

Effects of Teacher and Student Relationship on the Learning of Chinese Language by International Students in China

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ABSTRACT China has become the largest destination for overseas study in Asia. However, the value of the teacher-student relationship (TSR), that influences the effectiveness of teaching content transmission, has not yet been realized in the practice of teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL). To supplement data for empirical research, interviews were conducted in this study with international students in China. Primarily using a psychological approach, the study focused on the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural communication between teachers and students. 30 international students studying Chinese at a university in China were selected for in-depth interviews and their perceptions of their interpersonal relationship with Chinese language teachers was analysed. Findings evidenced four factors that have a positive impact on TSRs. These were, engaging teaching strategies, interactive in-class discussions, after-class informal chats, and intercultural awareness. Based on the findings, this paper proposed relevant suggestions to improve TSR further.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Research

Enhanced international communication and travel contribute to international student mobility (Wen 2018). International student mobility is increasing across the world, and mobility patterns are altering. China's emergence as a major destination country in its own right is perhaps the most significant change that has occurred in recent years (Mulvey and Lo 2021). Among international students worldwide, 492,185 of them studied in China in the year 2018, making China the third largest destination for international students (Ministry of Education 2019). It is therefore necessary to conduct relevant research on this large group of international students.

Purpose and Significance of the Research

The teacher-student relationship (TSR) influences the effectiveness of teaching content

transmission and affects students implicitly and constantly (Huo 2017). A favorable TSR is conducive to establishing a safe and comfortable environment, that students prefer to actively communicate with others in and also develop a positive attitude to learning a language, increasing their language level. As Mu (2017) proposed, TSR is intimately related to learning effect and mainly manifested in two aspects of students' learning cognition and classroom effect. Zhang (2007) also states that interactive communication is effective for students to master knowledge and skills, which will both, stimulate students' learning motivation and improve the classroom effect. Teachers' proper expectations and positive emotions are beneficial to the development of students' self-confidence and it can effectively reduce the degree of students' depression (Yang 2002).

With the development of China's foreign policy, China has become the largest destination for overseas study in Asia. However, the value of TSR has not yet been realized in the practice of TCFL. Teachers pay too much attention to academic teaching and ignore the importance of the psychological and emotional relationship with their students. To supplement data for empirical research, interviews were conducted in this study among international students in China. This paper reports on the findings in relations to the following research questions:

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1. What is the current relationship situation between international undergraduates and teachers in Chinese language learning?
2. How do international students in China describe their relationship with teachers in their Chinese language learning?
3. How do international students in China perceive the influences of the teacher-student relationship in their Chinese language learning in China?

This study explores the influence of teacher-student relationship on Chinese learners from emotional factors, focusing on the analysis of problems from the perspective of educational psychology. Besides, it may assist practitioners in having a deeper understanding of the learning situation of Chinese learners and provide new ideas for related Chinese learners and educators.

Literature Review

Teacher-student relationship (TSR) refers to one of the most critical, essential and dynamic interpersonal relationship in school organisation (Mu 2017), and hence, teachers and students are both an important component affecting the progress of students' Chinese language learning and an engagement of Chinese language learning motivation (ibid). Its essence is the interpersonal relationship based on psychological communication, which takes teaching content as the medium and mainly in the form of emotion, cognition and behaviour communication between teachers and students (Zhang 2007). In this study, the researchers will focus on the influence of interpersonal psychological relationship between teachers and students on the study of Chinese by foreign students.

Since the 1950s, a large number of scholars have done research on the measurement and analysis of teacher-student relationship. Meanwhile, the Minnesota Teacher Attitude Inventory (MTAI) was widely applied to measure teacher's attitudes toward students and teaching (Yee and Fruchter 1971). Its score is a measure comprised of five interpretable and meaningful attitude dimensions, identified as follows:

1. Children's irresponsible tendencies and lack of self-discipline
2. Conflict between teachers' and pupils' interests

3. Rigidity and severity in handling pupils
4. Pupils' independence in learning
5. Pupils' acquiescence to the teacher.

However, its scores have been found unstable and the correlation validity lacks authenticity and accuracy because of the spurious response. Then, Barrett-Lennard created a self-reported questionnaire called the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (BLRI) to measure the teacher-student relationship, based on the client's perceptions of the therapist's attitudes in the relationship (Barrett-Lennard 1978). The BLRI comprises four subscales, namely, empathic understanding, level of regard, unconditionality, and congruence. These studies show that teachers' enthusiasm to encourage students can promote students' creativity and improve their academic performance.

It is believed that positive relationships between instructors and students have a substantial impact on students' academic progress. According to Xie and Derakhshan (2021), "Teacher care, clarity, credibility, rapport with students, stroke, immediacy, and confirmation" are examples of how teachers positively anticipate academic outcomes in students such as "motivation, learning, engagement, involvement, class attendance, willingness to communicate, performance, and success". As a consequence, the aforementioned traits of teachers may be seen to be advantageous, as they contribute to learners' satisfaction and enable their objectives and requirements to be met (Frymier 2016). Happy psychology evolved from a more conventional outlook on life to a more open-minded approach, and as a result, happy emotions have been developed in learners when instructors and students engage positively and constructively (Wang et al. 2021). According to studies, students are more likely to see their instructors as just if they have been provided with helpful interactions in the classroom that address the students' needs (Gasser et al. 2018). Noddings (1984) created the phrase "teacher care", which refers to a teacher's level of empathy and sensitivity toward the needs of others. Similarly, one may say the same thing about educational contexts (Gasser et al. 2018). It is believed that when students are aware of their professors' compassion for them during class, they would feel more secure (Noddings 2006). When instructors show

care for their students' well-being, students feel more appreciated, are more engaged in class, have a stronger sense of self-worth, and perform better (Derakhshan et al. 2019).

Given the critical role of strong teacher-student connections in students' learning outcomes, classroom-based research on teacher-student relationships is surprisingly scarce. In contrast to studies that examine relationships and achievement-related outcomes at the group level, Utrecht University researchers have concentrated on the more immediate effects of good connections. This study studied how teacher-student relationships are established in classroom interactions and how teacher-student interactions influence students' contextual learning behaviours (Claessens et al. 2016). The teacher-student connection is an abstract construct that is best understood as "the generalised interpersonal meaning students and instructors attach to their interactions with one another" (Wubbels et al. 2012: 11). Given that all human relationships are temporally nested and evolve via real-time interactions, the teacher-student relationship may be seen as an accumulation of a plethora of transitory conditions (Korthagen et al. 2014).

Based on tremendous reliable studies, as an important research topic in the hidden curriculum, TSR plays a vital role in promoting the development of teaching practice and completing the educational and teaching objectives. The most urgent problem is that the empirical research on teacher-student interaction behaviour is yet to be proposed. Previously, scholars paid close attention to the teaching skills and levels of Chinese as a foreign language (Huo 2017). Nevertheless, few laid emphases on TSR, and especially hardly has any research sought to provide methods based on juxtaposing the theory and empirical research in an attempt to figure out which types of teacher-student relationship are given priority by foreign Chinese language learners.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participants

The survey took the international college of a comprehensive language university as an example, which had a high degree of internationalisation. The subjects of the survey were international students majoring in Chinese. The par-

ticipants were both female (N = 17, 56.7%) and male (N = 13, 43.3%). Their ages varied from 18 to 23 years (N = 22, 73.3%) years and above (N = 8, 26.7%). They were undergraduate or graduate students, including 3 freshman (10%), 9 sophomore (30%), 6 junior (20%), 9 senior (30%), and 3 graduate (10%) students. All the interviewees had passed the Chinese Language Test (HSK) before entering the school. The grades that the participants received were such that 6 (20%) had passed HSK-1 level, 6 (20%) had passed HSK-2 level, 12 (40%) had passed HSK-3 level, 3 (10%) had passed HSK-4 level, and 3 (10%) had passed HSK-5 or higher level. Thirty overseas students in China took part in the interview and all responded by the end of the spring semester of the 2020-2021 academic year.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study adopts qualitative research based on the perspective of hidden curriculum. The transcribed interviews respectively went through three steps of coding, that is, open, axial and selective. These open codes were put together for the second round of axial coding, as they had many overlapping results. The axial coding yielded 24 converged categories, ranging from aspects of the TSR affecting students to reasons for students not having conversations with teachers.

In selective coding, eight recurring themes emerged, including aspects of the TSR affecting students, act of showing affection for Chinese teachers, willingness to answer questions in class, atmosphere of Chinese classes, qualities of Chinese teachers that attract attention, types of Chinese teachers that students like, willingness of chatting with Chinese teachers after class, and reasons for students not having conversations with teachers. Table 1 specifies the themes and 24 categories and the frequencies of initial codes.

RESULTS

This section presents the performance and views of the interviewed international students in TSR and Chinese learning.

A Good TSR Stimulates Enthusiasm and Motivation of Students' Chinese Language Learning

TSR has become a significant factor to stimulate students' enthusiasm and motivation to

learn Chinese. According to the frequencies of codes, quite a large number of students think that TSR may influence learning interest. Table 1 shows that a good TSR can indeed promote students' interest in learning Chinese. Harmonious TSR can make teaching activities run more smoothly. In this way, teaching content is easier to understand for students, and students will give feedback to their teachers as soon as possible. TSR influences the transfer of knowledge and understanding in aspects of students' interest, attitude, achievement and emotional state, and influences the Chinese language learning of international students.

Table 1: Emerging themes, categories and frequencies of initial codes

<i>Emerging themes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Frequencies of codes</i>
Aspects of the TSR affecting students	Learning interest	23
	Learning attitude	17
	Academic performance	21
Act of showing affection for Chinese teachers	Being active in class	19
	Completing homework carefully	20
	Communicating with teachers	13
Willingness to answer questions in class	Being confident	13
	Being general	14
	Being indifferent or afraid	11

Dealing with Inadequate Attention to Classroom Atmosphere

With regard to the atmosphere of Chinese language classes, a few students hold the view that the atmosphere in their Chinese language class is active and the interaction between teachers and students is frequent (Table 2). On the contrary, more students think that the atmosphere in their Chinese language class is quiet with little interaction between the students and the teacher owing to the fact that the teacher does not care much about the students. This leads to the students doing their own things during class. It is therefore easy to see that the learning atmosphere in a Chinese language learning class for international students is not sufficiently engaging with only a few international students finding the classroom atmosphere lively and positive. According to the results of the interviews with students, teachers often impart

knowledge in order to catch up on the progress of the class, which makes students lose their interest in answering questions. Students believe that teachers should adjust their teaching methods and establish an equal and harmonious TSR in order to motivate students effectively in class.

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Allowing Teachers to Use Their Knowledge and Personality

It can be seen from Table 3 that a teacher's charm and academic ability plays an important role in the process of international students learning Chinese. It can be seen that students like humorous teachers and these teachers are the most popular with students. Humorous teachers get along easily with students, resulting in a good TSR. Among the three qualities most favored by students, being humorous and getting along well with students are shown to be more conducive to constructing a harmonious TSR.

Table 1: Emerging themes, categories and frequencies of initial codes

<i>Emerging themes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Frequencies of codes</i>
Aspects of the TSR affecting students	Learning interest	23
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Coping with Reduced Opportunities for Communication

Talking to teachers after class can promote the TSR to a certain extent, but in most cases, due to time and other constraints, there are few opportunities for teacher-student communication after class (Table 4). With regard to the willingness to chat with Chinese teachers after class, quite a large number of students indicate that they want to talk with their teachers after class. It shows that students have a strong desire to communicate with teachers, and students are willing to express and share with teachers. Nevertheless, they did not take that step because of various restrictions, including shyness, lack of time as well as other reasons. In mitigate lack of time as a barrier for communication between teachers and students, the researchers suggest setting up teacher office hours in the Chinese college. The main form of office hours is that different teachers answer students' questions in the office at a specific time. Students can see when each teacher is free on the college website and go to their office to talk to them directly. This aims to strengthen academic guidance for students and improve the relationship between teachers and students through face-to-face communication.

Table 4: Emerging themes, categories and frequencies of initial codes

<i>Emerging themes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Frequencies of codes</i>
Willingness to chat with Chinese teachers after class	Would like to	24
	Do not want	21
Reasons students are not having conversations with teachers	No interest	7
	No chance	35
	Being afraid to talk to teachers	10

DISCUSSION

First, the researchers confirm that a healthy TSR is not only a unique social and international interaction but has a remarkable influence on students (Huo 2017; Chen 2019). Furthermore, we tentatively indicate that a strong TSR contributes to students' engagement in four aspects, including learning interest, learning attitude,

mood status and their academic performance (Engels et al. 2021).

Second, the researchers observed that international students learning Chinese show their affection for their teachers in three ways: actively participating in the classroom, completing their homework carefully, and frequently exchanging their ideas with teachers. These discoveries, which are inferred from empirical research, strongly support the study of Xie and Derakhshan (2021) which reflects that teachers' positive engagement and anticipation will benefit student-related outcomes. What is more, this study contributes to filling in the blank in the empirical field in international students' perception of the TSR influence in their Chinese language learning.

Third, the level of concern teacher's shown for their students and a classroom environment that invites participation is important for a strong TSR. This research indicates that teachers focus too much on academic teaching and neglect to adjust the classroom atmosphere or take students' interest into consideration. The research further validates that rapport-building can be orchestrated through different methods such as classroom dialogue (Sybing 2021).

Fourth, this study reports that a teacher's personality and academic ability play important roles in the process of international students' learning Chinese. A teacher's personality provides an incentive value for students' academic development (Fang 2010). Zhang (2012) explains that teachers' personalities affect the acceptability of educational content in three ways. First, personality is an invisible influence, which has a traction effect on students' interest in learning. Second, teachers with different personalities may have different teaching requirements for the same content. Third, if the same teaching content is taught by different teachers with different personalities, the acceptability to students is also different. The research of Shen (2009) shows that teachers' professional qualities are most respected by students, and a vivid and flexible approach in the classroom can attract students' attention and interest in learning. In addition, a teacher's personality, interpersonal relationship and other factors can have a certain impact on students' motivation to learn.

Another important finding is that mitigating reduced opportunities for communication can

help improve TSR. The research by Zhou (2018) indicates that communication effectiveness has a significant predictive effect on TSR, and communication is an important means to build a good TSR. Liu (2019) argues that communication between students and teachers belongs to cross-cultural communication in a broad sense. Cross-cultural communication between teachers and students requires both sides to respect and understand each other's culture. Students are one of the subjects of communication between teachers and students, as well as knowledge recipients of Chinese language teaching. To improve communication and cooperation between teachers and students, it is not just the effort of teachers or schools that should be relied on, but students' own willingness to learn will also be needed (Pu 2021). The new era calls for the TSR to break past the traditional methods, reconstruct, and establish a new model of a good TSR or "teacher-student community", that is a new model for good TSRs, strengthening communication between teachers and students (Huang and Tang 2021).

Due to the limitation of the sample used in this research, there would be benefit in conducting further research improving the samples used.

CONCLUSION

In teaching activities, teachers create ways for communication between teachers and students, and students give feedback according to the ways created by teachers and they interact in the teaching activities. Based on the reality of communication, teachers are suggested to master the multi-faceted functions of new media to promote teachers and students communicate in various ways, and enhance the mutual understanding between them. For example, in the process of online teaching, teachers should not only use new media technology to explain micro-lessons and share files, but use network forums or video communication to inspire students' enthusiasm for discussion. It can be seen that teachers' behavioural strategies play a decisive role in the establishment of a good relationship between teachers and students in TCFL. Therefore, based on the investigation and analysis of the current situation of TSR, this paper mainly discusses how to establish a good TSR to promote the development of TCFL from the perspective of teachers.

Findings prove four aspects that have a positive impact on TSR, namely, participatory teaching strategy, classroom interactive discussion, informal chat after class, and cross-cultural awareness. Besides, carrying out extracurricular activities, providing more adaptive courses and consciously communicating with students can improve the teacher-student relationship to a certain extent, improve the teaching effect of teachers and the Chinese learning level of international students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the future, it is hoped to attract more researchers' attention to the teacher-student relationship and foreign students' Chinese learning, and conduct more in-depth and comprehensive research on this, explore more feasible ways and methods to build a harmonious teacher-student relationship, and jointly provide some guiding experience and reference for the teachers of Chinese as a foreign language.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the limitation of many conditions, both theoretical interpretation and empirical research in this paper have shortcomings. First, because of the limited time and experience, a comprehensive study on the factors influencing the teacher-student relationship and its influence on international students has not been done. Second, the research object of this paper is restricted by the number of samples. Although the student samples involved in South Korea, Brazil, Russia, Egypt and other countries, national sample selection is not comprehensive enough, this to some extent can cause some limitations of this study, subject to further research in the future.

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