A Preliminary Discussion on the Relationship between English Teachers and Learners in China

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Keywords: Relationship, Differences, Commonness, Authorities.

Abstract. According to English teachers, what is of most significance is the kind of relationship we build between teachers and learners. In building up the relationship, teachers and learners play their own roles, but teachers take much of the responsibility in the type of the relationship which will decide the outcome of teaching and learning, directly or indirectly. This paper attempts to explore English teachers and learners’ relationship from a feasible perspective, and discusses the differences, commonness, authorities and friendliness existing in the relationship between English teachers and learners.

Introduction

In a long run, many scholars have discussed the fundamental concepts, theories and issues in Foreign Language Education. All these aim to give us a comprehensive framework of what constitute good education. Among this, the relationship between English teachers and learners functions importantly in the process. However, the attention paid to this issue of many English teachers is far from enough in China, which becomes the focus of discussion in this paper.

The Context for Discussion

All relationships can not be set up without referring to context. Let’s first look at the brief history of English Language Teaching (ELT) in China: 1. Grammar-translation approach up to 1970’s; 2. Behaviorism approach in the 1970’s; 3. Humanistic approach in the 1980’s; 4. Communicative approach in the 1990’s; 5. Social constructive approach in the 2000’s. With the changes of approaches to teaching, teachers’ role in class also varies. For instance, in the grammar-translation approach, the teacher talks dominantly during the class and learners seldom voice a word unless they are asked to answer. Under this circumstance, the teacher is stereotyped as the only authority in education and as the gateway to knowledge.

According to this view, it is the teacher’s responsibility to decide on the success or failure of class. Learners thus become passive in learning and obedient to teacher’s instruction. The distance between teachers and learners is very large and a hierarchy is inevitably and invisibly set up between teachers and learners and even between good learners and poor learners. Such kind of relationship is criticized by many scholars and educators with the rise of humanism education and democracy. They point out that education has laid much emphasis on knowledge teaching and its practical use, ignoring the human nature, morality and personality, and the learners growing up in such kind of relationship will lack the ability of critical thinking and dependent learning.

Secondly, let’s see what opportunities for development in China ELT ever met: 1. the implementation of the policy of reform and opening up to the outside world in 1978 makes English functions necessarily; 2. Changes that have taken place in ELT since then in these aspects including that social respect towards English teachers has rapidly aroused; English teaching condition has been improved gradually; the materials for English study has blossomed and English has gained its popularity among Chinese people. As a result, formal expansion of ELT programs took place
represented by two College English Syllabuses for non-English majors of science and technology since 1985 and for non-English majors of the humanities and social sciences since 1986. Chinese’s interest for English reached its peak in the implementation of the National Proficiency Test – CET IV (College English Test IV) and CET VI (College English Test VI).

Therefore, today’s English teaching in China has gotten to a forked road: to continue the exam-driven ELT or to adjust ELT to the whole development of persons. Here the “persons” mean not only English learners but also English teachers. And correspondingly, the relationship between Ts (teachers) and Ls (learners) also needs reconstructed.

The Conflict between Professional Knowledge and the New Demands of Professional Practice

Schön (1983: 14-15) in his book, *The Reflective Practitioner*, mentions “the crisis of confidence in professions”. The main reason of this crisis, he argues, is that “professional knowledge is mismatched to the changing character of the situations of practice: the complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts”. All the elements are regarded as “central to the world of professional practice”. In other words, the crisis also happens in the area of ESL teaching.

According to Schön (1983: 14-15), in many fields, “leading professionals speak of a new awareness of complexity which resists the skills, experiences and techniques of traditional expertise”. In addition, “professionals are called upon to perform tasks for which they have not been educated”. Schön (1983: 14-15) cited a comment from Dr. Harvey Brooks, who is the former dean of the Harvard University School of Applied Physics, “the niche no longer fits the education, or the education no longer fits the niche”, and professions are now confronted with an “unprecedented requirement for adaptability”. In fact, it is also true in EFL teaching in China. For example, there is a policy which requires that all EFL teachers, no matter how old you are, how many years you have taught, should have a computer certificate to be one of the basic elements as an EFL teacher.

The new demands of the professional practice indicate that whether a teacher has many years’ teaching experiences doesn’t make more sense in this case. Because the experienced teachers, like all inexperienced teachers, have to see a “tangled web (Schön, 1983: 14-15)”, and they would be confronted with many unexpected difficulties which have never happened in their career before. In other words, facing the new demands of professional practice, experienced teachers may not have more advantages over inexperienced teachers.

Flow and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Teachers’ Practices

In addition, a study which focuses on “flow and EFL teachers’ practices” conducted by Tardy and Snyder (2004) could give us some indication on EFL teachers’ experience as well.

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997), cited by Tardy and Snyder (2004: 118), the concept of flow describes “a mental state resulting from peak experiences in which the level of challenge is high, but manageable given a person’s skills”. Besides, Csikszentmihalyi (1996), cited by Tardy and Snyder (2004: 118), suggests that “flow can occur in teaching as the teacher works to interest and motivate students to pursue educational goals”. He emphasizes that in flow experiences “attention becomes ordered and fully invested, leading to a loss of self-consciousness and a distorted sense of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997: 29-33, cited by Tardy and Snyder 2004: 118)”. Therefore, Tardy and Snyder (2004: 118) conclude that “the motivation provided by teachers’ sense of flow may be essential to effective teaching”.

Of course, the flow experience in teaching discussed above seems mainly depended on a certain period of teaching, such as a class, a lesson. And “the teachers all reported experiencing flow”? (Tardy and Snyder, 2004: 118) before. However, it could be assumed that if flow could occur in a period of time like a class, it could also occur in the middle of the career. In other words, we could find such “flow” more obviously in a group of EFL teachers with some certain teaching years. In this concept, we may more easily find out in which age group could EFL teachers have relatively better
performance according to the characteristics of teachers’ flow experiences (Tardy and Snyder, 2004: 120-123): “1) interest and involvement; 2) authentic communication; 3) spontaneity/unpredictability (something that could not be planned or predicted, but seemed to arise rather spontaneously); 4) teacher-students dialogue; 5) moments of learning”.

Learners in the Relationship

As foreign language classrooms are composed of students from an increasingly diverse background, language teachers can no longer count on a stock of common knowledge against which to teach the foreign language and culture; they cannot build on common schooling habits, common conversational styles; they cannot even count on shared levels of knowledge of a common native tongue. “The notion of a generic native speaker has become so diversified that it has lost its meaning. Attention to this diversity forces teachers to take into consideration differences in class, gender, race and ethnicity in the design of classroom activities.”(Kramsch, 2000:49) English learners, as one of the components in the relationship, their roles are quite often been underestimated or even neglected by teachers. However, a relationship without considering the diversities of learners is doomed to be a failure. Such kind of relationship will turn out to be a unilateral one that eventually imposes damages to both sides, Ts and Ls: Ls complain that the teacher pays little attention to their real needs and Ts feel disappointed at Ls alienation. Learners actually have their own parts to the relationship “including implicit contributions such as experience, feelings, attitudes and skills and explicit contributions like information or perceptions” (Williams & Burden, 1997: 85).

Therefore, when considering building up the relationship between Ts and Ls, one can not neglect Ls’ factors, such as their characters, their psychological development, their interests etc.

Teachers in the Relationship

Now, we come to the most crucial component of the relationship-teachers. The type of relationship is largely dependent on how teachers view their role in ELT. As teachers, we are in an easy position to impose our values, judgments and preference, etc., on learners. Teachers’ so-called “superiority” (Kramsch, 2000:56) often pervades in class and thus makes teachers the authoritative power repressing learners’ independent thinking. It’s better not to exaggerate teachers’ function, or in other words, to keep cool about what teachers can do to help students. According to Williams & Burden (1997:67), it’s better for teachers to “regard themselves as mediator rather than instructors”. Mediation is a term used by psychologists to refer to the part played by other significant people in the learners’ lives, who enhance their learning by selecting and shaping the learning experiences presented to them. Instructors disseminate knowledge while mediators introduce knowledge, skills and strategies to learners; with teachers performing as instructors, learners become passive receptors, while with mediators, learners become active participant in reciprocating thus willingly accept tasks or negotiate to make tasks more suitable; instructors care little about learners’ self-image while mediators help learners build it; instructors attempt to control the class, while mediators aid learners to study autonomously and independently; instructors restrict learners in classroom while mediators encourage learners to care about social issues.

When teachers function as mediators, they select and organize stimulus that they consider most appropriate for the learners in a suitable way. According to Feuerstein (1996), there are twelve features of mediation: 1) significance (to make learners aware of the significance of the learning task); 2) purpose beyond the here and now (to make learners aware that the learning experience can not be restricted to the immediate time and place.); 3) shared intention. To encourage and develop learners to: 4) get the sense of competence; 5) control their own behavior; 6) set realistic goals and ways for achieving them; 7) get prepared internally for challenges and search for new challenges in life; 8) be aware of changes and able to recognize and evaluate them; 9) believe in positive outcome whatever the problem might be; 10) share the spirit of co-operation; 11) recognize their own individuality and uniqueness; 12) feel they belong to a community and a culture. By discussing teachers’ ideal role in
ELT, we come to the conclusion that a sound relationship between Ts and Ls is urgently needed in order to realize teachers’ true value.

Tasks in the Relationship

This may arouse doubts: what can tasks contribute to the relationship between Ts and Ls? Actually, tasks play a dispensable role in this relationship. “A task is any activity that learners engage in to further the process of learning a language” (Williams & Burden, 1997: 88). Therefore, tasks become the forum within which such meaningful interaction between two or more participants can take place. Not a relationship can be established without interacting among people. In this sense, tasks can be seen as the greenhouse for the relationship. As Williams & Burden (1997: 103) point out that “a task is: an interface between the teachers and the learners; a manifestation of the teacher’s view about education and belief in language learning; subject to different treatment by teachers with varied beliefs, and different tasks could be treated in the same way by teachers who have one common belief”. From Nunnan’s (1992: 89) view of “the components of tasks: 1) input data 2) activities (procedures) 3) goals 4) roles of teachers 5) roles of learners 6) a setting”, we can see tasks are like threads that cluster the whole class activities together. Since the relationship is embedded in these tasks, the design of tasks should be cautious. Former philosophers also give us some implications for relationship between Ts and Ls.

Over half a century ago, Dewey (1938) proposed The Foxfire Approach to Teaching and Learning. In the spirit of Dewey, The Foxfire Approach is “learner centered and community focused” (Dewey, 1938: 56). Implementing it requires a give-and-take relationship among teachers, learners, the curriculum, and community. Teachers constantly strive to increase learners’ participation in decisions that affect them, integrate the curriculum into the community, and ensure that learning objectives are met or surpassed. In this process, four core practices (Student choice, teacher as facilitator, academic integrity, and community connections) become so interwoven they are inseparable.

Conclusion

By far, we have discussed the compositions of the relationship respectively, now let’s come to the point directly: what kind of relationship on earth is needed in China? Based on the discussion above, we may get the idea that the ideal relationship between English teacher and learners in China may be established on the democratic and equal basis, on which teachers and learners learn from each other, respect each other, and strengthen each other. The teachers would play the role as a collaborator, conductor and participator.

References