

TEACHERS ROLES IN PROMOTING WBLL : AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract

By means of questionnaire , online feedback from the students , interviews with the teachers and comparisons of two groups four tests results in one and a half years , this paper demonstrates teachers vital roles in promoting WBLL , reveals the relationships between students WBLL activities and their teachers promotion and guidance , between learner autonomy in WBLL and teacher autonomy , and between students learning achievements and their involvement load in WBLL . According to the research findings , the writers point out some positive ways to promoting WBLL .

Key words

teachers roles ; WBLL ; learner autonomy ; learning achievements

1. Introduction

With the rapid advancement of information communication technology , especially , with the wide spread of the Internet , using technology to enhance language teaching and learning has become a popular practice among many Chinese universities . In order to keep pace with social progress , implement the reform of College English teaching and learning , foster learner autonomy and realize the education idea of life long learning , the Ministry of Education of China has adopted a national plan to introduce web - based language learning (WBLL) into College English teaching and learning , thus more and more universities have established self access centers (SAC) to practice WBLL .

Chongqing University , as one of the experimental universities of the Ministry of Education , started the reform of College English teaching and learning in 2003 , changing the traditional English teaching format into the three dimensional one : large classes for English reading , small classes for English speaking and writing , and computer assisted language learning for listening , speaking , communicating and autonomous learning . To make sure students have enough English learning resources , the university introduced four sets of online listening and speaking courseware recommended by the Ministry of Education , developed the English learning databank and online course platform for students to use anytime and anywhere in the campus network . But what's the effect of this reform ? Are the plentiful online learning resources made full use of by the students ? With these questions in mind , the writers began the investigation into students online learning activities in the SAC . And to the writers surprise , the students behaviour in the SAC is quite different . Some students actively participate in various kinds of WBLL activities besides completing the compulsory listening , while some seldom take part in online learning activities except finishing the required one hour s listening a week , and some make use of the SAC to play games , send and receive emails , chat in Chinese or surf the Chinese websites . Seemingly , it is normal , because each student has his / her own likes and dislikes . But after further investigation , the

writers discovered a noteworthy phenomenon :the students often participating in WBL activities in the SAC are always those from certain classes ,who always discuss the same topics or complete the same tasks at certain time on the course platform .Is it accidental ?Associating the features of this phenomenon with Kern & Warschauer's (2000) research findings that many language teachers have enthusiastically embraced networking technology and have developed creative ways of using networked computers with their students ,whereas many other teachers remain skeptical of the value of computer use in general ,the writers address the following questions and make the study from both theoretical and experimental perspectives :

- 1) Is there any relationship between students WBL activities in the SAC and their English teachers promotion and guidance ?
- 2) To what extent does learner autonomy in WBL depend on teacher autonomy ?
- 3) What is the correlation between students English learning achievements and their involvement load in WBL ?

2 . Theoretical perspective on WBL

2.1 Input ,interaction and output perspective on WBL

According to Krashen's (1981 ,1982) comprehensible input hypothesis ,the learner improves and progresses along the natural order when he /she receives second language input that is one step beyond his /her current stage of linguistic competence . The importance of comprehensible input as a major factor in second language acquisition (SLA) is further stressed by Long's (1985) interaction hypothesis that what makes input to be comprehensible is modified interaction ,or negotiation of meaning ,and when meaning is negotiated ,input comprehensibility is usually increased and learners tend to focus on salient linguistic features .Swain (1985) extended this concept to comprehensible output ,who believes that providing learners with opportunities to use the language and skills they have acquired ,at a level in which they are competent ,is almost as important as giving students the appropriate level of input . Since then ,many other researchers explore the relationship between interaction and SLA (Gass 1997 ; Ellis 1999) ,believing the most useful interactions are "those which help learners comprehend the semantics and syntax of input and which help learners to improve the comprehensibility of their own linguistic output" (Hegelheimer &Chapelle 2000 :42) .

However ,providing consistent ,comprehensible input requires a constant familiarity with students ability level ,which represents a great challenge to traditional teaching ,because not all learners can be at the same level of linguistic competence at the same time . Nevertheless ,WBL offers students the opportunity to hear/read comprehensible input ,to negotiate meaning ,and to produce/write comprehensible output (Chapelle 2001) ,thus ensuring each learner receiving input appropriate for his /her current stage of linguistic competence . Therefore ,applying SLA theory to WBL increases comprehensibility ,making the learning content more understandable ,and enhances interaction ,offering students opportunities to use their language skills in direct communication and for the purpose of negotiating meaning in real life situations .

2.2 Constructivist perspective on WBL

Constructivism was derived from Piaget's (1972) perspective of learning and Bruner's (1966 ,1973) general framework for instruction based upon the study of cognition ,whose central idea is that human learning is an internal process that occurs in the mind of the individual and learners build new knowledge upon the foundation of previous learning . Learners incorporate knowledge into the mind by investigating and discovering for themselves ,by creating and recreating ,and by interacting with the environment .

Constructivist paradigm emphasizes the process of learning ,attaches importance to meaning-making through active participation in socially ,culturally ,historically ,and politically situated contexts . As pointed out by Vygotsky (1978) ,knowledge is constructed through communication with others . An individual's cognitive system is a result of communication in social groups and cannot be separated from social life . Therefore ,"social interaction provides mediated interpretations of experiences and much of what is learned about the world is dependent upon communication among individuals" (Leflore 2000 : 111) .

Since learning is an active process, a learner directed interactive learning environment is more appropriate than a teacher dominated learning environment for students to construct their knowledge. WBL is one of the best environments of realizing constructivist framework. Under WBL environment, learners are encouraged to construct knowledge by exploring information and moving at their own pace, on their own needs, and at their own time, which lead to the development of critical and independent thinking skills, deeper understanding of concepts and long lasting learning. In this way, teacher's roles change from a filler and transmitter of knowledge to an organizer and a guide of the teaching process, while students' roles alter from passive accepters to active constructors of knowledge and meaning.

Constructivist approach to learning stresses authentic, challenging projects that include students, teachers and experts in the learning community, which is also one of the advantages of WBL. Through chat rooms, e-mails, and other communicative tools, learners can engage in an active dialog, ask or discuss questions, express their ideas, get experience from their partners, thus bring his/her initiative and potential into full play and make social interaction and communication, cooperative and collaborative learning come true.

2.3 Sociocognitive perspective on WBL

Sociocognitive perspective maintains language is a social and cognitive phenomenon understood through social interaction and assimilation of others' speech, rather than merely a private entity or series of operational sequences that occur solely in the head. Peer interaction, scaffolding, and modeling are important ways to facilitate individual cognitive growth and knowledge acquisition (Vygotsky 1962, 1978). From sociocognitive perspective, language instruction is viewed not just in terms of providing comprehensible input, but rather as helping students enter into the kinds of authentic social discourse situations and discourse communities that they would later encounter outside the classroom (Kern & Warschauer 2000).

With sociocognitive approaches to WBL we move from learners' interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer (Kern & Warschauer 2000). Computers provide alternative contexts for social interaction and facilitate access to existing discourse communities and the creation of new ones. With the Internet, students may search through millions of files around the world within minutes, and using e-mail, chat rooms, BBS, ICQ, Newsgroup, etc., students can communicate with each other. Through synchronous and asynchronous conversations, they encounter hundreds or thousands of people and all kinds of authentic social discourse situations and discourse communities, thus cultivating their communicative and collaborative competence.

2.4 Autonomous learning perspective on WBL

According to Holec (1981), autonomy is to have the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, such as determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedures of acquisition and evaluating what has been acquired. In his opinion, this ability is not inborn but must be acquired either by natural means or by formal learning, in a systematic, deliberate way.

Compared with traditional English teaching and learning, WBL is a more effective form of autonomous learning, which not only presents opportunities for learners to study on their own, independent of a teacher, but also offers opportunities for learners to direct their own learning (Benson 2001). Therefore, WBL supports autonomous learning, advocates a learner-centred approach, encourages individualized and cooperative learning, and eventually makes learning more efficient and more productive.

3. Empirical study on WBL

WBL promises great potential for second language teaching and learning, because it overcomes the spatial and time limitations of traditional classroom, and solve many problems insurmountable in the traditional classroom, such as limited resources, authenticity of language materials and collaborative learning, etc. Thus the exploration of how learners acquire their language skills through WBL receives a great deal of attention, and many researches on WBL, both theoretically and practically, have been

conducted and a lot of results have been achieved . However , little research to date has been conducted to explore the correlations between students WBLL activities and their English teachers promotion and guidance , between learner autonomy in WBLL and teacher autonomy , and between students English learning achievements and their involvement load in WBLL . This empirical study is to find the answer to the above problems through a more detailed data analysis , hoping the research findings will provide some inspiration for teachers in promoting WBLL and at the same time contribute to our knowledge of the research in the field .

3 .1 Subjects

The writers chose 108 non -English major students of four classes as the main informants , who were graded band 1 through the English placement test after enrolment in Chongqing University . The two classes , taught by teacher 1 , are group 1 , whose students often communicate in English in the SAC besides completing the compulsory learning , and the other two classes , taught by teacher 2 , are group 2 , whose students only go to the SAC to complete the required one hour listening a week . The two English teachers are the interviewees . There are 57 students in group 1 , among them 20 being males and 37 females . In group 2 there are 51 students , 35 males and 16 females . All of them ranged in age from 17 - 21 , with an average age of 19 . And all of them have studied English for more than 6 years . 108 questionnaires are distributed to the students and collected by their English teachers .

3 .2 Instruments

3 .2 .1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire is designed to investigate the differences in online English learning between the two groups of students . The questionnaire has four sections . Section one is the background information ; the informants are required to fill in their personal information of age , gender , and years of English learning . Section two is about students attitude to WBLL , consisting of 20 statements , each having five choices : 1 =strongly disagree , 2 =disagree , 3 =neutral , 4 =agree , and 5 =strongly agree . The informants are demanded to choose one closest statement that corresponds to their opinions . Section three is related to students learning behaviour in WBLL , and section four is concerning teachers promotion to WBLL , containing 18 and 14 statements respectively . The informants are expected to choose one closest answer that corresponds to their true cases on the 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 : 1 =never , 2 =seldom , 3 =sometimes , 4 =often , and 5 =always .

3 .2 .2 Placement test and achievement tests of band 13

In order to give an objective assessment of the students progress over the one and half years learning and confirm that WBLL under the proper guidance of the teacher is more effective than that without the guidance of the teacher , the four tests results of the two groups are compared and analyzed .

The English placement test , set by CET 4 / 6 Committee , containing listening , reading , vocabulary and cloze , was employed to grade the students after enrolment in Chongqing University . The reliability coefficient of the paper proves to be 0 .753 , and 0 .813 after being standardized .

The English achievement tests of band 13 were used to test whether students have achieved the levels the university stipulates , all of which were designed by the institute s exam committee , re-examined and verified by experts . To ensure the objectivity of the assessment , the students names had been sealed before assessment . All the English teachers teaching the same band participated in the rating according to unified assessment criteria at the same time and in the same place . Therefore , the validity and reliability of the tests are relatively high .

3 .2 .3 Interviews with the teachers

The interviews were conducted with the two English teachers . The purpose was to have better understanding of their perceptions and pedagogy of WBLL , and what guidance they gave to the students in WBLL and how they gave the guidance . In order to avoid not telling the truth because of psychological pressure or discomfort , the writers got to know the problems through several informal chats with the teachers .

3.2.4 Students WBLL behaviour and feedback

The data of this part are all from the course platform ,including students attitudes towards the platform ,the assessment of their learning and the output quantity of their communicative and collaborative learning in the first term .

3.3 Procedure

The survey was conducted in four stages :1) handing out and collecting questionnaires ;2) data analysis (Factor analysis ,Cronbach ,mean values ,standard deviations and two tailed P values obtained from independent samples T test ,with $P < 0.05$ as the criterion for statistical significance ,were applied using SPSS Version 14.0) ;3)interviews with the two English teachers and 4) online investigation about students actual attitudes and behaviour in WBLL .

4 . Research results

4.1 Questionnaire

Factor analysis of the 52 items of the original questionnaire has been used to measure the construct validity of the scale . Three factors are supposed according to the contents of the investigation :students attitude to WBLL ,students behaviour in WBLL and teachers promotion to WBLL .

Through KMO test ,the value of the scale is proved to be 0.879 and Approx . Chi-Square of Bartlett's Test is 6590.050 . The significance of Bartlett's statistic is zero ,less than 0.05 ,which means factor analysis can be performed .

After principal component analysis and varimax orthogonal rotation ,the writers delete the 4 items , whose factor loading is less than 0.4 or high in two dimensions ,or whose meaning is hard to interpret or repetitive . The result shows the cumulative contribution of the 3 factors is 45.918 % . The factor loading of each item can be seen in Table 1 . The Cronbach of each dimension is measured and the results show the modified questionnaire has appropriate and well-documented reliability because the Cronbach of dimension 1 is 0.9148 ,0.9083 and 0.9112 respectively ,which assures the high internal consistency of the questionnaire .

Table 1 . Dimensions and factor loadings of each item in the questionnaire

Dimension 1		Dimension 2		Dimension 3	
Students behaviour in WBLL	Students Attitude to WBLL	Teachers	Promotion to WBLL		
item	Factor loading	item	Factor loading	item	Factor loading
32	.763	15	.748	46	.763
31	.728	3	.700	47	.752
29	.725	10	.696	52	.721
34	.695	8	.670	51	.702
37	.694	13	.661	48	.689
35	.679	4	.657	43	.688
26	.673	14	.649	49	.682
38	.632	2	.638	50	.652
33	.631	11	.637	42	.645
36	.618	16	.631	45	.595
25	.608	1	.624	41	.422
30	.604	17	.611		
23	.591	9	.605		
21	.575	19	.593		
27	.499	18	.579		
22	.482	7	.571		
28	.423	6	.563		

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3
	12	.519
	5	.482
	20	.482

From dimension 1 one can see the average mean for group 1 is 2.9309, while for group 2 only 2.0784 and there is great difference between the two groups behaviour in WBLL (P =0.000). It can be seen from dimension 2 that most students have a positive attitude toward WBLL, as the mean values for both groups are in the high range (3.5193 for group 1 and 3.3892 for group 2), showing most students agree that WBLL contributes a lot to the improvement of their language skills. The statistical results show there is no significant difference in the responses of the two groups (P >0.05). The statistics of teachers promotion to WBLL can be seen from dimension 3. The students evaluation of their teachers in this aspect is quite different. The average mean for group 1 is 3.8644 in the high range, while that for group 2 is 2.9519 in the medium range. The former are more positive about their English teachers in WBLL, so statistical significance can be observed between the two groups (P =0.000). Comparatively, the students of group 1 make better use of WBLL than those of group 2, although the latter almost have the same positive attitude towards WBLL, which may be closely related to their English teachers promotion and encouragement (See Table 2).

Table 2. Statistics result comparison between the two groups in their responses to the questionnaire

dimension	group	N	Mean	SD	Sig. (2 tailed)
1	1	57	2.9309	.63881	.000
	2	51	2.0784	.64057	
2	1	57	3.5193	.67100	.278
	2	51	3.3892	.56713	
3	1	57	3.8644	.58718	.000
	2	51	2.9519	.79718	

4.2 Tests

As shown in Table 3, in the placement test, the two groups had almost the same English proficiency, with the average mean scores and standard deviations being very close and no significant difference seen from the results of the independent samples T test (P >0.05). So it is safely concluded that both groups have the same English proficiency when entering the university.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the placement test (The total score is 85)

group	N	Mean	SD	Sig. (2 tailed)
1	57	38.18	14.126	.648
2	51	37.55	15.257	

Results from the analysis of the two groups English achievement tests of band 13 indicate (Table 4): in the test of band 1, there is significant difference in their achievement of English listening proficiency (P =0.015), with group 1 clearly better than group 2, but there is no significant difference in reading (P =0.385) and translation (P =0.323); In the test of band 2, there is significant difference in their English writing proficiency (P =0.002), and although there is no significant difference in listening and reading (P =0.117 and 0.343 respectively), the mean scores of group 1 are slightly higher than those of group 2; Comparing the average mean scores of the test of band 3 in listening, reading and writing, one can find out that group 1 are generally better in the three language skills, because the mean scores of group 1 in listening, reading and writing are higher than those of group 2. Moreover, significant differences exist in both reading and writing proficiency, especially in writing, with the significance levels of the difference being 0.041 and 0.000 (p <0.05).

Table 4 . Descriptive statistics of English achievement tests of band 1-3

Band	Group	N	Listening (10 points)		Sig.(2- tailed)	Reading (15 points)		Sig.(2- tailed)	Translation(band 1) , writing(band 2 and 3)(15 points)		Sig.(2- tailed)
			Mean	SD		Mean	SD		Mean	SD	
1	1	57	9.63	2.238	.015	13.23	2.440	.385	12.46	2.284	.323
	2	51	8.58	2.183		13.00	2.352		12.93	2.239	
2	1	57	9.88	2.274	.117	14.84	2.501	.343	9.70	2.454	.002
	2	51	9.26	2.394		14.34	2.425		8.47	1.273	
3	1	57	8.20	2.020	.058	10.98	2.832	.041	11.30	2.258	.000
	2	51	7.46	2.022		9.97	2.324		8.78	1.487	

4.3 Interviews

The interviews, aiming at knowing more about the teachers' attitudes, pedagogy and suggestions for WBLL, were conducted with the two English teachers. The comments from them were recorded and summarized as follows:

The teacher of group 1: I think WBLL should be strengthened further. Those of us who are practicing teaching and communicating with students through WBLL have experienced the advantages of it, so we are active in encouraging students learning through WBLL in the SAC by participating ourselves in students learning activities on the net. However, not all of the teachers realize the advantages of WBLL. Reluctance to spend more time, lack of computer knowledge and being skeptical of students' autonomous learning competence may be the main factors that hinder teachers from encouraging students to use the web sources. Teachers have a vital role to play in supporting learners in WBLL mode until the learners become autonomous.

The teacher of group 2: I think WBLL is a good way of improving students' competence in English, but the effectiveness of WBLL depends on the students themselves. It is impossible for us to spend so much time online to communicate with students, because we have so many lectures every week. Moreover, our knowledge in computer is limited. Without proper training in computer, how can we give proper guidance to the students?

The two teachers' responses explain the reason of the different behaviour between the two groups in the same WBLL environment. And one can come to the conclusion that although some other factors may influence learners' improvement on language proficiency, WBLL with appropriate guidance from the teachers does have some positive effect on students.

4.4 Students' WBLL behaviour and feedback

To understand students' attitudes towards the online course platform and their behaviour, the writers make two aspects of investigations on the platform. The first is the click frequency and the vocabulary output quantity statistics of the students in group 1. The average click frequency of each student in a term is 1580 times, with the highest click frequency reaching 4958 times. And the average English output quantity in the forum in a term is 13980 words a student, the most being 35 thousand words, which is incomparable to the traditional teaching mode.

The second is the feedback of the students in group 1. After they had been learning with the platform for a semester, their English teacher writes a message on the forum expressing her willingness to know students' feelings and experiences on the platform. After the teacher published the message, answers appeared in a continuous stream, which are summarized as follows:

- 1) Our course platform is wonderful, which expands our knowledge, gives us a free room to communicate and helps us practice and improve our writing;
- 2) The Forum is most valuable, because it gives us the chance to talk freely and to express our own opinions on some aspects, where we can discuss some topics in our daily life or study, say what we want to say, and show our experiences;
- 3) Wiki is very useful, which helps us to remember words;
- 4) Workshop and Chat room are also very

interesting and beneficial for us to express our ideas in writing and chatting in English .

5 . Discussion

5 .1 The necessity of teacher guidance in WBLL

WBLL may foster learner autonomy because it creates the conditions in which learning proceeds by negotiation ,interaction ,and problem solving ,rather than by telling and showing . However ,it doesn't mean that learner autonomy will develop naturally in WBLL .If proper encouragement and guidance from the teacher are given ,students can soon achieve the transition from dependence to independence ,adapt themselves to the new learning environment ,and take an active part in WBLL activities . As shown in the study ,the students of group 1 are supported ,challenged and stimulated by their teachers and ,with ample opportunities for online input and interaction ,they increase their output greatly ,whereas those of group 2 ,who are put into the WBLL environment to implement their own learning without guidance ,are largely hindered in the application of the resources of the net ,thus their output is greatly limited . Therefore ,only when good WBLL environment is combined with appropriate cultivation from the teacher ,learner autonomy in WBLL can be developed .

5 .2 The necessity of the transition of teacher roles in WBLL

Many studies have shown that the successful implementation of CALL depends largely on teachers ,who eventually determine how it is used ,which force teachers to re think and often modify their whole teaching approach ,to acquire new skills ,to update their already existing skills ,and to take on greater responsibility for the educational choices they make (Jones 2001). However ,not all of the teachers are well prepared for it . Teachers new ,emerging roles entail possessing increasingly complex skills ,such as managing and controlling the learning process ,initiating students learning motivation ,their affective and cognitive competence ,engaging in some meaningful activities ,including collaborating with students ,exchanging ideas ,providing and receiving feedback ,etc . Therefore ,English teachers ,in addition to language proficiency ,skills of using multimedia and web technologies ,should be involved in students learning process ,acting as their learning buddy ,support and challenge the learning activities ,so that to realize the transition of roles and conception of learner centred .

5 .3 The necessity of teacher training in implementing WBLL

Teachers new roles in WBLL determine they have a good deal of work to do ,including managing students ,offering continuous guidance ,choosing software and resources ,preparing problem based tasks ,monitoring progress and evaluating learning results ,which needs not only professional but also managing and social knowledge from the teachers . Moreover ,adopting a new ,technology enhanced approach to teaching raises the important question of investment in time and energy (Canapero 2004). However ,just as Little (1991) points out teachers who were themselves taught in the expository mode and whose training was in the same tradition ,are likely to find it difficult to make the transition from purveyor of information to a counsellor and manager of learning resources . Thus teacher training becomes a key to the success of the implementation of WBLL . Policymakers should examine the psychological ,social ,cognitive ,and organizational factors that affect teachers willingness to integrate technology in their teaching ,investigate how teachers interact with students in a technology supported language environment (Zhao 2005) ,so that to make teachers better prepared for incorporating WBLL in their teaching practices and trying various approaches in the context of their own practice . Therefore ,in addition to making technology an integral part of teacher preparation ,the integration of technology in schools will be facilitated by reform of in service professional development of teachers ,reform of teacher preparation programs ,and transformation of pedagogical practices from teacher centred to student centred approaches (Vrasidas & Glass 2005) .

6 . Conclusion

Concerning the questions being addressed at the beginning of this paper ,three main points are made clear about the practice of WBLL . First ,students WBLL activities are closely related to their English teachers promotion and guidance ,second ,learner autonomy in WBLL largely depends on teacher autonomy ,and third ,students learning achievements are positively correlated with their involvement

load in WBLL . Therefore , conclusion can be safely drawn from the study that students learning in WBLL , if guided appropriately , can have a positive effect on their learning , not only their current but also their life long learning , which is just the goal of our education .

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