

# On Becoming an English Tutor: A Self-narrative Research of My English Teaching

**Li Wan, Zhu Xiaodong**

*School of Foreign Languages, Gannan Normal University, Ganzhou, Jiangxi, 341000, China*

**ABSTRACT.** *Tutors are also teachers, and tutor experiencing can contribute to teachers' development to some extent. However, there're few studies on tutors at home and abroad. This study takes self-narration as the research method and the author as the research object. It elaborates the author's tutor experience and feelings from being a school English teacher to an English tutor. And the author analyzes some tutoring problems and proposes some advice for the student being tutored, the school teacher, the parents and other tutors as well.*

**Keywords:** *Tutors; teacher development; English teachers*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Xinhua Dictionary, private tutoring is a kind of family education that parents provide their children with moral, intellectual and physical education. And in the social reality, the meaning of family education has been extended, parents for their children to ask a tutor for homework is also agreed to tutor. (Lai Shixiong, 1998) The phenomenon of family education is not an occasional individual phenomenon in a region or a certain period of time. It can be said that there are tutors from abroad to home, from the past to the present. Therefore, because of many families and students' requirements, lots of teachers or college students are becoming tutors. Although many teachers or college students have the experiences of being tutors. There is only one article (Xiao Mei, 2002) written about her tutor experiences and thoughts on tutoring on the HowNet. Imperfectly, it's like a teaching diary rather than an article or thesis. It lacks some details and profundity. I had been an English teacher for three years in a primary school in Shangyou County, Jiangxi Province before I became an English

tutor in my postgraduate study. Therefore, I believe I can have a more deep understanding towards my tutor experience, contributing to my future teaching practice and giving some advice to others as well.

## **2. RESEARCH METHODS**

### ***2.1 Self-narrative autoethnography***

This study follows the qualitative research paradigm and takes self-narration as the research method. Different from other qualitative research methods (such as ethnography, case study, narrative inquiry, etc.), researchers in self-narrative research take the self as the research resource, which is not only the research object, but also the research tool, and the main source of data. The data are presented in narrative form. Self-narrative studies emphasize the interaction between individuals and other people, other groups, the social and cultural environment in which they live. Instead of deliberately avoiding subjective disputes, self-narrative studies frankly show readers their own experiences and reflections and the specific social environment in which these experiences take place. Through deep self-reflection, self-narration helps to explore the interaction between self and society, between individual and group. It reflects on one's own silent emotion, forgotten motivation and depressive mood (Canagarajah, 2012:261), revealing one's own thoughts. The purpose is to associate self-experience with certain social and cultural history, better solving the real problems. In the process of self-narrative writing, researchers should place their personal experience and growth experience in a specific social and cultural environment. Moreover, the researchers should be frank, responsible and pragmatic. Meanwhile, readers' tolerance and understanding are required, so as to facilitate the organic interaction among researchers, readers and narrative texts.

### ***2.2 Data collection and analysis***

In addition to interview, participatory observation, field diary, various written documents and other data (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007), self-narrative research relies more on soft data generated by researchers through introspection, reflection and recall (Wall, 2008). This study takes the author as the research object. The data was

collected from October,2018 to February,2019 during the whole process of my tutor teaching and my continuous reflection. The main data of this study include:1) Informal communication with parents and the student. 2) Tutoring records and reflection journals.

Following the principle of qualitative data analysis, this study extracts the data subject and analyzes the mutual verification and interaction among various data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In order to ensure the authenticity of the research and avoid personal assumptions, this article narrates the research in the first person “I”, and reveals the problems and puzzles the researcher encounter through the above data and clues.

### **3. FROM AN ENGLISH TEACHER TO AN ENGLISH TUTOR**

I joined the British study tour last summer, and it took me a large sum of money. Moreover, I owed my friends much money. In order to pay off the money, I accepted to be an English tutor, teaching an eighth-grade boy. The boy was introverted and diffident. His father was a junior college teacher and his mother was a housewife. We made a deal that I came to their home to coach him English an hour every night from Monday to Thursday and two hours on Sunday. Totally, I became an tutor for 60 days and 68 hours at their home.

#### ***3.1 Description of the tutor experience***

We began classes on October 8th, 2018. Firstly I found that he had little interest in English. And he was pretty poor at speaking English. He was afraid of making mistakes and reluctant to speak English. To inspire and encourage him to speak English, I decided to give him five minutes to talk about his school life before having classes. Meanwhile, I would help him and give him some support. Gradually, he became much more lively to talk, but always Chinese more than English. Anyhow, I regarded this as a progress.

Sometimes I wouldn't stop him if he exceeded five minutes' talking. However, I found that he had an inclination to idle away the time through talking about his school life. Then I got it that every class should be divided into several clear parts and made him have the sense of time. Two weeks later, we got know each other much better.

And I formed a relative steady teaching procedure according to his level and disposition. There were four parts in a class: 5 minutes' warming-up, 15 minutes' lesson or vocabulary reading, 30 minutes' homework coach and 10 minutes' sum-up. Furthermore, he was accustomed to this kind of teaching. Especially the first and last parts.

And according to his situations, I planned to help him form good learning habits, master some basic learning methods and own strong personality. In order to achieve these goals, firstly, I demanded him to clean up the desk and take out his English book, notebook, exercise book every time before I arrived at his home. Moreover, I induced him to write down some important notes and made him know the significance of keeping noting to form good learning habits. To help him know some basic learning methods, I would enlighten him to get the main idea of each dialogue before reciting. And taught him some problem-solving skills before doing exercises.

Furthermore, I would shape him to have strong willpower by limiting time for him to finish some fixed tasks, encouraging him to guess or looking for answers from books or notes. For one hand, it's mean to help him stay focus on learning and have sense of time. For the other hand, push him to be persistent. And every time when we finished one hour's class we would come to a summary according to his performance together. To some extent, I was a bit strict, for I would tell him the truth if I was unsatisfied with his performance. Absolutely, I would help him analyze the reasons and encourage him.

I supposed it as a good way to make him know his weakness and improvement, making him reflect on his behaviors and improve his summarizing ability.

However, after nearly four months' coaching, he still made a little progress at English and had little interest in English, even little progress at learning habits. Because of these, I felt very disappointed and depressed. From the bottom of my heart, I tried my best to help him and gave him lots of suggestions. How disappointed it was a failure. Therefore, I hope to draw some lessons from this unsuccessful tutor experience and try to give some suggestions to students, parents, school teachers and other tutors.

### ***3.2 Analysis of the unsuccessful tutor experience***

### ***3.2.1 The student's problems***

He had weak English foundation and single thinking mode. He couldn't read a lot of English words and sentences. He can hardly write some English words except some extremely easy ones. For example, he didn't know how to remember or write the word "engineer" even though I taught him several times and he copied a few times. And he could only think of "I" or "You" as the subject of a sentence, like "I am taller than you" or "You are shorter than me." But never think of using "My brother is shorter than me." etc. What was worse, he had little idea or thoughts about his future. When I asked him "what are your hobbies?" He only answered me "Football, playing cellphone and watching TV." And he told me that he didn't know what he want to be in the future. He always listened to his parents and obeyed their arrangements.

He was diffident and had poor learning habits. His handwriting was pretty bad and he never wrote down some notes on his book unless you pushed him. He seldom read English, and he was unwilling to read loudly even though you asked him to do that. He always stopped reading when encountered the unfamiliar words and he was afraid of making mistakes or errors. Similarly, he never tried to do some exercises that he didn't know, he'd rather left them blank instead of filling them casually or looking for the answers from books. Apart from those, every time I came to his bedroom, his desk was in a mass. And seldom prepared for English class initiatively.

All in all, He was unconfident and weak-willed. And he had little impetus to learn English.

### ***3.2.2 The tutor's problems***

I Lack of enough preparation for the class. Even if I had three years' teaching experience, I was unfamiliar with the teaching content. And I spent a little time preparing for the class, most of the task and activities occurred to my mind depending on my past teaching experience. Therefore, sometimes I was short of some knowledge to teach him and couldn't give him extra exercises or information immediately.

I didn't have enough patience for the student. I didn't like doing things inefficiently or practicing without progress. For my own impatient disposition, I would easily incline to feel unsatisfied towards his behaviors, especially when he

made the same fault or mistake where I had told him several times. And maybe because of my strict demands, he felt kind of tension in my class.

I didn't get enough support from the family. In the beginning, his father told me that I should cultivate his interest in English learning and coach his homework, I should prepare the lessons before teaching his son. However, being a tutor I forgot my right to require the parents' support and trust. I should have said that parents should examine or check their child's homework, they should believe my teaching methods and ability, and they should trust me, support me. For the worse, when they doubted or rejected my teaching methods, or never supervised their child to finish homework, I gave up my teaching methods and requirements. I felt helpless and I never took actions, like arguing or rejecting having classes to protect my teacher identity.

### ***3.2.3 Parents' problems***

Parents had little positive influences on their child. They rested too much dependence on the tutor, and seldom took effective actions to help their child according to the tutor's feedback or advice.

Parents paid little attention to their child's learning habits, handwriting or extra reading. As a result, their child formed bad learning habits and was weak in mental flexibility.

Parents lacked enough trust to support the tutor. For they didn't attach much importance to my feedback and requirements, which dampened my teaching enthusiasm. For example, I planned to play five minutes' video to inspire the student if he did a good job. And I regarded it as a good way to open his eyes, involving him into authentic English environment. However, his mother asked me to stop playing video to him, therefore, I quitted this plan.

### ***3.2.4 Possible problems***

The student's English teacher at school was a new teacher. Therefore, she might be unfamiliar with the teaching contents and lacked some teaching experience or skills. She might be not good at inspiring students' English thinking or arousing their learning interests.

#### **4. REFLECTIONS FROM THIS TUTOR EXPERIENCE**

After nearly 60 days' tutoring in four months, I reflect on some teaching problems and reasons why the student didn't make much progress. What's more, I draw some lessons from this experience and try to propose some advice for the student, the school English teacher, the student's parents and others tutors.

##### ***4.1 Some suggestions for the student***

Firstly, the student should pay much attention to his handwriting, learning habits and learning methods so as to gain confidence and achieve more success. Secondly, try to read more good books in a limited time and in a planned way to foster strong personality, and form better language thinking as well. Besides, this can improve his understanding and writing abilities. Lastly, the student should have more communications with his classmates, teachers and parents. He should try to learn from his classmates, especially those who are good at English. Moreover, he should try to express his own opinions or difficulties with his teachers or parents to obtain support or help.

##### ***4.2 Some suggestions for the school teacher and parents***

School teachers should attach more attention to the students with learning difficulties, especially to their learning habits and behaviors. Meanwhile, give them more opportunities to show themselves and don't forget encourage or praise them in class.

Parents should think before having a private tutor. For one thing, most college students just teach according to their own learning experiences or teaching ideas. They lack basic or enough teaching knowledge to support their teaching, which may do some harm to their children. For another, parents are children's first teachers, and tutors are just helpers. Therefore, they should try to build up a positive learning environment for their children, like buying good books to them regularly. Or spent some time studying, reading with them together. And, parents should often have a talk with their children, and try to understand and respect them. In that way, both parents and children will know and trust each other better. Most importantly, parents should

consciously shape their children to form good living and learning habits, which are much more significant than scores.

#### ***4.3 Some thoughts from this tutoring experience***

Firstly, being a tutor or inviting a tutor is a two-way selection. Before accepting an offer, tutors should get to know the parents' demands clearly. More importantly, tutors should make them know your teaching experiences and abilities. Tutors should try your best to obtain their respect and trust, and what you want them to support you or what they should do to help you. In other words, as an employee, you not only have your obligation but also your rights. Being a tutor, whatever you are, a college student or a school teacher, you should have your own teaching standards and demands. If you are confident about your teaching, while the parents disobey your teaching plans or methods, you should have the courage to reject having classes. For tutors are also teachers, also need parents' recognition and respects. Therefore, tutors should gain parents' appreciation through teaching attitudes and abilities.

Secondly, tutors bear more roles than school teachers. A school teacher is an organizer, a leader, a researcher, or a friend etc. However, a tutor may not only play all the part of these roles, but also be his cooperative partner or competitor during tutoring periods, for there are no other learners. And this may influence the effect of teaching. Furthermore, it takes tutors' more energy or patience to help one student. Since tutors should not only study the student from all aspects, but also look for any possible solutions to help him.

Thirdly, student's home may be not a good choice for classes. Students may don't have much impetus or sense of tension to have classes at their own homes. So it may be harder for them to stay focus on classes. And sometimes the teacher or student may care that whether the parents are listening to their conversation or not, which may influence tutors' prestige building or teaching effects. Usually, homes are lack of necessary teaching aids for classes, and this may increase tutors' teaching difficulty. Besides, the teaching effects may be influenced by the family atmosphere.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

Tutoring is a part-time job that many college students, postgraduate students and



even doctoral students have done. The industry is very common, but there are many irregularities. Some parents ask students to tutor mostly because of the low price and their pureness. And many students choose to engage in tutoring for the pay is higher and more honorable than other part-time jobs. However, whatever the reasons are, family education is a two-way choice. Parents need to carefully choose suitable tutors for their children. And tutors need parents' cooperation, trust and respect. From my own experience, I find out that although being a tutor is different from being a school teacher. There are some relationships between them. Or I can say that they contribute to each other. Being a tutor makes me know one student's grown-up environment better and understand the student more deeply and roundly. And I regarded it as sort of progress in my teaching career. However, I still wonder what kind of college students or school teachers are qualified tutors? And how should a teacher swift the roles of being a school teacher to a tutor? Maybe these are questions that need further study and discussions.

I have to admit it that there are some shortcomings or limitations for my self-narrative research. For my tutoring period is a bit short and most of my data are my teaching records and journals. So, some conclusions or analysis may need further research or observation. And in the future, maybe I should have more talks with students' parents face to face.

## **6. Acknowledgement**

The Project of Philosophy and Social Sciences of Jiangxi Province (Item number: 18JY27).

## **REFERENCES**

- [1] Mei Shixiong(1998). Where to Go for College Student Tutoring. Guangming Daily, vol.0923, pp.5
- [2] Xiao Mei(2002). A Tutor Experience of a College Student. Juvenile Study, no.02, pp. 25-26.
- [3] Canagarajah, A(2012).Teacher Development in a Global Profession: An Autoethnography. TESOL Quarterly, vol.2, pp.258-279
- [4] Hammersley, M. & P. Atkinson(2007).Ethnography: Principles in Practice(3rd

Edition). London: Routledge.

[5] Wall, S(2008). Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, no.1, pp.38-53

[6] Miles, M. & A. Huberman(1994). Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook. Thousand Oaks: Sage.