



Chinese students' perceptions of teacher–student interpersonal behavior and implications

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ABSTRACT

Students' perceptions are one of the most important elements in evaluating the learning environment. Although the literature is replete with studies investigating teacher–student interpersonal behavior in science classrooms, relatively few studies have been conducted in foreign language classrooms, and in countries like China. The researchers in this study investigated the perceptions of teacher–student interpersonal behavior in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in China. A total of 823 students from 19 classes taught by 9 teachers were asked to assess their teachers' actual and ideal interpersonal behavior using the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI). Results showed that, on actual interpersonal teacher's behaviors, Chinese students reported higher scores for Leadership, Helpful/Friendly, Understanding, Student Freedom and Strict; and lower scores for Uncertain, Dissatisfied, and Admonishing. On ideal interpersonal teacher's behaviors, Chinese students indicated even higher scores for Leadership, Helpful/Friendly, Understanding, Student Freedom, but lower scores for Dissatisfied, Admonishing, and Strict. Implications will be discussed.

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1. Introduction

Learning activities in classrooms are always accompanied by interpersonal interaction (Doyle, 1979) and these interactions are an important element of the perceived learning environment (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). Wubbels (1993) found that interpersonal teacher behaviors were strongly related to student achievement (both positively and negatively). Since then, interpersonal teacher behaviors have been proved to be strongly and consistently related to student achievement (e.g., den Brok, 2001; den Brok, Levy, Rodriguez, & Wubbels, 2002; Fisher & Waldrup, 1999; Henderson, Fisher, & Fraser, 2000; Scott, 2001). The reciprocal nature of teacher–student communication in particular makes it a powerful influence on the learning environment and, subsequently, on student performance (achievement) (Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, & van Tartwijk, 2006). Therefore, in this study, we chose to explore the influence of students' perceptions of teachers' behaviors on students' academic achievements.

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Across all approaches – qualitative, quantitative, or mixed – the use of questionnaires to assess students' perceptions has been the predominant method in learning environments research (Soerjaningsih, Fraser, & Aldridge, 2001; Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). To assess the impact of learning environments, some educational researchers have tried specifically to investigate students' perceptions of interpersonal teacher behavior by using the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI). Based on Leary's (1957) graphic representation of interpersonal behaviors, the QTI was first developed in The Netherlands by Wubbels, Creton, and Hooymayers (1985) to measure secondary school students' perceptions of interpersonal relationships in the classroom, allowing for an assessment of the correlation of learning outcomes to student perceptions. It was then translated into English (Wubbels & Levy, 1991) and several other languages (see den Brok et al., 2002, for more details on QTI questionnaire) and widely used in different countries. For example, den Brok, Fisher, and Koul (2005) collected data on 1021 students in 31 English as Foreign Language (EFL) classes in 18 secondary schools (Grade 9 and Grade 10) in Kashmir. The results demonstrated a positive and statistically significant effect of the two interpersonal dimensions (Influence and Proximity) on students' subject-related attitudes. In the present study, we similarly investigated students' perceptions of the interpersonal behavior of their teachers in EFL classrooms, but did so in a different national and cultural context and by linking these perceptions to students' achievement in the subject instead of to their attitudes.

The reasons that we investigated EFL students' perceptions of the teacher–student interpersonal relationship in China were threefold. First, although learning environments studies using the QTI have been conducted in many countries neighboring China (e.g., Fisher, Richards, Goh, & Wong, 1997, comparing data in Australia and Singapore; Goh & Fraser, 1998, in Singapore; Kim, Fisher, & Fraser, 2000, in Korea; Scott, 2001, in Brunei; and Wei & Onsayad, 2007, in Thailand), there is very limited learning environments research generally, or research on teacher–student interpersonal behavior specifically, in China (Wei, den Brok, & Zhou, 2009). The present study will fill this void by investigating Chinese EFL students' perceptions of the teacher–student interpersonal relationship on a large scale (using data from more than 800 students), thus providing unique insights into learning environments (especially as assessed by the QTI) and how they function in various cultural contexts.

Second, the cultural setup of China differs from the contexts in which many other current learning environments studies are conducted. Traditionally, researchers utilized Confucian heritage cultural views to explain perceived learning behaviors (e.g., Ferris & Tagg, 1996) or teacher–student relationships in China. Researchers arguing a Confucian influence on teacher–student relationships (e.g., Chan, 1999; Cummings, 1996; Elstein, 2009; Ho & Ho, 2008; Leng, 2005) claimed that the teacher–student relationship is modeled on the teacher-centered, master–disciple relationship, which greatly shapes Chinese learners' expectations for teachers and for learning styles and strategies (Elstein, 2009).

There are, however, different views regarding Chinese learners and teacher behaviors. Researchers seeking to debunk the myth of Confucian heritage-shaped learning environments pointed out that contemporary Chinese learner expectations of their teachers are changing (Chan & Rao, 2009; Watkins & Biggs, 1996; 2001; Zhou, 2010). They claimed that, rather than being “culturally pre-set” (Cheng, 2000, p.435), Chinese learners prefer their teachers to be less dominant so that students are given opportunities to undertake self-directed learning. They wish their teachers to keep a guiding role while providing them with space to grow and develop.

This new body of research from the past two decades (1990's – to date) is timely, and provides an important supplement to understanding the impact of a new culture of learning on changing educational contexts, changes of characteristics of Chinese learners, learners or teachers' views toward teacher practices, and teacher–student relationships. There is, however, scarce research investigating students' perceptions of interpersonal teacher–student relationships in Chinese classrooms to reflect the changing context and changing learners and teachers. Although Chan and Rao (2009) pointed out that contemporary Chinese expert teachers craft a pedagogy integrating both traditional *yan* (严, strict with high expectations for students performance) and Western student-centered collaborative inquiry (for developing better understanding and motivation), whether this is the case in the eyes of the students is yet to be explored. The current study, therefore, contributes to the two-decade efforts of research in understanding learning environments in China, measuring interpersonal teacher behaviors through the eyes of their EFL students.

The third reason that we investigated EFL students' perceptions of the teacher–student interpersonal relationship in China was that, although the QTI has been used in many subjects of learning (e.g., den Brok et al., 2005; Wubbels, Brekelmans, & Hoomayers, 1991; Wubbels, Creton, Levy, & Hooymayers, 1993), there are few applications of the QTI in EFL environments.

English education is considered as a very important core course in China (Silver, Hu, & Lino, 2002). With the dominance of English as a global language, English learners and teachers in China put more emphasis on English language education, although the focus of teaching and learning is still examination oriented (Pan & Block, 2011). In a rapidly changing society, contemporary EFL students in China are similar to their Western counterparts in terms of being active and open-minded learner and preferring equal, interactive teacher–student relationships. Shi (2008) observed that Chinese EFL students embraced Western values of inquiry-based learning and interactive teacher–student relationships on one hand, but on the other hand emphasized that good English teachers should help them to pass exams and provide detailed notes.

In another study on contemporary ELT in China, Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) pointed out that the EFL learners and in-service teacher trainees in their study reinforced the image of “the” Chinese learner, whom Watkins and Biggs (1996) identified as motivated, holding respect for teachers, and willing to adjust to Western style of English learning methods. More importantly, the EFL teacher trainees' positive attitudes toward student-centered communicative English teaching noted by Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) resulted not in the abandonment of traditional pedagogy but in critical review of it, and in reflection of the appropriateness of integrating Western ELT innovations.

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