The Culture, the Program, and the Supervisor: Clinical Supervision Challenges in Chinese DLI Contexts

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate challenges and tensions encountered by university supervisors working with student teachers in dual language immersion (DLI) settings. Despite the growth of Utah’s statewide DLI program, Utah university teacher programs have few faculty members familiar with the partner cultures and languages of Utah’s DLI model. Drawing from a larger multiple case study, this study examines three non-Chinese university supervisors’ written reflections and focus group transcripts during supervision in Chinese DLI classrooms. Findings suggest the challenges and tensions encountered by these supervisors were not just cultural in nature; at times, university supervisors were unfamiliar with the DLI model and/or unsure of whether challenges were products of cultural differences, the DLI model, or other influences.

Keywords: student teaching; student teacher supervision; dual language immersion programs; bilingual education

The purpose of this study is to investigate challenges and tensions encountered by university supervisors working with student teachers in dual language immersion (DLI) settings. Teacher education and clinical supervision studies have examined teacher educators working in different cultural contexts (e.g., Williams & Berry, 2016) and cultural differences between university supervisors and teacher candidates (e.g., Lee, 2011), yet very few studies have examined student teaching in DLI settings. The growth of DLI programs across Utah—and our own experiences with student teachers in DLI settings—has led to a particular interest among our team in teacher preparation for DLI settings. In previous work (e.g., Davis et al., 2023), we have explored a student teaching triad in a Chinese DLI setting, in which the university supervisor was not Chinese and not well versed in either the culture or language of instruction. Although we documented challenges that arose from this student teaching arrangement, we have since questioned whether such challenges were a product of cultural differences and understandings.

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versus conflicting understandings or expectations of Utah’s statewide DLI program. We sought to examine challenges and tensions university supervisors encountered across DLI classrooms, as well as the sources of these challenges.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Utah’s DLI classrooms represent a site of teacher learning that has recently received greater attention from scholars. In the Utah DLI model, participating schools are expected to establish a one-way DLI class in each grade so that native English speakers can learn the partner language (Li et al., 2016). The DLI class is actually two separate classes taught by a partner language and English-language teacher, who teach each group for half of the school day (i.e., the 50:50 model; Leite & Cook, 2015). Instruction at each grade level includes prescribed percentages of time, enabling the model to be replicated across the state in different schools using multiple languages (Leite & Cook, 2015), including Chinese.

Recruitment of Chinese-language teachers is a particular challenge for American schools, likely making the prospect of a preservice pipeline for Utah DLI schools alluring; however, few DLI teachers appear to be prepared by Utah university teacher preparation programs. Several challenges make the establishment of such a pipeline in Utah difficult. First, Utah’s university teacher preparation programs have few, if any, Chinese-speaking teacher educators, meaning university supervisors may not be fluent in the language in which they are supervising teacher candidates. Second, very little scholarship on clinical supervision documents student teacher supervision in DLI settings (Davis et al., 2023). For example, Kim et al. (2017) studied several Korean teacher educators’ experiences in the US, though not in DLI or other bilingual teaching contexts. Lee’s (2011) study also focused on monolingual student teacher settings, examining two points of the student teaching triad: American teacher candidates as well as herself as a Korean university supervisor. In a more recent study, Guise et al. (2020) investigated the effects of professional development on university supervisors’ written feedback to support emergent bilinguals. However, it is unclear in Guise et al.’s (2020) study if supervisors were working in dual language settings; inclusion criteria included supervising student teachers “at a school site that included emergent bilinguals” (p. 60).

One exception to this limited scholarship is Davis et al.’s (2023) study of critical incidents found across a single Chinese DLI student teaching triad. The triad examined in this study consisted of a Chinese student teacher pursuing elementary certification, a school-based Chinese mentor teacher, and a non-Chinese university supervisor. Across the triad, cultural differences were observed that may have inhibited student teacher learning; since the university supervisor was not fluent in Chinese, she at times struggled to assist the student teacher in the development of instructional and assessment strategies for Chinese literacy in particular. While this pilot study provided an intriguing window into student teaching in DLI contexts, we wonder whether Davis et al. (2023) were really observing cultural differences, or if the challenges they noted were more a product of different interpretations of the DLI program and its expectations—or, perhaps, a combination of the two.

In this study, we used critical incident analysis (Harrison & Lee, 2011) but examined multiple cases and perspectives of critical incidents among university supervisors who do not speak the Chinese language fluently. Critical incidents are “unplanned and unanticipated” events or experiences that may result in a turning point, decisive action, and possibly new understandings of teaching practice (Farrell, 2013, p. 81; Tripp, 1994). Incidents become critical through
recollection and reflection, which can enable experiences to be understood in new ways (Farrell, 2013; Harrison & Lee, 2011). For example, Akpovo (2019) used critical incident analysis to document the different perspectives student teachers in a Nepal-based practicum experience developed based on how events were viewed, experienced, evaluated, and communicated. Critical incident analysis often examines events or experiences identified by students or learners (e.g., Akpovo, 2019), but the approach has also been used to examine multiple perspectives on learning within an event or experience (e.g., Davis et al., 2023; Weiss et al., 2021). This study examined critical incidents from the perspectives of three university supervisors, who were involved in preparing and supporting three Chinese student teachers in separate dual language classrooms. We used critical incident analysis to inform the following research questions: 1) What challenges or tensions did three university supervisors encounter working with student teachers in Chinese DLI settings?, and 2) What were the sources of or influences on the challenges or tensions university supervisors encountered?

**METHOD**

This study is part of a larger multiple case study (Stake, 2013) of three student teaching triads in DLI settings. The study focuses on the experiences of the three university supervisors from the larger study: two working with student teachers in an elementary DLI setting, and a third working with a student teacher in a secondary DLI setting. All names and places mentioned in the sections below are pseudonyms.

**PARTICIPANTS AND STUDY CONTEXT**

All three university supervisor participants of this study were full-time faculty members from a university teacher preparation program in Utah. Both the university and schools in which participants supervised student teachers were located in South Junction, a rural community of approximately 40,000 residents. The demography of South Junction and the Junction District were similar: more than 80% of students were categorized as Caucasian, with 30% of students also categorized as economically disadvantaged. Although Junction’s elementary and middle schools shared this racial demography, they both reported higher percentages of economically disadvantaged students (both greater than 40%). Student and mentor teachers in the Junction District Chinese DLI program were all women who were born and raised in China. However, the participants of this study were not Chinese or fluent in the Chinese language: US2 was a Caucasian woman from Utah with an elementary education background, whereas US3 was a Caucasian man who relocated to Utah following secondary education teaching experiences; US1 was a Hispanic/Caucasian woman with elementary education and administration experiences.

**DATA SOURCES**

The larger study included multiple forms of data. Between January and May 2023, we collected individually written reflections from all student teaching triad members and audio recorded conversations between dyads (e.g., mentor and student teacher); we later conducted focus groups between researchers and triad members along with post study debrief conversations between the research team members (see Appendix). In this study, we analyze the supervisors’ written reflections, transcripts from the focus groups they participated in, as well as post-study debrief conversation notes. Written reflections were collected via the app WeChat and by email from participants; participants were instructed to identify critical incidents in student teachers’
learning as well as in supervisors’ interactions with student teachers that the supervisor regarded as important learning situations. Following the completion of student teaching, two focus groups (each approximately 60 minutes in length) were held between researchers and student teaching triads; focus groups were audio recorded, with the recordings transcribed verbatim by the research team. Finally, debrief conversations took place between the research team by email and in person to discuss observations and possible topics of interest. When these conversations were held in person, written notes were recorded by a member of the research team.

DATA ANALYSIS

All data was stored and analyzed using MAXQDA. We utilized descriptive coding to code any tensions or challenges noted by supervisors (Saldaña, 2016). Second cycle coding involved versus coding (Saldaña, 2016) to examine the sources of these tensions or challenges. The first author independently initiated both rounds of coding; once completed, the second author reviewed second cycle coding, and differences in conclusions regarding versus coding and relationships were resolved through consensus. Analytic memoing was used throughout and after both rounds of coding to explore conflicts and tensions and their sources.

RESULTS

Preliminary analysis for this study revealed a number of challenges supervisors encountered while working with student teachers in Chinese DLI settings. Unlike Davis et al.’s (2023) study, which focused primarily on the cultural differences between triad members, this study uncovered challenges that were not direct products of cultural difference. In the sections below, we provide examples of challenges stemming from cultural differences, but also DLI program requirements and district or other external mandates and standards.

CHORAL RESPONSE: CHINESE TEACHING STRATEGY VS. DLI PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Among the most noticeable differences for US1 during her observations was the repeated emphasis on loud, choral response. Much of the interaction US1 observed between student teacher and students was through call and response of Chinese words and sentences. US1 noted in one reflection that ST1 “managed the call and responses really well” and that students “were very engaged and energetic” during this teaching approach. Compared with her student teachers in non-DLI settings, US1 found the use of choral response far more common in ST1’s and MT1’s classroom. This observation led US1 to wonder if choral response was used since it was a common teaching approach in China, and/or if choral response was an explicit demand of the Utah DLI program. Without knowing for sure—and not wanting to be culturally insensitive or inconsistent with the DLI program’s requirements—US1 elected to focus her observation feedback on other elements represented in the Utah Teacher Candidate Performance Assessment & Evaluation System (i.e., the PAES evaluation, which is Utah’s student teaching rubric). Her subsequent written reflections discussed differentiation and groupings of students, as well as managing student behavior using a behavior clip chart along with proximity.

US1’s decision exemplifies two related challenges in DLI student teacher supervision: understanding the DLI program and accessing its requirements or expectations, and melding these requirements or expectations with the more general requirements laid out in the PAES evaluation. In the absence of first-hand experience with Utah’s DLI program, US1 and other supervisors may need to learn about the program from Utah’s DLI web site and/or the language specific DLI web
sites, specifically administrator-focused documents such as the DLI Core Instructional Strategies Observation Protocol (Utah Dual Language Immersion, 2016), which identifies “choral” as an option for oral responses, along with turn and talk, think-pair-share, precision partner, and other possible forms of student engagement (p. 2). Without knowledge of the program or the DLI web sites—which were brought up in one of the focus groups towards the end of student teaching—university supervisors may find it difficult to be an effective complement to the DLI program’s expectations. Instead, university supervisors may “focus on observable teaching and student behaviors” in DLI settings, just as Davis et al. (2023) found the university supervisor in their study did.

Student-Centered Teaching: Chinese Beliefs vs. American Beliefs (or District Mandates)

Throughout student teaching, US2 heard her student teacher and the mentor teacher use the term student-centered to describe teaching. On one occasion, US2 observed a lesson the student teacher later described as student-centered, which did not reflect US2’s understanding of student-centered instruction. US2 attempted to clarify in a post-observation conference whether the two instead meant engagement. Following the conference, US2 recalled how ST2 discussed “using more of the methods that she learned in China with her own schooling,” which she contrasted from the “American approach [that] was more student centered.” This distinction led US2 to wonder whether ST2’s contrast between these approaches was a product of cultural difference (i.e., Chinese views or typical practices concerning student involvement and engagement) or local factors (i.e., the school district at the time emphasizing “engagement strategies” in teacher professional development activities). Towards the end of the student teaching semester, US2 addressed these approaches with ST2 and MT2, who helped US2 to understand that the student-centered approach discussed by ST2 and MT2 was the same as using engagement strategies US2 had previously brought up in conferences; these were efforts to help students to engage with the content and classroom activities through the use of the Chinese language.

Teaching Culture: DLI Program Requirements vs. External Standards

US3’s supervisory work was different in that it took place with a secondary (rather than elementary) student teacher who was attempting to earn certification in Chinese as a world language. Since the university did not have a Chinese as a world language program, the student teacher had to compile a portfolio based on the ACTFL world language competencies, which included standards related to cultural products and practices. US3 found during the semester that the DLI program heavily emphasized language learning, yet the cultural learning required by the program was less clear to the student teacher and even her mentor teacher. Cultural learning was further complicated by the mentor teacher’s use of translated English/Language Arts standards rather than the state’s world language standards, which were based on the ACTFL world language competencies. The use of multiple standards created a situation in which ST3 was forced to “graft standards” from the various areas to class activities instead of “developing lessons from standards [she chose].” US3 found discussions of teaching culture with ST3 seldom focused on the nature of culture or how culture might be shared with or conveyed to students. Instead, cultural knowledge was most often discussed in terms of the various standards that had to be used in MT3’s class, along with the competency portfolio requirements, which US3 described as “crea[ting] like this huge albatross hanging over us” during the student teaching experience.
This study provides additional perspective on the complicated terrain university supervisors invariably navigate in their clinical teacher education roles, specifically in dual language education contexts. The supervisor role has long been described as complex and requiring negotiation with school-based mentor teachers and student teachers (e.g., Slick, 1997; Slick, 1998), negotiations replete with dilemmas in schools but also in university communities (McCormack et al., 2019). Supervisors’ negotiations and dilemmas in this study appeared to parallel the challenges dual language teachers in Henderson and Palmer’s (2020) studies described. Although Henderson and Palmer’s (2020) participants taught in Spanish dual language education programs, they reported grappling with their own teaching identities as well as district/program mandates for the dual language program in which they taught. Unlike Henderson and Palmer’s (2020) participants, the supervisors in this study were not bilingual. Nevertheless, these supervisors also found themselves immersed in the challenges of dual language education teacher learning contexts that were shaped by district and program mandates, as well as preservice teacher education responsibilities and certification requirements.

The importance of the university supervisor role in dual language education or other bilingual education contexts demands greater attention to the specific knowledge base and skillset university supervisors must have to support preservice bilingual/dual language teachers. Guise et al. (2020) have suggested that supervisors in bilingual/dual language settings may have an important impact on the learning of emergent bilingual students. Yet, for the university supervisors participating in this study, this impact may have been restricted by the supervisors’ limited understanding of the Utah DLI program and certification requirements, as well as differences in the way common teaching approaches and practices were discussed and operationalized by student and mentor teachers. University supervisors working with preservice teachers in bilingual/dual language settings must develop a baseline level of knowledge of program and curricular expectations for the bilingual/dual language classroom, as well as cultivating their capacities to tactfully engage student and mentor teachers when classroom practices diverge from the basic expectations for preservice teachers. These findings, along with navigating cultural and language differences between supervisors and other student teaching triad members (see also Davis et al., 2023), are among the essential knowledge and skills university supervisors must develop for preservice bilingual/dual language teacher education.

While the supervision challenges described in this study are irregularly encountered in the setting where this research took place, they are likely to be encountered again in the future. Given the growth of Utah’s statewide DLI program, in common languages like Spanish as well as Chinese, Portuguese, German, and French, there is a growing demand for partner-language teachers in Utah and beyond (Peng, 2016; Yan & Davis, 2023). It would be advantageous to the state’s DLI program for teacher education programs to prepare teachers specifically for teaching in DLI settings; however, to date, we are not aware of any Utah-based teacher education program that prepares teacher candidates for DLI teaching. If teacher education programs are to prepare teachers for DLI settings, teacher educators—including university supervisors—must also be better prepared to navigate DLI program requirements, district mandates, and external standards, all while observing teaching in a language they may not fluently understand.

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**APPENDIX**

Select Focus Group Questions

1. What was your approach to working within a student teacher triad? How did you know what to do? Or not to do?
2. Tell me about a challenge you faced during this semester. Who was involved? How was this challenge negotiated? Was it resolved/overcome?
3. What was surprising about student teaching/student teacher supervision in a Chinese DLI program?
4. What did you anticipate encountering in student teaching/student teacher supervision in a Chinese DLI program?
5. What challenges are you hearing across triads? Are there any common solutions?
6. What would you do differently if this situation came up again: a Chinese student teacher, but a supervisor who doesn’t necessarily speak Chinese?
7. What recommendations do you have for student teaching in general? For this situation specifically?