

A Review of Studies on Teachers' Roles and Their Limitations in PBL Presentation Context

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Abstract—At all levels of learning and teaching, it is known that teachers play important roles. A teacher's role may be determined and studied from the functions he performs in different activities. These roles are often stereotyped but under the problem-based learning mode, they are flexible and deserve new studies since the transformation of the teaching and learning model entails a fundamental change of teacher role. As numerous research has been done on teachers' roles, this paper intends to carry out a literature review of these studies and sort out the possible limitations in problem-based learning environment.

Key words-teacher roles; limitations; PBL; presentation;

I. INTRODUCTION

In China, as for what is meant by teacher's roles, numerous definitions have been offered. Among them, Gu Mingyuan maintains that they refer to the actions expected from teachers that suit their social position or status [1]. This definition has two senses: one is teachers' professional behaviors; the other is their role expectations. Leng Yu points out that teacher's role is an individual's position and status in a social group [2]. It contains social expectations of the behavioral pattern that a teacher presents. Educators like Lu Jie and Wang Fengxian have done a much deeper research on the concept. Their perceptions fall into three [3]. The first regards teacher's roles as specific behaviors teachers have in a working environment such as a classroom. In this sense, they believe that teacher's behaviors which are observable and objective may affect students' or others' behaviors. Their second perception is that teacher's roles are expectations of a teacher. These expectations can be the ones held by teachers themselves and can also be the ones towards them from students, parents, school administrators or other social members. This is because teachers are intellectuals, thus they tend to think rationally and are ready to live up to the external expectations through constant improvement. The third claims that teacher's roles refer to a teacher's social status,

i.e. the position that is assigned by the society. This perception focuses on teachers' static feature and is concerned with teachers' professional identity and social status.

In our view, teacher's roles refer to the functions teachers perform in pedagogical context because teacher's roles are not fixed, but dynamic in different circumstances.

II. STUDIES OUTSIDE OF CHINA

In the west, since the 1970s, some theoretical schools have made in-depth explorations of teacher's roles. They include constructivism, humanism, pragmatism, and critical pedagogy which have examined teacher's roles from different dimensions and have greatly pushed the development of studies on teacher's roles.

Constructivism uses Piaget's psychological theory to analyze teachers' development. It takes learners' intellectual activities as the focus of teaching and regards students and teachers as explorers and constructors who construct their own knowledge. According to constructivism, teachers are not only prompters and cooperators in students' learning, but also act as explorers. Teachers should explore methods, help students to solve learning problems, create favorable learning environment, encourage students to raise questions, and make theoretical assumptions. In the process, teachers should be able to construct activities. Besides, teachers are also theory constructors who are devoted to the development of learners' intelligence and comprehension levels. In constructivist view, teachers construct new knowledge when dealing with the outside world and hence acquire continuous professional development [4].

Humanistic theoreticians have studied teacher's roles since 1950s. Carl Rogers, the most outstanding representative of humanism, points out that teachers can only serve as facilitators in students' learning. As facilitators, teachers should help students make clear what they should learn, arrange appropriate learning activities, provide materials for students, encourage learners to find

their own value as well as build and sustain a proper psychological atmosphere that can stimulate learning. Teachers can successfully play the role of a facilitator by doing the above jobs well. Comes, another famous representative of humanism, claims that a teacher's role is similar to the role of an artist because good teachers don't follow fixed rules but have their own characteristic ways of teaching. He also believes that teachers are artists and their art of teaching is tacit knowledge that won't be directly transmitted to others. In all, according to humanism, education should prompt a comprehensive development of students' cognition and emotion [4].

Dewey's pragmatism has also greatly influenced researchers who study teacher's roles. Among them, Joseph Schwab and Donald Schon are most influential. Unlike the previous researchers who focused on technical problems of teaching steps or class management skills, they explore such problems as the nature of teaching, the teaching control, difficulties in teaching practice and the ways to solve them. According to pragmatism, teachers are also learners who learn and form understandable knowledge from personal practice. What's more, pragmatists put forward a new understanding of teacher's role, i.e. reflective practitioner. That is, teachers should always reflect on themselves and on their work to perfect teaching and improve themselves. Schon proposes that reflective teaching practice should be included in teacher training programs to train teachers to be professional practitioners [5] [4].

Critical pedagogy makes surveys of educational phenomenon from social perspective. Britzman, Lather and Smyth are representatives in this area. Unlike previous micro theories, critical pedagogy is a macro theory which can be divided into three schools. The first school advocates "deschooling movement" and regards teachers as members of state bureaucracy and technical staff of teaching. The second school is concerned with the theory of new Marxism that is related with social structural functionalism. Scholars of this school hold that teachers belong to middle class or petty-bourgeoisie and they play an important role in monitoring, managing, and disciplining people who will provide serve to capital production in future. And the third school suggests that teachers' roles are to help change people's working environment [4]. Although different schools hold different views, they all agree that teachers play a key role in educational reform and in order to take the role of positive reformers, teachers should rethink their roles in education and work to realize equity and justice. In a word, it is necessary to analyze and think under a wide social and cultural background to better understand teacher's roles [6].

At present, there are lots of well-known books on teacher's roles [7]-[9]. Although opinions and studies are numerous and vary widely, four categories of teacher's roles can be generalized: (1) social roles, which mean that teachers are guardians of extant system of education and transmitters of culture; (2) school roles, of performing the functions of managers and decision-makers of school

affairs; (3) teaching roles in classroom, which include multiple roles that teachers should play such as facilitators, stimulators, leaders and so on; (4) self-professional roles, which contain self-career identity, self-role reshaping, and professional development that is realized during the process of becoming reflective practitioners [4].

Specifically, students' presentation has the following features:

(1) Students' presentation is student-centered because it should be done by students themselves. It is not only a teaching activity to teachers, but also a learning activity to students.

(2) Students' presentation is task-based. During the process, teachers set several tasks for students to finish while students should accomplish these tasks according to some certain rules.

(3) Students' presentation involves a series of actions such as collecting information, studying on project, forming results, making PPT, etc.

(4) Students' presentation is an interactive activity. Presenters deliver their ideas to audience while audience discuss, evaluate and give feedback to presenters.

III. STUDIES IN CHINA

Studies on teacher's roles in China involve a wide range of areas and can be roughly divided into three categories.

The first category includes research on the connotations of teacher's roles, specifically conceptions and definitions of teacher's roles and functions of different teacher's roles. As mentioned earlier, though many scholars define teacher's roles from different angles, Gu Mingyuan's definition is considered to be most authoritative while Lu Jie and Wang Fengxian's explanations of teacher's roles are elaborate and comprehensive [1] [3]. In teaching, teachers do play different roles and hence they have different functions accordingly. A teacher can act as a director, a guide, a consultant, etc. to organize and manage a class, to introduce learning tasks and lead activities, to facilitate learning process and implement instructions, to establish and control the atmosphere in class and so forth [10]. In all, various definitions and functions highlight the fact that teachers are important in teaching.

The second aspect involves research on the change of teacher's roles from different perspectives. It covers study in the Internet era [11], which claims that teachers should transform from directors, imparters, executors and managers to designers of future life, constructors of knowledge system, researchers of teaching and artists of interpersonal relationships; studies from the lifelong learning perspective points out that teachers should be advisers and consultants of students' future development, guides and facilitators of students' learning, researchers of education and a new type

of socialites [12]; studies based on the multiple intelligence theory claim that teacher's roles should turn from an imparter and an explainer to a director, from an executor to a participant, from a ruler to a partner; and study based on education curriculum reform proposes that teachers should play the roles of cooperators of collecting education resources, researchers of improving teaching quality and inheritors of advanced culture [13]. In all, these studies all agree that teacher's roles should vary according to the changes of times and society.

The third aspect consists of the researches on the conflicts of teacher's roles. Specifically speaking, they are studies on representations of conflicts, reasons for conflicts, and measures to eliminate conflicts of teacher's roles. It is well-known that a teacher plays a complex of various roles and because of this, it is inevitable that conflicts would appear and are shown through psychological inertness, reverse psychology and wait-and-see psychology [14]. The conflicts of teacher's roles are caused by two main reasons: one is different role expectations and the other is the contradiction between teacher's subjective motive and role expectations from objective system. Long-term and intense conflicts may harm teacher's working enthusiasm and reduce teacher's efficiency in teaching. Therefore, some measures are put forward to buffer the conflicts. For example, society should create loose environment for teachers; schools should reduce the burdens of teacher's roles; and teachers should also strengthen the adaptable ability of their roles [15].

To sum up, although there are a lot of researches on student's class presentation and on teacher's roles respectively, studies that combine these two topics are hardly found. In order to make up this shortage, the research analyzes the expectation differences of teachers' roles between students and teachers in English postgraduates' class presentations.

IV. LIMITATIONS IN PBL PRESENTATION CONTEXT

From the above literature review, it's obvious that teacher's roles have been much investigated and discussed by scholars in and outside of China. However, the authors find that there might be some limitations in the current research about teacher's roles.

First, most of the studies we have reviewed are theoretical rather than empirical. They talk about the roles teachers are supposed to play, either from the perspective of education, society, or from the perspective of constructivism, humanism, pragmatism, and critical pedagogy. We have stated earlier in this article that teacher's roles are functions teachers perform in coping with their tasks. Thus it would be better grounded for these functions to be observed, explored, and analyzed empirically, with first-hand data collected from teachers, students, parents, and administrators, though meditations are important as preliminary steps for any empirical studies.

Second, since teacher's roles are dynamic rather than fixed, descriptive studies are needed. Under different

theoretical frameworks such as education, constructivism, humanism, pragmatism, and critical pedagogy, it seems that teachers are stereotyped with a set of fixed responsibilities to fulfill. A possible limitation with this prescriptive style of studies is that the results may sound convincing and reasonable but they do not fit with the profession we are doing or we are familiar with which turns out to be just the opposite. We believe that teachers play different roles when facing with different students and tasks.

Third, most of the current research on teacher's roles seem to have been done outside of context rather than in context. We know that whatever role a teacher plays, it should and must correspond with those circumstances under which he works. It is quite normal for teachers of all levels to meet the requirements set by administrative office and needs from students or sometimes from parents and society. So what we often hear is how teachers manage to do a good job through adjusting to a specific situation. Teaching is tangible and real, so it would be far better and convincing for studies on teacher's roles to be made in an actual context.

We believe that the transformation of the teaching and learning mode entails a fundamental change of teacher's roles. In this sense, the above limitations are obvious in the current problem-based learning (PBL) presentation context. Nowadays, student-centered class presentation has been widely used in China, particularly among postgraduates by many teachers to improve postgraduates' autonomous learning ability and language competences. It is a research-based in-class activity in which students present their views, supportive materials or research results on a given topic. This activity may encourage students to learn to solve problems on their own.

Owing to its PBL nature, teachers are expected to play multiple roles in the process. These roles can be viewed from two aspects. On one hand, teachers have had diversified expectations of their own roles since students are assigned to the activity; on the other hand, students hold various expectations of roles from their teachers such as guiding, monitoring, and, helping them, or making comments and giving suggestions [16] [17]. But in the actual practice, we have noticed that teachers have different perceptions of their roles in this activity. For example, some teachers may let students do everything on their own, assigning themselves to the role of a listener while some may act as commentators at the end of students' presentation [18].

Whatever roles and however they are played may greatly affect the learning results. As a consequence, some differences or gaps may exist between students' expectations to their teachers and teachers' expectations to themselves with regard to the roles teachers play.

To better carry out this mode of teaching and learning, it is of paramount importance to survey both teachers' expectations and students' expectations of teachers' roles, using instruments like interview, questionnaire, class observation, etc. Furthermore, once the differences or gaps

between the two parties about teacher's roles are found and identified, measures can be taken to narrow them down to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of teachers' roles in this activity.

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Dr. Xiaofang Gao earned her Bachelor degree and MA degree in English language and literature from Central China Normal University (CCNU), P. R. China, MEd. degree in Education from University of Newcastle upon-Tyne, U.K., and PhD. degree in Linguistics from Communication University of China. Currently she is a professor at CCNU (English Department, School of Foreign Languages). Her research interest includes ELT, Pragmatics, and Discourse Analysis.

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