Teacher Agency in Teaching Debate:
A Sociomaterial Perspective

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Abstract

Teacher agency has been well recognized as a critical theoretical notion in explaining teacher decision making and teaching practice. This institution-based case study examined one instructor's course development process and teaching practice in a pilot debate class based on fieldnotes, instructor interviews, and questionnaire analysis. The results showed that various decisions that the instructor made from the development to delivery of the pilot course were in line with the intersection of multiple elements, including the instructor's beliefs, professional experience, and various pedagogical conditions such as class size, students' level, institutional demands, and time constraints. The study demonstrated that while teacher agency functioned as an essential mediator in teacher decision-making, the instructor's various decisions were nonlinear and adaptive. Based on the findings, the researchers discuss teacher agency from a sociomaterial perspective, which focuses on social and material resources deeply embedded in the pedagogical environment. The study addresses a potential application of the sociomaterial approach to teacher agency studies and sheds light on how teacher agency can be reconceptualized.

Keywords: Teacher Agency, Sociomaterial appraoch, English language education

Introduction

The present study is a part of a three-staged longitudinal research project that examines teacher agency in curriculum development processes. Phase one of the research reported students' responses to a pilot English debate class (see Mishima & Yamamoto, 2020). This article presents results from the phase two study, which attempted to examine teacher agency in relation to the pilot English debate course taught at an urban university in Japan.

Teacher agency

The central conceptual notion of the present study is teacher agency—a highly elusive concept that has called for various debates and contentions over the years (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015a). In education, teacher agency is often defined as their capacity to act (Priestley et al., 2015a). This particular definition of teacher agency has been the locus of a debate among scholars and philosophers, in which teacher agency is often assumed to be an attribute of the individual insomuch as other arguably more widely researched psychological constructs such as teacher motivation, beliefs, identity, and emotions (see Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018, for collective work on language teacher psychology). Overviewing the research landscape on teacher agency, studies specific to English language teaching are still scarce (White, 2018) though with some notable exceptions. For instance, one thread of teacher agency research focused on examining the relationship between teacher agency and identity (Ruohotie-Lythy & Moate, 2016; Kayi-Aydar, 2015). Some pursued the role of teacher agency in classroom settings (Kitade, 2015; White, 2018), while others investigated teacher agency concerning language planning and policy (Ng & Boucher-Yip,

2016).

This study adds to the growing body of research on teacher agency to explore it from an ecological perspective. While some scholars advocate the ecological view of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (e.g., Priestley et al., 2015b), ecological orientations in teacher agency studies in EFL contexts remain lacking. In addition, an investigation into teacher agency concerning teaching English debate at the tertiary level in Japan is, to the best of our knowledge, currently nonexistent.

To explore teacher agency in a situated manner, we adopted a sociomaterial approach, which defines our theoretical positionality in our investigation.

Sociomaterial approach

The sociomaterial approach has been used predominantly in work organization research, which seeks to understand *materiality* and its role in shaping various professional organizations (Fenwick & Landri, 2012). The approach is characterized by its fundamental focus on understanding phenomena/activities within social and material conditions (Fenwick & Landri, 2012). In this view, the sociomaterial approach treats all subjects of interest, including humans and nonhumans, on an equal plane. In addition, a phenomenon under investigation is assumed to emerge from the collective interactions of humans and non humans. Based on these theoretical tenets, we view agency as an emergent state that resides in the particular/temporary relationships between humans and nonhuman objects in a specific moment; it is unstable and ever-changing. We also presuppose that teacher agency is not an individual's exclusive attribute but distributed across social and material conditions that envelop teachers' decisions and actions.

Methods

Context

The current study was conducted in the process of developing a mandatory English course for first-year students, English Debate, at an urban university in Tokyo. The course aims to help students understand the nature and structures of debate in English and develop critical thinking and research skills. Students must analyze and formulate arguments logically on issues from multiple perspectives and respond to questions.

Participant

Lisa (pseudonym), the instructor participant, was a Japanese and English bilingual. She lived in the United States for five years and in Singapore for four years. She holds two M.A.s and a Ph.D. in Lowercase and is an experienced teacher trainer, curriculum developer, and textbook writer. In her 20 years of teaching experience, Lisa has designed and taught various English language classes. However, she had no prior experience with teaching debate.

Data collection

Data were collected in Spring 2019 from the pilot debate class instructor, who was also in charge

of developing the debate course curriculum. The researchers first administered an instructor questionnaire (Appendix I) to elicit the instructor's basic demographic information and her opinions and beliefs about teaching the pilot debate class. The researchers also observed pilot class lessons, took field notes, and collected all class materials from the instructor.

In addition to the above, two instructor interviews were conducted (Appendix II). The interviews were semi-structured to allow the participant to dialogically share her experience and perceptions about teaching the pilot debate class. All predetermined questions were open-ended, and follow-up questions were asked for clarification and elaboration. The interviews lasted for two hours and were recorded on an IC recorder. The recorded interview data were then transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis

To explore teacher agency from a sociomaterial perspective, the researchers analyzed all data focusing on Lisa's decisions and actions in teaching the pilot debate course. The interview data, field notes, and all class materials were open-coded. All coded data were then thematically labeled and organized. After which, the researchers identified illustrative excerpts from the interview data and the other data sources to present notable findings. Throughout the analysis, the researchers consulted each other to ensure the trustworthiness and truthfulness of the emerged codes, themes, and findings.

Results

The analysis identified three major themes and their associated subthemes as a nexus of sociomaterial conditions within which Lisa's decisions and actions are embedded. Table 1 presents the three major thematic categories of sociomaterial conditions: a. instructor attributes, b. teaching environment, and c. time constraint.

Table 1
Descriptors of three thematic categories of sociomaterial conditions

Sociomaterial Categories	Descriptors
Instructor Attributes	The category refers to the instructor participant's unique qualities defined by her teaching experience and beliefs.
Teaching Environment	The category refers to specific sociomaterial constraints as the instructor participant perceives within the instructional context.
Time Constraint	The category refers to a physical constraint placed by the availability of time as perceived by the instructor participant.

To demonstrate how her agentive decisions and actions emerged in consort with the sociomaterial conditions, select excerpts are presented in the sections that follow.

Instructor attributes

Teaching experience. Lisa encountered many challenges as she had never taught debate to English language learners. For instance, in the instructor questionnaire, Lisa mentioned difficulty in imagining the structure and timing of a debate for teaching purposes:

Excerpt 1

I never had the experience of teaching a debate class. So it was hard to imagine the structure and timing [of debate].

Lisa's lack of experience with teaching debate coincided with her perceived difficulty in designing an appropriate debate format to teach. She first searched and watched video recordings of debates on the Internet to remedy the issue.

What follows in Excerpt 2 shows that Lisa's decision to search and watch video recordings is a product of her lack of teaching experience and foregrounded forms of materiality: videos on the Internet and textbooks. Those resources provided the primary material conditions wherein Lisa's decision was made possible.

Excerpt 2

I first tried to design the end product of the debate by watching several video recordings on American elementary school students having a debate. I also went through several debate textbooks written for Japanese elementary school students. I looked through elementary school materials to get the overall structure [of a debate].

Teacher's beliefs. Teachers' beliefs are often discussed with teachers' decision-making and teacher agency (Biesta et al., 2015). Excerpt 3 below shows that Lisa firmly believes in developing students' curiosity and helping them to become more "inquisitive." However, as discussed elsewhere (Mishima, 2018), teachers' beliefs need to be translated into tangible forms of teaching practice in alignment with available material conditions.

Lisa mentions a means to give a practicable form to her beliefs, "by searching for information, especially on the Internet..." This particular account demonstrates that the availability of the Internet had been assumed in her pilot debate class, wherein Lisa repeatedly encouraged her students to conduct thorough research on the Internet to develop their arguments and find evidence to perform a good debate (fieldnotes).

Excerpt 3

My mission as a language educator is not simply to improve my students' English language skills. I want my students to take the initiative in their learning. My role as a teacher is facilitating and creating an environment where students feel comfortable speaking and asking questions. What I constantly feel lacking among students is their curiosity. I want them to be more inquisitive and question things. I want them to be curious about different cultures, values, beliefs, and practices. By searching for information, especially on the Internet, they can access multiple perspectives beyond what is provided in textbooks (Instructor Questionnaire).

Teaching environment

Instructional decisions and actions can never be separated from social conditions embedded in the specific teaching context (e.g., institutional culture, rule of conduct, and expectations). We collectively refer to this type of contextual condition as the teaching environment based on the social network theory proposed by Wellman (1988). The teaching environment includes three major conditional elements across two different levels of context. Class size and students' level were identified at the micro-level of context (i.e., the classroom), and institutional demand was identified at the meso-level of context (i.e., the language program). We found that these contextual backdrops encapsulated Lisa's instructional decisions.

Class size. Class size is an essential factor in planning and teaching a lesson (Russell & Curtis, 2013). Class roasters were all tentative at the research site before the first lesson. In other words,

Lisa was not sure how many students would sign up for her class until after she began teaching. Excerpt 4 indicates the uncertainty of her class size and how it might affect the team and time arrangements of debates in planning her lessons.

Excerpt 4

The main issue was the number of students. I wasn't sure how many students would sign up for the course. The team and time arrangements [for debates] would differ depending on that. In the worst case, I would end up with only one or two students in class. But in the end, 25 students signed up for the course (Follow-up interview).

Students' level. Planning lessons according to student language proficiency is vital for quality language education. However, students' level was another element that remained uncertain until Lisa started teaching her class. To safeguard against the unknown element, she devised strategic counter-measures. For example, Excerpt 5 presents two different ways Lisa implemented to prepare her lessons. One was to teach the debate skills in small chunks to help potentially weak students learn the necessary skills. The other was randomly changing students' groupings to balance students' differing levels.

Excerpt 5

Because this pilot course was conducted in an elective class, I didn't have a clear idea of the students' level. To solve the issue, I decided to introduce the debate skills step by step. So even less proficient students can learn. Also, I changed the groups randomly at the beginning of every lesson to ensure students were divided into different members and levels (Instructor Questionnaire).

In addition to the above, Excerpt 6 indicates that Lisa intentionally chose an introductory textbook with the premise that modifying the textbook for higher-level students would be much easier.

Excerpt 6

I wasn't quite sure about the level of my students, so I looked for a basic-level textbook. It's much easier to choose a more accessible textbook and adapt it by adding more challenging materials (Follow-up interview).

Even after Lisa began teaching the class, her reflective and adaptive decisions manifested differently. Excerpt 7 presents a notable example in which she made substantial changes to the initially prepared lecture slides by adding more complex tasks to meet the needs of varying levels of students in her classroom.

Excerpt 7

In reality, students' levels varied. So I had to change the PPT slides and add more challenging tasks for higher-level students (Follow-up interviews).

Institutional demand. Whether teaching or developing a curriculum, teachers' decisions are never free from the pedagogical context and its various influences (Owston, 2007). The debate class Lisa designed was to be delivered as one of the first-year mandatory English courses within the unified English curriculum. The curriculum serves approximately 4000 first-year students annually at the university (fieldnotes). The class size was 25 or fewer in many mandatory courses, including the debate class. The prospective number of instructors assigned to teach at least a section of the debate course was thus proportionately large. Given these contextual backgrounds, Lisa was highly conscious of how she designed the debate course and how it might impact other instructors once the course was officially launched. Accordingly, Lisa aimed to develop a course that would be simple and easy for instructors to understand. Consider Excerpt 8:

Excerpt 8

Because the course is to be offered in the unified curriculum, it had to be as simple as possible so that other teachers could also understand and follow the structure. The unified curriculum means there is a set of fixed goals and objectives. Within the framework, teachers can plan their lessons. I'm in a position to design the course, so I need to show them a model. Flexibility in the syllabus is suitable for experienced teachers, but most instructors have no experience teaching a debate course. Also, part-time instructors teach in other universities and don't have much time to plan their lessons. So what I always had in mind was to create a course that is simple and easy to understand (Follow-up interview).

Time constraints

Teachers face many constraints in planning and teaching lessons. One of such constraints is time availability, which is crucial in understanding teachers' decisions (Teig et al., 2019). At the initial stage of planning her lessons, Lisa searched for reading materials that could serve as an introduction to topics to be debated in class. However, finding suitable reading materials on a wide range of topics was not easy, primarily due to her limited time developing, preparing, and teaching the debate class. Excerpt 9 suggests that Lisa's perceived time limitations were an essential factor in searching for ready-made materials to teach debate skills and structure with minimal modifications.

Excerpt 9

Due to the time limitations, I searched for a published textbook with familiar reading topics for Japanese university students, such as having schools on Saturdays and increasing consumption tax in Japan. It was a critical thinking textbook. So I adopted reading materials from it, and then created PPT slides to introduce the debate skills and structure. They are easy to make and modify later (Follow-up interview).

Discussion and Implications

Our results show that Lisa's various decisions were inseparably linked to specific social and material conditions in her work environment. Figure 1 below presents the teacher agency's overall structure and the identified sociomaterial conditions as a summative overview of the results.

Figure 1
Teacher Agency and Sociomaterial Conditions
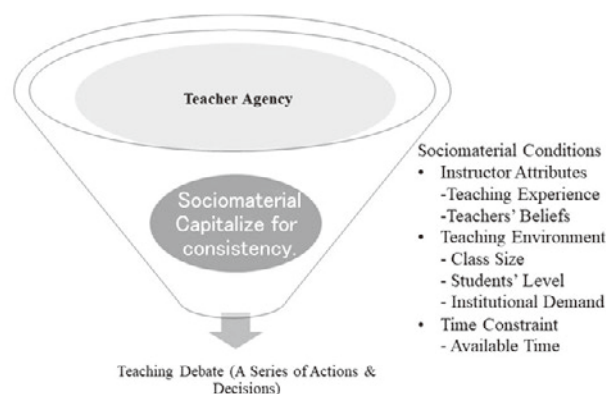
A critical finding in this study is that teacher agency as manifested in agentive decisions and actions is embedded in multifaceted social and material limitations perceived by the agent in the field. The various manifestations of teacher agency are highly interactive and dialogic in that there is no clear separation between the self and the environment. The finding is contrastive to the pervasive conceptualization and representation of teacher agency as an individual characteristic that teachers possess and act upon (see Bandura, 2001 for more discussion on the individualistic approach to teacher agency).

In our investigation, we adopted the sociomaterial approach under the assumption that whatever forms of teacher agency one might exercise, their resulting decisions and actions are socially and materially constrained; social and material contexts need to be integratively investigated in understanding teacher agency. The sociomaterial approach enabled us to treat an individual (i.e., teacher) and their perceived material and social conditions as mutually constitutive to the agent's decisions and actions.

As we highlighted in the results, Lisa's pedagogical decisions are entangled with the various forms of materiality, such as the Internet, videos, and textbooks. Giddens (1984) rightly argued that teacher agency is constrained by available resources such as classroom equipment. Physical constraints in our study extend to the availability of time within which the instructor planned, developed, and conducted debate lessons. Furthermore, Lisa's perceived social constraints are present in the forms of unknown class size and student level as well as institutional expectations. The finding corresponds to to that of Hanson's (2003) that school conditions and processes mediate teacher agency. Our study indicates, however, that social conditions seem to go beyond the mediators of teacher agency as they are embedded in teachers' actions. In other words, without the social and material constraints, Lisa's adaptive and interactive decision-making and actions cannot be fully explained. This point is notable as social conditions are often external factors to teachers' actions (Luttenberg et al., 2013).

The hallmark of teacher agency is found in the ontologically performative sphere wherein the agents actively seek and find ways to execute socially and materially possible decisions and actions Etelapelto et al., 2013 Pappa et al., 2019). We found Lisa a highly active agent, as exemplified in her adaptive actions in planning and preparing lessons. This type of heightened involvement in professional work marks agents as active, and it requires them to be aware of various constraints placed upon them at personal and institutional levels. The importance of teacher agency studies lies in its recognition of teachers as active agents for professional development, curriculum reforms, and improvement (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Priestly et al., 2012). The line of studies pursues the role of the agent and its impact on teachers in various contexts under the premise that teachers with an active agency should bring about positive educational outcomes. However, agents are not free from material and social limitations; *active* does not readily mean that positive changes are possible.

Furthermore, Biesta et al. (2015) argue that what matters in teacher agency studies is to examine the *quality* of actors' engagement with contexts to act. That is why exploring social and material constraints as perceived by teachers is necessary. In addition, the focus of such studies needs to be on agents' adaptive decisions and actions in and with context rather than on agents in isolation or factors affecting them. In such endeavors, the sociomaterial approach helps us shift our view of agency from human to phenomena, which encompasses human and nonhuman actors (i.e., sociomateriality) as equally important research subjects.

Conclusion

This study examined one instructor's teacher agency teaching an EFL debate class in a Japanese higher education context. By adopting a sociomaterial approach, the study found that the instructor's teacher agency manifested in her pedagogical decisions and actions encapsulated by various social and material conditions. It demonstrated that the exercise of teacher agency is context-bound, interactive, and adaptive; the instructor's enacted decisions and actions are part of social and material constraints.

Given the ongoing COVID-19 epidemic, English language teaching in Japan is facing radical changes on all fronts. Amid these changes, the role of teachers is becoming ever more critical as the quality of instructors is central to quality education. Teacher agency is an essential area of research in language education to understand how teachers adapt and respond to the constantly changing landscape of social and material conditions in their respective pedagogical contexts. As this study has shown, an ontologically individualistic approach to examining teacher agency may well be insufficient to represent the complexity of the construct and how it is exercised in tandem with emerging sociomateriality. This point echoes the proposition forwarded by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) to reconceptualize agency:

> Neither rational choice theory, norm-based approaches, nor any of the other sociological perspectives extant today provide a fully adequate understanding of its significance and constituent features. Nor do such perspectives satisfactorily answer the question as to how agency interpenetrates with and impacts upon the temporal relational contexts of action.
>
> (p. 1012)

Finally, our study is limited in its replicability and generalizability, given our methodological choice. We purposefully adopted a qualitative research design to investigate teacher agency in *situ* and focused on one instructor participant. While it allowed us to closely analyze various qualitative data sources, the extent of social and material conditions we identified was most likely far from exhaustive. For example, social conditions may extend to the instructor's social relationships and interactions with her colleagues as collegial support or collaboration is commonplace in developing and teaching a new curriculum. Bringing other instructors into research would have added another layer of complexity to the study.

For future research, we believe it is imperative to include multiple agents and their surrounding social material conditions within the same instructional context to present a fuller picture of teacher agency at work.

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Appendix I
Instructor Questionnaire

Q1. What is your sex?

Male/Female

Q2. How long have you taught English at the university level?

Q3. Have you ever taught debate in English?

Yes/No

Q4. In your opinion, what are essential things to remember in teaching debate?

Q5. Did you encounter any problems in planning lessons for the debate class? If yes, how did you solve them?

Q6. What kinds of resources would you need in planning future lessons for the debate class?

Appendix II
Semi-structured Interview Questions

Q1. Please describe the process when you were planning the course.

Q2. What were the challenging things when you were designing the course?

Q3. Please explain the process of selecting/creating the teaching materials.

Q4. What aspects did you try to emphasize the most when you were teaching the debate course? Why?

Q5. What were some of the difficulties that students faced during the course?

Q6. To what extent did the classroom facilities affect your teaching?