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Exploring the Teacher Role in English MA Class Presentations

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Introduction

Teachers are best known for their role of educating students that are placed in their care. Beyond that, teachers serve many other roles in the classroom. As Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) stated, if the classroom is a stage in a theater, and students are actors, the teacher would be many people in our theater: director, prompter, coach, scriptwriter, audience, and, above all, another actor. Teachers adjust their role according to their particular teaching situation. Sometimes it is even necessary to change between roles in one single activity. The present study will explore the teacher role in class presentations (CPs), a typical activity in the communicative classroom (Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 2011). The reason for selecting CPs as the setting is their increasing popularity in higher education. While there is a growing interest in examining university students' development of academic literacy through CPs (Morita & Kobayashi, 2008), few studies center on the teacher role. CPs as a typical activity in the communicative classroom requires teachers to play a more complex and flexible role rather than the traditional knowledge imparter. Thus, it is worthwhile for both teachers and students to understand and reflect on what roles teachers play and how they might help to guarantee meeting the learning outcomes.

Literature Review

The teacher role has long been a focus of research, with an abundance of definitions and opinions. Dating back to Piaget, the teachers' main function is to help construct knowledge with the role of a constructor. Teachers lead students to explore problems, form assumptions and seek solutions through constructing corresponding learning activities. Humanists take a different perspective, as they put priority in the value of human intelligence. To inspire, encourage and stimulate are the major missions for teachers, who are designated as facilitators. In addition, humanists also perceive teachers as artists, and the transmission of implicit knowledge is the highest religion of teaching. Dewey, along with other researchers of his school, encourages teachers to become professional practitioners by means of reflection, i.e., teachers themselves are learners, with "learning by teaching" being their motto. Of course, classroom management, lesson planning and problem-solving are also written on their list. Critical pedagogy makes surveys of educational phenomenon from social perspectives. Harmer (1983, 2000) argues that the

teacher role changes with the different functions which they perform in various educational settings. He claims a teacher acts as a controller, taking control of the whole class; an organizer, organizing the learning tasks, learning procedures and classroom activities; a prompter, encouraging students to actively participate in the class and offering suggestions when silence occurs; an assessor, correcting students' mistakes and inappropriate performance, or providing feedback for further learning, as a participant actively communicating with students; and a resource-provider, providing relevant materials. More concisely, Brown (1994) pinpoints five roles being more conducive to creating an interactive classroom and summarizes them as controller, director, manager, facilitator and resource. Livingston (2016) stresses the role of teacher education in educational change, noting that teacher educators have important responsibilities supporting and challenging the development of teachers for the future.

Aside from theoretical discussions, some studies have explored the teacher role in practical contexts. Becuwe et al. (2016) explore the teacher role as a facilitator in teacher design teams. Similarly, Noreen has (2009) also studied the role of the teacher in promoting learning in small groups. He uncovered multiple dimensions of the teacher role in fostering beneficial group dialogue, and claims teachers are expected to manipulate strategies and help promote students' elaboration of ideas. Though still taking group oral activity as the focus, Yang's (2010) case study of five Chinese ESL learners studying in a foreign academic setting investigates the negotiations and challenges experienced by these L2 learners through their engagement in an academic presentation in a regular content course. Though the literature is not scarce in CPs, few studies focus on the teacher role in CPs. With its growing fever as a typical activity of communicative language teaching, all factors involved in CP are worthy of empirical study. Furthermore, the English MA students who participate in the first round of interviews with this study all agree on CPs being the prior teaching activity in most of their content courses. While many ESL students perceived such oral activities positively as an opportunity for them to practice English, learn about the values promoted in English-medium universities, and refine their presentation skills (Ginkel et al., 2016; Zappa-Hollman, 2007), different views are voiced during the interview. Some students state that they are uncertain about how to prepare for this activity and wonder whether they could indeed develop their overall competence during the process. Others think that teachers do not play an adequate role during this activity, and thus neither teaching nor learning proves satisfying. Such different voices interest the researcher to want to explore what roles teachers actually play in this activity and what students expect of their teachers. Ten different teacher roles were selected based on the existing literature and interviews were held with participants of this study. These roles would be elaborated in relation to the three major stages of CPs, which include pre-presentation, while-presentation and post-presentation. Four research questions are posited:

1) What roles do teachers play in the three major stages of CPs?
2) What teacher roles do students expect their teachers to play?
3) Are there some discrepancies between the actual teacher role and students' expectation?
4) If discrepancies exist, what might be the possible causes?

Study Design

Participants

A total of 42 English MA students from five comprehensive Chinese universities in a major city of northern China were invited to participate in the study; 20 participants are in Grade 1 and the other 22 are in Grade 2. The researcher invited 15 participants (three from each of the five universities) to take part in the first-round of interviews for the purpose of discerning their general understanding of the teacher role

and their expectations of teachers during CPs. All 42 participants responded to the questionnaire, which explores their expectations of the teacher's role and teacher's actual performance. Follow-up interviews were also conducted with 10 participants, two from each of the five universities to further explore the underlying reasons for possible discrepancies.

Research Instruments

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed based on the teacher roles suggested by Harmer (1983), Brown (1994), Noreen (2009), and the first-round interviews with 15 participants were conducted. Two sections of the questionnaires were designed to help answer the research questions. One section explores students' expectations of the teacher role and the other investigates the teacher's actual performance. There are 18 items in each section detailing ten possible teacher roles in CPs. The questionnaire is presented in Chinese to avoid possible misunderstandings. Participants are asked to choose from one of the 5-point Likert scale response options.

Semi-structured interview

To help explain and verify the quantitative findings in the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' and teachers' perceptions about the teacher role. Two subjects from each of the five universities volunteered to participate in the interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Major Findings

At pre-stage, students collected materials, conducted research on the given topic or an issue they decided to present on and then wrote up a report with the aid of PPT. Table 1 shows students' expectations of the teacher role and their actual performance.

TABLE 1.
Expected Teacher Role and their Actual Performance at Pre-stage

	Organizer		Resource-provider		Consultant		Instructor	
	N	M	N	M	N	M	N	M
S' expectation	42	4.00	42	3.45	42	3.12	42	3.43
T' actual role	42	4.33	42	1.81	42	2.52	42	3.57

(S=student　　T=teacher　　N=number of participants　　M=mean)

We can find at this stage the "organizer" is the most expected role of the teacher among the students. This indicates that the teacher is expected to provide detailed directions on this activity and establish clear standards of evaluation on their performance. As S1 and S3 state in the interview, they want to know exactly what their task is and how they can prepare for it. "Resource-provider" is the second most commonly expressed role on the list, indicating that teachers are expected to provide participants with the necessary information and materials for the preparation of their CPs. In the interview, participants recall finding materials being time-consuming and of low-efficiency. Moreover, participants expect teachers to provide some instructions on the contents and design of the presentation, as S3 and S6 state, "imparting knowledge and training presentation skills are both important". As for "consultant", S4 says that when confronted with problems and confusion during the preparation, they expect teachers to offer the

necessary consultation and help to solve the problem.

The table also shows that the teacher's actual performance at this stage does not always correspond with students' expectations. "Organizer" has a mean of 4.33, which indicates that most students agree that their teachers do well in proposing detailed requirements and clarifying assessment. In the interview, five students mentioned their teachers always help them figure out how to prepare for a smooth presentation. The role of "instructor" is acknowledged as well, stating that most teachers provide instructions on the contents of the presentation and impart some learning methods combined with presentation skills. S2 states that teachers spend much time instructing them on how to conduct an effective presentation. The "Consultant" role, however, is not well recognized. In the interview, three students indicated that though they are in need of help from teachers, they are not ready to disturb their teachers, worrying that may take extra time and energy of their teachers. The least recognized role is "resource-provider". S1 and S6 mention that they really hope their teachers can provide authoritative and reliable materials for their presentation, while most teachers fail to do so. S4 believes that her teachers assume CPs are an autonomous activity to be managed by the students themselves.

At the while-stage, the presenter gives a presentation on the given topic. This could also be done in pairs or in groups. Normally CPs are organized with the aid of a PPT or other media. The following table shows students' expectations and teacher's actual performance at this stage.

TABLE 2
Expected Teacher Role and their Actual Performance at the While-stage

	Manager		Participant		Observer	
	N	M	N	M	N	M
S' expectation	42	3.05	42	3.74	42	3.76
T' actual role	42	3.57	42	2.07	42	4.02

The table shows students value the "observer" as much as the "participant" role for their teachers, indicating on the one hand that students consider themselves as the center of the class; on the other hand, they expect teachers to become involved in the activity. S6 says he enjoys a sense of achievement and prefers his teacher to be an observer. S2, however, points out that she expects guidance on organizing and performing. S4 states that teachers' participation in the presentation can arouse other students' interest and push them to fix their attention on the presenter. The role of the "observer" is indeed most often performed by teachers, meaning nearly all students view themselves as the center of class, having much freedom and independence to control the pace.

For the role of "manager", more than half of the students place value on this. In the interview, S3 states that sometimes he may fail to get the class to focus on his presentation, as he becomes nervous while standing on the stage and feels even worse when noticing that some audience members are not paying attention to him. Thus, he hopes the teacher can help get the students' attention. Indeed, most participants agree (mean of 3.57) that their teachers are acting as a dutiful manager in the classroom setting. This indicates that teachers are mindful of establishing and maintaining order among the audience members.

"Participant," though highly expected by students, seems to be the least recognized role. In the interview, three participants claim that teachers merely sit and observe their performance rather than participating in the activity or guiding them to think actively. S9 states that he wishes teachers could take part in the presentation and interact, keeping both the presenter and audience active.

At the post-stage, a discussion might be organized about the presented contents or the teacher might provide a critique of the CPs, covering the contents as well as how the presentation is performed, and provide feedback on possible improvements in future work. The audience may also ask questions to which the presenter responds. The following table shows what students expect out of their teachers and how the teachers actually perform.

TABLE 3
Expected Teacher Role and their Actual Performance at the Post-stage

	Assessor		Innovator		Instructor	
	N	M	N	M	N	M
S' expectation	42	4.05	42	4.17	42	3.10
T' actual role	42	4.40	42	2.02	42	3.40

The role of "innovator" is mostly expected with a mean of 4.17, which indicates a majority of participants expect teachers to help broaden their horizons and inspire them to think in a profound way. However, this role is surprisingly underplayed by teachers, which indicates teachers are not fulfilling the duty of inspiring students to think creatively and broaden their horizons. In the interview, most students claim they anticipate more guidance on developing critical thinking and cognitive skills, as such learning strategies are much more important than properly learning the content knowledge.

The role of "assessor" is also highly valued, as students would like to get feedback from teachers on their performance. For example, S2 states that after giving a presentation, she wants to receive feedback from teachers about the contents, her oral expression and presentation skills. This role is actually mostly played by teachers, with a mean of 4.02. S1 reckons teachers always offer them detailed feedback, involving the evaluation on the presentation performance and corrections of the presentation contents.

For the role of "instructor," four students in the interview agree that their teachers can guide them to reflect on their performance after giving the presentation, impart related knowledge on the topic of the presentation and instruct them with some useful skills to organize a successful class presentation. "Instructor" is the role performed second to "assessor," indicating teachers are offering necessary instruction to help students complete the learning task.

Discussion

The present data consistently show across the three stages of CP that students' expectations of their teacher roles and their actual performance do not always coincide with each other. Roles played by most teachers include "instructor" at the pre-stage and post-stage, organizer at the pre-stage, observer at the while-stage, and assessor in the post-stage, and indeed these roles are common in a range of classroom activities, according to Karavas-Dukas (1995, as cited in Hedge, 2002, p. 27), who studied a group of experienced teachers from widely differing worldwide contexts and representing a variety of teaching approaches. However, Hedge (2002) claims that "as well as being partly dependent on personality or a particular method, the precise interpretation of these functions would also be to some extent socially and culturally dependent". Teachers are honored with relatively high social status and regarded as authority figures in Chinese culture. Teachers intuitively take instructing content knowledge as their mission and students are simply ready to accept that, as Brindley (1984) points out that learners, particularly if they come from an Asian cultural backgrounds, are more likely to believe that the teacher has the knowledge and it is their mission to impart this knowledge to the learner through activities like explanation, writing and exemplifying. Thus, it might explain why the role of "instructor" presents a rather high degree of coincidence both in the pre-stage and the post-stage of CPs, since naturally both parties agree that teachers should be in control and responsible for any learning activity. Disseminating knowledge and training skills are also deemed as a teacher's essential duties. When teachers perceive "instructor" as their major role with any learning activity, s/he is more likely to sit back and observe. The students, on the other hand, who have been trained in such educational and cultural settings, tend to act obediently, following the instruction, granting the customs, and compliantly accepting the assessment.

In recent decades, however, the overall educational circumstances of Chinese classrooms have seen much change, with traditional concepts and practices challenged and influenced by well-established

educational and pedagogical values from the West. As Kubanyiova (2016) states, language teachers are constantly called upon to negotiate pedagogical choices that seek to develop students' additional languages (L2s) for a variety of educational, social, heritage, identity, and instrumental purposes in a range of contexts. As such, contexts go well beyond the narrow pedagogical concerns of language instruction in the classroom, and so we are rethinking language teacher's role from a "passive technician" to a "reactive practitioner" through to a "transformative intellectual" (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Thus, it is good news that students are rather quick and sensitive to such new trends and are more ready for the change. One typical role, the "innovator", announces such needs from students who are beginning to look beyond the course contents per se, with challenging goals that are more cognitively demanding. Yet it is also in this role where much discrepancy is found between students' perceptions and teacher's actual performance, showing teachers are not as ready as students to adapt themselves to new missions in helping developing students' world outlook, and critical and creative thinking. There probably remains tension between the requirements of the learning tasks for teacher behavior and cultural expectations of what is appropriate teacher behavior (Hedge, 2002; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Such tension can arise for both teachers and students as well. A further question to ask might be what if the teacher becomes very ready for the change, both conceptually and pedagogically, then what will the students reaction be, and will they move quickly and react accordingly? For any activity involving human thinking and interaction, it never appears to be linear, but rather spiral, while the parties involved perceive, act, and reflect, and then with the necessary changes made, move along and proceed further. The discrepancy with the role "innovator" now proves intense, yet it may become less intense as teachers and students are both seeing such needs and finding a means to cooperatively and interactively meet these needs.

Similarly, at the pre-stage, while teachers mostly act as an "instructor," participants think "resource-provider" is a more preferred teacher role, meaning scaffolding is necessary to enable students to fulfill their tasks. Another expected role, that of "participant," also explains such a voice. As a typical form of public speaking activity, CPs can often be anxiety-inducing (Toland et al., 2016) and it is natural for students to expect the necessary support and guidance from teachers. Disappointingly, the data show teachers are more likely to sit back and play the role of "observer" at this stage. Students are longing for the teacher's voice and opinion. They are ready to accept a teacher sitting amongst them, which again proves students are quicker to change, a change in their perceptions of authority and responsibility (Hedge, 2002). As any classroom activity is in essence a social activity, any change happening to it should involve both parties. Thus, it may require a corresponding change of perception with teachers. CPs are designed to develop students' multiple competencies, and accordingly, teachers are to optimize the learning environments by acting in corresponding roles so as to encourage competencies in practice (De Grez, 2009; Wesselink, 2007).

Conclusion

In comparison to the usual practices of traditional teacher-centered classrooms, successful CPs require teachers to change or switch between more traditional and relatively "fresh" roles in order to facilitate such a task-oriented and student-centered activity. The discrepancies found between the teacher's actual roles and students' expected ones could result in miscommunication between the two parties, which in turn reduces the efficiency of classroom teaching and learning. One piece of good news from the present study is that within the students' highly expected roles of "resource-provider," "participant" and "innovator," we can read the message that they are honest with the likely problems and confusion encountered during their learning process. They want their teachers to be assisting and motivating through the process. Teachers may fail to respond accordingly, as in the process of converting between the accustomed roles of instructor or assessor and much more diverse roles, CPs require far more than a simple change in methodology. They may require a change in the teacher's self-perception. Either

pre-service or on-the-job training might help teachers to better understand what they are doing and why they are doing it, and they must think intelligently about how to accomplish this more effectively. At present, universities have the capacity and the expertise to meet this need. But they may not have it for much longer if the shift to school-based teacher education continues unabated (Orchard & Winch, 2015). Furthermore, for students to accept teachers with such adept roles, whether it be sitting among them or mentoring intellectually, requires a corresponding change in their perceptions of teacher authority and responsibility.

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