

## Teacher-Student Relationship and Quality Education in College and University English Teaching

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### Abstract

The relationship between teachers and students is the most important factor in English teaching process. Such relationship has been changing according to certain theories such as the second language acquisition theory, the social constructive theory, etc.. In China, quality education, which means the process in which people's characters and self-cultivations are molded and high-quality talents are developed through the means of education, has been proposed for tens of years, yet it has not been effectively carried out in college and university English teaching course. One of the reasons is that the traditional teacher-student relationship has hindered its development. Therefore changing such traditional relationship becomes a must if we want to meet the requirements of quality education. This paper discusses the conversion of such kind of relationship in English teaching course and explores the quality education towards the students in colleges and universities.

**Key words:** Teacher-student relationship; Quality education; English teaching

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### INTRODUCTION

With the expansion of foreign trade and cross-cultural interaction, foreign language teaching especially English

teaching has gradually developed from a fashion to an obligatory discipline in China including university and college education. In the process of English teaching, under the influence of linguists both at home and abroad, teachers have been trying different teaching methods. As a result, those different teaching approaches embody a changing teacher-student relationship.

The quality education has appeared as the counterpart of the exam-oriented education in China. In order to develop the new-type of persons of talent required by the new century, each discipline should adapt itself to the requirements of quality education better, college and university English course is of no exception. To achieve this purpose, the key point is to convert the traditional relationship between the teachers and the students.

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP CONVERSION

### 1.1 Definition of the Teacher-Student Relationship

The teacher-student relationship refers to the specific reflection of the human relationship established at school in the mutual educational activities through the exchange of information and communication.

### 1.2 The Theoretical Background

#### 1.2.1 The Second Language Acquisition Theory

Krashen, one of the most famous experts in the field of SLA, typically emphasizes that language learning comes about through using language communicatively, rather than through practicing language skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2000). Ellis gave his opinion on instruction and acquisition "it would seem that 'exposure'...is far more important than 'instruction'. In other words, it is not focusing on the form of 'when' questions that helped some of the children to develop, but the opportunity to negotiate

a communicative task.” (Ellis, 1994, p.45) Therefore, from the SLA theories, we know that the aim of second language teaching should be developing the learners’ language proficiency and the teachers should give just proper instructions where necessary and leave most of the time for the students to use the target language.

### 1.2.2 The Social Constructive Theory

The social constructive theory is a kind of learning theory, which is proposed by Lev Vygotsky. According to this theory, learning and development is a kind of social and cooperative activity, which cannot be taught. Knowledge is constructed by the learners themselves, but not transmitted by other people. This kind of construction takes place in the process of communicating with other people and is the result of communication. It stresses that people’s learning and development happens in the communication and interaction with other people while the teacher is the most important interactive part of the students. Teaching should be placed in the meaningful situations in which the learned knowledge could be used (GONG & LUO, 2003, p.19).

For the purpose of the students’ personal development, teachers should put special emphasis on the main function of the students and provide abundant language materials and contexts, at the same time they should integrate the students’ life experience outside school with their learning activities within school. The more the students’ participate in such kind of activities, the more they will experience the automatic feelings. The more the students have the feelings of self-control, the more they will participate so that they will have more interior motivation that can better facilitate their language development.

### 1.2.3 The Linguistic Communicative Theory

Communication plays a very essential and irreplaceable function in various kinds of human activities needless to say in second language acquisition and language teaching process. Dell Hymes, a famous sociolinguist, introduced the term “communicative competence”. According to him, communicative competence refers to that aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts, i.e. the knowledge that enables a person to communicate functionally and interactively. Such competence includes grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. To summarize, the key of linguistic communicative theories show us that language is used for human communication and a successful linguistic communication depends on one’s communicative competence. Therefore in English-teaching classroom, it is the duty of the teachers to design language techniques to engage the learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. They should also create a more authentic environment in which the learners can use the language for communication with each other or with the teachers. The teachers should

not just pay attention to the real use of language while ignoring the most basic component, they should also give proper attention to the grammatical competence with the help of which the students could communicate more successfully and easily.

### 1.2.4 The Theory of Humanistic Education

In the theory of humanism, it is proposed that in the process of education, the students’ personal feelings and personal needs should be respected and valued. It puts emphasis on the learning which has real personal significance and importance, and it suggests the whole-person education which includes cognition and feelings.

The main aim of humanistic approaches is to draw the learners into an affective engagement in the learning process, to make classroom activities meaningful as experiences that involve the individuals as whole persons. All in all, in the process of language teaching which aims at the use of the language for communication, the learners should become the center of learning, all of the teaching activities should promote the learners’ linguistic performance and the learners should be given much more time to develop their own ways of language use through experience within and outside the classroom. So the purpose of teaching should be directed at the learners themselves. The teachers should analyze the learners’ needs and take into account of the learners’ feelings to achieve the final goals of promoting personal development and developing personal ability not only in the field of language but also in other aspects.

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## 2. A BRIEF REVIEW OF TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN ENGLISH TEACHING

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Different teaching methods result in different teacher-student relationships. In the following part, let’s review what the teacher-student relationship is under different English teaching approach.

### 2.1 The Grammar-Translation Method

Grammar-translation method was first known in America as the Prussian Method. In this teaching method, language is taught in the same way as logic and literature, and the teachers’ main duty is to impart knowledge to their students. The relationship between the teachers and the learners is that of the classical teacher-centered methodology. The teachers are expected to provide technical explanations, rules and examples to the students. They are not necessarily required to speak the target language, since their students are not obliged to do so either.

### 2.2 The Audiolingual Method

The audiolingual method is a combination of structural linguistic theory, contrastive analysis, aural-oral procedures, and behaviorist psychology. It claimed to have

transformed language teaching from an art to a science, which would enable the learners to achieve mastery of a foreign language effectively. In audio lingualism, the teachers' role is central and active, which is a teacher-dominated method. The teachers model the target language, control the direction and place of learning, and monitor and correct the learners' performance, while the learners are viewed as organisms that can be directed by skilled training techniques to produce correct response. Yet although in this teaching method the relationship between the teachers and the learners is still a kind of teacher-centered, i.e. the teachers teach and the learners learn, after all the learners have the chance to speak. In a sense, it is a kind of progress compared with the teacher-student roles embodied in the grammar-translation method.

### 2.3 The Communicative Language Teaching Approach

The communicative approach in language teaching starts from a theory of language as communication. The goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes referred to as "communicative competence". Another linguistic view of communication favored in Communicative language teaching is Halliday's functional account of language use. "Linguistics...is concerned...with the description of speech acts of or texts, since only through the study of language in use are all the functions of language, and therefore all components of meaning, brought into focus" (Halliday, 1970, p.145). There are several roles of teachers in communicative language teaching. For example, it is their duty to facilitate the communication process between all participants in the classroom and between these participants and the various activities and texts; the teachers should act as an independent participant within the learning-teaching group; the teachers should work as organizers of resources and as resources themselves at the same time they should work as guides within the classroom procedures and activities. In communicative language teaching, the teachers can also serve as needs analysts, counselors, and group process managers. For the role of the learners, Breen and Candlin described it as follows: The role of the learners as negotiators -- between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning -- emerge from and interact with the role of joint negotiators within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities which the group undertakes (Breen & Candlin, 1980, p.110).

### 2.4 The Task-Based Approach

Task-based language teaching is an approach to the design of language course in which the point of departure is not an ordered list of linguistic items, but a collection of tasks. It draws on and reflects the experiential and humanistic traditions as well as reflecting the changing conceptions of language itself. In this kind of teaching approach, the teachers play as the selectors and sequencers of tasks and they should be responsible for preparing the learners for

tasks and raising their consciousness. For the learners, they should become the group participants, monitor of their activities, risk-taker and innovator in the process of language practice.

After considering the above several different kinds of English teaching methods, we could notice a gradual change of the relationship between the teachers and the learners, i.e. from the traditional teacher-centered relationship to the learner-centered relationship, which greatly reflected the influence of humanism. So from this trend and those theories mentioned in the former part, we know that today's English teachers should break away from the traditional teaching methods which required more on the teachers while gave the learners little chance to apply what they've learnt. They should learn from the newly-established methods such as the task-based method and establish a new type of classroom teaching structure in which the learners' principal role should be paid attention to. In addition, the language teachers should have a clear and new realization of their position and function in the process of language teaching and try their best to provide the learners with the learning experience, which is full of personal significance so that the learners could construct their own knowledge system.

The above introduced teaching methods are provided for the learners at all levels, i.e. they are general methods. But as we know, personal development at different levels has different characters, which is the same in the process of language learning. In different learning stages the learners show different ability and desire for certain knowledge. The learners who had studied English for at least nine years before going to colleges and universities have had some systematic grammatical knowledge, so what they need to do in colleges and universities' English class is to consolidate those knowledge and practice more of what they have learned, to make creative use of the language and to communicate with each other by using English. Thus the relationship between the teachers and the learners should gradually change from the teacher-centered relationship to a learner-centered relationship. The teachers should provide as much chance as possible for the learners to use the language so that the learners' initiative and learning interest could be stimulated and their communicative ability could be developed. This is the ultimate goal of language teaching in colleges and universities. Also the special condition of China, i.e., as a developing country in the world, places a more severe requirement on the practicality of the knowledge gained by the learners. That is to say that the learners can use what they have learned, including language, in employment after graduation. With China's entry to the WTO, communication and cooperation are increasing day by day in the world and Chinese interaction with the outside world becoming more and more frequent, it is far beyond the rapid developing need both domestically and internationally to only rely on cultivating talented

people majored in English. The fluent use of English in social communication has already become the main norm of measuring the non-English majors' working ability in talent market. Under such a situation, the teachers in colleges and universities should realize that changing the relationship between themselves and the learners will not only benefit the learners' language learning which will stimulate their language acquisition at last but will also benefit the implementation of the quality education which is necessary for the development of both the learners themselves and our country.

### **3. THE QUALITY EDUCATION AND ENGLISH TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

#### **3.1 The Quality Education**

In recent years, we have often heard it said that Chinese education should take responsibility for providing a strong moral power and intelligence support for the development of the economy and the overall progress of society. So the changing of educational ideas, renewing of the concept of education and achieving the quality education become very important tasks.

The quality education, which is the most widely used term in Chinese education, has been proposed for several decades. It was firstly proposed in the 1980s and used in the fundamental education as the counterpart of exam-oriented education. It refers to the process in which people's characters and self-cultivations are molded and high-quality talents are developed through the means of education. In fact, the quality education is such kind of a process: making use of the inheritance and the active influence of the environment to muster people's initiative and promote the internalization of human culture to personal psychology so as to further improve personal development. The basic contents of quality education in colleges and universities include morality quality education, science and culture quality education, physical and psychological quality education, creativity and ability quality education, among which "ability" refers to the learners' self-learning ability, practice ability, understanding ability, innovative ability, organizing ability, cooperative ability, etc.

#### **3.2 The Necessity of Carrying out Quality Education in Language-Teaching Class**

In order to improve the students' quality and develop the talents needed by the new century and knowledge economy, higher education should carry out the quality education. As we know higher education is composed of so many different subjects, among which the most common one that almost every undergraduate will learn is English. Since it covers such a wide number of students, and will be used so frequently in these undergraduates' future lives,

so it is necessary to carry out the quality education in the foreign language teaching class.

#### **3.2.1 About Exam**

Nowadays, English language education in colleges and universities is still at the great influence of various exams and we can still call it "exam-oriented education". As we know, except those who major in English, almost all other undergraduates have college English courses. The standard of checking whether they learn it well or not is whether or not they can pass the CET-4 and CET-6 exams, so most of the students learn English for the sole purpose of passing exams. And as a certain amount of college and university English teachers are greatly influenced by such exams, they spend much time helping the students prepare for them which hinder the development of students' various abilities.

#### **3.2.2 The Necessity of Humanistic and Cultural Education**

Since college English mainly focuses on the teaching of the students majored in science and engineering, therefore attaching importance to the humanistic studies in English is of great significance. While in the field of humanism, culture is one of the most important aspects. As a carrier of culture, language is closely related to it. Language is a part of culture so it is influenced by social customs and culture factors such as people's beliefs, value concepts, religions, conventions and so on. The inseparability of language and culture tells us that we cannot just teach language for its own sake but should integrate culture education into the process of language teaching. The special position of college English and the importance of the English language in the world determine that English language education should take responsibility of contrasting Chinese and Western culture. This is not only the need of developing the students' culture quality but is also beneficial to the students' understanding of social, cultural and living conditions, comprehending of the learning contents and will improve their communicative ability.

#### **3.2.3 The Necessity of Innovation Education**

As the soul of the quality education, innovation education should be carried out in all kinds of subjects. Since language is a complex system and has the designed features such as productivity, so the same expression can have different meanings and the same meaning can be expressed by different sentences, also the two sentences of unrelated meaning can occur together in a certain context to make sense. All of these depend on the innovative use of language. That is to say, the students can put together familiar elements in new or novel combinations. As long as the students can make innovative use of the language they can become more successful in real communication. Since the process of innovative education involves the students' asking innovative questions and challenging the authorities, so the students' problem-solving ability can also be developed in language teaching class.

### 3.2.4 The Necessity of Moral Quality Education

It is well-known that language is used for human communication. In the process of communication, we should not only know how to express our thoughts, but should also know how to express ourselves properly in different situations. Most of the time, we use language to establish good relationships with each other, so carrying out moral quality education is necessary. We should teach the students to respect other people and show politeness in communication, especially when they use the language to communicate with foreigners. How they behave and how they use the language could show the morality situation in our country. In addition, in language teaching class, the students' cooperative ability can be developed to the utmost because they have to cooperate with both their teachers and their fellow students if they want to learn the language well.

## 4. THE CONVERSION OF TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP AND QUALITY EDUCATION IN COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY ENGLISH CLASS

### 4.1 The Limitation of the Traditional Relationship

China is a country with a long history of cultivation. Under such circumstances, people's concept of value and behavior customs are greatly influenced by traditional culture, and so it is for the relationship between the teachers and the students. The traditional education which emphasizes the idea that the students are inferior to the teachers gives the teachers and the students unequal status in the classroom. The teaching contents and processes are all decided by the teachers while the students must obey unconditionally without participation.

Under the influence of Confucianism, the relationship between the teachers and the students is always regarded as the relationship between the parents and the children. As children we must listen to whatever our parents say and do everything according to their orders. So the students can only accept what the teachers teach them and cannot challenge their authority. The teachers monopolize the knowledge. Just as a famous educator in former Czechoslovakia said that the mouth of the teacher is a fountainhead from which the stream of knowledge flows out. (YANG, 2003, p.84) Under such circumstances, the teachers will inevitably become the core the teaching process, and the relationship between the teachers and the students can only be the kind of subject and object. The teachers only consider the students as the receivers not the masters of the knowledge, thus the students are in a passive condition from the very beginning to the end and lack the initiative. Such kind of relationship makes the teachers become sacred. Therefore in the whole teaching process, the students often give up their own doubts and

follow the teachers' opinions. Moreover, due to the fact that such a style of education overemphasizes the students' subordinate positions, the students' independent thinking and creativities are restrained and their individualities cannot be fully developed. The students can only behave according to certain discipline which causes the vanishing of their creative spirit.

### 4.2 The Conversion of the Relationship in English Teaching Class

From the several representative language teaching methods introduced above, we can easily see that the relationship between the teachers and the students has changed a lot in general. The teachers are gradually changed from the authorities to the organizers, guides, counselors. Yet, these are the general changes of the teacher-student relationship, this may not be completely suitable for the special conditions of language teaching in our country. Then what kind of new relationship is suitable for the learners in our country in the process of college and university English learning? Under the instruction of the above theories and the specific condition in China, I divide the two-year college and university English course into three stages (the first stage is the first semester, the second stage includes the second and the third semester, and the third stage is the last semester) and proposed the following new relationship:

#### 4.2.1 The Teachers as the Initiators, the Students as the Successors

In the first stage, since the students have just finished their Senior High School education, which mainly focused on the teachers' teaching of grammar points, most of them do not have the ability of initiating learning activities. Thus, in this stage, the teachers should play as the initiators of the teaching and learning activities, i.e. they tell the students what they should do and how they can successfully carry out the tasks. For example, when they learn a text, the teachers should teach the students the new vocabulary and grammar points in it and then ask the students questions about the text as well as help and lead them to answer these questions. Therefore the students just act as the successors of the activities initiated by the teachers in the process of teaching and learning. The task for them in this stage is mainly to master the basic knowledge, which is the necessary part of their creative use of the language.

#### 4.2.2 The Teachers as the Semi-Initiators, the Students as the Semi-Initiators

In the second stage, since the students had learned the basic language knowledge for a whole semester and their ability has developed to a certain degree, so they can initiate some kind of learning activities by themselves. For instance, they can establish some kind of associations with the words they've learnt before without the teachers' explanations, they can make up some dialogues by themselves based on their daily lives.

But in this stage, we can only call them semi-initiators because there are still some learning and teaching activities that they cannot carry out by themselves, it is still necessary for the teachers to initiate the rest of the activities. For example, the teachers still need to explain the complex grammar points in detail and they need to initiate the questions about the text to help the students master the main points of it, but now the students can answer the questions without guiding from the teachers. And in this stage, the teachers should decide on different objectives and teaching methods according to different levels of the students so that each of the students could get development. In addition, the teachers should design some authentic classroom tasks which have something to do with the subject of the text to gradually develop the students' language using ability. In short, entering this stage, the students can make use of some language knowledge they've learnt before to deal with certain problems and initiate some activities.

#### **4.2.3 The Teachers as the Time-to-Time Helpers and the Students as the Complete Initiators**

In this stage, after three semesters' learning and practicing, the students' language knowledge has reached a certain high level and they have learnt enough from the teachers to know how to initiate classroom activities. Needless to say the vocabulary learning, the students have mastered enough grammatical knowledge as well as the ways of analyzing a text. That is to say, they have accumulated enough basic knowledge to deal with many kinds of language problems: they can ask questions about the text and get the main points of the text through these questions; they can initiate such activities as discussion, making up more complex dialogues associated with their daily lives through searching for the materials on their own. In this stage, the teachers mainly play the role of time-to-time helpers when the students meet certain difficulties, e.g. when they are unsure how to express themselves by using a more appropriate expression or when the progress of their activities cannot be carried out normally. Besides the contents of the textbooks, the teachers should provide the students with more comprehensible language materials from Internet, newspaper, etc. which the students could analyze by themselves and from which they could get more useful and practical information. The teachers also become the participants in the activities initiated by the students. Thus the students' language ability in practice could be totally developed and they can make creative use of the language they've learnt before to solve the new tasks.

In short, the purpose of this kind of new relationship between the teachers and the students is to help the students become the host of the English class step by step on the basis of a good mastering of the basic language knowledge. This would be a useful and practical way for Chinese students.

### **4.3 The New Relationship and Quality Education**

#### **4.3.1 The New Relationship Can Promote Students' Creativity**

Creativity is the core of the quality education. In the new type of relationship, the teachers gradually become time-to-time helpers and stimulators for the students and they are willing to listen to the students' special opinions and discuss with the students if they have different ideas on certain problems. This kind of relationship, which is divided into three stages, is especially useful for the students' creative development because people's creativity also develops step by step.

#### **4.3.2 The New Relationship Can Develop Students' Practical Ability as well as Problem-Solving Ability**

Another distinctive feature of the quality education is that the students' practical ability as well as problem analyzing and solving abilities are greatly developed. In the new type of relationship, the teachers will create more chance for the students to use the language and they will create certain situations which are full of problems waiting to be solved by the students. In this process the teachers will act as the necessary helpers and the students gradually become the initiators, as I've explained.

#### **4.3.3 The New Relationship Can Develop Students' Cultural and Moral Ability**

The purpose of the quality education is to develop the students abilities in various areas including cultural and moral ability. It is well-known that language is the carrier of culture, so we can carry out the culture quality education in English teaching class. In English class, the students should learn about the different cultures of different countries and compare them, they should construct their own understanding towards these different cultures. And they need to exchange their ideas with the teachers. This new kind of relationship can achieve this purpose. The teachers could firstly introduce the culture of different countries or assign certain tasks to let the students find the different cultures themselves through various media such as the Internet, newspapers, and magazines which can also develop the students' practicality, and then compare these cultures together with the students to achieve the final goal of helping the students have a clear understanding of each different culture and have a successful communication as well as learn the beneficial parts of each culture. Another goal of the quality education is to develop the students' moral quality. In the new type of relationship, the teachers will give more chance to the students to use the language for communication and they will create many tasks which require the cooperation of the students to complete. In these kinds of activities, each student should take responsibility which is the core of moral quality and the students would learn how to behave properly to achieve successful communication. Also in

the English class, under this new relationship, the teachers could instruct the students how to establish harmonious relationship with other people by introducing the deeds of famous people in foreign countries which seldom happens in traditional education and they themselves could also set up good examples for the students.

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## CONCLUSION

As long as the traditional relationship between the teachers and the students changes into the new type, and the teachers are conscious of the importance of carrying out the quality education in colleges and universities, the language teaching class could become a place for the quality education. Under this kind of situation, it is possible for the students to become the fully-developed talents required by the new century and the knowledge economy.

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