

# Transformation of the Role of China's Foreign Language Teachers in the Internet Era

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**Abstract:** *Compared to foreign language education in other countries, China's foreign language education is a vast and complex project with a short history. What is even more impressive is that in the past half century, the country's higher foreign language education has a huge scale and demonstrated a level of prosperity that has been admired by the education community around the world. However, the problems and challenges it poses are also not obvious to everyone. At present, higher foreign language education cannot keep up with the pace of global integration and information society development at various levels. College foreign language teachers, as implementers of reversing the dilemma of foreign language education in universities, should strive to enrich their professional content in practical teaching work, and also need to have a keen insight into new trends in foreign language teaching and extraordinary courage to explore new teaching methods and try advanced teaching methodologies. In the context of new social needs, the teachers should complete a new transformation of one's own role and a new determination of positioning.*

**Keywords:** *Foreign Language Teachers, Higher Education, Role Transitions*

## 1. Introduction

The development of new information technology and the emergence of more intelligent products have led to a continuous diversification of social demand. At the same time, it also lays the physical foundation for the rapid updating of educational science and technology. The education concept based on information technology has given birth to one new form of education after another: MOOCs (massive open online courses), flipped classrooms, mobile teaching, micro classes, Moodle teaching platforms (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment teaching platforms), and the like. This is bound to bring a revolutionary change to higher education, and the challenges it brings to teachers are also unprecedented. The level of higher education has always been regarded as one of the most important indicators of the progress of a country. The repositioning of the entire higher education system in social life is such a difficult unavoidable choice for the teachers concerned. Different governments implement different policies for transformations of teacher roles based on their own circumstances, and China cannot be outside of it. Foreign language teaching, as a part of the entire higher education system, may face even more challenging and complicated tasks. This is because the unique nature of this discipline itself determines its unique status and different ways of transformation of teacher roles compared to other disciplines. As the specific implementers of this transformation, foreign language teachers in universities should correctly meet the diverse needs of foreign language teaching society and properly handle the interrelationships between market economy entities, and find their own position in the overall social system. In the fundamental aspects of foreign language teaching in higher education before the implementation of the reform and open policy of China, it has long been a pure language teaching, pure literature teaching, and an educational model with pure foreign language proficiency tests as the main focus. The necessity and rationality of this long-term unchanged foreign language education model are constantly decreasing and weakening in the Internet era. Such situation seriously hinders China's foreign language teaching in higher education and students' foreign language learning from improvement. Hence, to transform the teachers' role is not only the task of the higher education administrative department, but also the mission of foreign language teachers in higher education. However, this seemingly necessary and simple reform may not be achieved overnight. College foreign language teachers must be fully prepared at the conceptual, psychological, technical, and operational levels, and bravely face the upcoming breakthroughs in the role transformation [1].

## **2. The Past and Present of Foreign Language Teaching in Higher Education : A Twisted History, a Confused Reality, and a Promising Future**

A general understanding of the past and present of foreign language education in China is a prelude to how it can get rid of the present difficulties. Since the Westernization Movement in the late Qing Dynasty, modern foreign language teaching has entered China with the trend of western learning spreading eastward. Especially since the founding of the People's Republic of China, professional foreign language teachers in universities have gone through an extraordinary history of more than sixty years. At the same time, non-professional public foreign language teaching in universities has also gone through the similar processes. The contribution of foreign language education in New China to the progress of the country is evident to all. It has cultivated a considerable number of foreign language talents in areas such as national diplomacy, foreign trade finance, cultural education, news and publishing, science and technology military, among which there are many outstanding experts.

But to this day, due to the transformation of society and the development of technology, the hidden problems in foreign language teaching in higher education have gradually become increasingly apparent. The problems include disconnection of foreign language teaching in universities from social needs, increasingly fierce student complaints, obstructing the teaching of other disciplines; Lagging behind the development of new teaching methods and technologies, and so forth. At the same time, the existence of foreign language education has received unprecedented questioning and attention from all circles of the society. Some universities have introduced policies to compress certain foreign language curricula; some officials have even called on different occasions to weaken or even abolish the current existence of foreign language teaching in schools. The shock that all of this has brought to foreign language teachers is that their functions are weakening and their status is marginalizing. For decades, the once popular foreign language discipline has fallen to a precarious state in the subject design of universities, causing confusion and even fear among foreign language teachers in universities. If foreign language teachers in higher education do not assess the situation and take proactive measures to fit demands of the times, the future situation may be even more unsatisfactory. Therefore, the deepening and expansion of foreign language reform in higher education is the current top priority.

At present, the conditions for the reform of foreign languages in higher education can be said that everything is ready but lacking momentum. Firstly, the government's education regulatory department hopes for an improvement in education strategy. As early as more than a decade ago, the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education advocated the utilization of advanced information technology to reform traditional teaching methodologies in order to comprehensively enhance students' applied abilities. Moreover, the strength of this policy is continuously increasing.

Secondly, the development of information technology has also provided technological soil for this massive teaching reform. It is worth mentioning that this reform specifically requires active reliance on new information technologies in English teaching. Reviewing the course of this trend, the early digital technology of education was advocated at the beginning, that is, the first generation Digital Revolution of education based on multimedia and network technology; Now teachers are further promoting more advanced micro courses, MOOC, flipped classrooms, and mobile teaching technologies, that is, the second generation of Digital Revolution in education[2] [3].

Thirdly, as the ultimate service goal of educational reform, college students urgently need to follow the demand orientation of the job market, improve the practicality of language in the process of foreign language learning in schools, that is, to enhance the communicative application ability in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating foreign languages, and strengthen the close integration of foreign languages learned with their own majors. At the same time, teachers hope that foreign language classrooms are no longer specialized places for learning foreign languages, but also places for learning different cultures and enriching the students themselves [4]. All of this requires the foreign language community in higher education to completely abandon the chronic disease centered on level exams and allow foreign language education to regain its true identity in universities. On the other hand, foreign language teachers in higher education, especially young teachers, are actively adapting themselves to the new teaching content, methodologies, and forms, based on their own characteristics and career development needs.

### **3. The transformation between the old and new roles of foreign language teachers is a reflection of the new trend and old power game in higher foreign language teaching**

The concept of revitalizing the country through education has been deeply ingrained in people's hearts for over a century. As a foreign language teacher in the higher education system, they play a unique role and an irreplaceable role in the trend of revitalizing the country through education. They have made unique contributions to China's exchanges with foreign countries. But with the development of society, their own functions in the society and expectations of society for them are also changing. In order to adapt themselves to the requirements of society and improve their career development, it is inevitable and imperative for them to face the new foreign language education. To complete this transformation well, repositioning of foreign language teachers' roles in higher education is the starting point of this task.

#### ***3.1. The Old Role of Foreign Language Teachers in the Higher Education System***

In China, due to the traditional concept of respecting teachers, teachers are excessively praised, and there is even a saying that 'once a teacher, for lifetime a father'. Its original intention is to respect teachers and value education, but one of its side effects is the formation of unequal one-way communication between teachers and students: in teaching, teachers are the center and subject, with the highest authority to preach; On the contrary, students are only obedient, and what they can do is to passively receive what the teachers said. And foreign languages have a characteristic of being hard to access and use, with fewer teachers able to teach them. Under the influence of this factor, foreign language teachers are more likely to unconsciously isolate themselves or be isolated by students at the disciplinary level. In the specific teaching implementation process, foreign language teachers, relying on their high monopoly position in foreign language knowledge, are more likely to arbitrarily choose educational content, teaching methodologies, and teaching assessment types. The consequence is a lack of participation among students in the process of foreign language teaching. Hence, there is a sharp contradiction between the instruction of teachers and the needs of students in the foreign language field of China's higher education: teachers focus on teaching at the level of language points, grammar, and paragraph structure. However, college students call for strengthening the cultivation of practical skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and workplace application abilities.

The old role of higher education teachers is also reflected in the long-term unchanged teaching mode, teaching methodologies, and exam evaluation. The old-fashioned teacher cannot get rid of the indoctrination teaching mode. Its basic feature is that teachers use classroom teaching as the handle and implement a "cramming" style one-way knowledge transfer. The grammar translation method is the mainstream teaching method. In this process, there is no need for excessive student participation; and they are not allowed to question too much [5].

Corresponding to the indoctrinated teaching model is the foreign language proficiency test which is of strongly administrative color. The relationship between indoctrination education and foreign language proficiency tests is actually a complementary to each other. At present, the foreign language proficiency test system includes College English proficiency tests (CET-4 and CET-6), English major proficiency tests (CET-4 and CET-8), online English proficiency tests for adult universities students, and several minor language exams outside of the English language. These foreign language exams include almost all Chinese college students. Few college students are spared from taking these exams. Although the level exam has a nationally unified exam scoring standard that appears fair, it is actually seriously disconnected from the actual needs of students. In addition, due to the excessive energy and time spent by teachers and students in the level foreign language exam, it directly affects the quality of other subjects, even the major subjects. To some extent, foreign language teachers in higher education are one of the creators of this unbearable situation. In order to cope with the task of passing the level exam, foreign language teachers must constantly revolve around exam questions, exam strategies, and exam scope in their teaching work. It seems that reviewing materials and previous exam question sets have become the only content of foreign language teaching for students and teachers. In this distorted teaching environment, teachers' teaching concepts are portrayed as solid, and they cannot achieve the ideal teaching state of free play and individualized teaching. All of this, the old role of foreign language teachers in universities has reached a dead end, and finding and accepting new roles will be an unavoidable choice for them.

#### ***3.2. The New Role of Foreign Language Teachers in the Higher Education System***

More than a thousand years ago, Han Yu, a Chinese scholar, proposed his understanding of the

teaching profession in his book "Teacher's Lecture": "Teachers are the ones who preach, impart knowledge, and dispel doubts." The rationality of its viewpoint as a classic has long been deeply rooted in people's hearts, but with the progress of the world, people's understanding of things is expanding at a geometric rate. Even in a small field, it is difficult for anyone to always be the leader. Teachers and students are also facing this new game rule. Can the profession of teaching disappear? The answer is exactly the opposite. In an era of knowledge and information explosion, every learner needs to find a pioneer to guide him more than before. Taking physics as an example: Perhaps a physicist is not needed to teach physics to students majoring in physics, but this student definitely needs someone who has studied or worked in physics to be around him. If this person wants to fulfill the function of inheriting physical knowledge, they should have the following abilities to complete their tasks:

First, summarize and analyze the learning content that learners have already completed, and point out the areas that need improvement.

Second, provide suggestions, insights, and methods for learners' future learning directions.

Third, inform learners of the learning resources and other mentors they can find.

Fourth, provide organizing, coordinating, and sometimes even adjudicating services to numerous learners.

Finally, equally communicate with learners, which is not only academic but also interpersonal and spiritual; it is both guiding and bidirectional [6].

As a foreign language teacher in higher education, in addition to the characteristics to be possessed by higher education teachers in the new era, one should also strengthen the fifth point of cultivation. Language is not a rigid knowledge or a formal knowledge system, but an external symbol of human emotions. Language communication is essentially emotional communication. In foreign language teaching, the proportion of emotional elements used by foreign language teachers must be greater than that of other science, engineering or management subjects. If foreign language teachers lack emotional elements in their teaching, mechanically preaching or being trapped within the scope of exams, such foreign language teaching is not far from failure.

Foreign language teachers in higher education should realize that in the digital information age, younger students are the "indigenous people of the digital world", and they themselves are just immigrants. For foreign language learning in the information age, foreign language teachers are no longer monopolists of knowledge. In the environment of the Internet, students may have much more foreign language resources than their teachers. In this situation, the strength of foreign language teachers is to use their professional strengths and professional experience to help students choose, identify, and share valuable and suitable foreign language content in the vast amount of knowledge and information. Treating oneself as the authority of students and treating students from a high perspective is clearly not a wise move for the new type of foreign language teachers in higher education.

Technology does not represent everything, but in foreign language teaching, the role of technology is clearly greater than many other disciplines, and the early objects of audio-visual education in history were mostly foreign language teaching. In the new situation, one obvious difference from the role of old foreign language teachers is that new foreign language teachers need to master and update their own teaching information technology, making the video content in foreign language teaching more vivid and rich, making foreign language teaching content closer to the true nature of the foreign language, making students' foreign language communication channels more smooth, and also making the simulated foreign language usage environment more realistic.

#### 4. Conclusions

In summary, the new role of foreign language teachers in higher education should be reflected in the following aspects: motivators of foreign language learning, guides of learning direction, organizers of learning objects, participants in language communication, sharers of resources, and users of technology.

The transformation of foreign language teachers in higher education is not a groundless slogan, it is a comprehensive requirement of the needs of the entire society, technological progress, and the close connection between the overall changes in the education industry. The role transformation of foreign language teachers in higher education is not only their own priority, but also it is responsible for schools and society to actively participate in. With the sole efforts of teachers, this transformation will be difficult and lengthy. They need support from school administration, manpower, financial resources, and policies.

In a crisis that is confusing and frightening, it is also an opportunity. The vast number of foreign language teachers in higher education will definitely take advantage of their role transformation to turn China, a major country in foreign language education, into a strong country in foreign language education.

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