2003; Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Combining Stryker and Burke's identity theory with the three identity aspect theory, it suggests that three identity aspects are organized in a “hierarchical order” (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) or “restrainedly with only one identity aspect takes the dominant position for a person in a given situation” (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999) - the identity salience. There are three types of identity salience: “individual, relational, and collective identity salience” (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Kashima & Hardie, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

2.2. Methodology

2.2.1. Analytical framework

Positioning Analysis is defined as a discursive practice ‘whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and intersubjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines.’ As a result, in conversations, due to the intrinsic social force of conversing-people position themselves in relation to one another in ways that traditionally have been defined as

roles. More importantly, in doing so, people ‘produce’ one another (and themselves) situationally as “social beings” (Davies and Harre 1990).

Bamberg (1997) considered the process of positioning to take place at three different levels that are formulated in the following as three different positioning questions:

1. How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the reported events?

Bamberg (1997) explains that “at this level, we attempt to analyze how characters within the story world are constructed in terms of, for example, protagonists and antagonists or as perpetrators and victims. More concretely, this type of analysis aims at the linguistic means that do the job of marking one person as, for example: (a) the agent who is in control while the action is inflicted upon the other; or (b) as the central character who is helplessly at the mercy of outside (quasi ‘natural’) forces or who is rewarded by luck, fate, or personal qualities (such as bravery, nobility, or simply ‘character’)

2. How does the speaker position him- or herself to the audience?

In Bamberg’s (1997) view, at this level, ‘we seek to analyze the linguistic means that are characteristic for the particular discourse mode that is being employed. Does, for instance, the narrator attempt to instruct the listener in terms of what to do in face of adversary conditions or does the narrator engage in making excuses for his actions and in attributing blame to others?’

3. How do narrators position themselves to themselves? How is language employed to make claims that the narrator holds to be true and relevant above and beyond the local conversational situation?

In other words, Bamberg (1997) holds that ‘the linguistic devices employed in narrating point to more than the content (or what the narrative is ‘about’) and the interlocutor’. In constructing the content and one’s audience in terms of role participants, the narrator transcends the question of: ‘How do I want to be understood by you, the audience?’ and constructs a (local) answer to the question: ‘Who am I?’ Simultaneously, however, we must caution that any attempted answer to this question is not one that necessarily holds across contexts, but rather is a project of limited range.’

In this study, the mentors’ identity will be mainly discovered at level 1 and 2.

2.2.2. Data collection and analysis procedure

After two semesters of implementing the peer-mentoring and collaborative learning program under the guide and facilitation of the course instructor, five mentors were interviewed in a semi-structured interview in Vietnamese to discover their identity as mentors. The recordings were transcribed and sent back to interviewees for confirmation and then were further analyzed.

The data analysis procedure was proceeded in three phases:

+ Phase 1: open systematic iterative analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of the interview data to identify the key concepts and themes of identity embedded in the narratives by participants

+ Phase 2: axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to refine, condense, and clarify the themes identified in phase one (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and negative case analyses (Williams, 2011) searching for data that contradicted developing hypotheses, to further strengthen the validity of the themes uncovered

+ Phase 3: theoretical sampling (Patton, 2002) to identify narratives that (a) were most resonant with the themes identified across the data gathered from all participants, (b) represented the elements of identity, and (c) met Clandinin and Connelly’s criteria for good narrative, (i.e. explanatory quality, invitational quality, authenticity, adequacy, and plausibility) (2000). To take an example, in Mentor 1’s answer to the question ‘How did you perform your

role as a mentor?' she said, '*... em sẽ hướng dẫn các bạn à học tập à có bất cứ cái gì mà các bạn khó hay là không hiểu thì sẽ hỏi em.*' This sample includes the explanation to the mentor's role as a help giver, clearly shows the speaker's hesitation in the choice of words, and answers the interviewer's question directly; moreover, this mentor spoke loud enough for the transcriber to note all the sounds.

2.3. Findings and discussion

2.3.1. Positioning level 1

In level 1, to answer the question of how the mentors and mentees positioned in relation to one another within the reported events, first, mentors regarded mentees as help-receivers:

"...em sẽ hướng dẫn các bạn à học tập à có bất cứ cái gì mà các bạn khó hay là không hiểu thì sẽ hỏi em" [Mentor 1]

(I would help them [mentees]...er...in their learning...er...if there was anything that they found difficult or didn't understand, they would ask me.)

In this case, mentors considered themselves as a facilitator who was ready to provide help whenever their mentees had trouble in their learning.

Moreover, mentors viewed mentees as reluctant half-hearted team members

1. *"Các bạn ý vẫn chưa thực sự cố vì một số bạn học chỉ để qua môn..." [Mentor 3]*

(They [mentees] still didn't try hard enough because some of them just wanted to pass the exams...)

2. *[...] trong những hoạt động này thì [ngắt] nó cũng có một chút bách các bạn ý phải dùng tiếng Anh, [ngắt] nhưng mà em cứ cảm thấy chưa thực sự hiệu quả ấy ạ [cười]. Tức là các bạn ấy có dùng nhưng mà kiểu miễn cưỡng khá chứ không, không phải tự giác. [Mentor 5]*

([...] these activities [stopped] kind of urged them [mentees] to use English, [stopped] but I felt that it wasn't very efficient [smiled]. It means they used English reluctantly, not willingly.)

From the mentors' perspectives, some mentees lacked motivation to learn in general and to speak English in particular. In some outing activities organized by Ms Claire which required students to engage in conversations with foreigners, several mentees were quite hesitate to partake and did not see those activities as chances to improve their language skills.

2.3.2. Positioning level 2

In level 2, the question of how the mentor positions him- or herself to the audience was clarified in the following identities.

a. "I" as an expert

1. *"Mình chỉ có thể giúp các bạn ấy gọi là **lọc nguồn** và hỗ trợ họ **giải đáp** những cái gì mà các bạn ấy cần..." [Mentor 4]*

(I just could help them to **choose the sources** and **answer** whatever they wanted to know)

2. *"[...] sau khi được em **giải thích** gì các bạn ấy cũng cảm thấy là bài giảng trở nên dễ hiểu hơn.) [Mentor 2]*

(...after I had **explained**, they felt that the lessons became more comprehensible)

In the extracts above, mentors looked at themselves as choosers of learning materials for their mentees and answerers to the questions mentees had. Also, they felt that they had the responsibility to explain anything unclear in the lessons to mentees. In other words, they projected themselves as of higher academic level than their mentees'.

b. "I" as authority

1. *"Thì trước khi chuẩn bị đấy thì em phải **phân công** giữa các bạn ý đặt ra những câu hỏi là, ờ, ví dụ mà đi quay thì sẽ phải hỏi những cái gì" [Mentor 1]*

(During the preparation stage, I **assigned** them to phrase the questions...er... for example, when we do the filming, what should we ask?)

2. Em sẽ **giao** một cái bài tập hoặc là những hoạt động gì đó để dành cho các bạn để các bạn làm và em sẽ chữa lại bài [Mentor 4]

(I will **assign** them a task or some activities to do, and then I would check their answers)

3. Cô yêu cầu đổi [...] để cho các bạn ý có tiếp xúc được nhiều hơn, với nhiều leader hơn ý. Nhưng mà sau đấy thì bọn em chỉ đổi một lần xong rồi kiểu không đổi lại nữa bởi vì **em cũng nghĩ là mọi người ổn định với nhau thì sẽ làm việc tốt hơn**. [Mentor 2]

(The teacher asked [us] to change [...] so that we could have more chance to interact with each other, and with different leaders. But then we only changed once and kept the same groups because **I thought if we worked stably as one group, it would be more efficient**.)

Mentors assumed that they had the right to assign tasks to their mentees to assist mentees' learning and they were capable of checking mentees' answers. Besides, mentors would act against the teacher's instructions to change group members regularly because they felt that remaining in the same group would be better for the mentees. In fact, they were the decision-makers in such situations.

c. "I" versus "them"

1. [...] các bạn ý chưa có một sự chủ động tiếp xúc với tiếng Anh, cho nên là cái tiếng Anh của các bạn nó chưa được trôi chảy, chưa tiếng Anh cho lắm. [Mentor 3]

(...they didn't have the initiatives to use English, so their English was not very fluent, not very "English")

2. [...] em bảo là em nghĩ em chưa chuẩn bị gì cả. Các bạn ý đọc bài rồi thì các bạn ý đứng lên nói thử xem, xong rồi có gì thì em sẽ support ở dưới [...] khi mà cô bắt phải lên thì khi ấy em không đứng được lên thì [cười] một trong các bạn ấy phải lên các bạn ý cũng tự bàn bạc với nhau để xem ai [Mentor 2]

(...I told them I hadn't prepared anything. They read the materials at home, so they should stand up and try voicing their ideas; if any problems came up, I would support them [...] When the teacher called upon us, if I couldn't answer [smiled], one of them would have to stand up. And they discussed among themselves to choose who was going to speak.)

3. [...] các bạn ý cũng cần cái sự chú tâm đến cái môn này đã và tìm cách để] chấp nhận và yêu thích nó. [Mentor 4]

(...they needed to pay more attention to that subject and tried to find ways to deal with it and love it)

4. [...] thúc bách các bạn ý phải dùng tiếng Anh nhưng mà em cứ cảm thấy chưa thực sự hiệu quả ấy ạ. Tức là các bạn ấy có dùng nhưng mà kiểu miễn cưỡng khá chứ không, không phải tự giác. Nên có thể là dùng xong rồi lại quên luôn. [Mentor 5]

(...urging them to use English but I still felt it wasn't efficient enough. It means they actually used English but reluctantly, not willingly. As a result, it was possible that they forgot it immediately.)

Mentors used the pronoun "they" in those extracts to show the difference between themselves and mentees. They kept themselves distant from the mentees' academic level by stating that mentees' lack of activeness in their learning resulted in low fluency and accuracy. In terms of learning attitudes and initiatives, mentors felt that they should give mentees chances to speak up because they were "reluctant" and hesitant.

d. "I" as leader apprentice

1. [...] em cũng phát triển được cái kỹ năng quản lý nhóm [Mentor 2]

(... I also develop group managing skills)

2. [...] qua những hoạt động làm việc nhóm thì em cũng a [ngập ngừng] cải thiện được cái khả năng giao tiếp trong cái việc làm nhóm và khả năng làm leader [Mentor 1]

(... Through group work activities, I er [hesitated] improved my communication skills in group work and leadership)

3. khi mà mình làm leader thì mình có cái trách nhiệm rất là lớn, mình phải chắc chắn về mọi thứ bởi vì mình, em không muốn kiểu gọi là chưa chắc chắn mà mình đã trả lời ý. Cho nên là luôn luôn phải mang cái tinh thần là mình phải học hỏi, và phải học rất là tốt để có thể giúp đỡ được cho các bạn ấy rất là nhiều [Mentor 4]

(When being a leader, my responsibilities were very heavy, I had to be sure about everything because I, I didn't want to answer their questions when I was not sure. So I always kept a high learning spirit, and I had to be a really good learner in order to help them as much as possible.)

4. là leader thì có khi mình sẽ thành người, kiểu như người truyền cảm hứng cho các bạn ý [Mentor 3]

(As a leader, sometimes I could be kind of an inspirer to them.)

Mentors clearly acknowledged their leading role in the group and appreciated it for its benefits to them. Thanks to the weighty responsibilities they bore, mentors recognized the development in a variety of aspects such as communication skills, leadership, learning attitudes, and inspiration. Moreover, they regarded these as important qualities of a good leader – the role that they had played for a long time. As a result, it can be concluded that mentors witnessed the improvement in terms of both interpersonal and professional skills in themselves.

In conclusion, the mentors' identity was clearly revealed in the interview. At level 1, they looked at mentees as subjects who needed help and facilitation and who did not whole-heartedly participate in learning activities. At level 2, mentors considered themselves an expert, an authority, a leader apprentice, and differentiated themselves from mentees. It is noticeable that mentors held a positive image of themselves and felt that they remarkably improved themselves both in terms of a learner and a leader.

3. Conclusions

The use of collaborative activities along with their efficiency as well as their weaknesses has been considered in myriad of studies. However, the lack of research on participants' identities and their perspectives about other members in the groups was the reason for this paper to be conducted to investigate the stated issues.

Firstly, regarding the first research question, the student-mentors recognized themselves as (1) initiators who came up with the activities, built up the plans, sought for the exercises; (2) monitors/distributors who distributed the work and frequently checked for the rate of progress; (3) help-providers who supported the mentees with any kind of help possible; and (4) encouragement sources who were in charge of motivate the mentees to carry on their duties.

Secondly, as for the second research question, four major identities which the mentors claimed themselves to be were discovered. (1) They considered themselves the academic experts whose duty was not only to find but also to grade the suitable knowledge for the mentees' level. Also, they admitted to be able to provide the mentees all the help the mentees needed; especially, the mentees afterward showed significant understandings and improvements except the ones who didn't enjoy their peer mentoring time. (2) They authorized themselves with all the decisions, from choosing the exercises/activities, distributing work, to methods of carrying on group work. Specifically, they even allowed themselves, in some cases, to

overpower the teacher to adapt or reorganize their groupwork. (3) They distinguished themselves from the mentees to show their higher/separate position which cannot be put on a par with other members in the same groups. The only participants they asked for the advice were the other mentors from four other groups. (4) All the mentors claimed themselves leader apprentices and gained several leading skills such as working in groups, guiding other people, assigning works and improving their personal knowledge as well as English language skills competence.

In terms of limitations, due to the lack of time, we have only looked into the identities presented by the mentors; other participants' perspectives and identities including mentees', course instructor's have not been investigated. Another limitation of our study comes from the number of group rearrangement. According to the mentors' narratives, the groups rearranged only twice before finalization. This may affect the results because one's relationship and perspectives may positively or negatively change while working with different partners.

As a result, follow-up research can be done to cover the areas that are not included in this study. Future studies can broaden the findings by analyzing other characters' points of view. Also, urging the number of groups' rearrangement can contribute to the greater reliability and validity of the research. In addition, other authors can do look at how the narrators/participants position themselves to themselves which was mentioned as Level 3 of our analysis methodology.

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