Messy collaboration: learning from a Learning Study

Bob Adamson & Elizabeth Walker

Abstract

Messy collaboration refers to complexity, unpredictability and management dilemmas when educators work together. Such messiness was evident in a Hong Kong English Learning Study, a structured cyclical process in which teachers and researcher-participants from a teacher education institution work collaboratively on effective student learning. This paper describes and analyses the collaboration from a micropolitical perspective using multiple participant-voices, including that of one who experienced the collaboration differently from the others. The analysis explores some reasons for the messiness of the collaboration, addresses the epistemological tensions, and considers ways to shift the collaboration towards one that facilitates innovation and learning.

Key words: lesson study, collaboration, reflective teaching, English (foreign language)

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Introduction

The concept of teaching as a collaborative enterprise has gained traction in recent decades, as it is seen "as a means to counter teacher isolation, improve teacher practice and student learning, build a common vision for schooling, and foster collective action around school reform" (Achinstein, 2002, p.421). In an era when reforms around the world have stressed school accountability and catering for the diverse needs of students, a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) represents a dialogic space that is potentially conducive to formulating concerted responses to educational dilemmas, and supportive of individual teacher professional development. Typical collaborative endeavors include action research projects and partnerships between schools and tertiary institutions that focus on situated learning (Wilmore, 1996; Vavrus, 2001; Korthagen, 2001).

Another popular, related concept is that of the teacher as reflective practitioner (Zeichner, 1994). This concept values situated knowledge generated by teachers from their own experiences through informal or structured reflection, with action research providing one form of structure (Wallace, 1998). Collaboration involving the teachers and other partners has the potential to bring together the reflective and dialogic processes of professional development. However, collaborative learning can be problematic (Fernandez, Cannon, & Chokski, 2003; Grossman, Wineburg, &

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Woolworth, 2001) and could result in what Hargreaves (1994) terms "contrived collegiality" rather than a productive generation of new learning.

The field of teacher education itself has been described as "messy text" (Segall, 2002, p.170). Within that messy text, messiness in teacher collaboration here refers to complexity, unpredictability and difficulty in monitoring and management when teachers work and research together (Ball & Cohen, 1999). This paper investigates an example of messy collaboration that occurred in the context of a Learning Study conducted in a secondary school in Hong Kong working in partnership with education faculty from a local tertiary institution. Learning Study is a form of action research where teachers investigate their students' learning difficulties and judge the effectiveness of their teaching strategies based on student learning outcomes. The teachers are supported by teacher-educators from the tertiary institution who specialize in the content area. The paper analyses the dynamics of the interactions between the participants in this Learning Study by drawing on the literature on micropolitics. This perspective helps to clarify the causes of the messiness that characterized this particular instance of collaboration. In her study of how conflicts are handled in teacher collaboration, Achinstein (2002) identified three micropolitical processes as critical dimensions in the interactions that she observed in her case study—conflict, border politics and ideology—and these proved to be illuminative in this present study.

The Learning Study

Learning Study in Hong Kong was inspired by the development of Teaching Study in

mainland China and Lesson Study in Japan (Li & Ko, 2007; Lo, Pong, & Chik, 2005),

which embrace the tradition of systematic and in-depth investigation into lessons for

teacher professional development. In mainland China, Teaching Study comprises a

demonstration lesson delivered by an expert teacher in the context of a large-scale

professional development workshop or by a teacher on a rotational basis within a

school. After observing the lesson, teachers participate in reflective discussions about

effective teaching methods and strategies. Japanese Lesson Study (*jugyou kenkyuu*) is

an integral part of teachers' work and professional development (Stigler & Hiebert,

1999). Teachers form teams based on their grade levels, subject matter or special

themes and meet for weeks, months or even a year to work together on a lesson or set

of lessons. The teachers observe a colleague delivering the lessons and the team

reflect together afterwards.

The Hong Kong Learning Study is distinguished from Teaching Study and Lesson

Study in that it is underpinned by the theory of variation propounded in Marton and

Booth (1997), which views teaching as a continuous process of changing students'

ways of seeing. Learning should be directed to something to be learned—the object of

learning—and learning arises from learners' discerning the critical distinguishing

features of the object of learning. These critical features are highlighted by variation,

which is achieved by, for example, contrasting the new learning with relevant prior

learning. The effectiveness of a lesson lies in whether students have acquired a more powerful way of perceiving the object of learning. Therefore, the primary focus of Learning Study is an object of learning, rather than actual learning activities (such as group work). It starts by establishing—typically by a pre-lesson-test or interview—students' prior knowledge and their existing perceptions, in order to identify an appropriate and worthwhile object of learning and the approach to improving perceptions.

The Learning Study described in this paper involved collaboration between four teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) in a secondary school, and two researcher-participants from a tertiary institution. The project formed part of a partnership between the school and the institution, and the Lesson Study was initiated by the school principal. The head (known as the Panel Chair in Hong Kong parlance) of junior secondary EFL led the team of teachers, though she did not teach a research lesson. Of the four teachers, only three were fully qualified. They were all teaching Form Two (Grade 8) students. The two researcher-participants, Cathy and Melanie (pseudonyms), both have a background in EFL teaching and hold doctorates in EFL learning and EFL curriculum respectively. Cathy, a Westerner with a working knowledge of Cantonese, had been teaching English in Hong Kong schools and educating teachers of English in applied linguistics, in the English department of the tertiary institution, for twenty years. She had extensive experience in conducting Learning Studies and, as senior academic staff, was designated the overall leader of

the study by the Director of the Learning Studies centre in the tertiary institution. Melanie, a native Cantonese speaker from mainland China, was in her first post in a tertiary institution, having recently completed her doctorate, and had recently joined the Learning Studies centre as a non-academic teaching consultant. She was embarking on her first Learning Study.

The Learning Study was divided into a number of steps (Figure 1) that were followed over a period of three to four months—allowing the Research Lesson to be delivered three times, with changes based on the experience of delivering the previous lesson being integrated into the second and third iterations. At the beginning of the process, a topic and an object of learning for the first Research Lesson were tentatively identified by the team, based on the teachers' understanding of students' existing ways of seeing (i.e., their prior understanding), the requirements of the curriculum, the available resources, the existing theories or research in the area, and the concept-related understandings and pedagogical beliefs of the teachers involved.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The next stage was the design and implementation of a pre-test involving all the students in the class and pre-lesson interviews with a focus group of students to establish the students' prior knowledge and to diagnose their learning difficulties. Based on these empirical data, the object of learning was fixed and variation patterns

and teaching activities for the Research Lesson were devised. One teacher then

enacted the collaborative lesson plan, while the rest of the team observed. The

observers focused on how students were learning and what was making their learning

happen. After the Research Lesson, the team conducted post-lesson interviews,

questionnaires and a post-test with the students to find out about their learning and

their views of the Research Lesson. After discussions, the Research Lesson was

redesigned and delivered by a different teacher with a different class. The process was

repeated across the three teaching cycles.

In reconstructing and analyzing the collaboration in this Learning Study, data were

derived from: the written final case report; written pre- and post-tests (e.g. Figures 2

& 3); teaching materials (e.g., Figure 4 and Appendices A & B); students'

video-recorded interviews and audio-recorded teachers' meetings during the study;

teachers' post-study oral presentation slides; and Cathy's post-study audio-recorded

reflections. The use of Cathy's reflections is not intended to privilege her voice but

rather to explore, with reference to a theoretical framework, possible reasons why she

was the only member of the team to express strong dissatisfaction with the outcomes

of the Learning Study.

Phase 1: Before the first Research Lesson

The team selected the topic 'personal pronouns' for the Learning Study, citing the

following common student mistakes:

1. He lent him book to me.

2. I saw their in the garden.

3. Her passed the ball to him.

Conflict arose in the team discussions at this early stage from the linguistic analysis of the students' mistakes. The teachers felt that the samples and a pre-pilot test indicated that the students confused the use of the different cases of English pronouns. The teachers had taught personal pronouns by explaining the traditional grammatical 'cases' of pronouns—nominative/subjective ('he'); accusative/objective ('him') and possessive ('his'). However, Cathy believed that there was an alternative way of seeing the problem:

> In the pre-pilot test, 10 out of 20 students didn't identify [the first word] "I" as a pronoun. ... I thought that this not identifying "I" as a pronoun showed that the students' understanding of pronouns was limited to pronouns as anaphoric reference, (you know, such as "[t]he sheep was black. It…") but…when I asked the teachers to focus on this finding … they replied that all students know that "I" is a pronoun. They focused on findings which I thought seemed to fit in with their preconceived notions of student difficulties and how they always approached the teaching of pronouns anyway.

Nevertheless, a pilot pre-test was designed (Figure 2) and from the students' performances, the teachers again concluded that students confused the forms and grammatical functions of different cases of personal pronouns.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Cathy believed that the data indicated that students had showed only minimal understanding of the fundamental deictic or referential nature of pronouns (i.e., that they have no inherent meaning; their meaning is retrievable only from the text or text's context), and probable unawareness of the 'referential chain' (including pronouns) as a linguistic resource for constructing textual cohesion as speech and writing unfold (i.e., enabling the entire talk/writing to 'hang together'). This functional way of seeing language is informed by advances in language study over the last two decades, such as systemic functional (Hallidayan) linguistics, and is considered particularly relevant to language teaching in schools (such as those in Hong Kong) where communication-oriented pedagogy is advocated, because of its focus on language in *use* (Halliday, 2007 (containing papers from 1960 to 1996); Christie & Derewianka, 2008).

The rest of the team seemed unconvinced by her argument, despite her status as project leader and team expert in applied linguistics. After this debate, she noticed changes in the dynamics of the team. There was a shift from English to Cantonese as the predominant language of their discussions, and Melanie assumed a more prominent role in directing the project. Although the shift meant that the discussions were in a language that was more comfortable for the rest of the team, Cathy, whose

competence in Cantonese was not as strong as the others' competence in English, felt marginalized:

> By the second meeting, the language was switched from English to Cantonese—oh, ever so nicely, but obviously I couldn't make as large a contribution, as I was spending all my time trying to understand what was being discussed.

Thereafter, Cathy had no input into the revised pre-test on students' understanding of the forms and functions of personal pronouns.

Altogether six students (two high-achieving, two middle-achieving and two low-achieving students) sat the test paper. They correctly answered almost all the questions. This was counter-intuitive to the teachers' initial diagnosis, but, as Cathy argued in a conversation with Melanie outside the school-based meeting, the revised pre-test merely required students to group words which were already given as pronouns rather than asking students to classify contextualized words independently, as the pilot pre-test (Figure 2) had done.

In follow-up interviews, three of the selected students (of different achievement levels) were asked about their understanding of personal pronouns and how they had addressed the questions in the revised pre-test paper. All three students said that Question A was easy as they had learned the table showing the cases of pronouns quite recently. When asked about the differences between the four cases, students admitted that they found it difficult to distinguish the use of object and possessive

pronouns. Their approach was to judge the use of different pronouns mainly according

to their perceptions of the positions of these pronouns in English sentences:

> Group One [i.e., Subject pronouns] must be put at the beginning of a
>
> sentence; Group Two [i.e., Object pronouns] must be put in the middle or at
>
> the end of a sentence; Group Three [i.e., possessive determiners] must be
>
> put at the beginning of a sentence; and Group Four [i.e., possessive
>
> pronouns] must be put at the end of a sentence.

[Student PB: Melanie's translation]

The teachers concluded from the revised pre-test results and interviews that students

had mastered the forms of English personal pronouns but they had problems in

understanding the grammatical functions of objective and possessive personal

pronouns. Cathy felt that these judgments again reflected a traditional view of

language without awareness of the role of grammar as generator of meaning, and she

argued that it was not possible to claim student 'mastery of pronoun forms' without

mastery of their semantic function *across* text in context. In addition, 'learning the

table' was not evidence that students could independently use pronouns or distinguish

their different meaning-making potential. Furthermore, Cathy argued that the way

teachers used the visual paradigm may have encouraged in students a sole focus on

the *order* of sentence constituents rather than awareness of their grammatical

functions *within* sentence constituents, not to mention their semantic function within

the clause and their role in referential chains and cohesion *across* the text. Cathy's

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arguments were again articulated in English discussions with Melanie off-site, and after further discussion between Melanie and the teachers, it was agreed that Melanie and Cathy would re-revise the pre-test (see Figure 3), which was finally administered to the three classes of students who took part in the Learning Study.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The results showed that fifty percent of students in Class 1 (n=24), 76.19% in Class 2 (n=21) and 81.48% in Class 3 (n= 27) explained the use of personal pronouns solely by their positions in sentences. Cathy claimed that these results supported her view that the teachers could not be confident that students had 'mastered the forms' of pronouns.

Pre-lesson interviews were undertaken with nine students of differing achievement levels. When interviewed about differentiating between the different groups of words, an average-achieving student replied:

> These words *[pointing to the subject nouns]* are normally used at the beginning of
>
> sentences. For example, when I talk about myself, I use 'I' at the beginning. Then
>
> if I want to talk about myself again, I can't use 'I' again. I should use 'me'.
>
> [Student 3B: Melanie's translation]

The data from these interviews were again interpreted by the teachers as evidence of students' lack of understanding of the clause/sentence-level grammatical function of

the four cases. On this basis, the teachers reiterated that the object of learning for the Research Lesson would be the 'cases' of personal pronouns, specifically 'subject', 'object' and 'possessive'. Thus, the teachers remained focused on the issue of grammatical 'case' at sentence level, consistent with their previous teaching and with the paradigm approach in the textbooks and their pilot tests.

Again Cathy dissented, seeing the problem at a text/discoursal level as well as at the discrete clause level. She was also concerned about the planning direction of the teaching because of its over-reliance on vague, apparently notional definitions of pronouns as 'groups of words that we can use to talk about people or things' (see Figure 2). Cathy's argument did not prevail, but a form of compromise was reached, whereby the object of learning was identified as having five critical features:

1. The 'action' is the core (i.e., essential element, carrying most meaning load) <u>of a basic sentence</u>; however, this was written up as 'the action is [in] the centre of the sentence' again reflecting a structural, rather than a textual or meaning-based orientation to the grammar.

2. There is always a 'doer' of the action; there is sometimes a 'receiver' of the action;

3. Noun groups and pronouns can be either a 'doer' or a 'receiver'

4. Subject pronouns can only be 'doer'; Object pronouns can only be 'receiver'; possessive pronouns within a noun group can refer to both 'doer' and 'receiver'.

5. Pronouns are found in other (non-basic) clause and complementation patterns.

The terms 'action' and 'doer' and 'receiver' are meaning-based (semantic) categories, which were intended to make more comprehensible to the students the grammatical categories 'Predicator', 'Subject' and 'Object'. However, the terms 'action' and 'receiver' in particular were compromises because of differences in grammatical viewpoints and terminology between the teachers and Melanie, on the one hand, and Cathy on the other.

Cathy next proposed text-types for the students to study in the Research Lesson. These were mostly authentic published narratives, which teachers might shorten. However, the rest of the team preferred to build the lesson around a text not requiring adaptation called 'Mary had a little lamb' (Figure 4), supplied by one teacher from her undergraduate course materials. It was preferred to Cathy's texts on the grounds that the story was linguistically undemanding and familiar to their students. Cathy felt that the text was less suitable, as the language was not rich enough for students to observe adequate variation in pronouns.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

According to the teaching plan, the teacher would first use the song 'Mary had a little lamb' and the first paragraph to present the three elements, 'doer', 'action' and 'receiver'. The students would then be asked to find more examples of the three elements in the second, third and fourth paragraphs, and to complete the tables in the

worksheet (Appendix A). The whole story would be presented on the blackboard, and printed also on students' worksheets, in order to provide students with the context of language use during their text observations. The students would highlight the personal pronouns in the tables on their worksheets. By observing the roles that different pronouns perform in sentences (e.g., Subject pronouns appearing only in the 'doer' column and Object pronouns in the 'receiver' column), the students would, in theory, be able to discern and generalize that different cases of personal pronouns perform different grammatical and semantic functions in English sentences. Such discernment was also expected to help students to modify their assumptions about clause position as sole determiner of personal pronoun choice.

Phase 2: The Research Lessons

In the first cycle of teaching, the teacher followed the lesson plan closely, and conducted the lesson in a carefully controlled teacher-guided manner. Post-lesson interviews for each teaching cycle were carried out with high, average and lower achieving students as for the pre-test interview. In the post-lesson interviews after the first cycle, the lower-level and average-level students did not understand the meaning of 'action', 'doer' and 'receiver', nor their relationships introduced by their teacher (using English) in the Research Lesson. The lower-level student indicated she would have preferred the grammatical explanation in her mother tongue, Cantonese, as she had difficulty in following it in English—a strategy suggested by Cathy and rejected by the team as counter to school policy. The interviews demonstrated no change in

students' assertions that pronoun choice depended on sentence position, as shown by the intermediate-level student:

Melanie: What's the relationship between 'doer' and 'action'?

Student 1B: What's the relationship? I don't know.

…

Melanie: How did you differentiate Group One pronouns and Group Two pronouns before?

Student 1B: One is used at the beginning and the other is used at the end.

Melanie: What about now?

Student 1B: Still the same. Because the doer is always at the beginning and the receiver is always at the end.

[Melanie's translation]

Reflecting on the lesson, the team decided that the relationship between 'action', 'doer' and 'receiver' needed to be shown more clearly. To do that, the terms 'action', 'doer of the action' and 'receiver of the action' were used in the second and third cycles. In these cycles, the team decided to ask students to work only on selected sentences so that students were given more time to work in groups and present their answers on the blackboard. Also, a consolidation exercise was added after introducing the functions of pronouns in which students were asked to correct the wrong use of pronouns and explain their reasons.

Many students in the second Research Lesson had difficulty in following the teacher's

instructions for completing the worksheet (Appendix B). As a result, there were timing problems and fewer informative input opportunities, and in the post-lesson interviews in the second cycle, the students continued to exhibit problems in distinguishing the three types of pronouns:

Melanie: Which part is the most difficult to you?

Student 2B: This part relating to the pronouns.

Melanie: What about you?

Student 2C: The same here. I found it still difficult to tell the differences between these groups.

[Melanie's translation]

In the third cycle, the perceived timing problems seemed to be solved, and in the post-lesson interviews, students seemed to show better command of the semantic functions of pronouns, compared to those interviewed in the first two cycles, which seemed to indicate that Cathy's ideas on meaning-focus/use were receiving some attention in the teaching.

The most vivid thing I've learned is how pronouns should be used. When you asked me before the lesson, I was not able to explain it. But now I know the answer: Group One is used as doers and Group Two as receivers.

[Student 3C: Melanie's translation]

The post-test results seemed to support the findings from the interviews about students' learning outcomes. Figure 5 compares the results of pre- and post tests of the

three teaching cycles. As shown in the first graph, the number of students able to use

semantic functions of personal pronouns to explain their corrections in Cycle Three

increased the most, by 48.15%.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

After the three cycles of teaching and research, the teachers and Melanie constructed a

report of the case and the teachers reflected on and evaluated the whole study in a

public presentation at the Learning Studies Centre. In the English-medium

presentation, the four teachers mentioned that the Learning Study had produced

beneficial outcomes. First, their students' learning of personal pronouns had been

greatly enhanced. As the teacher teaching the first cycle noted,

    After the Research Lesson, [the students] were able to explain very clearly,

    very meaningfully. So they know that if we need a doer, we need to use

    Group One. If we need an object, like 'her', we need to use Group Two—that

    is, the object pronouns—so they were able to explain their ideas in this way.

Second, the teachers felt that their own pedagogical knowledge had developed. Using

their knowledge of variation theory, they reflected critically on their use of the text

'Mary had a little lamb.' As the first cycle teacher, who chose the text, said,

    We found that actually there aren't enough examples of object pronouns.

    There are one or two and they are 'it' or 'him'. They are not representative

    enough. That's why it didn't reinforce students' learning of this group of

pronouns.

The teachers also found that investigating students' learning problems through pre-test and interview could be helpful in their teaching. The teacher who taught the second cycle commented,

> It will help us to plan the lesson better, because if we know what kind of problems our students are having. In order to have a good lesson plan, we will need to know what the problem is. And then we'll take a look at the problem and design our lesson accordingly.

Micropolitical Analysis

On the surface, this Lesson Study was reasonably successful: many of the students seemed to have a better grasp of the functions of pronouns than they had at the outset, and the teachers believed that they had enriched their pedagogical knowledge. However, Cathy's view was more jaundiced:

> I really liked these teachers, but I thought that they were satisfied with so little learning. …None of the more junior members articulated any subject-related learning at all, least of all on the grammatical nature of pronouns.

Cathy's dissatisfaction with the Learning Study is analyzed below in terms of the dimensions of micropolitical processes identified by Achinstein (2002). For each of the three dimensions—conflict, border politics and ideology—Achinstein sets out a spectrum of ways in which communities behave, while the fourth continuum

summarizes the implications for organizational change and learning (Figure 6). It is

important to reiterate Achinstein's caveats that this analysis is merely a snapshot, that

it cannot represent the full complexity of the processes, and that communities are

continually in a state of flux.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Conflict

Cathy's participation in the Learning Study proved to be a source of tension, partly

due to ideological differences (explored below) and partly due to role expectations.

Cathy viewed her role:

> … as somewhat important at the initial stages of the Learning Study as the
>
> supposedly more expert knower, at least subject-wise, and that I would probably
>
> scaffold, guide, and sort of direct at the beginning…. And as we got more into the
>
> teaching, I would withdraw and be more of an adviser at the later stages.

While Author (2007) illustrates some unfortunate consequences for students of

undiagnosed limitations in teachers' subject understandings, and Fernandez et al

(2003) conclude that collaborative lesson studies "must include room for

knowledgeable coaches who can stimulate the thinking of groups so they can rise

beyond their own limitations….into rich arenas" (p.182), the participation of a

designated 'expert' may inhibit overall team learning (Glazier, 2009).

Tension was exacerbated by the fact that Cathy's designation as 'expert' and leader by

the Learning Studies Director had not been conveyed to the rest of the team:

> I didn't know until later that [Melanie] and the teachers thought that my
>
> assertions were inappropriate because apparently [Melanie] had been told or led
>
> to believe that she was in charge and that I was an observer.

Given the questions of hierarchy and roles that are thrown up by a project involving a partnership between a school and a tertiary institution, the confusion surrounding Cathy's participation in the project and the resultant conflict were inevitable in the absence of clear specifications and acceptance of the roles assigned to each member of the team from the beginning of the project.

Border Politics

Language was a barrier: the switch from English to Cantonese reduced Cathy's capacity to benefit from the discussions and to honor others' contributions which could have resulted in 'repositioning' all round (Glazier, 2009). She was particularly frustrated by the need to communicate off-site and the lack of opportunity on-site to contribute her questions about group decisions and grammatical clarifications:

> I didn't feel equipped to explain and deal with this, especially since I was like the
>
> English intruder and they were trying to discuss things in Cantonese.

The powerful conversations about practice glimpsed in the perceptive contributions of the expert practitioners in the Japanese Lesson Studies reported in Fernandez et al

(2003) were thus not evident here. 'Conversations' in both a metaphorical and literal sense are at the core of Kelly's (2006) discussion of epistemological plurality and legitimacy discussed briefly below.

Ideology

Cathy viewed her ideological role as one of empowering the teachers—helping them to explore new ways of seeing and teaching linguistics amid the contextual opportunities and constraints in the school; and providing information about current relevant theories and research as necessary:

> In diagnosing the problems and in planning, I wanted the teachers to move away
>
> from the reliance on students' textbooks and the prescriptive thought,
>
> information and orientation in these textbooks and "one size fits all". I wanted
>
> them to start to take a more research stance [to language, text and teaching].

The challenge was bridging the gaps among different knowledge bases:

> I wanted them to build on traditional [grammatical] understanding. I wanted them
>
> to incorporate semantic [...] meaning-related meta-language into their teaching.
>
> This, I felt, was more transparent and more justified in Functional Grammar than
>
> some meta-language is in traditional grammar. But there was really a lot of
>
> resistance to this.

Cathy's inability to disturb the teachers' pedagogical orientations also resonates with Parks' (2008) depiction of (pre-service) interns' unwillingness to respond to her

challenges regarding the subject matter. Parks' original text (p.1209) is minimally re-worded here (changes in bold) to apply to the pronoun Study:

> However, rather than looking back at the way the **pre-test** did or did not **expose undeveloped linguistic** ideas, the **teachers** instead questioned the validity of my observation ….The [...] **teachers** turned my challenge **that 50% of students did not know that 'I' was a pronoun** into a statement that everyone knew what **pronouns** were. In addition, at no time during the planning or analysis did they **engage with suggestions to** consider **[…]** what knowledge of **pronouns** might be important **linguistically** beyond the ability to name and **group** them.

The challenge of different knowledge bases is inherent in Learning Studies through the involvement of teachers as grounded practitioners with 'authority of experience' (Munby & Russell, 1994) and academics from the tertiary institution. Mismatches in knowledge base are particularly salient in linguistics and hence in EFL Learning Studies. Unlike the vertical knowledge structure of the sciences, which is "a coherent, explicit and systematically principled structure, hierarchically organized" (Bernstein, 1996, p.161), the knowledge structure of linguistics is horizontal: "a series of specialized languages" (ibid). In the absence of agreement on how language as a "fourth order semiotic system" works (Kilpert, 2003, p. 182), and on grammatical terminology, it is daunting for teachers to take full advantage of the explanatory power of competing knowledge structures of linguistics (Kilpert, 2003; Hudson, 1994).

Concluding discussion

The partnership between a school and a tertiary institution that is central to the dynamics of a Learning Study is fraught—as this paper demonstrates—with potential tensions, such as outsider-versus-insider perspectives; academic versus grounded knowledge bases; unclear hierarchical statuses; and diverse and conflicting agenda. The responses of the case study team to the tensions could be classified as veering towards the left-hand side of Achinstein's continua: there was exclusion of the dissonant voice; erection of barriers to critical reflection on existing beliefs; and a lack of willingness to countenance alternative approaches to pedagogical content knowledge, resulting largely in the maintenance of the status quo. The responses could be construed as a preference on the part of busy teachers to remain in their comfort zones, especially in a cultural context that values harmony, and to collaborate, without deep engagement with the professional development goals of the Learning Study, in a superficial 'procedural display' (Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou, 1989).

Learning Study collaboration can be messy in its social-intellectual complexity, its unpredictability regardless of participants' prior experience, and its management dilemmas. The collaboration in this case was a compromise constructed through various power and discourse relationships in the team that were generally resistant to change. While the politics of human interaction are significant factors in this complex collaboration, the tension at its heart clearly goes beyond the micro-political to

epistemological differences concerning the nature of language, and ultimately to issues of social justice. The challenge here seems more than bringing personal differences together and building positive support for teachers. In the interests of improving students' education (a matter of social justice), the challenge is to "create [out of the entire learning study community] speakers of multiple points of view, but with sufficient expertise to be relevant" (Kelly, 2006, p. 42, our brackets). In this study, the perceived lack of relevance of the Systemic Functional argument, and the absence of the kind of co-operation where coercion is purely by "the force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1990, p.198, cited in Kelly, 2006) together disallowed significant knowledge production, right-hand shift in the collaboration paradigm, and above all talking across epistemological traditions. Epistemologically, 'hermeneutical conversations' are, on the other hand, those "which seek to investigate and interpret the knowledge, practices and aims of competing theory groups" (Kelly, 2006, p.43). Literally, 'conversations' of this sort (possibly mediated by 'brokering' as in He, 2009) permit open debate, self-correction given adequate criticism, and a means to critically review discourses, such as the traditional and Systemic Functional. For instance, the latter, among all the competing discourses of linguistics, makes the strongest claims regarding social justice (Butler, 2003), while social justice is outside the concerns of the former. In language Learning Studies, then, further work is needed on knowledge production through enabling hermeneutical conversations, especially in cultural contexts that prioritize harmony.

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Word count =   6237 – including abstract

Appendix A: Worksheet used in Cycle 1

Read the story 'Mary had a little lamb' and fill in the tables below

Paragraph 1

Doer	Action	Receiver	Others
Mary and her husband Martin	live		in a tiny village in Yuen Long
Martin	gives	Mary a little lamb	
the lamb	is		missing

Paragraph 2

Doer	Action	Receiver	Others
Martin	comes		home
his wife	tells	him	about the missing lamb
Martin	looks for	the thief	
He	tells	several of his friends	about the missing lamb

What can we observe from the tables above?

1. There must be <u>an action</u> (a. an action   b. a doer   c. a receiver) in every sentence and it is the centre of the sentence.

2. There is <u>always</u> (a. always   b. often   c. sometimes   d. seldom   e. never) a 'doer' of the action in a sentence.

3. There is <u>sometimes</u> (a. always   b. often   c. sometimes   d. seldom   e. never) a 'receiver' of the action in a sentence.

Paragraph 3

Doer	Action	Receiver	Others
Martin	goes		to Alex's house immediately
	shouts		
You	stole	my lamb	
	Give … back	it	to me

Paragraph 4

Doer	Action	Receiver	Others
I	haven't taken	it	
Alex	explains		
I	've bought	a new lamb	
Martin	apologises		to Alex
they	are talking		
it	begins to rain		
Martin	stays		in Alex's house

What can we observe from the tables above?

4. Noun groups and pronouns can be either a 'doer' or a 'receiver', but in different cases.

  (a. verb groups   b. noun groups   c. pronouns   d. adjectives   e. adverbs)

Based on what we can observe from the tables above, what can the following groups of pronouns do in a sentence?

Doer	Receiver	Doer/Receiver (plus a noun group)
Group 1	**Group 2**	**Group 3**
I	me	my
We	us	our
You	you	your
They	them	their
He	him	his
She	her	her
It	it	it

Paragraph 5

Doer	Action	Receiver	Others
Martin and Alex	go		outside half an hour later
the rain	has stopped		
a lamb	stands		in front of them
It	is		almost white

What can we observe from the story?

5. There are sentences in which we cannot find the 'doer' of the action. (e.g. The rope has been cut)

30

Appendix B: Worksheet used in Cycles 2 & 3

Read the story 'Mary had a little lamb' and fill in the tables below

Paragraph 1

	Doer of the action	Action	Receiver of the action
1	Mary and her husband Martin	live	
2	Martin	buys	a little white lamb
3	he	cannot find	the lamb
4		has been cut	the rope*
5	Someone	has stolen	the lamb

Paragraph 2

	Doer of the action	Action	Receiver of the action
6	Martin	comes	
7	Martin	looks for	the thief
8	Alex	has got	a new lamb

Paragraph 3

	Doer of the action	Action	Receiver of the action
9a	Martin	goes	
9b		shouts	
10	You	stole	my lamb
11		Give back	it

Paragraph 4

	Doer	Action	Receiver of the action
12	I	haven't taken	it
13	Alex	explains	
14	I	've bought	a new lamb
15	Martin	apologises	
16	they	are talking	
17	it	begins to rain	
18	Martin	stays	

What can we observe from the tables above?

✧ <u>Noun groups</u> and <u>pronouns</u> can be either a 'doer' of an action or a 'receiver' of an action, but in different 'cases'.

   (a. verb groups   b. noun groups   c.pronouns)

Based on what we can observe from the tables above, what can the following groups of pronouns do in a sentence?

Doer of an action   Receiver of an action
Doer/Receiver of an action

_____

(+ a noun/noun group)

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
I	me	my
We	us	our
You	you	your
They	them	their
He	him	his
She	her	her
It	it	its

Are the following sentences correct? Explain your answers in Chinese. Then make corrections to the sentences if there is anything wrong.

1. My is white.	☒	'My' cannot be used alone. It can only be a doer when it is used with another noun in a noun group, e.g. 'my lamb'.
2. They haven't taken it.	☑	
3. Their lamb is black.	☑	
4. Us like the story very much.	☒	'Us' can only be a 'receiver' of an action in a sentence.
5. You tell he the story.	☒	'he' can only be a 'doer' of an action in a sentence.

What have we learned today?

1. <u>Action</u> is very important in every [basic] sentence.

2. In every [basic] sentence, there is always <u>an action</u> and <u>a doer of the action</u>.

3. However, some of the actions may not have <u>a receiver</u>.

NB: * denotes flawed analysis

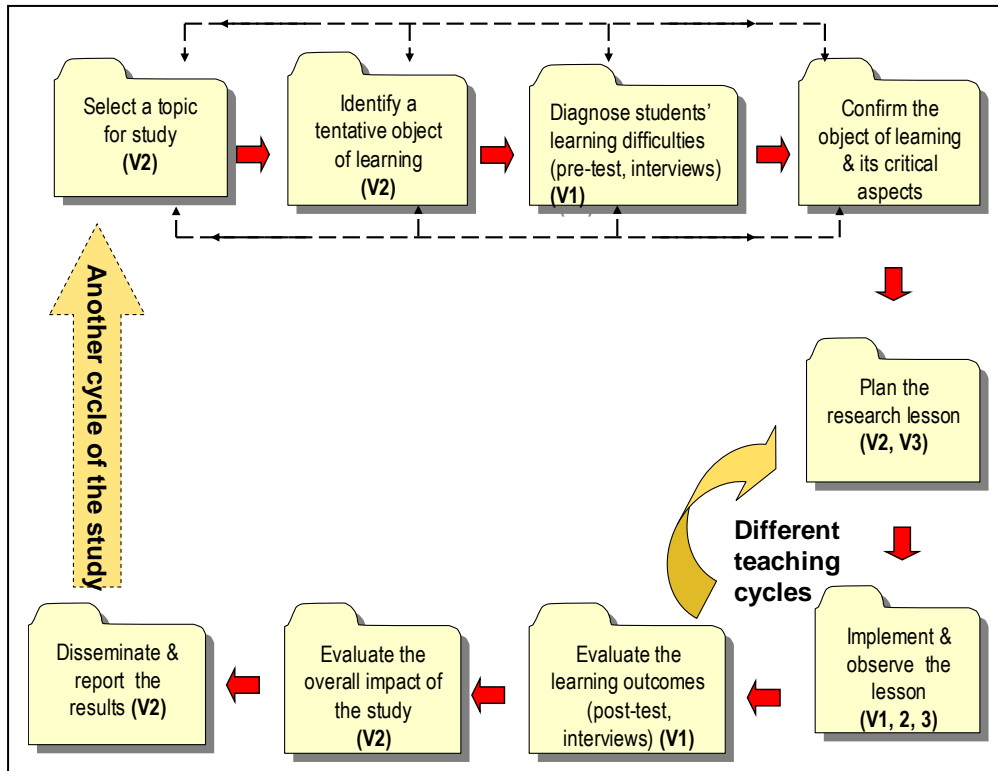**Figure 1 Steps in a Learning Study**

Figure 2 Pilot pre-test on English personal pronouns

A. There are four groups of words that we can use to talk about people or things.

Examples:
  Group 1: I like apples.
  Group 2: Mary gave me some money.
  Group 3: This is my desk.
  Group 4: The book is mine.

<u>*Please write the following words in their groups.*</u>
I   his   yours   he   mine   us   she   it   their   me   we   you   her
ours   you   them   my   his   it   her   him   your   its   our   they
your   you   hers   its   yours   theirs   you

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
I	Me	my	mine

B. Correct the mistakes in the following passage.
   Peter is me best friend. His are 14 years old. She is very clever. Us are studying in Class A, Form Two. Us likes reading very much. Him often give her books to my. And I often give his me toys. Us often does we homework together.

Figure 3 Pre-test on English personal pronouns

Please correct the mistakes in the sentences ② to ⑤ and explain in Chinese why you make the correction. .

①This is mark. ②Him is me best friend. ③ Us like reading very much. ④His often gives I his book. ⑤And me like he very much.

Example:

① Correct sentence: This is Mark.

　Explain: 姓名的第一個字母要大寫. 　[*Proper noun needs capitalization*]

② Correct sentence:

　Explain:

③ Correct sentence:

　Explain:

④ Correct sentence:

　Explain:

⑤ Correct sentence:

　Explain:

Figure 4 'Mary had a little lamb'

Mary had a Little Lamb

Mary and her husband Martin live in a tiny village in Yuen Long. One day, Martin gives Mary a little white lamb. The next day, the lamb is missing. The rope has been cut. Clearly someone has stolen the lamb.

When Martin comes home, his wife tells him about the missing lamb. Martin at once looks for the thief. He tells several of his friends about the missing lamb. Finally, he finds out that his neighbour, Alex, has suddenly got a new lamb.

Martin goes to Alex's house immediately and shouts, 'You stole my lamb! Give it back to me or I'll call the police.'

'I haven't taken it,' Alex explains, 'I've just bought a new lamb, but *my* lamb is black.' Therefore, Martin apologises to Alex. While they are talking, it begins to rain. Martin stays in Alex's house until the rain stops.

When Martin and Alex go outside half an hour later, the rain has stopped. Suddenly, a lamb stands in front of them. It is almost white! Its wool, which has been coloured black, has been washed clean by the rain!

Figure 5 Comparison of pre- & post-tests results of the three cycles

Comparison of pre- & post- tests results: semantic explanation

	C1	C2	C3
pre	25.00%	33.33%	0.00%
pos	54.17%	66.67%	48.15%

| + 29.17% | + 33.34% | + 48.15% |

Comparison of pre- & post- tests results: judging by positions

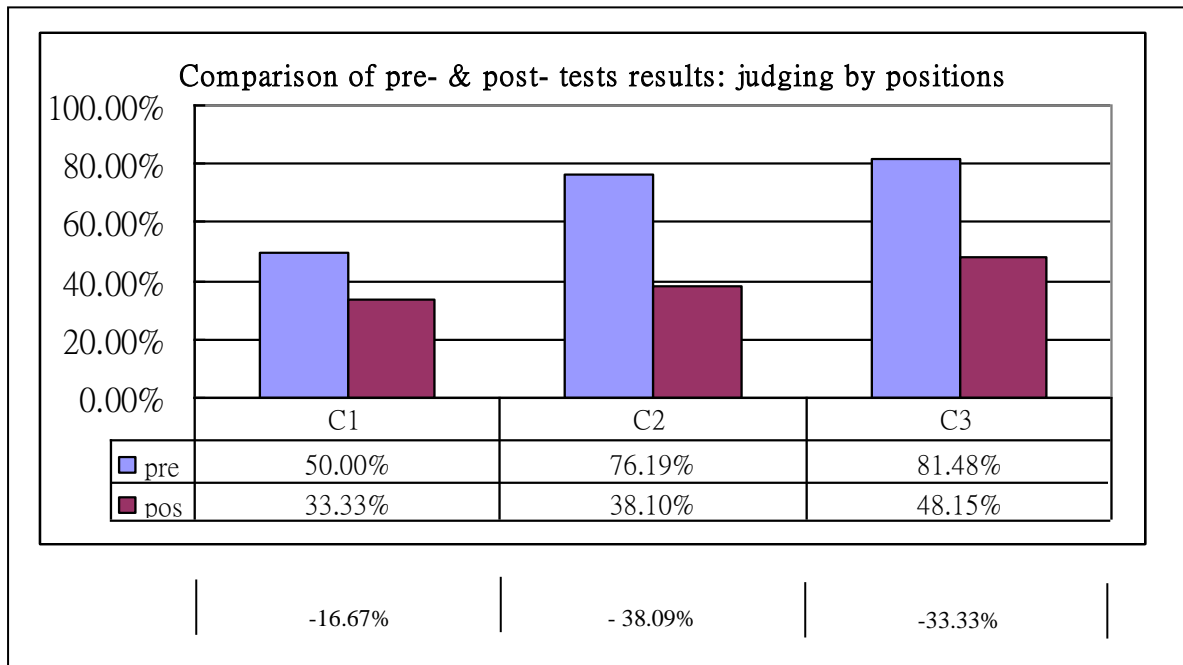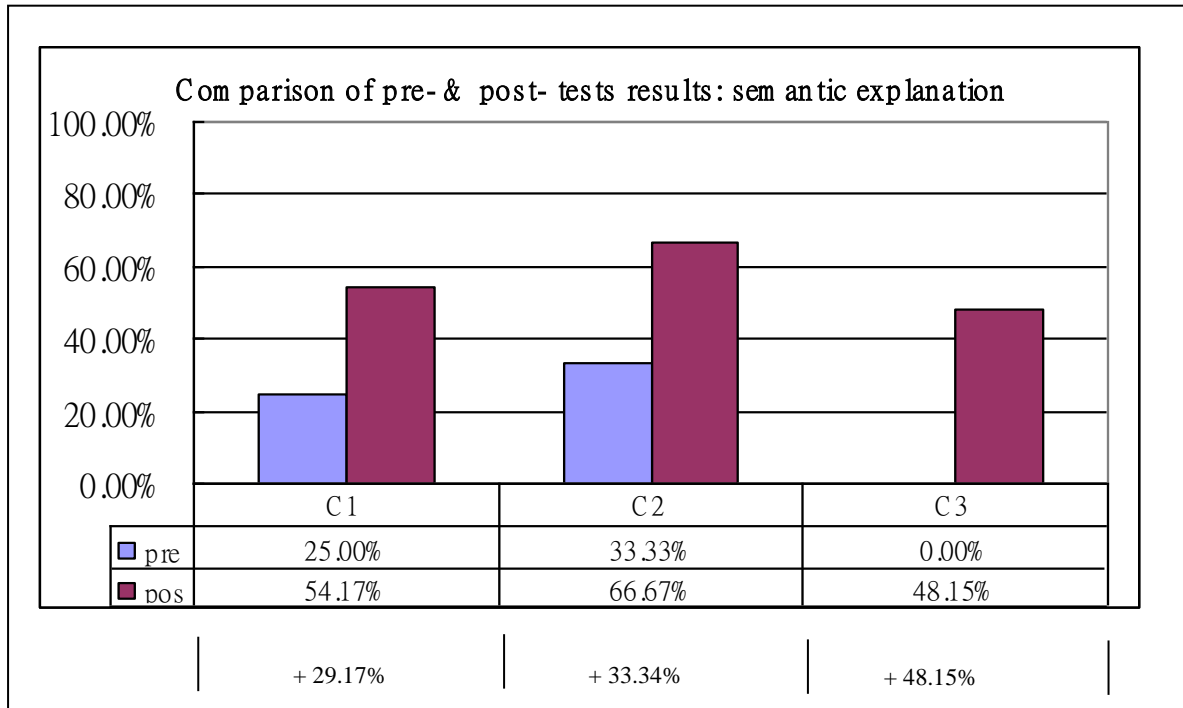|	C1	C2	C3
pre	50.00%	76.19%	81.48%
pos	33.33%	38.10%	48.15%

| -16.67% | - 38.09% | -33.33% |

Figure 6 Continuum of dimensions of micropolitical processes (adapted from Achinstein, 2002)

Conflict stances	*Avoidant* Harmony, low levels of dissent	←——————→	*Embracing* Welcome opportunities for critical reflection and alternative views
Border politics	*Unified/Exclusive* Homogeneity of beliefs; barriers to outsiders	←——————→	*Diverse/Inclusive* Heterogeneity of beliefs; open boundaries
Ideology	*Mainstream/Congruent* Little critical reflection; maintenance of existing ideology of teaching and learning	←——————→	*Critical/Counter* Critical reflection on existing ideology of teaching and learning, and action to challenge it
Organizational Change and Learning	*Stability/Static* Status quo reinforced	←——————→	*Change/Learning* Innovation and organizational learning