



# Effects of perceptions of the learning environment and approaches to learning on Chinese undergraduates' learning



Jianpeng Guo<sup>a</sup>, Lingyan Yang<sup>b</sup>, Qiheng Shi<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Education, Xiamen University, China

<sup>b</sup> School of Public Affairs, Xiamen University, China

## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Perceptions of the learning environment  
Approaches to learning  
Learning outcome  
Teaching quality  
China

## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between students' perceptions of the learning environment, high school performance, approaches to learning, and learning outcomes (generic skills development and course satisfaction). A sample of 74,687 undergraduates from 39 full-time regular universities in China responded to a questionnaire comprising four self-constructed scales. The results supported the reliability and validity of the instruments. A structural equation model showed that approaches to learning mediated the relationship between perceptions of the learning environment and learning outcomes. Specifically, deep approach was found to positively predict learning outcomes. Good teaching positively predicted deep and surface approaches, as well as learning outcomes. Student-faculty and peer interactions were strong predictors of learning approaches and learning outcomes. High school performance had weak effects on learning approaches and learning outcomes. These findings highlight the need of developing new instruments for assessing Chinese undergraduate students' learning and have implications for improving undergraduate teaching in China.

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, quality has been one of the most influential key words in higher education; due to the increasing emphasis on accountability and quality assurance in the public sector (Byrne & Flood, 2003; Hooper, 2012). It is common these days that tertiary educational institutions are required to provide evidence that students are benefiting from their experience in universities. For example; in the United Kingdom; all publicly funded higher education institutions are mandated to participate in a national student survey (NSS) to evaluate their students' learning experience (HEFCE, 2003). The Australian government mandated that all graduates from all Australian universities should complete a questionnaire reporting their course experience (CEQ). In the United States; over 1600 colleges and universities have participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) since 2000; aiming at collecting information about students' participation; activities; behaviors; efforts; and learning gains.

The evaluation of quality has also been a hot topic in recent years in China's higher education. China's higher education system has now shifted its focus from expansion to quality. Since 1999, China's higher education has experienced a dramatic expansion of student enrollment and institutions. The number of Chinese regular higher education institutions increased from 1100 in 1990 to 2546 in 2015. The gross

enrollment ratio increased from 3.4% in 1990 to 40% in 2015, with about 36.47 million students in higher education (Wu, 2016). China now has the largest student population in higher education in the world, accounting for about 20% of global size. However, the rapid expansion of higher education has caused a series of problems, especially the concerns about the quality decline of teaching in higher education. As former president Hu (2011) pointed out, quality has been the core task and essential topic for Chinese higher education reform and development. In July 2010, the State Council of the People's Republic of China issued the *Outline of China's National Plan for Medium & Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)*, which implies that China is entering a quality-centered development stage focusing on quality assurance and improvement.

Within the context of attaching importance to quality of higher education, teaching quality is now increasingly considered as the core to the quality of higher education. Improving university teaching quality is now a central agenda for China's higher education. In 2003, Chinese Ministry of Education launched an undergraduate teaching evaluation (UTE) programme to assess the teaching quality in higher education at the institutional level. Furthermore, Premier Li Keqiang recently required that higher education institutions should improve their teaching quality in his 2016 report of the work of the government. The importance of teaching quality in higher education is also explicitly

\* Corresponding author at: Institute of Education, Xiamen University, No. 422, Siming South Road, Xiamen, Fujian, 361005, China.  
E-mail addresses: [guojianpeng@gmail.com](mailto:guojianpeng@gmail.com) (J. Guo), [uilingyan@gmail.com](mailto:uilingyan@gmail.com) (L. Yang), [qhshi@xmu.edu.cn](mailto:qhshi@xmu.edu.cn) (Q. Shi).

emphasized in the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2020) for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China, as well as other important documents of the Communist Party of China (CCP). As Qu (2015) pointed out, this is the first time Chinese government mentions college teaching in its five-year plan, and the first time college teaching is written into a significant document of CCP.

Although China's higher education system has seriously considered its teaching quality recently and designed the UTE programme to monitor the quality of undergraduate teaching, criticisms about the evaluation have been expressed by various stakeholders in recent years. One of the biggest concerns lies in the fact that students' voice was almost neglected in the UTE process of assessing teaching quality (Mohrman, Wang, & Li, 2011; Yin & Wang, 2015). The UTE programme was mainly about the "macro factors" such as equipment, facilities, campus environment, and teaching management, rather than the "micro factors" about the actual teaching and learning process, such as students' learning experiences and teachers' teaching approaches (Gao, Zhang, Chen, Lan, & Zhang, 2006; Lee, Huang, & Zhong, 2012).

Students' surveys of educational effectiveness have been widely used in many countries to evaluate teaching quality and learning experiences (Marsh, Ginns, Morin, & Nagengast, 2011). As Hooper (2012) claimed, students, the recipients of a teacher's interventions, are the only people who can provide feedback on their teacher's performance. Ramsden (1991) demonstrated that students are uniquely qualified to judge teaching quality because they see a great deal of teaching and can convincingly distinguish good teaching from bad teaching. As a result, a huge research literature has been produced in the area of student evaluation of teaching, making it one of the most widely studied topics in higher education. Therefore, it was suggested that university students' experience and evaluation should be integrated into the assessment of university teaching. In China, although the empirical research of assessing quality of university teaching from students' perspective is in an early stage, this topic is increasingly discussed recently. Using self-construct instruments, the present study attempts to survey a large sample of Chinese undergraduate students on their perceptions of the learning environment, learning approaches, as well as the effects on their learning outcomes.

## 2. Approaches to learning, perceptions of the learning environment and learning outcomes

Marton and Saljo (1976) first identified the concepts of deep and surface approaches to learning in their text comprehension experiments, which have been widely used and have stimulated considerable research in higher education. An important finding from these experiments was that qualitative differences in students' learning outcomes were closely linked to the different approaches to learning adopted by the students, with a deep approach being related to higher quality learning outcomes, whereas a surface approach was related to lower quality learning outcomes. This finding was replicated in many other subsequent studies (e.g., Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Piggott, 2010; Hounsell, 1997; Minbashian, Huon, & Bird, 2004). The initial findings helped the Gothenburg group develop phenomenography into a distinct research paradigm which aimed at describing people's qualitatively different ways of experiencing the world. The dichotomy between a deep approach and a surface approach to students' learning also became the point of departure for Entwistle, Ramsden, Biggs and colleagues to develop a number of questionnaires to investigate students' approaches to learning, conceptions of learning, and perceptions of the learning environment in a more quantitative way (e.g., Biggs et al., 2001; Biggs, 1987; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Tait, Entwistle, & McCune, 1998).

An approach to learning is a combination of students' learning intentions, motives, and strategies. A deep approach to learning is one in which students have an intrinsic interest in understanding the underlying meaning of the learning material and use strategies of "seeking meaning", "relating ideas", and "using evidence". In contrast, a surface

approach to learning is one in which students have an extrinsic interest in the learning task and adopt strategies of "rote learning", "memorizing", and "reproducing" (Biggs, 2001; Entwistle et al., 2001; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991). Moreover, some researchers also proposed an achieving/strategic approach as the third approach to learning, in which students effectively manage space and time to obtain highest grades with minimal effort (Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001). Such achieving strategies include time management, organized studying, concentration, and so on (Entwistle & McCune, 2004). However, it has been suggested that students' approaches to learning are best described in terms of two factors: a deep and a surface approach; the achieving approach should be considered a component of the deep approach (Kember & Leung, 1998; Zeegers, 2002).

Central to this research tradition is the phenomenographic view of learning. Different from cognitive theories that consider learning as construction of mental representation, phenomenography interprets learning from a relational and perceptual perspective (Guo & Pang, 2011). As Marton and Booth (1997) argued, an experience is in its essence non-dualistic; that is, the human and the world are not separated. When we see something, we create individual-world relations through our experiences. For example, if a person experiences an object as a bird, then the meaning of the bird is not in the object, neither is it "in the subject's head." Instead, as Svensson (1984) explained, it is constituted as the relation between the object to which awareness is directed and the person as the subject. Therefore, learning can be defined as the formation of new individual-world relations and thus a new way of seeing something rather than psychological entities located within individuals. Approaches to learning are not considered to be learners' stable characteristics but are determined by the relation between the learner, the task, and the context within which the learner experiences the task (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven, & Dochy, 2010; Entwistle & McCune, 2004). As a consequence, a learner might exhibit different approaches to learning in different contexts or different learners might adopt different approaches to learning in the same context.

Ramsden and Entwistle (1981) conducted the first empirical study to investigate the relation between approaches to learning and perceptions of the learning environment. They found that students' perception of heavy workload and less learning freedom was related to a reproducing orientation, and their perception of good teaching and more learning freedom was related to a meaning orientation. Ramsden (1991) developed the course experience questionnaire (CEQ) to measure students' perception of the learning context, including subscales of good teaching, clear goals, appropriate workload and assessment, and emphasis on independence. Ramsden (1997) found that students who adopt the deep approach to learning tend to consider that the teaching quality is good, the teaching goal is clear, workload and assessment are suitable, and freedom in learning is acceptable; conversely, students using the surface approach tend to hold opposite views. Similar relations between approaches to learning and perceptions of the learning environment have been consistently reported by other researchers (e.g., Diseth, 2007; Kember & Leung, 1998; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999).

Researchers have also investigated the relations between approaches to learning, perceptions of the learning environment, and learning outcomes. Trigwell and Prosser (1991) showed that students who have higher quality learning outcomes adopt deeper approaches to learning and perceive the learning context as one in which the teacher is helpful, the teaching goal is clear, feedback is adequate, explanation of content is good, and learning freedom is sufficient. Other studies have generally indicated that perceptions of learning context and learning outcomes are positively correlated with a deep approach to learning but negatively correlated with a surface approach (e.g., Diseth, Pallesen, Brunborg, & Larsen, 2010; Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Richardson & Price, 2003; Sadler-Smith, 1997). Especially, approaches to learning in these studies are considered as a mediator between perceptions of the learning environment and learning outcomes. For instance, Diseth (2007) found that a surface approach was a mediator

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4941233>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4941233>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)