The mediating effects of teacher-student power relations in a blended English course for academic purposes

Li Cheng[1]

Abstract. Guided by the theory of Language Socialization (LS), this study investigates the mediating effects of teacher-student power relations in an academic English course. To do so, several sets of data were collected: responses to a questionnaire survey, a series of semi-structured interviews, and the online interactions which took place on two teaching platforms (WeChat and QQ). Our results show that together with other factors, the power relations highlighted in this study influenced the participants' academic performances. Besides, three types of teacher-student power relations were brought to the fore. Eventually, the power relations identified affected the construction of role identity in our study. The findings provide supporting evidence for the complicated power relations which exist between language learners and their community of practice.

Keywords: teacher-student power relations, language socialization, blended learning.

1. Introduction

In the past ten years, many researchers have studied how language learners communicate with each other through a variety of communication platforms and how power relations mediate their language learning (Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2013; Schreiber, 2015). The literature of the field particularly shows that good relationships between/among teachers and students result in optimal guidance

1. Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Beijing, China; licheng@bupt.edu.cn

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and support and increased academic performance among students (Badie, 2017; Pennings & Hollenstein, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to explore the mediating effects of the power relations (i.e. teacher-student power relations and student-student power relations) which took place in a blended English course for academic purposes implemented in a Chinese university. The research questions under study are the following.

- What are the major factors related to the teacher-student power relations?
- What power relations can be identified in the learning situations under study?
- How are power relations related to the students' social identities/roles?

2. Method

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is LS (Duff, 2010; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Researchers of LS maintain that learners are socialized in a community of practice. In this respect, the concept of *identity/role* serves to better understand the power relations underlying any learning situation (Block, 2007).

This ten-month study (September of 2019 to June of 2020) took place in an English course at a university in Beijing. It was a two-term course with the teaching focus of Term 1 being 'academic speaking' and that of Term 2 'academic writing and conference communication'. The final team project of the course was the participation in a student conference: the Model International Conference 2020 (MIC). There were requirements related to MIC, e.g. topic selection, paper writing, and team presentations. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19 in December of 2019, a blended teaching approach was used in the course; the online component of the course included the delivery of online academic lectures followed by guided discussions on two social media platforms (WeChat and QQ) and an offline mode of face-to-face tutoring.

After the launch of the project, 185 students volunteered to participate in this study and signed the dedicated consent forms. A set of data collection techniques were employed: a 40-item questionnaire survey, 15,732 WeChat and QQ messages posted on the platforms of the course, and 20 one-hour semi-structured focused group interviews conducted in Chinese.

The questionnaire was adapted from Tierney and Farmer (2002) and consisted of five sections: teacher-student power relations (Cronbach's α=0827), students' role identity (Cronbach's α=0723), social support (Cronbach's α=0841), learner autonomy (Cronbach's α=0926), and individual innovation (Cronbach's α=0793).

The questionnaire was distributed to the participants in mid-June 2020 and 183 (98.9%) replies were collected. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed following Hycner's (1985) guidelines. All the WeChat and QQ messages were coded following Gee's (2011) tools and Jamshidnejad's (2011) guidelines for interactional discourse.

3. Results and discussion

Discussion in this section attempts to answer the three research questions detailed above.

3.1. Factors related to teacher-student power relations

Table 1 presents the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data and the factors related to the teacher-student power relations which were highlighted.

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Teacher-student power relations	4.235	0.743
Students' identities/roles	4.001	0.832
Social support	3.904	0.768
Learner autonomy	3.536	0.732
Individual innovation in research projects	3.342	0.802

Statistical analysis indicates that the students' social identities/roles were closely related to 'teacher-student power relations'. Moreover, different types of teacher-student power relations enhanced – in varying degrees – the students' learning autonomy and motivation in this study (see discussion below). This was supported by the fact that 36 participants received institutional funding to take part in the MIC event. Eventually, 65 out of 100 focal students in the group interviews mentioned that their teachers and the most competent members in the teams were of great help for the completion of the MIC projects.

3.2. Types of teacher-student power relations

The analysis of the 15,732-word messages posted on WeChat and QQ revealed three major types of teacher-student relations (Table 2): (1) 'instructor and tutor', with direct instructions and commands, indicated a controlled type of relationship (frequency in CI= 1,432, frequency in OE=1,092), (2) 'facilitator and trainer' highlighted the guidance and training support which the students benefited from during their projects to help them master content knowledge and develop the skills they needed to see them through to completion (frequency in CI= 812, frequency in OE=892), and (3) 'friends and buddy', who provided each other with mutual support to complete their assignments (frequency in CI= 322, frequency in OE= 292).

Table 2. The major types of teacher-student power relations identified

	Frequency in CI	Frequency in OE
Instructor and Tutor	1,432	1,092
Facilitator and Trainer	812	892
Friend and Buddy	322	292

Note: frequency refers to the number of sentences indicating power relations in the interactions.

3.3. Power relations and students' social identities

As mentioned earlier, MIC was the final project of the course. It implied organizing the conference itself and delivering various outputs (i.e. the students' academic papers and presentations). Table 3 presents the communication activities the participants carried out while completing their MIC projects and the number of recorded interactions per communication activity.

Table 3. Form-focused and meaning-focused activities on WeChat and QQ

	Form-focused communication activities and number of online interactions	Meaning-focused communication activities and number of interactions
1	Studying language points (1,172)	Exchanging information, e.g. academic search (2,307)
2	Correcting errors and mistakes (1,559)	Maintaining the relationship (3,462)
3	Consulting language form (355)	Checking the task requirements (628)
4	/	Asking about the tests and final examination (119)

Note: the numbers provided in Table 3 refer to the number of sentences related to MIC in the data collected.

According to Gee (2011) and Jamshidnejad (2011), in educational contexts, the interpersonal communication processes and the relationships established between participants are usually meaning-focused and/or form-focused. Therefore, the

analysis of the students' online interactions and the identities/roles identified in the interactions can reflect the power relations which exist between the members of a given communication community. Through the analysis of the online messages posted by the study participants, seven types of communication activities were thus identified, among which three were form-focused and four meaning-focused.

It should be noted that although 412 out of the 732 theme-based group exchanges collected were initiated by the team leaders, all the team members had clear work instructions to follow in their MIC projects. The completion of different communication activities led the students to develop their teambuilding skills and perform different roles, such as team leader, team player, coordinator, negotiator, helper, or observer. In one focused group interview, Hanna said

> "My English is poor. I didn't talk much but I'm a good listener. And I'm a good PowerPoint designer. I designed all the PowerPoint for our team presentation ((smile, confident))" (Interview, 2020-05-30).

As such, the analysis of the communication activities and the students' roles provides supporting evidence for the important role played by power relations in language learning contexts (Badie, 2017; Pennings & Hollenstein, 2020).

4. Conclusion

This study explored the dynamics of the teacher-student relations taking place in an English course. Data analysis shows that teacher-student power relations are closely related to students' social identities/roles. Moreover, three types of power relations were identified. Finally, these power relations were reflected in the students' meaning-based or form-based communication activities. The findings provide supporting evidence for the complicated relations which exist between language learners and their communication community. With the increasing popularity of the use of digital technology in the language classroom in China, it is suggested that more attention be paid to longitudinal investigations exploring the cognitive, social, and affective aspects of the power relations which take place in natural settings.

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