IMPROVING THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN
CHINA’S COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

Approved:  

Date: May 4, 2011
IMPROVING THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN
CHINA’S COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

A Seminar Paper
Presented to
The Graduate Faculty
University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirement for the Degree
Master of Science in Education
English Education

By
Wanting Li (Ava)
2011
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the people who have helped me throughout this seminar paper writing.

Firstly, my great indebtedness goes to my advisor, Dr. Yuanyuan Hu, who has contributed her precious insight and knowledge towards the completion of my paper. Without her steady, generous help and support throughout the entire process, this paper would not have been completed.

Secondly, I also feel a special debt of gratitude to Kate Bucko, who works at the UW-Platteville Writing Center. She has helped me revise my paper.

Finally, I would like to thank my beloved parents and friends for their encouragement and support, which have furnished me with an important source of courage to go on in this long, hard journey.
Abstract

IMPROVING THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN
CHINA’S COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

Wanting Li

Under the Supervision of Yuanyuan Hu, Ph.D.

Given the high status of English in China and the communicative nature of language, the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms is important to the success of college English education in China. This paper aims to explore the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms. On the basis of a review of the literature on the role of a teacher in a foreign language classroom, the paper analyses the roles that college English teachers in China have played and have not played in classrooms and identifies problems and concerns in relation to the teacher-student relationship. The paper concludes with suggestions for improving the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APPROVAL PAGE…………………………………………………………...i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE…………………………………………………………...ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS……………………………………………………...iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT………………………………………………………………...iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS……………………………………………………...v</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION…………………………………………..1
   Introduction
   Statement of the Problem
   Definitions of Terms
   Delimitations
   Method of Approach

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE……………………….4
   Teacher-Student Relationship in a Foreign Language Classroom
   Teacher-Student Relationship in China’s College English Classrooms

CHAPTER 3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS……………….13
   The Importance of Improving the Teacher-Student Relationship in
   China’s College English Classrooms
   Suggestions for Improvement

REFERENCES………………………………………………………………18
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Education has always been a focal point of concern for people all over the world. With the development of social economy and the advancement of technology in China, educational topics have been examined in more depth, including the topic of the teacher-student relationship. English, a worldwide language nowadays, is highly valued in the college curriculum in China. However, the teacher-student relationship, which is of critical importance to the quality of college English instruction, is not given due attention.

The role of a teacher in a foreign language classroom is not like that of a teacher in a Chinese language classroom. Students may feel nervous in a foreign language classroom. According to Yang (2007), the communicative nature of language determines that the teacher-student relationship is more important in a foreign language classroom than that in other classrooms. The teacher-student relationship in a foreign language classroom needs to be handled well so that students can feel comfortable to learn the foreign language well.

The teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms is an interesting and important topic for both students and teachers. Establishing a good and harmonious teacher-student relationship in college English classrooms is very important in that the teacher-student relationship can affect student achievement (Qin, 2009). Improving the teacher-student relationship can not only contribute to the quality of instruction and student learning, but also foster students’ creativity (Wang,
Chinese traditional culture is rich in valuable experiences and models for teachers, students, and the relationship between teachers and students (Su, 2009). China has its unique traditions to cultivate the relationship between teachers and students and train students in schools. However, as Xia (2009) points out, there are some problems in the teacher-student relationship in college English classrooms in China. Chinese traditional education emphasizes the absolute authority of teachers. With such a tradition, some English teachers in China do not pay sufficient attention to students’ interests and needs. They play limited roles in the classroom setting, which may reduce the effectiveness of their teaching.

Given that the teacher-student relationship is critical to the success of college English education in China, this paper explores problems existing in the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms and provides some suggestions to improve the relationship.

**Statement of the Problem**

The paper explores the following two questions: Why should the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms be improved? How could the teacher-student relationship be improved?

**Definition of Terms**

Teacher-student relationship: the academic relationship between teachers and their students

College English: English for non-English majors in China
Delimitations of Research

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over ninety (90) days. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar. Key search topics include “the role of a teacher in a foreign language classroom,” “teacher-student relationship in a foreign language classroom,” and “China’s college English classrooms.”

Method of Approach

A brief review of the literature on the teacher-student relationship in a foreign language classroom was conducted. A second review of the literature on the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms was carried out. The paper ends with suggestions for improving the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the literature on the teacher-student relationship in a foreign language classroom and the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms.

Teacher-student Relationship in a Foreign Language Classroom

The Role of a Teacher in a Foreign Language Classroom. The role of a teacher is one of the most important factors to the success of classroom instruction (Brown, 2007). The role a teacher plays can have significant impact on students’ learning. A foreign language teacher can play different kinds of roles. Different roles can have different effects on students.

In traditional educational settings, a teacher is regarded as a controller. In that situation, teachers decide what materials they use in class, what their students should do in and after class, and what answers they would provide to different questions. This is what a teacher typically does in a teacher-centered classroom: the teacher being an imparter of knowledge and demonstrator. Students typically listen to the teacher and take notes while the teacher explains all language points. Sometimes it may be necessary to explain in detail some language points like vocabulary and grammar rules with examples and assignments so that the students can understand them better and practice after class to enhance what they have learned in class. For example, audiolingualism is a teacher-dominated method. With audiolingualism, the teacher’s role is to control the direction of learning a foreign language, monitor the
students’ performance, and correct them if they make any mistakes. Although some control on students is indeed helpful to classroom management, a teacher should be more than just a controller in a foreign language classroom.

In foreign language classrooms, interaction is vital. The student-centered approach can be more productive. In student-centered classrooms, a teacher could be a creator of a language environment, guide, advisor, and navigator of language knowledge (Zhang, 2006). Teachers can adopt student-centered methods such as cooperative learning and total physical response (Richards, 1996). With cooperative learning, the teacher’s role is to divide students into groups or pairs, manage both interaction and learning among students, monitor students’ learning process, stimulate interactive language, and provide feedback and encouragement. Cooperative learning relies most on students’ group work and pair work. With the total physical response method, a teacher’s role is to direct students’ behaviors; students are imitators of the teacher’s nonverbal movement as well as verbal utterances.

Communicative language teaching emphasizes student-centeredness (Richards, 1996). With the communicative language teaching approach, a teacher plays a variety of roles: a teacher is a manager to organize communication activities, a monitor to supervise student learning, a guide to lead classroom procedures, a facilitator to help students with communication, and a bilingual helper to help them understand language points.

The first role that a foreign language teacher can take on is that of manager. As a manager, a teacher would plan lessons, provide information, and manage classroom
time. If teachers take into account their students’ needs, they can manage their class materials and activities more effectively, which can enhance their students’ learning.

As a monitor, a teacher would supervise student learning, for example, requiring students to prepare for each class, helping students develop effective learning strategies, and assessing student learning outcomes (Lin, 2002). The students could also evaluate their new understanding and improve their language knowledge during this process.

As a guide, a teacher could lead students into the right direction of learning. It is good for students to learn a foreign language in a positive language environment with a teacher’s guide. There may be various constraints to a teacher’s instruction, but a favorable teacher-student relationship can contribute to a positive language environment.

A foreign language teacher can also be a classroom facilitator, helping students learn in an easier manner. Language teachers can successfully facilitate student learning if they know what their students already know, provide interesting materials or activities to motivate them, create opportunities for them to interact with each other, and encourage them to practice what they have learned (Woodward, 2001). With a teacher being a facilitator, students may become more autonomous learners. As a foreign language teacher, to establish a relaxing language environment is essential. Students will feel free to talk if the class environment is relaxing.

A teacher can also be a bilingual helper in a foreign language classroom. The teacher could explain language points in a native language, which could help students
better understand the foreign language. The students should be allowed to ask
questions if they have any about foreign language learning. The teacher’s positive
encouragement can eliminate students’ anxiety, enhance academic motivation, boost
student self-confidence and self-esteem, and increase interaction (Lin, 2002).

The Teacher-Student Relationship in a Foreign Language Classroom. There is
no doubt that the teacher-student relationship is very important in foreign language
classrooms. The relationship between teachers and students can affect the atmosphere
of a class, the organization of classroom activities, and the academic achievement of
students. Interaction is essential in a foreign language classroom because of the
communicative nature of language. The teacher-student relationship in a foreign
language classroom is more important than that in other academic subjects.

A teacher is very crucial to students’ foreign language learning. A teacher’s
instruction affects foreign language learning; a teacher playing different roles
throughout the instruction may lead to more effective foreign language teaching
(Spada & Lightbown, 2002). For example, with a teacher being a facilitator, students
can feel relaxed and enjoy the learning process in a comfortable environment. It is
known that if students love a teacher, it is likely that they love the course the teacher
taught and have higher motivation to learn. An English teacher can observe student
responses to his or her instruction and adjust his or her roles accordingly.

The success of foreign language learning depends heavily on interactions
between teachers and students (Hall & Verplaetse, 2000). The teacher-student
relationship in foreign language classrooms is basic to successful interactions in
language classrooms.

The Teacher-student Relationship in China’s College English Classrooms

Roles that English Teachers Have Played. With the deepening of China’s reform and opening-up policy and international economic globalization, English now is a required course starting in elementary schools in China. However, foreign language education in China continues to reflect the long traditional Chinese culture on the teacher-student relationship. The traditional teaching culture in China emphasizes teacher-centeredness. The traditional teacher-student relationship limits the roles of teachers in China’s college English classrooms.

The teaching culture in China is featured by authoritarianism, efficiency doctrine, and elitism (Yin, 2009). According to Yin (2009), teachers’ authority is fully reflected in the saying “He who teaches me for one day is my father for life.” The traditional Chinese culture values the absolute authority of teachers in the teacher-student relationship. The efficiency doctrine means that teachers give priority to student academic achievement. However, the efficiency doctrine limits teachers’ teaching styles in China’s exam-oriented education system. Elitism means that teachers tend to give more attention to outstanding students. The students whose academic achievements are relatively poor may be neglected.

An English teacher under this cultural background may be a controller of teaching, information provider, guide, and evaluator. The teacher is in the position of leader while students are learners and need to accomplish their learning tasks under the teacher’s guidance. During the teaching process, the teacher may mainly focuses
on imparting knowledge. Priority is given to teaching students language knowledge, but students’ non-intellectual factors in the learning process are largely ignored (Qin, 2009).

With the development of foreign language teaching in China, the communicative language teaching approach has become prevalent in recent years emphasizing student-centeredness (Fan & Da, 2010). With the student-centered teaching model, an English teacher is recommended to play different roles such as organizer, promoter, co-worker, and bilingual helper.

**Roles that English Teachers Have Not Played.** Although English has been taught in China for many years, English teachers’ roles in China’s college English classrooms are still limited.

In China, teachers in most public colleges have no right to develop their own curriculum or choose their own teaching materials. College English teachers in most regular schools are not curriculum developers or teaching materials developers. The curriculum and teaching materials are normally selected by their schools. In other words, college English teachers in China have to teach the contents in textbooks that have been chosen by their schools to attain the teaching objectives and help their students pass the exam at the end of the semester. Sometimes teachers would be using the same textbooks for several years. Some college English teachers have thus used the same teaching plans for several years.

Many college English teachers are not familiar with their students’ interests, hobbies and other non-intellectual factors. Some students think that their English
teacher is too serious, and they seldom have any opportunities to interact with their English teacher (Xiang, 2004). Moreover, students whose academic achievements are poor are afraid to talk to their teachers in class (Xia, 2009).

College English teachers do create language environments in classrooms. They speak English in class and provide opportunities for students to practice English speaking. However, some teachers have not played the facilitator role, helping students during their group activities or arousing students’ academic motivation. Teachers normally know which students are better than the other students in terms of proficiency and learning strategies, but few teachers seem to care about the interests or hobbies of lower-achieving students and arouse their interests in English learning.

English speaking is an essential part of English learning. However, many students cannot express their meanings clearly in English even after they have passed CET-6 (CET is the abbreviation for College English Test). The speaking activities in China’s college English classrooms are restricted in variety. Most students cannot really practice their English speaking in class. Some English teachers in China turned an English speaking class into an English corner and just let the students talk with their classmates about uninteresting topics in the textbook, or some English teachers just turned an English speaking class into an English movie class (Qian, 2006).

**Problems and Concerns.** English language teaching is unique compared with other subjects. Interaction is important in English language teaching and learning. However, one of the three features of teaching culture in China, authoritarianism, leads to a lack of interaction between teachers and students. We can still see the
respect for knowledge and the teachers in China, which shows that we keep the fine tradition of “respect for teachers” since ancient times (Shi & Peng, 2008). However, it is undeniable that the dignity of the teaching profession has been seriously distorted and alienated: unidirectional emphasis on the absolute authority of the teachers in the teaching activities subjectively requires students’ absolute obedience to the teachers. Prestige is necessary, but authoritarianism destroyed people’s subjective initiative so that the teacher-student relationship is in a completely passive state. We should respect our English teachers. But if students turn that respect into fear and do not ask questions when they do not understand, this respect will do no good to their English learning.

With the further deepening of China’s reform, especially accompanied by the enrollment expansion in recent years, China’s higher education has changed from elite education to mass education. As a result, there is reduced contact and communication between teachers and students; the teacher-student relationship between among some students and teachers is unfavorable (Guo, Xu, & Wang, 2009). The enrollment expansion in China resulted in high student-teacher ratio, which led to less communication opportunities between teachers and students. In a college English classroom, a teacher barely has opportunities to communicate with every student due to the large class size. According to Yu (2008), a survey shows that most students hope there is a chance to communicate with teachers after class, but the chance is rare. Besides, it is difficult for teachers to involve students in group work or pair work in such big English classrooms.
Some students have high anxiety and are reluctant to speak in English due to two of the three features of teacher culture in China, efficiency doctrine and elitism. It is reasonable for teachers to pay attention to their students’ achievements because our evaluation criteria have not been reformed: student academic performance has always been weighed heavily. Many students have to pass CET-4 and CET-6 to graduate from college in China. It is thus understandable that teachers prefer “good students.” If this preference is intended to encourage other students to become “a good student,” this preference may be justified. However, some students whose academic performances are poor still hesitate to talk with their English teachers or speak with other classmates in English in class. They are afraid of making grammar mistakes and cannot express their meanings in a clear way. Even students who have already passed the CET-6 may be reluctant to speak in English, not to mention the students who have not passed yet.

Some teachers are lack of creativity because they are not eligible to develop their own curriculum or choose their own teaching materials. To fulfill teaching objectives, they may not attempt to create a favorable classroom atmosphere or use additional materials. Students may feel bored in class. It is not good for the students to study English in such a class atmosphere.

It is clear that there are problems with the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms: lack of interaction between English teachers and students, students’ high anxiety and reluctance to speak in English, and lack of creativity on the English teachers’ part. The teacher-student relationship is a mutual relationship that needs both teachers’ and students’ efforts to improve it.
CHAPTER 3
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The review of related literature shows that there are some problems in the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms: lack of interaction between English teachers and their students, students’ high anxiety and reluctance to speak in English, and lack of creativity on the English teachers’ part. These problems can negatively affect student learning of English. As students have to pass English exams to graduate from college, it is really important for students to learn English well in college. The teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms is crucial to student success. It is thus very important to improve the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms.

The Importance of Improving the Teacher-Student Relationship in China’s College English Classrooms

As the basic interpersonal relationship in China’s college English classrooms, the teacher-student relationship can not only directly influence the effectiveness of English learning and teaching, but also communication in English between teachers and students. According to Cui (2008), the teacher-student relationship has significant impact on teaching activities and quality-oriented education. Quality-oriented education means education for all-round development. For English education, students should develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. If the students have high anxiety and are reluctant to speak in English, they cannot improve their English speaking skills or interact with their English teachers in class. A good
teacher-student relationship can lower students’ anxiety and allow the students to feel comfortable to speak in English.

Different teacher-student relationships can create different classroom environments, and classroom environments can affect the teachers’ teaching and student learning. If the teacher-student relationship is poor, the classroom atmosphere will be tense, and students will feel insecure or keep silent. If the teacher-student relationship is good, the classroom atmosphere will be friendly and harmonious; students will feel relaxed and think actively. A harmonious situation is what students like; in a poor classroom atmosphere, students may unconsciously want to escape. After a certain time, their negative feelings will affect their interests in learning. A good teacher-student relationship can shorten the psychological distance and provide relaxing and friendly language environment; students may be more willing to have English classes and be confident (Xu, 2007).

A good teacher-student relationship can contribute to effective teaching and learning, which is an important prerequisite to cultivate innovative talents, and the hidden power to perfect students’ personalities (Yao, Liu, & Ling, 2008). A good teacher-student relationship is a kind of mutual understanding, respect and love. It is not only an important factor to stimulate students’ interests in learning and prompt them to be more active in learning professional knowledge and skills; to some extent, it is also the source of strength to encourage the students to try their efforts unremittingly toward the direction of teachers’ expectations. Only when the teaching atmosphere is democratic, and the teacher-student relationship is harmonious, can the
students feel safe psychologically. When a person’s nervousness is relieved and at the same time he or she is fully trusted and encouraged, his or her creative potential will be able to function effectively.

A good teacher-student relationship can help students form a positive attitude toward English, which can help the students achieve self-confidence so that they will continue their learning.

**Suggestions for Improvement**

In view of the identified problems in relation to the teacher-student relationship in China’s college English classrooms, the following suggestions are proposed to address each problem.

Regarding the lack of interaction between English teachers and their students, the teachers could read students’ personnel files or develop a questionnaire to find out students’ interests and hobbies, or communicate with their students after class. The English teachers can learn more information about the students after reading the students’ personnel files and communicating with them. The teachers can choose topics related to students’ interests and hobbies to arouse students’ interests. The interaction between teachers and students is the precondition to establish a good teacher-student relationship (Jiang, 2004). Only through communicating with students, can teachers fully understand their students’ personality characteristics, hobbies, English background, language potential, and learning styles, and then tailor teaching to their students’ needs.
To deal with the students’ high anxiety and reluctance to speak in English, English teachers should care more about the students whose academic achievements are poor. They could also give more opportunities to the students to practice in English and encourage them to speak in English in class. Appropriate interaction between English teachers and their students can lower the students’ anxiety. The lack of interaction between English teachers and their students is interrelated with and students’ high anxiety and reluctance to speak in English. If English teachers interact with their students appropriately, the students will have lower anxiety and feel more comfortable to speak in English in class. If the classroom environment is relaxing, the students will have lower anxiety and feel free to interact with the English teachers in English.

To help English teachers improve their creativity in the classroom, they should be provided with training opportunities to learn some teaching strategies. Universities and colleges could let English teachers choose their own teaching materials. With the freedom to choose teaching materials, English teachers could use whatever they think will be helpful to accomplish academic objectives; they could also make different lesson plans and activate the class atmosphere by using different teaching materials. The size of English class should be reduced so that teachers can employ more teaching methods, such as group work. In a small-sized class, an English teacher could interact with every student and have group work and pair work.

However, there are constraints to improving the teacher-student relationship in college English classrooms. For example, student academic performance has been
used as the sole evaluation criterion in China; students have to pass the national exams to get into colleges. CET-4 and CET-6 are the two major exams for students to take during college. They only test students’ listening, reading and writing skills and overlook students’ speaking skill. Although China’s educational system poses constraints to improving the teacher-student relationship, college English teachers and students should make efforts to improve their relationship collaboratively.
References


