

# COMPARISON OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS OF INTERPERSONAL TEACHER BEHAVIOR IN THE COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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## Abstract

Some teachers think they are friendly and understanding to their students . But do students feel the same way as the teachers do ? This paper focuses on College English teachers interpersonal behavior . Through investigation with questionnaire and teachers individual interview and students group interview , significant differences are found between teachers self perceptions of their interpersonal behavior and the perceptions from their students . Some discussions on the reasons why there exists discrepancy between teachers and students perceptions are followed . This study offers some implications to EFL teaching and EFL teacher education in China .

## Key words

interpersonal behavior ; questionnaire ; interview ; perception difference ; implication

## 1. Introduction

Much attention has been given over the last three decades to the development and use of instruments to assess the qualities of the classroom learning environment from the perspective of both teachers and students ( Burden & Fraser 1993 ; Fraser 1986 ; Fraser & Walberg 1991 ) . Because a particularly important aspect of classroom environments is the relationship between teacher and students , some research in the Netherlands , the USA and Australia has focused on perceptions of teacher interpersonal behavior and communication in the classroom ( Wubbels & Levy 1993 ) .

Wubbels & Levy ( 1993 ) distinguish two aspects of teacher behavior . The first is the methodological aspect which refers to the plethora of technical strategies such as the choice and organization of teaching material , the method of transmission , motivation strategies and assessment . The second is the interpersonal aspect of teacher behavior which is mainly concerned with the creation and maintenance of a favorable climate in the classroom . Of importance here is the kind of relationship which is built up between the teacher and his students . Every teacher develops his own personal style with regard to this aspect of his behavior . Some studies have been done on the correlation between teachers interpersonal behavior and other variables . For example , in a study with physics teachers and their students , Brekelmans ( 2002 ) found a clear relationship between teachers proximity and student motivation . The higher the perception of teachers proximity , the higher the motivation of the students . Den Brok et al . ( 2002 ) investigated how students perceptions of their teachers vary with student cultural background . The results of the study demonstrate that there are cultural differences in the student perceptions of teacher student interpersonal behavior .

However , most prior investigations on interpersonal teacher behavior were conducted mainly in western contexts and little research has been done on interpersonal teacher behavior in China . What's

more ,too much research on interpersonal teacher behavior has been carried out in elementary or secondary classrooms and little has been done on tertiary level and few studies have compared teachers perceptions of their interpersonal behavior and those from their students . Therefore ,in this paper the following two research questions were posed :

RQ1 : Do there exist significant differences between teachers and students perceptions of interpersonal teacher behavior in the College English classroom ?

RQ2 :Is there any relationship between the amount of discrepancy between the students and teachers perceptions and the character of a teacher s behavior ?

## 2 . Research Method

It is widely agreed that multiple methods are useful in achieving greater understanding . In order to find out reliable answers to the above research questions ,data collection for the present study involved both quantitative and qualitative sources . Through the Questionnaire of Teacher Interaction ( QTI ) ,the answer was sought to the first research question . Naturally ,questionnaires have the critical disadvantages of imposing the researcher s framework onto the subjects . To cope with this problem and answer the second research question ,teacher individual interview and student group interview were conducted respectively .

### 2 .1 Questionnaire of Teacher Interaction ( QTI )

Leary (1957 ) believed that the most important forces driving human behavior are the reduction of fear and the corresponding maintenance of self-esteem . Therefore ,when people communicate they consciously or unconsciously choose behaviors which avoid anxiety and allow them to feel good . In a clinical and psychology research setting ,Leary and his co-workers analyzed hundreds of patient therapist dialogues and group discussions in clinical and other situations . These conversations and discourse were divided into short statements representing different kinds of interpersonal behavior .

By adapting the Leary Model ,Wubbels ,Creton ,Levy &Hooymayers (1993 ) developed the Model for Interpersonal Teacher Behavior and subsequently designed the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction ( QTI ) .

Since its development ,the QTI has been used and accepted as a reliable research instrument in western contexts ,especially in the Netherlands ,America and Australia ( Wubbels &Levy 1993 ;Fisher ,Richards ,Goh & Wong 1997 ) . However ,little research has been done on teachers interpersonal behavior with the QTI in China except Xin (2000 ) who translated and made some revision on the original English QTI and developed a Chinese version . However ,the reliability coefficients of three scales were only between 0 .4 and 0 .5 . In order to increase its reliability level and make it more applicable to the study of teachers interpersonal behavior in College English classroom in China ,based on the original English version ,10 items of the Xin s QTI version were revised . The questionnaire has teacher s version and student s version with the same items .

The revised questionnaire has eight scales which are used to measure eight kinds of teacher interpersonal behavior : Leadership , Helping /Friendly , Understanding , Student Responsibility and Freedom ,Uncertain ,Admonishing ,Dissatisfied and Strict . Each scale consists of 6 items . The revised Chinese version of the QTI contains 48 items altogether and the response provision in the QTI is a five-point Likert type scale which is scored from 1 ( Never ) to 5 ( Always ) . The higher the scale score ,the more a teacher would exhibit the behavior relating to that scale . Table 1 provides the name of each scale , its description ,item numbers and the reliability coefficient of each scale .

Table 1 . Description ,item numbers and reliability coefficient for each Scale

Scale	Description	Item numbers	Reliability Coefficient	
			Teacher	Student
Leadership	Extent to which teacher provides leadership to class and holds student attention	1 ,5 ,9 , 13 ,17 ,21	0 .84	0 .64
Helping / Friendly	Extent to which teacher is friendly and helpful towards students	25 ,29 ,33 , 37 ,41 ,45	0 .83	0 .78
Understanding	Extent to which teacher shows understanding /concern /care to students .	2 ,6 ,10 , 14 ,18 ,22	0 .65	0 .72
Student Responsibility / Freedom	Extent to which students are given opportunities to assume responsibilities for their own activities .	26 ,30 ,34 , 38 ,42 ,46	0 .55	0 .54
Uncertain	Extent to which teacher exhibits her /his uncertainty .	3 ,7 ,11 , 15 ,19 ,23	0 .65	0 .56
Dissatisfied	Extent to which teacher shows unhappiness /dissatisfaction with student .	27 ,31 ,35 , 39 ,43 ,47	0 .59	0 .75
Admonishing	Extent to which teacher shows anger / temper /impatience in class .	4 ,8 ,12 , 16 ,20 ,24	0 .63	0 .68
Strict	Extent to which teacher is strict with and demanding of students .	28 ,32 ,36 , 40 ,44 ,48	0 .56	0 .53

## 2 .2 Interview procedure

In order to find out whether there is any relationship between the amount of discrepancy between the students and teachers perceptions and the character of a teachers behavior in the class , 12 representative teachers and 36 corresponding students participated in the interview . The 12 representative teachers included three effective teachers who were well liked by students and had won awards or prizes for excellent teaching , three poor teachers who were given relatively low scores from students evaluation for two semesters in succession , three experienced teachers and three novice teachers who had taught College English for more than ten years and for no more than two years respectively . Three students from each of the above 12 teachers classes were asked to participate in the interview and the 36 students were divided into four groups according to the kind of classes they were from . All the 12 teachers and 36 students were willing to attend the interview .

During the interview , the teachers and the students were asked to give answers or make comments on some questions built upon the closed questionnaire items . The questions involved comments on their teachers friendly , understanding , strict and dissatisfying behavior , the extent to which teachers gave students freedom and responsibility for their learning , teachers classroom management strategies and opinions of the necessary qualities of a good English teacher . For teachers , their training experiences were also required . The length of the students interviews ranged from 20 to 25 minutes for each group and it took about 15 minutes for each teachers interview . The interviews were voice pen recorded and then transcribed .

## 2 .3 Participants

In order to be able to include enough samples of students and teachers in this study and to limit its impact on the regular College English class routine and teacher workload , the QTI was administered at random to 30 College English teachers in Zhejiang Gongshang University who in turn administered the questionnaire to 20 students in their classes . It involved a total of 600 students in thirty classes with different majors . 30 valid responses from teachers and 542 valid responses from students were received respectively . In the interview , as mentioned above , a sample of 12 representative teachers and 36 corresponding students were solicited for participation .

### 3 . Results

#### 3 .1 Discrepancies between teachers self perception and students perceptions of interpersonal behavior

An independent sample t test was performed to investigate whether there are significant differences in the perception of teachers and students on the different aspects of interpersonal relationship in the classroom environment . The data revealed significant difference between the mean scores of teachers and the mean scores of the students in five of the eight scales . The difference was significant at 0 .05 level and above ( Table 2 ) .

Table 2 shows clearly that teachers and their students agree most about the level of the teachers Leadership , Student Responsibility /Freedom and Admonishing behavior . However , there is a considerable mismatch between teachers perception and their students perception on five scales ( Helping /Friendly , Understanding , Uncertain , Dissatisfied and Strict ) .

It appears that teachers consider themselves to be more friendly and helpful ,and understanding to their students than their students perceive to be so . Teachers think they are strict with their students more than their students perceive to be the case . Also , teachers perceive themselves more uncertain than they appear to be in class and they display more dissatisfied qualities in class than their students realize . So teachers seem to inflate both their negative and positive qualities compared to their students who are more moderate in their views of their teachers .

Table 2 . Group Statistics — Teachers self perception and students perception of interpersonal behavior

Teacher behavior Dimension	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	T value	Sig . ( 2 tailed )
Leadership	Student	3 .889	0 .623	-1 .087	0 .278
	Teacher	4 .017	0 .645		
Helping /Friendly	Student	4 .116	0 .626	-2 .205 *	0 .028
	Teacher	4 .379	0 .618		
Understanding	Student	4 .152	0 .553	-2 .315 *	0 .021
	Teacher	4 .392	0 .507		
Student Responsibility /Freedom	Student	3 .675	0 .629	-0 .839	0 .402
	Teacher	3 .775	0 .637		
Uncertain	Student	2 .072	0 .649	-3 .177 **	0 .002
	Teacher	2 .468	0 .842		
Dissatisfied	Student	1 .747	0 .570	-2 .420 *	0 .016
	Teacher	2 .006	0 .533		
Admonishing	Student	1 .463	0 .524	-0 .969	0 .333
	Teacher	1 .560	0 .602		
Strict	Student	2 .970	0 .601	-1 .971 *	0 .049
	Teacher	3 .193	0 .622		

\*\* p < .01 ; \* p < .05

#### 3 .2 Results from the interview

##### 3 .2 .1 Agreement between teachers and students

As mentioned in the methodology ,12 teachers and 36 students were interviewed in order to test the results found with the QTI . When asked about the degree of leadership they displayed and the extent to which their students were given opportunities to assume responsibilities for their own learning ,nearly all the teachers claimed that they were strong leaders who in most cases dominated the whole class . Their students were given certain freedom and responsibility . Similar responses were obtained from their students . Most students ( 30 participants ) agreed that their teachers sometimes gave them certain amount

of freedom and they could have some influences on their teachers decision-making . Many students unanimously took English assignment for example . They were sometimes entitled to choose the assignment they preferred to do from several alternatives and to finish it in whatever way they liked . Also nearly all teachers believed that they were helping /friendly and understanding to their students whose responses were basically consistent with those from most students except that four students (one from an experienced teachers class ,the other three from the poor teachers class ) mentioned the lack of communication between teachers and students . One student explained “ our English teacher is just lecturing ;he seems only interested in his own lecture ,but nothing else and seldom cares about our liking and disliking . We feel some kind of psychological distance between our teacher and us ” . In the interview , all teachers agreed they seldom punished their students for poor performance or misbehaviors in class , which was echoed by the interviewed students . Therefore it seems that students and teachers agree most about the teachers Leadership , Student Responsibility /Freedom and Admonishing behavior . Whats more , both teachers scores and students scores were relatively high on Helping /Friendly and Understanding scales although there is certain degree of discrepancy between some teachers answers and their students , which is consistent with what Table 2 shows .

### 3.2.2 Discrepancy and perceived behavior

Through the interview ,the relationship between the amount of discrepancy between the students and teacher s perceptions and the character of a teacher s behavior is also analyzed .

As to perceptions of teachers Dissatisfying behavior ,about 40 % of teachers admitted sometimes they showed their dissatisfaction with students in some moderate ways ,such as complaint for not finishing assignment or comparison students performance between different classes he or she taught . About 42 % interviewed teachers said they seldom expressed their dissatisfaction in front of the whole class although sometimes they were not satisfied with their students ,and only two teachers (one poor teacher and one experienced ) acknowledged they would get irritated for their students misbehavior or poor performance in class . However ,the majority of students responded that they seldom sensed their teachers dissatisfaction in class .It seems there is certain mismatch between teachers and students perceptions on this scale . And also a striking difference was found between poor teachers replies and those from their students when asked about whether they were satisfied with College English teaching . One poor teacher complained bitterly in the interview :

I m satisfied with my devotion to the class but not with the students devotion to their English learning . I do my part but students fail to do their part . I am irritated when the students do not give response to my questions . They remain silent even when given yes or no questions . The poor communication results from their poor study habits and their belief that they come to take the class not to share the class .

Clearly the teacher blames her students for the problems in English class ,while the three students from her class complained about the boring lectures . They made such a comment on their teacher in the interview :

Most of the time our teacher just focuses on key words and useful expressions . She doesn t seem to care about what we like and dislike . However if we fail to answer her questions or some students are not listening she will get irritated . It always seems to be our fault . We feel bored of our English class .

On the contrary ,impressive similarities were found between effective teachers responses and those of their students . Take the effective teacher Autumn for an instance . To our surprise ,her replies to most questions were strikingly similar to those of her students . In Autumn s view ,a good English teacher should not only care for students English learning ,but also their all round growth as a person . Just as one of her students remarked in the interview :

Autumn is willing to lend an ear to our worries and annoyance ,ready to discuss with us issues of mutual interest ... she gives suggestions to our problems and troubles ... she seems to know how to deal with classroom misbehavior in a humorous way ... We enjoy the English class atmosphere . Autumn is

very popular with us .

Therefore ,it seems that the mismatch between teachers self reports and students perceptions is larger for teachers who display little effective behavior than for those teachers who show a lot . In other words ,the more a teacher shows Dissatisfying and Unfriendly behavior ,the larger the discrepancy between the teacher s self report and the students perception .

Nearly all teachers and students admitted that students misbehaviors were something common in College English class ,such as eating breakfast ,sleeping ,reading phone message ,talking or reading something irrelevant to the class ,etc . Nearly all teachers thought it necessary to take some measures to stop students misbehaviors and argued they were able to deal with classroom disorder effectively . Asking questions ,using eye contact or gestures were the most widely mentioned strategies in the teachers interview . Although most students (81 % participants ) commented that their teachers were confident and knew how to cope with disruptive students ,a few students remarked their teachers were blind to what happened in class and seldom took strategies if students misbehaved in class . Four students from a novice teacher s class complained in the interview like this :“ It appears our English teacher doesn t know how to deal with misbehavior in class ... at the beginning he takes some strategies ,but it seems not very effective . Now he just turns a blind eye to those disruptive students .” Three students from a poor English teacher s class remarked in this way :“ Our English teacher is just busy lecturing and he doesn t care what happens in class . Maybe he is not very interested in what we are doing or he just doesn t know how to deal with us .” So from the interview ,it is discovered that the discrepancy is larger between students and their novice or poor teachers perceptions on uncertain behavior . In the interview some novice or poor teachers appear to be more confident than their students perceive . This is a bit different from what is revealed through QTI which shows teachers perceive themselves a little more uncertain than their students realize .

As to strict behavior ,about 70 % of teachers (8 participants ) claimed they were strict with their students ,while nearly all students felt their College English teacher was not as strict as their high school English teacher . In other words ,students think their teachers are not as strict with them as their teachers themselves believe . However ,most students further argued it was not necessary for College English teachers to be that strict with them . The 4 not very strict teachers and most students gave the same reason that they were already adults and they should take their own responsibility for English learning .

When asked about the important qualities for an effective English teacher ,a sharp difference was found between teachers answers and those of students . About 80 % of teachers listed “ professional ” as the most important quality while to our surprise only three students held the same opinion . Most students put such qualities as caring ,conscientious ,understanding ,friendly ,humorous ,enthusiastic ,etc . on the top of the list . It seems that teachers attach more importance to their instructional behavior while students place great emphasis on teachers interpersonal behavior .

#### 4 . Discussion

This research has provided valuable information on how College English teachers self perceived their interpersonal behavior with their students and what the students think of their teachers interpersonal behavior in class . There are some significant differences between teachers perceptions and the perceptions of their students in the scales of helping /friendly ,understanding ,uncertain ,dissatisfied and strict . On the other hand ,it shows the more a teacher and student disagree about the behavior displayed by the teacher ,the less the teacher shows effective behavior and there is a relationship between the amount of discrepancy between the students and teacher s perceptions and the character of certain types of teacher s behavior . Teachers pay more attention to their instructional behavior while their students value their teachers interpersonal behavior .

Some students do not think their teachers are as helping /friendly and understanding as the teachers think they are probably for two reasons . One is that some teachers self reports might be more or less a result of teacher ideals rather than actual behavior . Another contributing factor is the lack of communication between teachers and students . One student complains in the interview :“ Teachers live in downtown and they hurry to catch school bus after class ,we don t even have time to ask questions ,let alone personal communication .” The research also shows that a lot of teachers still value strictness .

Strictness is a behavior that is characteristics of high power distance countries ( Hofstede 1991 ). In Chinese culture ,teachers are expected to care about students and enforce strict rules . As the aphorism goes ,“rearing without education is the fault of the father ,teaching without strictness is the negligence of the teacher ”. However ,although some teachers value strictness ,they are not as strict as they think in class probably for the same reason why some teachers consider themselves to be more friendly and helpful ,and understanding to their students than their students perceive to be the case . That is ,some teachers self reports might be a result of teacher ideals rather than actual behavior .

It is evidenced by the interview that most teachers are aware what is going on in English class which is echoed by most students . However ,some teachers seem to disagree with their students on teachers uncertain behavior . From students perception ,some novice and poor teachers turn a blind eye to class disorder . This is probably because they don t know how to cope with them effectively or because they try to protect themselves . According to Fuller &Brown (see Lewis 2001 ) ,there are a number of levels of concerns experienced by teachers as they gain experience . Initially teachers are concerned about their physical and emotional well being . So for those teachers who appraise classroom misbehavior as threatening would act to protect themselves ,even at the temporary expense of students learning and other needs .

However ,in the interview ,the novice and poor teachers consider themselves to be more confident than their students perceive , which is a bit different from what is discovered through QTI . The investigation with QTI shows teachers perceive themselves a little more uncertain than their students realize . This is probably because when the interview concerns matters such as emotions ,feelings and experiences of the interviewees ,it is likely that some interviewees sometimes tend to maximize their positive behavior while minimize negative one ( Denscombe 2004 ). In Chinese culture ,uncertainty or lack of confidence is regarded as negative personality . So in order to “save their face ” ,nearly no teacher considers himself or herself in the interview to be uncertain when it comes to dealing with classroom disorder although for some teachers it is the case from some students perceptions . In comparison with interview investigation with QTI was conducted anonymously ,teachers were more likely to tell the truth about their negative behavior ,such as uncertain behavior .

When some problems occur in classroom ,the interview evidences that some teachers and students tend to disagree as to how or why certain events took place . There is a tendency that teachers and students blame each other . The poor teacher who complained bitterly in the interview is a typical example . According to Wubbels &Levy (1993 ) ,the phenomenon of blaming the other guy is not uncommon . However ,its unreasonable to single out students for blame ,since class problems are the result of both students and teachers behavior .

## 5 .Implications and Limitations

For some reasons ,the present research is subject to some limitations . The first limitation involves the selection of the participants . All the participants are just from one university and thus ,might not well represent the College teachers interpersonal behavior in China . The results of this study need to be interpreted with caution . The second limitation pertains to the application of the instrument originally generated in the Western culture to the Chinese samples although some revision has been made . Further research needs to be done to develop a Chinese QTI with higher reliability and validity . However ,bearing these limitations in mind ,it should be noted that this study offers some implications to EFL teaching and EFL teacher education in China .

Firstly ,it is imperative to increase teachers self awareness of their behavior . According to Bailey , Curtis & Nunan (2004 ) ,self awareness is the cornerstone of all professional development which is an essential ingredient ,even prerequisite to practicing reflective teaching . Once teachers are made aware of their inappropriate interpersonal behavior ,the vast majority are willing and eager to change .

Secondly ,it is effective to change their interpersonal behavior through feedback . The most effective way for teachers to know the profile of their interpersonal behavior is to engage in informal discussions with students ,and regularly solicit anonymous feedback from students .

Thirdly, teacher training should play certain role in helping EFL teachers deal with real classroom. Some studies (see Alvarez 2007) have showed that teachers who are trained to be more effective in meeting both academic and non-academic student needs are more likely to create a positive and successful classroom environment for all students. However, the great majority of university EFL teachers just become English teachers overnight without pre-service professional training for the target learners. They have been selected from fresh graduates of BA program in English and, increasingly, MA program in English language and literature (Wu 2005). Most EFL teachers shape their views of effective teaching and learning and their teaching practices with prior learning experiences as learners. The interviews demonstrate that most of the teacher participants have received little pre-service or in-service training in how to deal with real classroom. That's why some EFL teachers, armed with pedagogical skills, are lacking in communication and emotional management skills in real classroom.

As the empirical research of teachers interpersonal behavior is a relatively new field of research in China, it is hoped that the present study will pave the way for more such studies.

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