

## ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS IN TRIPARTITE SUPERVISORY CONFERENCING PROCESSES

AMY B. M. TSUI, *University of Hong Kong*  
FRAN LOPEZ-REAL, *University of Hong Kong*  
Y. K. LAW, *University of Hong Kong*  
ROSINA TANG, *University of Hong Kong*  
MARK S. K. SHUM, *University of Hong Kong*

**ABSTRACT:** Most studies of role perceptions and expectations in supervision involving the supervisor, the cooperating or mentor teacher, and the student teacher were based on questionnaire surveys or interviews. Relatively few examined actual conferencing discourse data from the perspective of how the role of each participant is played out in the discourse. This article reports on a study of supervisory tripartite conferences, analyzing conferencing discourse data both quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings show that though the power relationship between the university supervisor and mentor teacher was asymmetrical, the two parties played complementary roles, with the former providing more input that requires reflection and evaluation and the latter providing more input that pertains to the practicalities and the contexts of classroom teaching. The findings also show that contextual factors such as the prior experience of the university supervisor and the mentor teacher, their relationship, and their self-perception can have considerable impact on the content of the conference as well as the way the conferencing processes are managed. This article points out that in order for university supervisors and mentor teachers to collaborate effectively, instead of trying to redress the asymmetrical power relationship, it would be much more realistic and productive to enhance their complementary roles by developing a long-term relationship that fosters mutual trust, and understanding of and respect for each other's work.

Supervision involving the student teaching triad of the university-based supervisor, the school-based cooperating teacher, and the student teacher is a topic that attracts constant interest.<sup>1</sup> A

---

*Authors' Note:* The authors wish to thank their colleague Philip Stimpson for his comments and useful suggestions on a draft of this article. They also wish to acknowledge the contribution of Polly Lao of the Curriculum Development Institute of the Hong Kong SAR for her contribution in the analysis of the data in the earlier part of this project, and Maria Chan, their research student helper, for her assistance in using NUD\*IST and SPSS to analyze the data.

<sup>1</sup>S. K. Slick, "Assessing Versus Assisting: The Supervisor's Roles in the Complex Dynamics of the Student Teaching Triad," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 13 (October 1997): 713-726; M. L. Veal and L. Rikard, "Cooperating Teachers' Perspectives on the Student Teaching Triad," *Journal of Teacher Education* 49 (March 1998): 108-119.

number of studies have been conducted on the relationship among the three parties, starting as early as the late 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Some studies examined the relationship from the perspectives of the university supervisor and the student teacher,<sup>3</sup> whereas others explored it from the cooperating teacher's perspective.<sup>4</sup> The relationship among the three parties is very much influenced by the perception and expectation of each party with regard to his or her own role in the supervisory process.

Most studies on role perceptions and expectations in supervision were based on questionnaire surveys or interviews. Relatively few investigated the actual supervisory process.<sup>5</sup> The exceptions are a study by Zeichner and Liston that investigated the quality of thinking as revealed in supervisory conferences between supervisors and student teachers; a study by Zeichner and colleagues that focused on the form and substance of the discourse between the university supervisor and the student teacher in two programs with very different ideological orientations; a study by Roberts that investigated supervisory discourse as a potentially face-threatening event; and a study by Waite that analyzed conference discourse from an anthropological linguistic perspective.<sup>6</sup> Even fewer studies have examined actual conferencing data from the perspective of how the role of each participant is played out in the discourse. Among the few is the work of Christensen, who analyzed the postobservation conference

---

<sup>2</sup>A. Karmos and C. Jacko, "The Role of Significant Others During the Student Teaching Experience," *Journal of Teacher Education* 28 (November 1977): 51-55; A. H. Yee, "Interpersonal Relationships in the Student Teaching Triad," *Journal of Teacher Education* 14 (Spring 1968): 95-112.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, C. Bain, "Student Teaching Triads: Perceptions of Participant Roles" (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 338 620, 1991); L. K. Barrows, "Power Relationships in the Student Teaching Triad" (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 173 335, 1979); D. J. McIntyre, "A Response to Critics of Field Experience Supervision," *Journal of Teacher Education* 35 (May 1984): 42-45.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, M. L. Veal and L. Rikard, "Cooperating Teachers' Perspectives on the Student Teaching Triad," *Journal of Teacher Education* 49 (March 1998): 108-119.

<sup>5</sup>Weller made an early call to examine the processes of supervision, but few studies have actually worked with conference discourse data. See R. Weller, *Verbal Communication in Instructional Supervision* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup>K. M. Zeichner and D. P. Liston, "Varieties of Discourse in Supervisory Conferences," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 1 (February 1985): 155-174; K. M. Zeichner, D. P. Liston, M. Mahlios, and M. Gomez, "The Structure and Goals of a Student Teaching Program and the Character and Quality of Supervisory Discourse," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 4 (May 1988): 349-362; J. Roberts, "Face-Threatening Acts and Politeness Theory: Contrasting Speeches from Supervisory Conferences," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 7 (Spring 1992): 287-301; and D. Waite, "Supervisors' Talk: Making Sense of Conferences," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 7 (Summer 1992): 349-371.

feedback given by university supervisors and compared the results with a study of feedback from cooperating teachers conducted by O'Neal two years before.<sup>7</sup> The comparison indicated that university supervisors gave feedback that was predominantly evaluative and that prompted student teachers to think critically about their teaching, whereas the cooperating teachers focused on reviewing events and telling the student teachers how to teach.

To the best of our knowledge, no study has been conducted on the actual discourse data when all three parties—the supervisor, the student teacher, and the cooperating teacher—were engaged in conferencing, and on the role that each of them played. The value of examining the actual supervisory discourse is that the understanding of each party's role and the relationship among them is based on how their roles and relationships are actually played out in the course of the supervisory conference rather than on what they perceive to be their roles.

This article reports on a study of supervisory conferences that involved the university tutor (referred to as UT), the cooperating teacher (referred to as the mentor teacher, or MT), and the student teacher (referred to as ST). We recorded and transcribed six supervisory tripartite conferences. We analyzed the data quantitatively to obtain an overview of the processes of interaction and the content of the discourses. This was followed by a qualitative analysis of two tripartite conferences according to the conference interaction dynamics.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### *Subjects*

The subjects consisted of three university supervisors, five mentor teachers, and six student teachers enrolled in a full-time preservice postgraduate certificate in education (PCEd) program at the University of Hong Kong. The three supervisors are UTs teaching the methodology course in the PCEd program in Chinese, English, and math. The five MTs are experienced and professionally trained graduate teachers working in Hong Kong secondary schools. The six STs are graduates with no teaching experience. The participants in this study took part in six tripartite postlesson conferences—two sets of lessons each in Chinese, English, and math. The same MT and UT were involved in the two math conferences.

---

<sup>7</sup>P. S. Christensen, "The Nature of Feedback a Student Teacher Receives in Post-Observation Conferences with the University Supervisor: A Comparison with O'Neal's Study of Cooperating Teacher Feedback," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 4 (April 1988): 275–286; S. O'Neal, "Supervision of Student Teachers: Feedback and Evaluation" (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 240 100, 1983).

### *Data Collection*

We collected the data during a nine-week teaching practicum. The six STs were placed in three different schools. STs teaching the same subjects were placed in the same school. All the tripartite conferences were held at the schools after the observations of lessons. We videotaped all six conferences and later transcribed and coded them according to the framework of analysis described in the following section. The conferences lasted for about 60 minutes each. The conferences on Chinese lessons were conducted in Chinese and translated into English.

## FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

### *Conferencing Discourse Processes*

In studying tripartite conference processes, we distinguished between the interactional processes and the content covered. We did not use predetermined categories to capture these two aspects apart from making a basic distinction between two fundamental types of speech functions that are apparent in any speech situation: giving and demanding.<sup>8</sup> The distinction between giving and demanding was particularly useful for the analysis of conferencing data in this study because it was clear from the data that the UT and the MT were mostly either offering their own observations, evaluations, and suggestions, or they were asking the ST to reflect on and evaluate their own lesson. We have used the terms "offering" and "eliciting" to describe these distinctive speech functions.

Although the terms "eliciting" and "offering" covered the speech functions of the majority of the utterances in the conferences, we noticed a number of utterances that served somewhat different functions. Some of them steered the direction of the discussion and were indicative of who was controlling the interaction. Others functioned as "lubricants" by acknowledging contributions made, asking for and giving confirmation, or agreeing with a previous utterance. Taken together, these utterances seemed to be concerned with managing the discourse. Therefore, instead of grouping them under either Eliciting or Offering, we believed it would be more informative to group them under the broad category of Managing Interaction. To summarize, the descriptive categories we have identified for conferencing discourse processes comprise Eliciting, Offering, and Managing Interaction.

<sup>8</sup>M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994). See also J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); and J. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

**Table 1. A Taxonomy of Speech Functions in Supervisory Conferences**

Eliciting	Offering	Managing Interaction
1. Reflection/analysis	1. Reflection/analysis	1. Comprehension checking
2. Evaluation	2a. Positive evaluation 2b. Negative evaluation	2. Asking for and giving confirmation and agreement
3. Suggestion/alternative	3. Suggestion/alternative	3. Acknowledgment
4. Information	4. Information	4. Meta-discourse
5. Observation	5. Observation	
6. Explanation	6. Explanation	
7. Expression of feelings	7. Expression of feelings	
8. Support	8. Support/empathy	

*Conferencing Discourse Content*

In trying to determine the content of the conferencing discourse, we believed that it is the elicitation and offering of opinions, reflections, ideas, judgments, evaluations, and so on that form the basis of supervisory discussions. However, in the detailed analysis of the conferencing data, we had no predetermined subcategories under the two broad speech functions of Eliciting and Offering. Instead, we adopted a "grounded approach" in which we allowed the subcategories to emerge after repeated readings. An iterative process of refining the subcategories resulted in a taxonomy of speech functions under each broad category of Eliciting, Offering, and Managing Interaction, as listed in Table 1.

Under the two broad categories of Eliciting and Offering, the first three subcategories—Reflection/Analysis, Evaluation, and Suggestion/Alternative—pertain to reflection, analysis, and evaluation of the lesson observed and suggestions for improvement. They correspond closely to what Zeichner and Liston classify as "prudential discourse" in their analysis of types of supervisory discourse, which they define as discourse "concerned with suggestions and advice regarding pedagogical actions and with evaluations of the worth and quality of such actions."<sup>9</sup> The fourth subcategory, Information, pertains to understanding more about the contexts of the observed lesson by eliciting or offering information relating to the curriculum, the students, the school context, or the student teacher. The fifth subcategory, Ob-

<sup>9</sup>See K. M. Zeichner and D. P. Liston, "Varieties of Discourse in Supervisory Conferences," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 1 (February 1985): 163.

**Table 2. Cognitive Demands of Interaction**

Discourse Process Category	Discourse Content Subcategory	Cognitive Demand
Eliciting	Reflection/analysis Evaluation Alternative/suggestion Explanation	Higher-order cognitive processes, likely to involve <i>judgment</i>
	Information Observation Feeling/support	Lower-order cognitive processes, likely to involve <i>facts and descriptions</i>
Offering	Reflection/analysis Evaluation Alternative/suggestion Explanation	Higher-order cognitive processes, likely to involve <i>judgment</i>
	Information Observation Feeling/support	Lower-order cognitive processes, likely to involve <i>facts and descriptions</i>

servation, refers to instances when the participant described what actually happened in the lesson. These two subcategories correspond closely to Zeichner and Liston's "factual discourse," which is purely descriptive. The sixth subcategory, Explanation, refers to instances in which the speaker elicits or offers explanation of what and why certain courses of action were taken or recommended. It is similar to Zeichner and Liston's "justificatory discourse," which is concerned with the reasons and rationales for pedagogical actions. The seventh and eighth subcategories, Feeling and Support, pertain more to psychological aspects concerning feelings or emotional support. Zeichner and Liston subsumed them under "prudential discourse." However, we believe there is a case for separating these two from the first three subcategories because they make different cognitive demands on the ST, as we discuss below.

### *Cognitive Demands of Conferencing Discourse*

When coding the data according to the subcategories identified, we noticed that although some involved higher-order cognitive processes that generally required making judgments, others involved lower-order cognitive processes that required only the provision of facts and descriptions. To determine if a difference existed in the contributions made by the UT and the MT in terms of cognitive demand, we distinguished between higher- and lower-order cognitive processes, as shown in the descriptions in Table 2.

Eliciting/Offering Explanations were placed under higher-order cognitive processes. Although two types of explanation, "explaining what" and "explaining why," exist in the conferencing discourse, the latter invariably followed the former, hence involving some form of judgment.

### *Dynamics of Conference Interaction*

Apart from who elicited and offered what to whom, another aspect of conference discourse sheds light on the role played by each party and the relationship between them. We referred to this aspect of interaction as "conference interaction dynamics." In an examination of this aspect, we drew on insights from conversational analysis, especially studies on conversational dominance. Many conversational analysts have observed that some participants in spoken interaction can be considered to "dominate" the shared construction of conversation in the sense of possessing or controlling the "territory" to be shared by the communicating parties.<sup>10</sup> To investigate this aspect, we identified four salient dimensions. The first dimension was the amount of talk, that is, who was doing most of the talking. The second dimension was who was doing most of the eliciting and to whom these elicitations were addressed. The third dimension was who steered the direction of the conference by making strategic moves such as initiating topic change and determining the aspects to be focused on. The fourth dimension was the juncture at which speakers made contributions to the conference and the manner in which they made these contributions.

### UNIT OF ANALYSIS

In the analysis of data, our first problem was to define a unit of analysis. One approach might be to analyze the discourse according to speech acts that are often co-extensive with sentence boundaries. However, we found it difficult at times to identify two sentences that were very closely linked as two separate speech acts because the speaker essentially was expounding the same idea with one sentence foregrounding the other. Let us take as an example the extract presented in Table 3.

In lines 8 to 13 of Table 3, the ST made an introductory statement by saying that there is a difference between a bar chart and a

<sup>10</sup>P. Linell, "The Power of Dialogue Dynamics," in *The Dynamics of Dialogue*, ed. I. Markova and K. Foppa (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 158. For topic change as an indicator of conversational dominance, see also C. West and A. Garcia, "Conversational Shift Work: A Study of Topical Transitions Between Women and Men," *Social Problems* 35, no. 5 (1988): 551-575.



**Table 3. Coding of a Segment of the Transcript from a Math Tripartite Conference**

Speaker	Statement	Coding
UT	1 You mentioned there should be a gap 2 between each column.	Offering observation
	3 When I was looking around, I saw a couple 4 of students putting the columns next to 5 each other.	Offering observation
	6 What is your view about whether there 7 should be a gap or not?	Eliciting analysis
ST	8 There is a difference between bar chart and 9 histogram. In a histogram data is collected 10 and presented in a continuous way and 11 there should be no spaces, while for the bar 12 charts, they are discrete; therefore I think it 13 must be a space between each rectangle.	Offering analysis
UT	14 But you didn't actually emphasize or 15 mention this during the lesson.	Offering observation
MT	16 Actually the students don't have any 17 knowledge about histogram.	Offering information
UT	18 Yes, exactly.	Managing interaction: agreement
	19 So in a sense you are giving a justification 20 in terms of a histogram which they haven't 21 met yet.	Offering analysis
ST	22 Um . . . I think if they really want to know 23 the reason, it would be better for me to 24 introduce the concepts of continuous and 25 discrete.	Offering alternative/suggestion
	26 Maybe I will try to ask some simple 27 questions like, Is there anything between 28 the number zero and one, the number of 29 brothers and sisters, or whether they could 30 have half a brother or sister.	Offering alternative/suggestion

histogram. He then went on to explain what the difference is. To code them as two speech acts of offering analysis would be counter-intuitive. We believed that the analytical unit should be informative in terms of the content of supervisory talk and decided on the notion of "idea unit," which could consist of a phrase, a sentence, or a number of sentences. The main criterion here was that each individ-



ual unit should contain a clearly distinguishable idea.<sup>11</sup> Each idea unit was debated fully for the first transcript. Although many were easy to categorize, on some other utterances agreement was difficult to reach. Consequently, at least two of us agreed to the categorization of all subsequent transcriptions. For the analysis of topic change, the unit of analysis was the "sequence," which consisted of a number of exchanges. Each sequence was marked by a change of topic.<sup>12</sup>

## FINDINGS

### *Distribution of Talk*

Tables 4a, 4b, and 4c display the overall distribution of the three major categories—Eliciting, Offering, and Managing Interaction—in each of the six conferences. In each category, the greatest frequencies are highlighted. (Note: In all the tables in this article, percentage figures are rounded to the nearest whole number. For cases in which this rounding results in 0 percent, the category remains blank.)

As the tables make clear, Offering constituted the bulk of the interaction in each of the conferences, ranging from 60 percent to 79 percent of all talk, whereas Eliciting accounted for the smallest portion, ranging from as low as 2 percent to 14 percent. Managing Interaction ranged from 16 percent to 30 percent. In the math and English conferences, the UTs were the dominant contributors in all three categories. In the math conferences, the UT accounted for as much as 60 percent of the interaction, and in the English conferences, the UTs accounted for 43 percent and 42 percent of all talk.

Although the patterns of the distribution of talk in the math and English conferences are similar, the two Chinese conferences exhibited a somewhat different pattern. In both conferences, the MT took up the highest percentage of Offering (35 percent and 32 percent) and made more contributions overall than did the UT, resulting in the MT being the dominant contributor in both cases (39 percent and 37 percent). Despite this fact, the UT still dominated in Managing Interaction (10 percent and 11 percent).

<sup>11</sup>In their analysis of supervisory conferences, Zeichner and Liston used a "thought unit," which is the smallest discriminable segment of the discourse to which they could assign a category. This unit was also adopted by Sharpe et al. in their analysis of conference discourse data. See K. M. Zeichner and D. P. Liston, "Varieties of Discourse in Supervisory Conferences," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 1 (January 1985): 160; L. Sharpe, M. S. Ngoh, L. Crawford, and S. Gopinathan, *Teacher Supervision Patterns and Discourse* (Singapore: National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, 1994).

<sup>12</sup>For the notion of "sequence" as used in this article, see M. Coulthard and M. Montgomery, eds., *Studies in Discourse Analysis* (London: RKP, 1981).

**Table 4a. Math Conferences: Numbers and Percentages of Speech Units in Three Categories of Speech Functions**

Category	Conference 1 (N = 191)				Conference 2 (N = 318)			
	n	ST	UT	MT	n	ST	UT	MT
Eliciting	26 (14%)	1	<b>21</b> ( <b>11%</b> )	4 (2%)	33 (10%)	1	<b>26</b> ( <b>8%</b> )	6 (2%)
Offering	123 (64%)	48 (25%)	<b>47</b> ( <b>25%</b> )	28 (15%)	191 (60%)	68 (21%)	<b>94</b> ( <b>29%</b> )	29 (9%)
Managing Interaction	42 (22%)	5 (3%)	<b>33</b> ( <b>17%</b> )	4 (2%)	94 (30%)	14 (4%)	<b>72</b> ( <b>23%</b> )	8 (3%)
Total	191 (100%)	54 (28%)	<b>101</b> ( <b>53%</b> )	36 (19%)	318 (100%)	83 (26%)	<b>192</b> ( <b>60%</b> )	43 (13%)

**Table 4b. English Conferences: Numbers and Percentages of Speech Units in Three Categories of Speech Functions**

Category	Conference 1 (N = 298)				Conference 2 (N = 295)			
	n	ST	UT	MT	n	ST	UT	MT
Eliciting	27 (9%)	1	<b>18</b> ( <b>6%</b> )	8 (3%)	25 (8%)	—	<b>14</b> ( <b>5%</b> )	11 (4%)
Offering	223 (75%)	71 (24%)	<b>91</b> ( <b>31%</b> )	61 (20%)	215 (73%)	66 (22%)	<b>86</b> ( <b>29%</b> )	63 (21%)
Managing Interaction	48 (16%)	12 (4%)	<b>20</b> ( <b>7%</b> )	16 (5%)	55 (19%)	16 (5%)	<b>25</b> ( <b>8%</b> )	14 (5%)
Total	298 (100%)	84 (28%)	<b>129</b> ( <b>43%</b> )	85 (29%)	295 (100%)	82 (28%)	<b>125</b> ( <b>42%</b> )	88 (30%)

*Conferencing Discourse Content and Cognitive Demand*

Table 5a displays the overall distribution of the subcategories of Eliciting and Offering in the math conferences as well as the cognitive demands of these categories. The UT contributed nearly all the elicitations that involved higher-order cognitive processes. The contributions from the other participants were negligible. In contrast, all three participants contributed substantially to the Offering subcategories that involved higher-order cognitive processes. In particular, those of the UT and the ST are almost the same, with the MT taking a somewhat smaller role.

In the Eliciting subcategories for the English conferences (see Table 5b), the differences between the UT and the MT were not as

**Table 4c. Chinese Conferences: Numbers and Percentages of Speech Units in Three Categories of Speech Functions**

Category	Conference 1 (N = 275)				Conference 2 (N = 317)			
	n	ST	UT	MT	n	ST	UT	MT
Eliciting	4 (2%)	—	2 (1%)	2 (1%)	20 (6%)	—	<b>16</b> <b>(5%)</b>	4 (1%)
Offering	216 (79%)	56 (20%)	65 (24%)	<b>95</b> <b>(35%)</b>	233 (74%)	78 (25%)	55 (17%)	<b>100</b> <b>(32%)</b>
Managing Interaction	55 (20%)	18 (7%)	<b>27</b> <b>(10%)</b>	10 (4%)	64 (20%)	18 (6%)	<b>34</b> <b>(11%)</b>	12 (4%)
Total	275 (100%)	74 (27%)	94 (34%)	<b>107</b> <b>(39%)</b>	317 (100%)	96 (30%)	105 (33%)	<b>116</b> <b>(37%)</b>

marked as in the math conferences. Both parties contributed small percentages. In the Offering subcategories, the pattern is quite similar to that shown in the math conferences. Again, all three participants contributed substantially, but the MT took a somewhat smaller role in two instances.

The interaction pattern for the Chinese conferences, exhibited in Table 5c, is somewhat different from that of the other conferences, particularly with regard to the Offering subcategories. The MT contributed a far higher percentage of higher-order subcategories than did the UT (22 percent as opposed to 12 percent in one conference, and 19 percent as opposed to 11 percent in the other). This difference is mainly because the MT provided twice as many suggestions as did the UT in both conferences. In fact, in five out of six conferences, with regard to the higher-order cognitive processes, most of the MT's contributions were in the Offering Suggestion subcategory. What made the Chinese conferences distinctive was simple. The MT replaced the UT as the clearly dominant provider of suggestions to the ST.

The overall pattern for the lower-order subcategories is similar for all the conferences. Very few elicitations occurred in any. For the Offering subcategories, clear differences occurred between all three participants. The majority of the ST offerings were in the Information subcategory, whereas most of the UT offerings were in the Observation subcategory; the MT contributions largely were distributed over both categories. The high frequency of providing information, particularly by the STs, is hardly surprising because they often must familiarize the UT with some relevant context or background. However, the even higher frequencies of observation from the UTs is

**Table 5a. Mathematics Conferences:  
Conferencing Discourse Content and Cognitive Demand**

		Conference 1 (N = 191)			Conference 2 (N = 318)		
Category and Subcategories		ST	UT	MT	ST	UT	MT
Eliciting/High	Reflection	—	5	—	—	8	1
	Evaluation	—	8	1	—	4	—
	Suggestion	—	—	—	—	3	1
	Explanation	—	2	—	—	9	1
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>15</b> (8%)	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>24</b> (8%)	<b>3</b> (1%)
Eliciting/Low	Information	—	6	3	—	1	3
	Feeling	—	—	—	—	—	—
	Support	1	—	—	1	1	—
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b> (3%)	<b>3</b> (2%)	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b> (1%)	<b>3</b> (1%)
Offering/High	Reflection	7	7	10	16	2	—
	Positive evaluation	4	6	—	2	11	1
	Negative evaluation	2	1	1	9	8	2
	Suggestion	4	16	8	12	19	14
	Explanation	11	—	1	17	14	2
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>28</b> (15%)	<b>30</b> (16%)	<b>20</b> (10%)	<b>56</b> (18%)	<b>54</b> (17%)	<b>19</b> (6%)
Offering/Low	Information	13	1	3	8	9	5
	Feeling	2	1	—	3	—	—
	Support	0	1	—	—	7	—
	Observation	5	14	5	1	24	5
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>20</b> (10%)	<b>17</b> (9%)	<b>8</b> (4%)	<b>13</b> (4%)	<b>40</b> (13%)	<b>10</b> (3%)
<b>Total</b>		<b>49</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>35</b>

Note: High = Higher-order cognitive processes

Low = Lower-order cognitive processes

worth a comment. As revealed in Table 3, the UT initiated the discussion with two observations about the lesson, which then served as a starting point for eliciting reactions from the ST. This move could be described as a "scene-setting" strategy that, although of low cognitive level, may have served as a springboard for some follow-up with higher cognitive demand. In fact, most of the observations made by both the UTs and the MTs in the conferences appeared to serve this function. Finally, although the pattern is similar for the six conferences with respect to the lower cognitive subcategories, the Chinese conferences were distinctive in that the MTs once again were the dominant contributors in the Offering category.

**Table 5b. English Conferences:  
Conferencing Discourse Content and Cognitive Demand**

		Conference 1 (N = 298)			Conference 2 (N = 295)		
Category and Subcategories		ST	UT	MT	ST	UT	MT
Eliciting/High	Reflection	—	5	5	—	3	8
	Evaluation	—	2	—	—	3	—
	Suggestion	—	3	3	—	4	—
	Explanation	—	—	—	—	2	1
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>10</b> (3%)	<b>8</b> (3%)	<b>0</b>	<b>12</b> (4%)	<b>9</b> (3%)
Eliciting/Low	Information	—	7	—	—	—	1
	Feeling	—	—	—	—	2	1
	Support	1	1	—	—	—	—
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>1</b> (0.3%)	<b>8</b> (3%)	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b> (1%)	<b>2</b> (1%)
Offering/High	Reflection	11	—	—	21	—	—
	Positive evaluation	3	10	14	—	7	11
	Negative evaluation	4	12	1	5	8	—
	Suggestion	15	29	30	7	21	20
	Explanation	12	21	5	16	10	2
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>45</b> (15%)	<b>72</b> (24%)	<b>50</b> (17%)	<b>49</b> (17%)	<b>46</b> (16%)	<b>33</b> (11%)
Offering/Low	Information	16	1	6	6	4	11
	Feeling	1	—	—	3	—	—
	Support	—	1	1	—	1	2
	Observation	9	17	4	8	35	17
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>26</b> (9%)	<b>19</b> (6%)	<b>11</b> (4%)	<b>17</b> (6%)	<b>40</b> (14%)	<b>30</b> (10%)
<b>Total</b>		<b>72</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>74</b>

*Note:* High = Higher-order cognitive processes  
Low = Lower-order cognitive processes

### *Conference Interaction Dynamics*

In the framework of analysis, we proposed four dimensions in the analysis of who plays the dominant role in supervisory conferences. The first dimension was the amount of talk. As discussed in the earlier section on Distribution of Talk, the UTs were clearly the dominant players in the math and English conferences. In the Chinese conferences, the MTs were slightly more dominant than was the UT.

*Who is eliciting from whom?* The preceding analyses of the distribution of talk in the six conferences did not discuss to whom the

**Table 5c. Chinese Conferences: Conferencing Discourse Content and Cognitive Demand**

		Conference 1 (N = 275)			Conference 2 (N = 317)		
Category and Subcategories		ST	UT	MT	ST	UT	MT
Eliciting/High	Reflection	—	—	2	—	7	3
	Evaluation	—	—	—	—	1	1
	Suggestion	—	1	—	—	3	—
	Explanation	—	—	—	—	2	—
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b> (1%)	<b>0</b>	<b>13</b> (4%)	<b>4</b> (1%)
Eliciting/Low	Information	—	—	—	—	3	—
	Feeling	—	—	—	—	—	—
	Support	—	1	—	—	—	—
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b> (1%)	<b>0</b>
Offering/High	Reflection	9	—	—	30	—	—
	Positive evaluation	4	5	2	6	17	17
	Negative evaluation	3	1	3	5	2	2
	Suggestion	3	21	42	6	16	37
	Explanation	12	6	13	10	1	4
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>31</b> (11%)	<b>33</b> (12%)	<b>60</b> (22%)	<b>57</b> (18%)	<b>36</b> (11%)	<b>60</b> (19%)
Offering/Low	Information	15	4	23	7	9	21
	Feeling	—	—	—	11	1	1
	Support	—	10	1	—	—	8
	Observation	10	18	11	3	9	10
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>25</b> (9%)	<b>32</b> (12%)	<b>35</b> (13%)	<b>21</b> (7%)	<b>19</b> (6%)	<b>40</b> (13%)
<b>Total</b>		<b>56</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>104</b>

Note: High = Higher-order cognitive processes

Low = Lower-order cognitive processes

talk was addressed. One may reasonably assume that talk was always addressed to STs. Table 6 provides a more precise breakdown.

The analysis of data displayed in Table 6 reveals that the majority of the elicitations were made by the UTs in all conferences, and they mostly addressed the ST. However, in a few instances, the UT elicited from the MT, thereby suggesting that the UT tried to engage the MT in the discussion. A typical example would be the UT inviting the MT to comment by saying "What do you think?" All elicitations made by the MT were addressed to the ST, and all of the STs' few elicitations were addressed to the UT.

**Table 6. Overall Distribution of Who Is Eliciting from Whom**

Person who elicited	Person who responded	Math		English		Chinese	
		Conf. 1	Conf. 2	Conf. 1	Conf. 2	Conf. 1	Conf. 2
		n	n	n	n	n	n
UT	ST	24	19	16	14	2	15
	MT	2	2	2	—	—	1
MT	UT	—	—	—	—	—	—
	ST	6	4	8	11	2	4
ST	UT	1	1	1	—	—	—
	MT	—	—	—	—	—	—
Total		33	26	27	25	4	20

*Topic change.* As indicated earlier, in terms of managing the interactions of a tripartite conference, topic change can be an important indicator of control. Who initiated such changes and how were these changes actually made? Useful here is a distinction between clearly overt changes in direction and more subtle changes embedded within the “flow” of the discourse. Indeed, much of the discourse in the tripartite conferences analyzed represented a flow in which topic changes arose from taking up a point made by a previous speaker and developing it. The more overt topic changes indicated by explicit discourse markers, however, served to structure the discourse, as in this example from a UT: “I wonder if I can just go to the worksheet now.”

To understand the dynamics of a supervisory conference in the terms outlined here, we conducted in-depth studies of two supervisory conferences: a math conference (conference 1), which is more or less representative of the distribution of talk for the four math and English conferences; and a Chinese conference (conference 2), which has a somewhat different distribution.

*Topic change in the math conference.* In the math conference, 12 distinct sequences marked topic change. Of these sequences, the UT initiated 10, and the MT initiated only 2. The UT specifically invited a third instance of topic change. In the first instance of topic change initiated by the MT, a new topic on questioning was introduced after she had concurred with the UT on the ST’s way of providing feedback to students. In other words, the change of topic was not explicit, but rather was subtly embedded in the MT’s response. It thus arose from the flow of the previous discourse but permitted the MT to take up a new direction:

*MT:* Well, that’s also my impression, that you seem to be rushing to give them the conclusion instead of drawing that out from them. *Well, one thing*



*is about the questioning . . .* You are asking some very definite questions that just ask them for the yes/no answer . . . instead of asking them some more open questions such as "what is good about this type of chart?"

From this point, the MT went on to give other examples, and the discussion continued for some time on the nature of questioning in the classroom and how to respond to students.

In the second instance, the MT ostensibly followed on from a previous contribution, but really used the opportunity of "holding the floor" in order to change the topic. In the following excerpt, before the MT's utterance, the UT had been discussing the mistake that the ST had made when going over a problem with the students.

*MT:* So actually I also remember a few occasions that you intentionally bring up some very common mistakes among the students and want to discuss with them.

The MT's use of the discourse marker "so" and the reference to "mistakes" gave the impression that her utterance was a continuation of the topic under discussion. In fact, the MT changed the topic from the mistake that the ST made in the explanation of a problem to the way the ST handled the mistakes that the *students* made.

In the last instance, the MT did not initiate the topic until the UT explicitly handed the floor over to her and asked if she wished to raise anything else about the part of the lesson in which the ST was reviewing the test. She took the opportunity and introduced a new topic on students' punctuality.

The above analysis of topic change suggests that the UT was very much in control of the direction of talk and was the dominant party in the conferencing process. The MT played a supporting role by following the direction of talk determined by the UT. When the MT did introduce changes in the direction of talk, she did not do it explicitly but rather tried to make it appear as though it was a continuation of the current topic.

*Topic change in the Chinese conference.* Thirteen sequences marked topic change in this conference. The structure of the conference, however, was not as explicit as was the math conference; neither the UT nor the MT clearly indicated that the discussion had moved on to another topic. In contrast to the math conference, the Chinese conference clearly was not dominated by the UT. The MT initiated three sequences, all of which occurred in the first half of the conference. The first initiation of topic occurred immediately after the usual invitation from the UT to the ST to begin the conference with a brief overall self-evaluation. When the ST finished, the MT made the first move to examine some specific aspect of the teach-

ing by saying, "I would like to look at how you handle the pace of the lesson." The first half of the conference consisted mainly of the MT eliciting from the ST and offering evaluations and suggestions to the ST with very little input from the UT. The MT also was able to change the topic of talk skillfully within the flow of the discourse by relating a new topic to what previously had been raised by the ST:

*MT:* Actually, *as you have mentioned before*, the teacher of the previous period was late, and when you went in you had to set things up and all this actually took up about 5 minutes.

From this point, the MT discussed time management in general with both the ST and the UT.

### *Juncture and Manner of Participation*

The qualitative analysis of the math conference revealed that the UT initiated topic change in 10 sequences, and 4 of them consisted of interaction between only the UT and the ST, with no involvement of the MT. In the other 6 sequences, although the MT participated, the MT entered either fairly late in the sequence, after some lengthy discussion between the UT and the ST, or only when the UT invited her to participate.

The MT's contributions often were cautious and tentative, coupled with hedging, especially when they implied criticisms of the ST's teaching. For example, in the second sequence of the math conference, after some lengthy discussion between the UT and the ST on going over students' solutions, the MT entered the discourse. She pointed out to the ST that he should not have asked for volunteers because they tended to be the ones who knew the correct answers, and he thereby lost the opportunity to use the wrong solutions as a springboard for teaching. However, the manner in which the MT made her point was interesting. The following is an edited excerpt from the conference:

*MT:* So there's another question I want to ask, that's, well, you asked students to volunteer for the answer, to do something on the board so—so is that the usual practice?

*ST:* Not as usual.

*MT:* So would you consider assigning some target person yourself?

*ST:* I have some [target students] in my mind. But since today, for this time, for this atmosphere in the classroom, I think they are a bit shy to answer questions.

*MT:* Well, because—like during this lesson—I wonder for those people put up their hands, well, they might have already scored everything correct during the test, and then they are confident enough to raise their hands.

Instead of telling the ST directly that he should not ask for volunteers right from the beginning, the MT prefaced the remark by checking if it was the usual practice for the ST to ask for volunteers and whether he had thought of targeting some students to give answers. The point about not asking for volunteers, therefore, was made in the context of providing a rationale for targeting some students rather than a criticism of what the student teacher had done. Also worth noting is how the MT used a modalized question, “Would you consider,” and the typical conversational hedge, “I wonder,” to indicate tentativeness.

Several features set the Chinese conference apart from the math conference. First, in the initial half of the conference, although the UT and the MT were roughly equal in initiating topic change, the MT initiated the first three topic changes. In the latter half of the conference, in the three sequences in which the UT changed topics, these moves were initiated when she still held the floor; further, these sequences were much shorter than those in the first half of the session. The UT obviously was trying to emphasize the points that she had noted during her observation of the student teacher's teaching.

Second, in all sequences, whether the topic change was initiated by the MT or the UT, both parties participated equally, unlike the math conference in which the MT came late to the sequence. Both the UT and the MT, on more than one occasion, referred back to issues that they had raised earlier in the conference and that continued to develop. This action suggested that they perceived themselves as much in control of the conference as was the other party and that they were keen to develop the topics that they considered important.

Third, the MT frequently directed his comments not only to the ST, but also to the UT, usually on behalf of the ST. This switch from addressing the ST to addressing the UT differed significantly from the MT's talk in the math conference. A typical example of such comments was the following: “Actually she knows the problem that you raised. . . . But she is a little bit scared.” Clearly, this MT was very supportive of the ST and, indeed, sounded almost protective of her. In fact, at one point, the MT even criticized the UT for being unfair to the student by making a negative judgment on the basis of only one observation of a lesson. Unlike the MT in the math conference who focused on specifics, the MT in this Chinese conference often formulated general guiding principles on the basis of his comments on the specifics.

## DISCUSSION

In the four conferences in math and English, results of the quantitative analyses of the distribution of talk in the conferences conform to the general expectations of roles in supervisory conferences. The UT was the authority figure who was in control. He or she usually did most of the talking and was expected to take the initiative by eliciting the student teacher's reflections on the lesson, evaluating if the lesson had gone well, making suggestions for improvement, as well as steering the direction of the conference. The UT also engaged more higher-order cognitive processes than did the other two parties, perhaps because of academic background. However, results reveal that the UTs' percentages in lower-order subcategories were also higher than those of the MTs, a rather unexpected finding. This apparent anomaly may be explained by noting that the subcategory Offering Observations constituted the bulk of these percentages and that these utterances serve a scene-setting function for the ensuing analysis. In other words, Offering Observations should not be understood in isolation but rather in the context of the discourse function that the utterances perform in supervisory conferences.

In the two Chinese conferences, the MTs were slightly more dominant in terms of the amount of talk. However, as the analysis of the discourse content shows, this domination was mainly a result of the MTs making twice as many suggestions for improvement as did the UT. In terms of *managing* the interaction, the UT made most of the contributions. In other words, the UT still very much controlled the conferences. Thus, for all six conferences, the UTs clearly were the authority figures in the supervisory triad. This finding is hardly surprising in the Chinese culture, in which respect for "authority" figures is well accepted and a natural hierarchy of UT, MT, ST is likely to be assumed.

In such a context, then, the dominant contribution to the discourse made by the MTs in the Chinese conferences would be a deviation from the cultural norm. This deviation may be explained by a recognition of the background of all the MTs. In the math and English conferences, the MTs had no previous experience in tripartite conferencing, although they were all highly experienced classroom teachers. In contrast, the MTs in the Chinese conferences did have previous experience in working in this way with UTs in general, as well as with the particular UT in question. Indeed, one of the MTs had been a classmate of the UT during high school.

The analyses of the dynamics of interaction in the math conference revealed that the dominance of the UT was realized not only in the amount of talk, but also in the ways in which the UT determined the topic and the direction of talk. The MT deferred to the au-

thority of the UT. This can be seen from the way she brought about topic change in an almost imperceptible manner to ensure that she was not disrupting the flow established by the UT. Also, the way in which the MT hedged her questions and the care she took in ensuring that her criticism of the ST's teaching was not based on a lack of understanding of the ST's usual practices suggest that even in areas where she clearly should have had an advantage over the UT, she did not see herself as the authority.

Research on the power relationships in this kind of supervisory triad has shown that the presence of the university tutor often disturbs the relationship established between the other two. For example, Veal and Rickard observe that the student teacher and the cooperating teacher work very closely on a daily basis, and the latter has great power and influence over the former. However, the occasional intrusion of a third member, that is, the university supervisor, often results in a power shift.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this shift is one of the sources of tension among the three parties. Such tensions between the university supervisor and the cooperating teacher have been widely reported, and few reports of successful triads are known.<sup>14</sup>

In light of the potential disturbance that the university supervisor's presence can create, the dynamics of the interactions in the Chinese conference analyzed appears particularly interesting. The MT was able to make major contributions to the conference without competing for control. In the qualitative analysis of topic change, both parties seemed to have equal control and ownership over the topic of talk. Perhaps this sharing was occasioned by the longstanding relationship between the UT and the MT as peers. Another reason could well be that the MT saw himself as having a role different from that of the UT.

Across the six conferences, the results reveal that the UTs mostly focused on those areas that may be described as enhancing professional development for the STs—namely, eliciting reflection, analysis and evaluation, providing evaluations, and justifying courses of action. On the other hand, the MTs clearly played to their own strengths by offering many teaching suggestions and providing information about the school context, the curriculum, and the students. Obviously the MTs appeared to feel most comfortable and to

<sup>13</sup>M. L. Veal and L. Rikard, "Cooperating Teachers' Perspectives on the Student Teaching Triad," *Journal of Teacher Education* 49 (March 1998): 108–119.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, C. Glickman and T. Bey, "Supervision," in *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, ed. W. R. Houston (New York: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 549–566; V. Koehler, "Barriers to the Effective Supervision of Student Teaching: A Field Study," *Journal of Teacher Education* 39 (March 1988): 28–34; D. McIntyre, "A Response to Critics of Field Experience Supervision," *Journal of Teacher Education* 35 (May 1984): 42–45.

believe that they had the most to contribute in these two areas. Thus, the UT and the MT can play complementary roles; the UT can link theory to practice and elicit reflection, and the MT can act as frontline teacher with expert knowledge of the teaching context and the curriculum. The MTs in the Chinese conferences seemed to have the confidence, probably because of their experience with tripartite conferencing, to make these complementary roles an effective way of sharing the discourse more evenly with the UT.

Finally, in all six conferences, the STs clearly played a passive role. The analysis of the elicitations revealed, as might be expected, that the interaction seemed to converge on the ST. What was striking was that the interaction, nevertheless, seemed to be more a two-way communication between the UT and the ST and between the MT and the ST, rather than a three-way interflow. STs never or minimally elicited contributions from the UTs or the MTs, and STs never initiated a single topic change. This finding does not suggest that the STs' engagement in the conferences was of low quality. Indeed, the distribution of talk reveals that the STs' engagement in higher-order cognitive processes was substantial, often taking up roughly the same percentages as did that of the UTs.

The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the conferences highlight two important aspects in supervision. First, a natural hierarchy of power in the supervisory triad appears to exist; the UT clearly is the dominant player. Second, this inequality in power relationship does not necessarily lead to conflict and tension. The Chinese conferences seem to demonstrate that, even within this hierarchy, the MT and the UT can work harmoniously by playing complementary roles.

## CONCLUSION

The tensions and conflicts between the university supervisor and the cooperating teacher or mentor teacher have been well documented. Some of the sources of tension and conflict are the lack of a clear goal in student teaching and the lack of a clear definition of roles, which lead to the competition for power and control in the supervisory triad, and the lack of communication between the two parties.<sup>15</sup> McIntyre has claimed that an understanding of the triadic relationship is lacking and calls for more critical analyses.<sup>16</sup> In this study,

---

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, P. Grimmer and H. Ratzlaff, "Expectations for the Cooperating Teacher Role," *Journal of Teacher Education* 37 (November–December 1986): 41–48; V. Koehler, "Barriers to the Effective Supervision of Student Teaching: A Field Study," *Journal of Teacher Education* 39 (March 1988): 28–34.

<sup>16</sup>D. J. McIntyre, "A Response to Critics of Field Experience Supervision," *Journal of Teacher Education* 35 (May 1984): 42–45.



we attempted to understand this relationship and the roles of each participant by examining what *actually* happened when the three parties were brought together in supervisory conferences and how the relationships were played out and negotiated, particularly between the UT and the MT.

Except for the Chinese conferences, the UT remained the dominant figure in the process in this study. Research on supervisory conferences has called for the achievement of a symmetrical communication structure or equal roles for the purpose of critical inquiry.<sup>17</sup> However, as several researchers have noted, asymmetrical power relations are inherent in the nature of supervision in which only one party's work is analyzed, in the structures of supervisory conferences, and in the role perceptions and expectations of participants.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, a truly symmetrical relationship certainly is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, even with the best of intentions of all parties.

Evidence from the Chinese conferences in this study reveals a redress of the power relationship may not be necessary in order for the university supervisor and the mentor teacher to collaborate effectively. They can play complementary roles, with the former providing more input that requires reflection and evaluation on the part of the student teacher, and the mentor teacher providing more input that pertains to the practicalities and the contexts of classroom teaching. They could even be playing different roles in different phases of the conferences, as Waite has pointed out.<sup>19</sup> In any case, a shared understanding of the role played by each party remains an essential feature.

Apart from a clear definition of roles, contextual factors also affect supervisory conferences. Zeichner and Liston have observed that factors such as the supervisor's and the student teacher's authority over the curriculum could have a strong influence on the content of the supervisory conference.<sup>20</sup> Evidence from this study suggests that contextual factors such as the prior experience of the university supervisor and the mentor teacher, their relationship, and

---

<sup>17</sup>J. Roberts, "Face-Threatening Acts and Politeness Theory: Contrasting Speeches from Supervisory Conferences," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 7 (Spring 1992): 287-301.

<sup>18</sup>D. Waite, "Supervisors' Talk: Making Sense of Conferences," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 7 (Summer 1992): 349-371; J. Smyth, "Problematising Teaching Through a 'Critical' Approach to Clinical Supervision," *Curriculum Inquiry* 21 (Fall 1991): 321-352.

<sup>19</sup>D. Waite, "Supervisors' Talk: Making Sense of Conferences," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 7 (Summer 1992): 349-371.

<sup>20</sup>K. M. Zeichner and D. P. Liston, "Varieties of Discourse in Supervisory Conferences," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 1 (February 1985): 155-174.



their self-perception can have considerable impact not only on the content of the conference but also on the way it is managed. This possibility suggests it is important for university supervisors to develop a long-term relationship with mentor teachers in order that mutual trust, understanding of, and respect for each other's work can be developed.

---

AMY B. M. TSUI is Chair Professor and Head of the Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong; phone: (852) 2859-2517; e-mail: bmtsui@hku.hk. FRAN LOPEZ-REAL is Associate Professor and Deputy Head of the Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong; phone: (852) 2859-1957; e-mail: lopezfj@hkucc.hku.hk. Y. K. LAW is a member of the teaching staff in the Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong; phone: (852) 2241-5299; e-mail: yklaw@hkucc.hku.hk. ROSINA TANG is a member of the teaching staff in the Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong; phone: (852) 2241-5292; e-mail: rwytang@hkucc.hku.hk. MARK S. K. SHUM is a member of the teaching staff in the Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong; phone: (852) 2857-8298; e-mail: mskshum@hkucc.hku.hk.

