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The blended ELT environment and the changing roles of teachers and students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper explores the changing roles of the teachers and the students in the blended teaching and learning environment in Hong Kong. This emerging blended environment has become the norm in tertiary education in the sense that both the teachers and the students are engaged in a combination of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and classroom face-to-face (FTF) interaction on a daily basis. This paper takes a discourse perspective in the analysis of both online CMC discussion forum data and classroom FTF discourse data. Discourse “acts” (Stenström, 1994, p. 30) are specifically analyzed in the data to reveal the multiple roles of the teachers and the students in this environment. These multiple and changing roles are further verified through two questionnaire surveys on the perceptions of their roles among a number of teachers and students. The findings show that in the blended ELT environment, while the traditional roles of the teachers as information providers, knowledge transmitters, supervisors and assessors, and the students as learners, participants, and respondents are still dominant, the teachers are also increasingly putting on new “hats” as expert learners, facilitators, course designers and organizers. Apart from being learners, the students are also taking on new roles as topic contributors, meaning negotiators, information providers, strategic communicators and monitors.

Keywords: *teacher roles, student roles, computer-mediated communication, face-to-face interaction, blended teaching and learning; discourse analysis*

Teachers and students worldwide take up new roles as new technologies are being introduced into education. There have been emerging modes, namely “web-enhanced”, “blended”, “hybrid”, and “fully online” (Smith & Kurthen, 2007, p. 457) learning and teaching in the majority of tertiary institutions in Hong Kong. These modes, consisting essentially of a face-to-face (FTF) component and a computer-mediated communication (CMC) component, have re-configured the constructs on learning, teaching, classroom dynamics, online discourse, and the roles and responsibilities of the teachers and the students.

This paper is based on a research project on the “blended” learning and teaching in the Hong Kong Institute of Education. The three “blended” courses involved in this project are “Vocabulary Studies”, “Language and Societal Modernization”, and “Written and Spoken Discourse for ELT”. Students of “Vocabulary Studies” and “Language and Societal

Modernization” are involved in the “blended” mode of learning, i.e. 80% FTF and 20% CMC by means of synchronous “Blackboard” online discussion forums. Students of “Language and Societal Modernization” and “Written and Spoken Discourse for ELT” are involved in questionnaire surveys on the changing roles of the teachers and the students in Hong Kong.

The purpose of the paper is to identify and explore the multiple and changing roles of the teachers and the students in Hong Kong in the blended teaching and learning environment through the discourse “act” (Stenström, 1994, p. 30) analysis of both classroom FTF discourse and online CMC discourse data. These multiple roles are further verified through questionnaire surveys on the perceptions of their roles among a number of the teachers and the students in Hong Kong. The roles of the teachers that have been identified in this research include information provider, knowledge transmitter, guide, assessor, course designer, facilitator, advisor, mentor, organizer, carer, monitor, social worker, decision maker, team-leader, participant, friend, manager, expert learner, entertainer, actor/actress/star, and researcher. The roles of the students that have been identified in this research include learners, participants, respondents, team-builders, teacher helpers, listeners, topic contributors, strategic communicators, meaning negotiators, meaning makers, peer competitors, information providers, and monitors. The terms were brainstormed among the survey groups, and then verified through questionnaire surveys.

Literature Review

The paper involves a discourse perspective on the “blended” teaching and learning environment and the identification of the multiple roles of the teachers and the students in Hong Kong, therefore, the literature review covers discourse analysis (DA), classroom and online based “blended” teaching and learning, and the roles and responsibilities of the Hong Kong teachers and students.

Discourse analysis is “the study of the relationship between language and the contexts in which it is used” (McCarthy, 2002, pp. 5-7). As far as the classroom FTF discourse and the online CMC discourse are concerned, the data for this paper has been analyzed according to the theories of the “hierarchy of classroom interaction”, i.e. lesson, transaction, exchange, turn, move and act (Coulthard, 1977, pp. 99-100), the “social conventions of classroom interaction” (Walsh, 2006, p. 216), and discourse “act” (Stenström, 1994, p. 30). A discourse “act” signals “what the speaker intends, what he or she wants to communicate”. According to Stenström (1994, p. 30), an “act” is the “smallest interactive unit”, and it can be identified and categorized into 28 “primary acts”, including “accept”, “acknowledge”, “agree”, “alert”, “answer”, “apology”, “call-off”, “check”, “closer”, “confirm”, “disagree”, “evaluate”, “greeting”, “inform”, “invite”, “object”, “offer”, “opine”, “query”, “question”, “react”, “reject”, “reply”, “request”, “smoother”, “statement”, “suggest”, and “thanks”.

Blended teaching and learning environments essentially involve a classroom FTF component and an online CMC component. Smith & Kurthen (2007, p. 455) have summarized that “combined e-learning FTF courses go by a number of terms, including ‘hybrid’, ‘blended’, and ‘web-enhanced’ learning”. They have also proposed a practical taxonomy of four distinct categories including *web-enhanced*, *blended*, *hybrid learning* and *fully online*:

Web-enhanced courses incorporate a minimal number of web-based elements, such as the syllabus and course announcements, into an otherwise traditional FTF course. In *blended* courses, the instructor adds, beyond an online syllabus and a few online documents, some significant online learning activities. For example, a blended course might have online quizzes or have a few online discussions, which account for a certain limited percentage of the course grade. But an important point is that these online activities do not replace any of the regular

FTF class meetings and account for only a limited percentage of course activities – less than 45%. If the online activities replace 45% to 80% of FTF class meetings, then the course is *hybrid*. Class with 80% or more e-learning are considered *fully online* (Smith & Kurthen, 2007, p. 457).

According to Skill & Young (2002, p. 24), “the likely future will be neither solely online learning nor solely instructor-led classroom learning”. They argue that,

for many of us who have been working with various learning models, it appears that hybrid or blended models most frequently emerge as the most effective learning strategy. This likelihood suggests that the creation of new learning environments should embrace both virtual and real spaces. Understanding how best to integrate these two modes of learning is and will continue to be a significant challenge for educators (Skill & Young, 2002, p. 24).

As far as the roles and responsibilities of the teachers and the students in the Hong Kong context are concerned, Chan (2003, p. 34) summaries that “schools in Hong Kong, in Western standards, are traditional, rule-bound institutions, where independence, individuality and creativity are far less valued than obedience, conformity, discipline and diligence, which are actively encouraged”, therefore, “teachers generally regarded themselves as mainly or more responsible for the majority of the language-related decisions” and “they preferred the responsibilities for these activities to be taken mainly by themselves, rather than handed over to the students” (Chan, 2003, p. 49).

However, over the last few decades, there has been a major paradigm shift in Hong Kong from teacher-centred to learner-centred teaching and learning. According to Ng, Murphy, & Jenkins (2002, p. 463), “in a learner-centred mode, the focus is shifted to the constructive role of the learner, which differentiates it from a teacher-centred model in which knowledge is transmitted from teacher to learner”. The paradigm shift and the introduction of new technologies into education have inevitably resulted in the multiple and changing roles of both teachers and students in Hong Kong. Kwan & Lopez-Real (2005, p. 284) have identified three distinct clusters arising from the teachers/mentors’ perceptions of their roles, namely “the pragmatic (such as provider of feedback, observer, instructor and role model), the interpersonal (such as counselor, equal partner and critical friend) and the managerial (such as assessor, quality controller and manager)”. However, there seem to be little empirical research on how discourse acts are analyzed based on blended teaching and learning data to identify the multiple roles of the teachers and students. This paper has attempted to fill the research gap by identifying and verifying the multiple roles of the Hong Kong teachers and students through blended FTF and CMC data analysis and questionnaire surveys.

Methodology

The project, on which the paper is based, involves multiple research methods including both qualitative and quantitative approaches. It has adopted a discourse analysis (DA) approach to the analysis of classroom FTF discourse and online CMC discourse data. In particular, different discourse “acts” in the data have been identified, categorized and analyzed in relation to the multiple roles of the teachers and the students in the “blended” ELT environment involving classroom FTF and online CMC discourse contexts. In addition, two questionnaire surveys have been conducted among a number of Hong Kong teachers and students regarding the perceptions of their changing roles as teachers and students in the Hong Kong “blended” ELT environment.

The research questions for this paper include: 1) what major “acts” do the teachers and the students in Hong Kong perform in the classroom FTF teaching and learning environment? 2) what major “acts” do the teachers and the students in Hong Kong perform in the online

CMC teaching and learning environment? And 3) what are the multiple and changing roles of Hong Kong teachers and students in the emerging “blended” ELT environment?

Data and Results

The data collected for the research project involves three courses offered in the “blended” mode of teaching and learning. All these courses are taught and delivered in the form of a combination of lectures, FTF tutorials, and synchronous online “Blackboard” discussion forums with the medium of instruction being English. For comparison and discourse analysis purposes, a number of lectures of the courses have been video-recorded and transcribed, and a number of online discussion forums have been downloaded (with the consent of the course participants). Due to the limited space for this paper and the selective nature of discourse analysis, the data of one FTF lecture/tutorial and one “Blackboard” discussion forum from the course “Language and Societal Modernization” are selected and analyzed in terms of discourse “act” identification and categorization.

In the 150-minute FTF lecture/tutorial, 631 discourse “acts” have been identified and categorized. The teacher performs a total of 511 acts while the students 120. The distribution of the different types of the teacher’s and the students’ acts in the sequence of frequency is shown in Table 1 (with the number of acts in brackets).

Table 1

The discourse “acts” of the teacher and the students in a classroom FTF lecture/tutorial

Teacher’s acts (type + number of occurrences)	Students’ acts (type + number of occurrences)
Inform (174), Statement (118), Acknowledge (47), Question (33), Evaluate (27), Opine (24), Request (21), Alert (19), Suggest (16), Check (9), Thanks (8), Reply (5), Invite (3), Agree (2), Apology (1), Call-off (1), Confirm (1), Greeting (1), Offer (1).	Statement (39), Inform (38), Answer (17), Confirm (8), Greeting (7), Opine (3), Apology (2), React (2), Reply (2), Check (1), Thanks (1).

In contrast with the classroom FTF discourse, in the three-hour online CMC discussion forum, 999 discourse “acts” have been identified and categorized. The teacher performs a total of 277 acts while the students 722. The distribution of the different types of the teacher’s and the students’ acts in the sequence of frequency is shown in Table 2 (with the number of acts in brackets).

Table 2

The discourse “acts” of the teacher and the students in an online CMC discussion forum

Teacher’s acts (type + number of occurrences)	Students’ acts (type + number of occurrences)
Statement (55), inform (54), evaluate (43), thanks (32), opine (17), agree (12), request (11), suggest (9), greeting 7), answer (5), alert (5), closer (4), question (4), offer (3), react (3), reply (3), confirm (3), call-off (2), check (2), accept (1), invite (1) and apology (1)	Inform (150), statement (135), opine (80), question (70), greeting (51), agree (43), evaluate (39), alert (34), suggest (23), react (19), thanks (17), answer (13), reply (13), invite (8), object (8), apology (7), check (6), query (4), acknowledge (4), offer (3), closer (2), confirm (2), request (1), and call-off (1).

In addition to the classroom FTF and online CMC “blended” ELT environment data analysis, two questionnaire surveys have been conducted among a group of 28 primary and secondary school teachers in Hong Kong and a group of 24 students from the Hong Kong Institute of Education. The teachers’ group has an average of 5 years of teaching experience. There are 10 male and 18 female teachers, among whom 20 work in primary schools and 8 work in secondary schools. The students’ group has an average learning experience of 14 years. There are 4 male and 20 female students, among whom 12 had their primary and secondary education in Hong Kong, 11 in the mainland China, and one in Indonesia.

The surveys involve a brainstorming session with the teachers and the students regarding the existing and emerging roles of the teachers and the students in the “blended” ELT environment in Hong Kong. The roles are then listed in a table, and the teachers and the students are invited to rank the extent to which they perceive themselves as taking up the listed roles. Table 3 shows the extent to which the teachers perceive themselves as the roles they take up.

Table 3

The roles of Hong Kong teachers

Role ranking	Roles	Percentage	Note
1	information provider; knowledge transmitter; guide; assessor	100%	
2	course designer; facilitator; advisor	96%	
3	mentor; organizer; carer	93%	‘Carer’ is ranked relatively high due to the fact that the majority of the respondents are primary school teachers.
4	monitor; social worker	89%	
5	decision maker; team-leader	86%	
6	participant (team-member); friend	82%	
7	manager	75%	
8	expert learner; entertainer	68%	
9	actor/actress/star	64%	
10	researcher	57%	

Table 4 shows the extent to which the students perceive themselves as the roles they take up.

Table 4

The roles of Hong Kong students

Role ranking	Roles	Percentage	Note
1	learners; participants; respondents; team-builders	100%	
2	teacher helpers; listeners	96%	
3	topic contributors; strategic communicators	92%	
4	meaning negotiators	88%	
5	meaning makers; peer competitors	79%	
6	information providers;	75%	
7	monitors	63%	The role of 'monitors' in the online CMC context refers to the fact that the students monitor the teacher's online presence (TOP) and other students' online presence (SOP)

Discussion

This paper centers around quality teaching and learning in the “blended” ELT environment and the changing roles of the teachers and the students in Hong Kong. Smith & Kurthen (2007, p. 458) suggest that “interaction, between instructor-student and between students, is at the heart of education, whether FTF, fully online, or blended-hybrid”. The “blended” ELT environment has challenged the “teacher-centredness and authority-oriented tradition of Chinese education in Hong Kong” (Chan, 2003, p.34). Through the interaction by a variety of media, including classroom FTF and online CMC communication, the teachers and the students are taking up and negotiating traditional as well as new roles in the new “blended” ELT environment in Hong Kong. The classroom FTF, online CMC, and the questionnaire survey data have shown that the “blended” ELT environment facilitates the paradigm shift from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching and learning, enhances the sustainable relationship between the teachers and the students, and reinforces the multiple and changing roles of the teachers and the students.

Firstly, the “blended” ELT environment facilitates the paradigm shift from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching and learning. As shown in Table 1, in the classroom FTF discourse, the teacher performs the majority of “acts” in terms of informing, and making statements, while the students perform a limited number of “acts” of making statements, informing, and answering. However, as shown in Table 2, in the online CMC discourse, the students perform the majority of “acts” in terms of informing, making statements, providing opinions, and questioning, while the teacher performs a relatively small number of “acts” of making statements, informing, and evaluating. These data indicate that the “blended” ELT environment facilitates the shift from knowledge transmission to knowledge construction, and the paradigm shift from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching and learning. In the new student-centred paradigm, the students are more likely to become autonomous learners and to take the responsibility for their own learning. According to Holec (1981), autonomous

learners hold the responsibilities of 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. The variety and number of “acts” that the students have performed in the “blended” ELT environment, including “inform”, “statement”, “opine”, “question”, “evaluate”, “suggest”, “object”, and “query” indicate that the students are not only taking more responsibilities in their own learning, but also taking up newer roles in their learning process.

Secondly, the “blended” ELT environment enhances the sustainable relationship between the teachers and the students. The traditional IRF/E (Initiation, Response, Follow-up/Evaluation) classroom discourse pattern (McCarthy, 2002) has been challenged in the “blended” ELT environment, where the teacher is perceived as more of a “participant” on the same interaction platform with the students. This helps sustain the teacher-student relationship as the teacher is no longer regarded as the sage on the stage but a guide on the side, while the students take more active roles in the learning process. In the “blended” ELT environment, the teaching and learning are perceived as a journey or a process rather than a product-oriented outcome. In terms of a sustainable relationship, the teachers and the students are expected to take up multiple and complementary roles. The students take more responsibility for their learning, and have more control over the relevance of the subject matter, the level of involvement and participation, and the contribution of the knowledge construction. In the meantime, the teachers take a bigger variety of roles as facilitators, organizers, monitors, managers and researchers during the teaching and learning processes. The teacher-dominant classroom FTF data and the student-centred online CMC data in Tables 1 and 2 show that a combination of the two teaching and learning modes in the “blended” ELT environment help the teachers and the students to become aware of their traditional and emerging roles, and this awareness, in turn, helps to sustain the relationship between the teachers and the students.

Thirdly, the “blended” ELT environment reinforces the multiple and changing roles of the teachers and the students. The two questionnaire surveys show that the traditional roles of the teachers and the students have shifted and have become increasingly dynamic. According to Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, & Chiu (1999, p. 88), teaching and learning in the “blended” context requires participants to constantly “negotiate their roles and understandings as they co-participate in various problem-solving activities”. In this sense, the “blended” ELT environment has a “democratization effect” (Smith & Kurthen, 2007, p. 472). Although the traditional roles of the teachers as information providers, knowledge transmitters, guides, assessors, course designers, facilitators, advisors are still dominant, new roles of teachers, as they perceive themselves as mentors, organizers, carers, monitors, social workers, decision makers, team-leaders, participants, friends, managers, expert learners, entertainers, actor/actress/stars and researchers, are emerging. These roles serve a variety of functions including “pragmatic” (such as mentors, expert learners), “inter-personal” (such as team-leaders, friends), and “managerial” (such as organizers, monitors, and managers). In the meantime, while the students are still perceiving themselves as learners, participants, respondents, team-builders, teacher helpers and listeners, they are also increasingly regarding themselves as topic contributors, strategic communicators, meaning negotiators and makers, peer competitors, information providers and monitors in the “blended” ELT environment.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the changing roles of the teachers and the students in the “blended” ELT environment in Hong Kong. It has adopted a discourse analysis approach in terms of identifying, categorizing and analyzing the discourse “acts” of the teachers and the

students in both classroom FTF and online CMC contexts. The research data have shown that the “blended” ELT environment not only facilitates the paradigm shift from teacher-centred to student-centred teaching and learning, but it also enhances the sustainable relationship between the teachers and the students, and reinforces the multiple and changing roles of the teachers and the students in Hong Kong.

The research findings indicate that in the “blended” ELT environment, while the traditional roles of the teachers as information providers, knowledge transmitters, and assessors, and the students as learners and participants are still dominant, the teachers are increasingly putting on new “hats” as facilitators, expert learners, monitors, entertainers and researchers, and the students as topic contributors, meaning makers and negotiators, information providers and strategic communicators. The multiple and changing roles of the teachers and the students imply that a paradigm shift has been taking place and the teachers and the students are expected to be aware of the shift and make adjustments in their teaching and learning accordingly.

Biographical information

Dr. Zhichang Xu is a lecturer in English as an International Language (EIL) at Monash University, Australia. He has a disciplinary background in Applied Linguistics and Intercultural Education. He has extensive research and teaching experiences in Beijing, Perth, Hong Kong, and Melbourne. His research areas include ELT, intercultural education, blended teaching and learning, academic writing, and World Englishes (For more information about the author, please visit <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/eil/staff/zhichang-xu.php/>).

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