

Teachers' Roles in Promoting Students' Learner Autonomy in China

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Abstract

Since 2007, the Ministry of Education of China has been promoting a shift from traditional teaching models to a new teaching model where students' autonomous learning skills can be enhanced. In particular, college students are encouraged to learn English free from the constraints of time or place. While learner autonomy has been perceived as contributing tremendously to student learning, it is a new concept to many local teachers and students. Many teachers even think that the emphasis on learner autonomy means teachers' functions are on the decline. This paper reports on an empirical study that investigated the current roles that teachers play in the context of learner autonomy. Through a questionnaire, the study reveals that teachers took on more challenging and multiple roles in the new teaching model. Meanwhile, the structural model for teachers' roles has been built so as to give implications to college English teachers in China.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Teachers' roles, Factor analysis, Structural model

1. Introduction

In the past decades, learner autonomy has become a "buzzword" and "central concern" in foreign language education to promote life-long learning, and attracted growing attention in language learning, especially when language teaching shifted to more communicative and learner-centered approaches. According to College English Curriculum Requirements issued by the Ministry of Education of China in 2007, colleges and universities should adopt a new teaching model which should be built on modern information technology, particularly network technology, so that English language teaching and learning will be, to a certain extent, free from the constraints of time or place and geared towards students' individualized and autonomous learning. The centrality of the student's role in the implementation of learner autonomy initiatives is apparent, but what roles should teachers play in this context? This paper aims to explore teachers' roles in facilitating learner autonomy in China.

2. Background to the Study

A plethora of studies have been carried out to define teachers' roles in autonomous learning both in China and abroad. As Higgs (1988:41) has noted, "the teacher should act as a manager of the learning programme and a resource person" in autonomous learning in which the learner works on a learning task or activity and is largely independent of the teacher." Zimmerman & Risemberg (1997) contends that teachers should promote students' self-regulated learning in the following aspects: 1) triggering students' motivation to regulate their own learning; 2) stressing the importance of the teaching of self-regulated learning strategies; 3) instructing learners on how to conduct self-monitoring; and 4) teaching learners to capitalize on social and material resources. "In the process of autonomous learning, teachers should assist learners in cultivating their abilities of setting goals, of selecting learning contents, of determining learning paces, of choosing learning methods and skills, of monitoring learning processes and of assessing learning effects. Therefore, teachers should act as a counselor, facilitator and resource person." (Hua Weifen, 2001) Gardner & Miller (2002) summarize teachers' roles in self-access learning as an information provider, counselor, authentic language user, manager, materials writer, assessor, administrator and organizer. Xu Jinfen and Xu Li (2004) assert that college English teachers should help students gain confidence in

learning English, assist students in making feasible study plans, introduce learning strategies and skills in a systematic way, guide students into reflecting on and implementing learning strategies, promote autonomous learning by encouraging students to learn in self-access centers and interacting with students in various ways.

Although researchers put forward their unique perceptions of the roles of teachers in learner autonomy, two central questions remain to be addressed: what actual roles have college English teachers played in China and what roles appear to carry more weight?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

A total of 2,685 non-English majors participated in this study. These students came from 8 universities at different levels in China, including comprehensive national key universities, local comprehensive universities, institutes of science and technology and institutes of finance. This was to ensure that the sample consisted of similar numbers of relatively high-achieving and relatively low-achieving students from different disciplines. All the participants have learned English for at least 6 years since their junior middle school, mostly in a foreign language context. In total 2,489 valid responses were received, 1308 of which were from freshmen and 1181 of which were from sophomores.

3.2 Instruments

Based on relevant theories and empirical studies on the relations between learner autonomy and teachers' roles, four variables about teachers' roles were identified: learning regulator, resource facilitator, classroom organizer, and study guide. In order to ensure the validity of the questionnaire, it was assessed and examined by experts in applied linguistics and experienced English teachers. Those ambiguous, unrepresentative and repetitive items were screened out. 24 items were eventually chosen to constitute a formal questionnaire. Participants have to answer each item on a five-point Likert scale (1=never, 2=seldom, 3=occasionally, 4=often, 5=always). The English translation of each item is presented in Table 1.

3.3 Procedure

All participants were given the questionnaire during regular class periods by their English teachers, who were briefed on the administration procedures. The teachers read the standard instructions out loud, answered students' questions, and reassured them that all the data collected were confidential and would be used for research only. It took about 8 minutes for students to complete the questionnaire. All the completed questionnaires were collected by the teachers and returned to the investigator.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Descriptive statistics for the data of the questionnaire were calculated. The reliability of the questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach alpha. A principal component factor analysis (SPSS11.5) was then carried out with a view to looking into teachers' roles in the learning process of non-English majors in colleges or universities in China. In order to estimate whether the variables posited in the scales could be identified, an exploratory factor analysis, using a maximum likelihood extraction with a varimax rotation, was performed.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Types of Teachers' Roles

An exploratory factor analysis of the data collected from the questionnaire reveals that the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was 0.941 and Barlett's test of sphericity appeared significant since the significance value approximated zero, indicating that factor analysis could be applied to analyze this sample. By means of a principal component analysis and varimax orthogonal rotation, a four-factor solution, with the eigenvalue for each factor being 9.535, 1.732, 1.443 and 1.303, was found to be the most parsimonious and statistically explanation of the data (See Table 1). These four factors accounted for 58.391% of the variance. The loadings for each item on four factors are shown in Table 1. The internal consistency estimates of reliability for the four factors are 0.880, 0.848, 0.828 and 0.836 respectively. The overall reliability of the questionnaire was established at 0.933 Alpha.

As shown in Table 1, Factor 1 includes 9 items, whose loadings range from 0.327 to 0.757. These nine items describe a variety of assessment methods and teachers' participation in extracurricular activities revolving around English study so as to help students build their confidence in learning English. Thus, this factor is termed as "learning regulator".

Factor 2 includes 6 items, whose loadings range from 0.484 to 0.786. These six items describe whether teachers often encourage students to make full use of useful resources, including English newspapers, magazines, news, reference books, websites, English Corner and peers, with a view to helping students acquire more knowledge about

the target language and enhance their English proficiency in an all-round way. Thus, Factor 2 is termed as “resource facilitator”.

Factor 3 includes 5 items, whose loadings range from 0.567 to 0.807. These five items describe how teachers organize their classroom activities, including role play, group discussions, presentations, debates and short plays. In the context of learner autonomy, it is advisable that in college English teaching, teachers should create a social and classroom environment favorable to students’ autonomous learning, thus catalyzing students’ learning spontaneity and creativity, enhancing students’ consciousness of autonomous learning and propelling students into taking their own initiatives to construct their knowledge. Thus, Factor 3 is termed as “classroom organizer”.

Factor 4 includes 4 items, whose loading range from 0.639 to 0.796. These four items describe teachers’ help with students’ difficulties in learning English, the impartment of learning strategies and methods and the formulation of study plans. Thus, Factor 4 is termed as “study guide”.

As can be seen from the above factor analysis, teachers’ roles are no longer singular as instructors imparting textbook knowledge to students in the context of learner autonomy at the collegiate level. They should take on more challenging roles. In order to successfully undertake multiple and multi-dimensional roles, teachers should be well-equipped with relevant knowledge in education and psychology in addition to their professional knowledge about English. In the meanwhile, they should arm themselves with the ability to apply modern information technologies, including multimedia and network technologies, so as to provide students with a richer variety of instrumental learning resources.

4.2 Correlations between the Variables for Teachers’ Roles

As a rule, if a questionnaire is comprised of different parameters, it is mandatory that items falling under the umbrella of the same attribute should have relatively high correlations. To explore the internal consistency of the variables for teachers’ roles, Cronbach alpha is used as an indicator to check the internal consistency of this scale. Statistics show that the correlations between different factors of teachers’ roles range from 0.472 to 0.685 (See Table 2) and that the correlations between different factors and the total score of this scale range from 0.788 to 0.868 (See Table 3). It demonstrates that this scale is characterized by high consistency and that different factors are relatively independent of each other, thus forming a salient and consistent construct.

4.3 Descriptive Analysis of Teachers’ Roles

In order to look into the current roles that teachers play in English teaching in the context of learner autonomy in colleges and universities in China, descriptive analysis of the data collected was carried out. Descriptive analysis shows that the average points for four roles vary from 3.3275 to 3.5061 (See Table 4). Ranked from the lowest to the highest are study guide ($M=3.3275$), learning regulator ($M=3.3661$), classroom organizer (3.3873) and resource facilitator (3.5061). From the perspective of the actual roles teachers play, teachers as resource facilitators score the highest, but the average points for the other three roles (including study guides, learning regulators and classroom organizers) are higher than 3.3 and there is no substantial difference.

Admittedly, it is increasingly indispensable that teachers should be furnished with multimedia and network technologies in the information era. Teachers also come to the realization that students are able to have mastery of a foreign language in a multi-dimensional fashion through all manner of channels. Therefore, teachers often encourage students to read English newspapers and magazines and listen to English news and recommend to students helpful English reference books and websites geared towards English learning. Meanwhile, in virtually every institute of tertiary learning in China, English Corner becomes a must-go venue for students to practice their spoken English. Teachers also urge students to go to English Corner so as to cultivate students’ capabilities of capitalizing on various kinds of learning resources for their English study.

Classrooms are the major place where most communication between teachers and students occur. As classroom organizers, teachers organize a diversity of classroom activities to improve students’ English competency. In general, teachers are inclined to hold activities easy to control and implement, such as role plays and group discussions. Those relatively complicated activities, including short plays and debates, are less frequently organized for many reasons. For instance, teachers feel that students’ English is not good enough to for these activities, their content is hard to be determined and students lack motivation for them.

Compared with the first two roles, teachers’ roles as study guides and learning regulators are secondary, but their distinction is very subtle. Given that the number of Non-English majors is very large in China (ranging from 45 to 60), it is exceedingly difficult for teachers to tailor study plans to every specific individual. Accordingly, the goals and requirements for English study may well appear way too loose and wide.

4.4 The Structural Model of Teachers' Roles

In accordance with structural equation modeling (Guo Zhigang 1999) and studies on teachers' roles, "study guides", "classroom organizers", "resource facilitators" and "learning regulators" are identified as observation variables in this research. In the process of building the model, slight adjustments were made in light of model fitting.

The evaluation of the goodness-of-fit is satisfactory (See Table 5). The P-value is 0.129, far larger than 0.05, which indicates the proposed model is acceptable. RMSEA is 0.020, which is far lower than 0.08 when the model is considered appropriate and still lower than 0.05 when the model is considered good. Other fit indices include NFI = 0.999, CFI=0.999, GFI=0.999 and AGFI=0.996. With all these indices combined, this model has a good fit and is considered to be acceptable.

As is shown in Figure 1, the path coefficients for "study guide", "classroom organizer", "resource facilitator" and "learning regulator" are .71, .66, .78 and .88. These differences indicate that the four observation variables contribute to the latent variable – "teachers' role" in a different fashion, but all of them are valid parameters. This reflects the importance of teachers' roles in promoting students' learner autonomy. The path coefficient between "classroom organizer" and "teachers' role" is the smallest (.66), meaning that the role of teachers as classroom organizers is the least important in facilitating students' learner autonomy; the path coefficient between "learning regulator" and "teachers' role" is the largest (.88), indicating the most tremendous contribution that teachers make in students' learner autonomy.

5. Conclusion

In this study, researchers carried out an empirical investigation of teachers' roles in college English teaching in the context of learner autonomy and arrived at the following conclusions:

- 1) In the context of learner autonomy, the functions of English teachers should not be undermined; rather, English teachers should take on more challenging and multiple roles (Lianzhen He, 2003). Not only should teachers answer students' questions, they should also provide a wide spectrum of resources concerning English study and encourage students to take full advantage of them, organize lively and interesting classroom activities so as to bring into full play students' initiatives in learning English, assist students in making feasible and individualized study plans and objectives and putting them into practice, and adopt different assessment approaches to evaluate students' actual performance.
- 2) By and large, teachers are able to play multiple roles, particularly in terms of making available learning resources. However, there is still much room for teachers to act as study guides and learning regulators. Moreover, these two roles carry far more weight than the role of classroom organizers in facilitating students' learner autonomy. In order to cultivate students' autonomous learning ability, teachers should offer proper guidance to students in monitoring and regulating their own study and give them explicit instructions on the strategies for learner autonomy so that they can be responsible for their own study. The best solution to this is to reduce the class size to below 30, if not 20 in English classes. In this way, teachers are able to take into careful consideration students' individual differences while enhancing their learner autonomy.

Although the sample of this research is extensive and relatively large, this research is merely based on the findings of the questionnaire. Therefore, researchers are unable to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation where the subjects responded to the questionnaire and thus find it hard to discover more profound reasons. In the future research, more research methods, such as qualitative analysis via interviews, will be adopted so as to collect more quality data. Furthermore, researchers can also analyze the influence of different teachers' roles on learners' motivation and strategies.

In a nutshell, teachers play an increasingly crucial role in fostering students' autonomous learning ability.

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Table 1. Factor Construct and Loadings

Item	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
21. My English teacher encourages students to give peer assessment.	.757	.221	.169	.120
20. My English teacher encourages us to make self-assessment.	.749	.207	.186	.168
22. My English teacher can motivate my interest in learning English well.	.668	.225	.128	.234
24. My English teacher can help me overcome such negative affective factors as anxiety, nervousness and shyness.	.667	.148	.220	.265
23. My English teacher can help me gain my confidence in learning English well by praising or encourage me.	.663	.213	.183	.271
16. My English teacher joins our English activity, such as English Week, English debates and English speaking contests.	.515	.365	.200	.048
19. My English teacher checks and evaluates our English study at regular intervals.	.504	.252	.361	.175
18. My English teacher encourages us to reflect on our learning process.	.493	.372	.147	.306
17. My English teacher opens up public channels for communication, such as public e-mail account, BBS and QQ (a popular Chinese chatting tool).	.327	.280	.245	.219
13. My English teacher encourages us to read English newspapers and magazines after class.	.146	.786	.187	.157
12. My English teacher encourages us to listen to English news after class.	.182	.760	.227	.094
14. My English teacher recommends useful English reference books.	.237	.698	.017	.261
15. My English teacher recommends useful websites about English study.	.239	.686	.223	.157
11. My English teacher encourages us to go to English Corner.	.303	.585	.072	.127
10. My English teacher encourages us to do peer study after class.	.313	.484	.218	.244
6. My English teacher organizes pair work in class.	.144	.129	.807	.208
5. My English teacher organizes group work in class.	.088	.188	.751	.297
8. My English teacher assigns us to prepare English presentations on a particular topic after class and give them in class.	.181	.198	.728	.078
9. My English teacher assigns us to prepare English short plays after class and present them in class.	.242	.147	.689	-.037
7. My English teacher organizes English debates in class.	.326	.083	.567	.163
2. My English teacher helps us make short-term English study plans.	.270	.139	.108	.796
3. My English teacher helps us make medium-and-long term English study plans.	.284	.180	.071	.784
1. My English teacher communicates with us and learns about our difficulties in learning English.	.224	.184	.251	.699
4. My English teacher tells us about English learning strategies and methods in class.	.141	.334	.229	.639

Table 2. Correlational matrix for the four factors of teachers' roles

	Study guide	Classroom organizer	Resource facilitator	Learning regulator
Study guide	1			
Classroom organizer	.472**	1		
Resource facilitator	.555**	.499**	1	
Learning regulator	.614**	.583**	.685**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Correlations between the four factors of teachers' roles and the total score of the scale

	Study guide	Classroom organizer	Resource facilitator	Learning regulator
Teachers' roles	.807**	.788**	.824**	.868**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4. Descriptive analysis of teachers' roles

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Study guide	2489	1.00	5.00	3.3275	.79029
Classroom organizer	2489	1.00	5.00	3.3873	.81903
Resource facilitator	2489	1.00	5.00	3.5061	.72340
Learning regulator	2489	1.00	5.00	3.3661	.70747

Table 5. Fit indices of the structural model of teachers' roles

	P	Chi-Square	Chi-Square/df	RMSEA	CFI	NFI	GFI	AGFI
Revised model	0.129	4.089	2.044	0.020	0.999	0.999	0.999	0.996

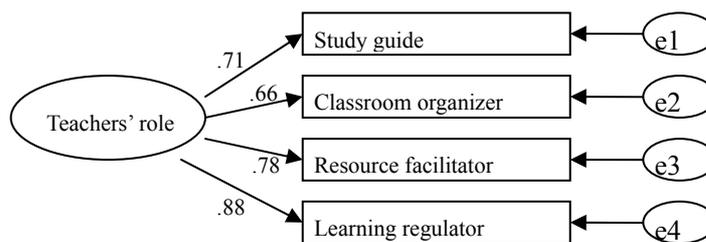


Figure 1. Structural model of teachers' roles