

# Analysis of the Role of Chinese English Teachers in Higher Education Institutions

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## Abstract

The paper makes use of role theory in sociology and competing value framework in management to conduct an objective analysis of the role of current Chinese English teachers in universities and colleges, aiming to enhance their insight as well as thinking and action capabilities so as to eventually increase teaching efficiency. By analysis, the writers find that the so-called role transformation heatedly discussed by many Chinese researchers and teachers is unrealistic in China for the time being. Instead of transforming their roles, it is better for Chinese college English teachers to wisely distribute their role resources to adapt to the implementation of the pilot version of Requirements for College English Teaching promulgated on January 30, 2004. Accordingly, the writers assert that by developing the ability of rightly distributing their role resources and all-round consideration of related factors as well as cultivating the dialectical way of thinking, Chinese English teachers in universities and colleges may increase their teaching efficiency and smoothly implement the teaching reform recently implemented in China.

## Key words

Role, role theory, competing value framework, role playing, ascribed role, achieved role, conscious role, unconscious role, regulated role, open role, role conflict and role imbalance.

## **Introduction**

Since the promulgation of the pilot version of the Requirements for College English Teaching by the working office of the Ministry of Education, PRC in January 30, 2004, many Chinese researchers and teachers in higher education institutions have started to discuss about the role transformation of English teachers in China. Most of them think that due to changes of college English teaching in terms of curriculum goals, modern technologies (particularly IT technology) and market demand, to name just a few, college English teachers should transform their roles from being grammar and structure instructors to being trainers, organizers, promoters, learners and researchers. However, is the idea of role transformation feasible and realistic? Is there any other solution emerging in the process of the teaching reform being undergone in China? The writers of this paper expect to find answers for these questions with the goal of helping Chinese English teachers to enhance self-understanding and performance complexity so as to smoothly implement the teaching reform.

## **Background**

According to Biddle (1986), role theories may be classified into five distinctive groups: functional role theory; symbolic interaction role theory; structural role theory; organizational role theory; and cognitive role theory. Symbolic interaction role theory began with Mead (1934) and was further improved by Sarbin (1954). Sarbin asserted that social roles have an existence independent of the individual. However, they are closely linked to the particular way in which each individual performs it. More recent contributors of symbolic interacting role theory include Turner. Turner (1974) examined role learning, the role and the person as well as the effect

of others' responses on interpretation of role behavior. He emphasized role construction and argued that the role construction of a person was intimately associated with his/her role recognition and role playing capability. In structural role theory, attention is "focused on 'social structures,' conceived as stable organizations of sets of persons (called 'social positions' or 'statuses') who share the same patterned behaviors ('roles') that are directed towards other sets of persons in the structure" (Biddle 1986). Structural role theory developed mainly through Ralph Linton (1936) and Talcott Parsons and E. A. Shils (1951) who focused on societies as functional units and emphasized the decisive influence of social organization on the role of an individual via role expectation.

When analyzing the role of a specific group of persons, neither simply emphasizing impact of social organization, nor focusing on personal role construction will be quite adequate. Only by integrating aspects from both symbolic interaction and structural role theories, can the role analysis be more comprehensive and convincing.

Another theory, generally called competing value framework, will also be referred to in this paper, as the writer expects to employ the concepts and ideas of this framework to help English teachers to enhance their behavior complexity and better handle their complicated roles.

Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983) put forward the competing value framework on the basis of a series of empirical studies on the notion of organizational effectiveness in the 1980s. As a result of these, they discovered two dimensions of effectiveness. The first dimension is related to organizational focus, from an internal emphasis on people in the organization to an exter-

nal focus on the organization itself. The second dimension represents the contrast between stability and control and between flexibility and change. These two dimensions form four quadrants: Open System model; Human Relations model; Internal Process model; and Rational Goal model. The Open System model puts emphasis on adaptability, readiness, growth, resource acquisition and external support; these processes bring innovation and creativity. The Human Relations model emphasizes cooperation among members within a common social system. The Internal Process model focuses on measurement, documentation and information management, which brings stability and control. The Rational Goal model emphasizes rational action; it assumes that planning and goal setting results in productivity and efficiency.

The Competing Values Framework got its name because the criteria within the four quadrants seem to carry conflicting messages: An effective organization should be adaptable and flexible. However, meanwhile, it should also be stable and controlled.

Quinn (2002) thinks that in order to increase his/her managing effectiveness, a leader with “highly cognitive complexity” must face challenges from three aspects: first, he/she should realize the value and weak points of the above-mentioned four models; second, he/she should have the capability to employ and obtain each model; third, he/she should have the capability to make use of the four models in a dynamic way. According to Quinn, only by successfully meeting these three kinds of challenges, can a leader increase their behavior complexity. Behavior complexity is based on cognitive complexity, which is the ability to reflect on the employment of different models. It can also be defined as the capability of wisely integrat-

ing and handling multiple roles and even conflicting roles. Such a mode of thinking is not only essential to leaders of organizations, but also to teachers whose roles are becoming more and more complicated and full of conflicting features.

### **Role theory, competing value framework and the role of current Chinese English teachers in universities and colleges**

The above section is intended to provide a general background and context in which to view the usefulness of role theory and the competing value framework in the analysis of the role of current Chinese English teachers in higher education institutions. The following section goes on to examine potentially fruitful avenues of research using these constructs.

#### **I. Role classification of Chinese English teachers in higher education institutions**

Judging from the way in which college English teachers in China acquired their positions, it can be seen that the role of Chinese English teachers in universities and colleges is both ascribed and achieved. Most college English teachers in China were excellent students who graduated from teachers' colleges or foreign language universities. They studied hard before graduation and excelled in scores. Accordingly, after graduation, they are invited to continue at their schools to become teachers, or are assigned to other universities to act as English teachers. Thus, being a college English teacher is the result of hard work and sound academic performance in the mother universities, which sometimes is consistent with their expectations (achieved role), and sometimes is just the result of obedience to the order of their schools (ascribed role).

As a result of the above-mentioned teacher selection method adopted in China, it can be seen that due to lack of professional training, some Chinese college English teachers have no clear understanding about their roles and role expectations as teachers, even though they are excellent English majors. In other words, many newly hired college English teachers in China are just playing non-conscious roles. They have little knowledge about what a qualified college English teachers should be.

Besides, the role of college English teachers in China is largely regulated and limitedly open. Teachers have no say in terms of selection of textbooks, teaching goals or curriculum design. Though they may adjust their teaching methodology and classroom activities to some extent, they all have to achieve one common goal, which is to help their students to pass English Proficiency Test IV after two years' English study in universities.

## **II. The increasingly complicated role set of Chinese English teachers in higher education institutions**

The role set of college English teachers in China is getting to be more and more complicated because:

1. Change of curriculum goals. Before the promulgation of the pilot version of the Requirements for College English Teaching by the working office of the Ministry of Education, PRC in January 30, 2004, college English teachers carried out their teaching tasks in accordance with the requirements of the College English Teaching Curriculum implemented since 1999. The document pointed out that the goal of English teaching for non-English major students was to help students to have relatively strong reading ability and a certain level of listening, speaking, writing and translat-

ing abilities (according to College English Teaching Curriculum published in 1999). In order to achieve this goal, college English teachers often acted as grammar, sentence structure and vocabulary instructors, with the purpose of assisting their students to increase their reading capabilities. As a change, sometimes, college English teachers organized some communicative activities in their classroom. However, this was very rare. After 2004, when the pilot version of the Requirements for College English Teaching was promulgated, things changed dramatically. The pilot version clearly defines that the teaching goal of current English teaching in universities in China is to develop the comprehensive application capabilities of students in order to allow them to effectively communicate in English in both oral and written forms in their future working and social environment. Meanwhile, it also requires college English teachers to help their students enhance self-regulated learning capabilities and comprehensive skills so as to adapt to the needs of economic development and international exchange in China. It can be seen that among the five skills of foreign language learning, namely listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, the new curriculum gives priority to listening and speaking. This has made college English teachers spend a certain amount of classroom time on the development of two kinds of skills in their students. It is no longer enough for them to play the role of grammar, sentence structure and vocabulary instructors. They also have to act as listening and speaking trainers. To become a successful trainer of speaking skills, they should also at least act as competent communicative activity organizers in the classroom.

2. Development of technologies. At least five years ago, it was not uncommon in China to see a college English teacher walk across campus to the classroom carrying a cassette recorder. However, today, telecommu-

nications and IT technologies have changed the whole landscape of English teaching activities in China. Nowadays, in some of the metropolitan cities, English teachers from different universities and colleges may make use of computer and Internet technologies to collaborate with each other on the study of the same text with students of the same age segment. They may even work together across countries, schools and disciplines to co-develop teaching software. In this sense, they have become cooperative teaching partners and teaching software developers, instead of simply being individual teachers in the traditional way. However, as many experts have pointed out, the computer can never become an independent instructor; it is the teacher's responsibility to integrate technology with language learning for effectively organizing classroom activities. Thus, English teachers are also acting as good organizers. Besides, in the internet age, it is easy for students to get information from external sources. Thus, English teachers are no longer knowledge oracles. Compared with traditional teachers, they are shouldering more responsibilities of being Internet navigators and language learning promoters. In addition, new technologies bring about varied challenges. In order to keep abreast of the times, English teachers should have life-long learning awareness and be good learners of both language and technology.

3. Call from the market. Traditionally, education in universities was seriously disconnected from market needs, which led to difficulties in getting jobs after graduation. According to a related official department of China's Ministry of Education, it is predicted that over one million college or universities graduates will not be able to find work in 2007. This has forced people to reconsider education in universities and colleges. As a subset of college education, English teaching is no exception. The pilot



version of College English Teaching requires that college English teachers should take the needs of students and the market into full consideration to actively transform from “pursuing for development and knowledge dispersing” to “being sensitive and responsive to market demand”. Accordingly, before delivering English teaching, they should spend much time and energy on conducting market surveys to find out the real needs of the market so as to offer targeted and practical learning experiences to their students. That is to say, prior to being good teachers, they should be good market researchers and monitors.

To sum up, at present Chinese English teachers in higher education institution are handling more roles than traditional teachers. Besides being simply grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure instructors, they are also listening and speaking trainers, communicative activity organizers, cooperative teaching partners, teaching software developers, Internet navigators, language learning promoters and life-long learners as well as market researchers and monitors.

### **III. Role transformation is unrealistic in China for the time being**

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the increasingly complicated role set of Chinese English teachers has become a reality recognized by all. Facing such varied role resources, is it possible for current English teachers in China simply to transform from some roles to others? The answer is “no” because of the following reasons:

1. The nature of current college English teaching in China remains unchanged, which is still largely examination oriented. Though different from the English Teaching Curriculum published in 1999, which specified

English Proficiency Test IV and VI as the only way of evaluation, the pilot version of the Requirements for College English Teaching adopts a combined evaluation system, which integrates summative evaluation with formative evaluation. In a routine news conference held by the Ministry of Education of PRC in June 26, 2006, the spokesman clearly pointed out that English Proficiency Tests IV and VI would not be cancelled and would still be regarded as the key method of evaluation. This means that college English teachers will still spend most of their time on assisting their students to pass examinations, which will still be the focus of English teaching in China. Any effort, old or new, which is made by college English teachers, should help serve this purpose.

2. It is the common knowledge that even today, grammar explanation still plays an important role in helping students to use the target language accurately and correctly.

3. College English teachers need time to enrich their knowledge base. As to what was mentioned in Item I of this section, most Chinese English teachers in higher education institutions are excellent graduate students majoring in English. Their knowledge of IT technology is quite limited. Without necessary training, it is impossible for them to successfully handle roles associated with IT or telecommunications technologies within a short period of time.

4. History tells us that prior to any transformation, a period of intellectual and material preparation is necessary. For example, in teaching methodology there was a gap of some 20 years between the Audio-lingual and Communicative methods, that is, roughly from the publication of

Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* (1957) to the arrival of Wilkins' *Notional Syllabuses* (1976). Chomsky had demonstrated that the structural theories of language "were incapable of accounting for the fundamental characteristic of language — the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences" (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p.64). He thereby undercut the then prevalent Audio-lingual Method, which had disregarded such ideas in favour of habit-controlled language learning. For some years there was no adequate replacement from Audio-lingual teaching, and teachers floundered around until Dell Hymes (1972) began to refocus on the social aspects of language, especially on communication.

By the early 1980s, leaders in the language-teaching profession had begun working on this fresh approach, and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged as the new paradigm. Amongst other things, teachers' and learners' roles were adjusted, the former being seen as "catalyst, consultant, guide, and model for learning," and the latter as having responsibility for their own learning, planning their own learning, monitoring their own progress, and so forth (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p.23). This restructuring of language teaching only reached completion in the 1990s, though in many EFL contexts it still remains elusive and even impractical. In short, the time lag between the origins of an idea and its full incorporation into the language-teaching profession is therefore far slower and longer than might be hoped.

#### **IV. Role imbalance experienced by Chinese English teachers in colleges**

Due to reasons mentioned in Item II of this section, the role set of Chinese English teachers in higher education institutions has become increasingly complicated. Since each role has its own set of regulations to

follow, usually, it is unavoidably common for teachers to lose sight of one thing when attending to another. Thus, role imbalance becomes the challenge faced by many English teachers in China for the time being, which mainly presents itself as follows:

1. Role overload. When preparing students for passing English Proficiency Test IV or VI, Chinese English teachers in universities and colleges have to help students increase their abilities of using the target language. Meanwhile, they also have to conduct teaching research and learn new technologies while keeping alert to changes of the market demands. All of these have often made them feel overloaded.

2. Role conflict. The role conflict experienced by Chinese English teachers in higher education institutions is mainly caused by two factors: one is role strain, which is the result of the fact that college English teachers now have to handle multiple roles simultaneously, leading to tension in terms of both time and energy distribution; the other is that in the role set of college English teachers, some roles conflict with others in terms of norms or expectations. For example, university administration often expects their teachers to increase the examination pass rate. However, students expect their teachers to help them increase their oral English in order to create a favorable impression during job interviews. Leaders of universities frequently require teachers to make use of newly purchased teaching equipment so as to show off during open-campus activities. However, teachers consider them unnecessary and distracting.

3. Role ambiguity. After the promulgation of the pilot version of the Requirements for College English Teaching, English teachers have had to

do a lot of unfamiliar work. For example, they have to spend time on designing teaching software, managing and updating school websites as well as analyzing market demands. These are all something brand new to them, which inevitably leads to role ambiguity.

Based on the above analysis, it can be seen that college English teachers are now handling multiple roles, some of which even conflict with each other and some of which are brand new. This often makes them feel uncomfortable and unsure of what to do. How to quickly get a good understanding of new roles and successfully deal with conflicting roles is the problem confronted by almost every college English teacher in China now.

#### **V. Managing competing values to handle conflicting roles of college English teachers**

Now that complicated role set and conflicting roles have become an inevitable reality faced by Chinese English teachers in higher education institutions, efforts should be made on how to manage them under complex environmental constraints in order to enhance teaching efficiency and action complexity.

Similar to what Quinn (2002) has found in research on the effectiveness of organizations, writers of this paper have also found two dimensions associated with the effectiveness of English teachers. The first dimension is related to English teachers' focus on student as well as school, government policy and market; the second dimension is related to the flexibility and stability of English teaching delivered by English teachers. The two dimensions form four quadrants, to which the writers have distributed roles of current English teachers based on the characteristics of each quadrant.

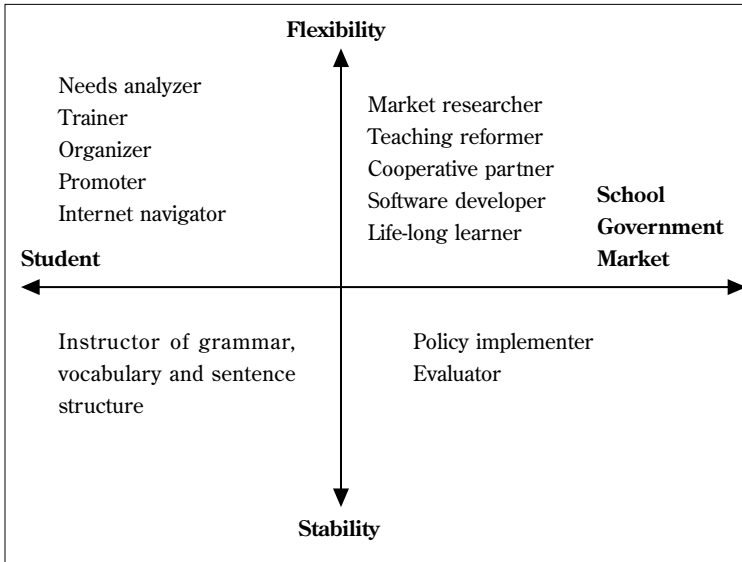


Figure 1. Conflicting roles played by college English teachers in China.

This is shown in *Figure 1*.

With regard to *Figure 1*, we would like to make the following explanations:

1. College English teachers in China are now dealing with more than the above- mentioned roles, because (a) due to the limited space, it is impossible to present all of the roles being played now by college English teachers; (b) college English teachers are working in a constantly changing environment. With the changing of factors associated with students, schools, government policies and markets, new roles may emerge. However, whatever the roles are, they may be placed into one of the four quadrants.

2. Roles in the diagram are not separate and static bricks. They work together and influence each other to form an organic whole, namely a unity, which is the college English teacher. Some roles within the unity may conflict with each other. Some may be mutually dependant.

3. As a college English teacher in China, his/her work demands an all-round consideration of factors associated with both the dimensions mentioned above in order to keep consistency and continuity of teaching and meanwhile remain open to reform all the time.

4. Since the time and energy of any college English teacher is limited, he or she should wisely distribute his/her role resources based on each time period and factor, such as teaching content, students' needs, requirements of schools and government policies, as well as market demands. In other words, he or she should decide the order of the roles in his/her role set based on the importance of each role in a particular period of time under a particular environment. This is just like what Chairman Mao Zedong, the founder of People's Republic of China, has mentioned in his article named *Several Issues Associated with Leading Methodology*, which said that leaders should rightly decide on the focus and priority of the work in a certain period based on an overall consideration of all historical and environmental factors in a particular geographical district. What's more, they should stick to the decision until the expected goal was achieved (Mao Zedong, 1943). Chairman Mao Zedong vividly compared this to the playing of a piano. He said that the playing of a piano required a joint action of all 10 fingers. However, if we press the keyboard with 10 fingers simultaneously, no good music could be produced. However, if we press it in accordance with rhythms, the sound would be quite different.

5. The above diagram reveals the contradictory nature of the role of current English teachers in China. Therefore, to be a qualified college English teacher in China, it is necessary to be equipped with a dialectical way of thinking. That is to say, teachers should realize that contradiction exists universally. Accordingly, it is wise to choose “Both A and B”, instead of “Either A or B”.

### **Conclusion**

Role theory and its related concepts help college English teachers in China better understand their roles and the contradictory nature of their role sets so as to stimulate them to strengthen role learning in the process of role construction. The competing value framework clearly reveals the status quo of the role set of college English teachers and accordingly encourages them to develop all-round consideration and a dialectical way of thinking. Hopefully, this will enhance behavior complexity and eventually increase teaching efficiency.

Still, there is lot of work to be done in terms of exploring deeply into the application of dialectical way of thinking in increasing college English teachers' performance complexity as well as how to make use of role construction theory to promote teaching effectiveness. Due to the limited space of this paper, the writer hopes to leave these points for future research. It is expected that this paper may provide some helpful suggestions and assistance to college English teachers in an age of constant development and change.

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