

Teachers' Image in the Eyes of University Students: The Influence of Language Style

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Abstract: Teachers' language style is one of the essential factors affecting teachers' image. This study takes college students as the object of investigation. It explores the influence of teachers' language style on teachers' image in the eyes of college students through a questionnaire survey and data analysis. The results show that college student's perception of teacher image is closely related to teacher language style. Factors such as teachers' affinity, sense of humor, and infectious language style can contribute to cultivating positive emotions and active classroom participation among college students, thereby shaping a favorable teacher image.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the advancement of modern education has opened up new possibilities for the portrayal of teachers. For instance, scholar Chen Liming argues that teachers should dedicate themselves to fostering students' moral development in the teaching process. Compared to didactic and indoctrination-based moral education, the teacher's role as a moral agent is more effective in fostering and influencing students' moral virtues.^[1] Furthermore, research efforts on educational technology have been intensified to ensure that the epistemology of teaching and learning is no longer biased towards mere efficiency but can achieve both speed and effectiveness. Achieving both speed and efficiency is crucial. However, there is limited mention of research on teachers' language styles and scarce relevant literature. The change in language style during the educational process plays a significant role in the development of modern education. Therefore, this paper takes the perspective of teachers' language style and conducts an extensive survey of first-year university students combined with relevant knowledge of linguistics to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how teachers' language style shapes their image.

2. Literature review

Classroom teaching is the main form of English learning for Chinese students. According to Xu Xianwen (2010), classroom teaching is the primary way to learn English, and there is an essential correlation between teachers' discourse and English acquisition in English classroom teaching.^[2] Teachers' language style is an essential channel for students to acquire language information in classroom teaching; from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, teachers' language style in teaching has a subtle influence on students' knowledge acquisition, value orientation and personality shaping, so we must pay attention to the dimension of teachers' language style. The analysis of the perspective of language style has given rise to the view and research on the image of teachers. Because of the modern education system in China, the education system of secondary schools and universities is very different, which leads to the social identity of secondary school students, from simple student identities after the college entrance examination overnight to independent adults. Students are the social role the government and society assign to school-age children, with "thick" normative requirements. The student is an institutionalised role, and school time and space are the boundaries of the student's role. The role of students, which was previously confined to the school

environment, now extends into the family, community, and society. Even outside of school, minors continue to be students.^[3] This shift has resulted in a change in the language style of university teachers from the traditional acerbic yet humanistic style seen in secondary schools to a more distant and respectful approach towards students. The significant alteration in language style and evolving perceptions of university teachers among freshmen have led to differentiation among university students not only in their classroom behavior but also within society and their personalities. Therefore, examining teacher image through the lens of language style is not only beneficial for cultivating university students systematically but also holds practical significance for advancing China's education system.

Scholars mainly analyze the research on teachers' language style from the following perspectives: firstly, they examine the correlation between teaching attitudes and language style. Zhang Jing and Sun Yueling believe that fluent, logical, connotative, and humorous language teachers use in the classroom can charm students and foster trust and closeness, leading to increased willingness to listen and communicate with the teacher.^[4] Secondly, they assess the relationship between teaching quality and language cultivation. Hua Fang argues that teachers' language cultivation directly impacts teaching effectiveness and quality; a teaching language is a tool for achieving educational goals.^[5] Thirdly, scholars analyze gender differences. According to Lu Yanfang, female teachers exhibit less directive discourse and more exploratory questioning in class; they also show less direct negativity but more indirect praise in feedback; additionally, female university teachers use more exclamatory emotional words in their tone of voice as they pay greater attention to social echo, emotional efficacy, and politeness strategies in classroom communication.^[6]

Foreign research on teachers' language style is extensive. For instance, Sinclair et al and Allwright et al conducted a series of empirical studies on language style early on, confirming the impact of teachers' language style on students at a practical level.^{[7][8]} American scholar Fenstermacher argues that teachers' language style serves as a moral reflection, portraying whether a teacher's image shines or not.^[9]

3. Study design

3.1. Research questions

Owing to the substantial distinctions between the middle school and university education systems, students evaluate the variations in language styles exhibited by these two categories of educators. Furthermore, owing to the distinctive nature of their living environment, college students harbor diverse sentiments towards differences in teachers' language styles and professional images, with varying degrees of disparity. This study specifically addresses the following three issues.

- 1) What are college students' perceptions regarding the disparities in language styles and professional images of teachers between middle school and university? Are there significant discrepancies between them?
- 2) Does language style affect students' perceptions of the teacher's image?
- 3) Does the teacher's language style and image have a more significant impact on students?

3.2. Subjects of research

The research object of this study was mainly selected as a total of 70 undergraduate students enrolled in recent years. The geographical scope of the objects chosen covers most parts of the country, and most of the students' majors are liberal arts majors.

Simultaneously, this study employs 1 to 1 offline semi-structured interviews as a supplement to the conclusions derived from quantitative research methods. The interviewees are selected using purposive sampling and snowballing techniques, focusing on encompassing diverse genders, ages, and majors to better fulfill the analysis requirements. Prior to the interviews, emphasis is placed on the students' overall learning experiences and unique personalities in order to capture personal information and develop tailored questions effectively. The interviews take place from January 18th to January 29th, 2024, with each interview lasting for 30 minutes; 19 undergraduate students are

interviewed. The interviewed undergraduates are predominantly located in northern China. In addition to standard questionnaire inquiries, personalized questions are also included for the students.

3.3. Research tools

The questionnaire focuses on the impact of changing language styles at university level on the portrayal of teachers, with a total of 14 questions containing basic information such as the age of the student, the student's year, and a list of different types of language styles to differentiate more finely between various stages of the change in language styles on the portrayal of the teacher's image.

An interview outline was set up with the questionnaire at the centre of the interview questions, including:

- (1) What is the language style of your secondary school teacher;
- (2) What is your perception of the image of secondary school teachers;
- (3) What is the language style of your university teachers;
- (4) What is your opinion about the image of university teachers.

In addition to these questions, some questions were tailored to the individual. For example, "Is the language style of teachers in Hebei, where learning pressure is higher, different from that of teachers in other universities?".

4. Data analysis

A total of 55 final valid samples were collected in this survey, of which the number of male students accounted for 23 and the number of female students accounted for 32. The coefficient of reliability analysis is 0.513, which is slightly higher than the average level, and the KMO value of validity analysis is 0.618, which is slightly higher than the average level. It shows that the statistical results of the questionnaire have a certain degree of persuasion

At the same time, after each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed and the overall structure of the interviews was changed and refurbished according to the effects of the interviews. A total of 18 valid samples were formed, resulting in an interview text of about 100,000 words. Out of consideration for the interviewees' privacy, this study describes each interview recording in the form of interview time-number-student male/female gender (M/F).

4.1. General situation

The results of the questionnaire indicate that there is minimal disparity in the portrayal of secondary school teachers and university professors. This finding contradicts the previous stereotype that "secondary school teachers should adopt a more severe language style," as 72.73% of students hold positive perceptions towards the language style and image portrayal of secondary school teachers, compared to 90% for university professors. However, the deviation in data reflects the basis of this stereotype to some extent. The interviews reveal variations in teachers' language styles and image projection based on gender, geographical location, and personal experiences. Both questionnaires and interviews demonstrate a strong correlation between teacher image and their language styles at secondary schools and universities, influenced by teaching styles, teaching environment, learning pressure, and personal experiences.

In terms of teacher-student relationships, the image of secondary school teachers resembles that of traditional elders while at university level it aligns with an equal "peer" relationship. This shift not only pertains to changes in teachers' language styles but also signifies a transformation in educational approaches and openness to student ideas.

4.2. Attitudes towards secondary school teachers' language styles

More than half of the female students surveyed perceived the language style of middle school teachers as cold and severe, whereas only 30% of male students shared this perception. Similar gender disparities were observed in the survey regarding other language styles. Additionally, differences in perceptions between male and female students were noted. Furthermore, an analysis

of different grade levels revealed that nearly half of first- and second-year students believed that the language style of middle school teachers was hostile and malicious, a phenomenon which significantly decreased among juniors and seniors, indicating a correlation with age-related growth and mental maturity

According to the interviews, there were notable differences in male and female students' perceptions of teachers' language styles. Male students tended to be more indifferent towards teachers' language styles, believing that it did not cause them psychological discomfort or pressure, for example stating "I feel that our teachers' tone of voice isn't very sharp" (20240120-13-M), while some female students expressed feeling psychologically affected by their teachers' language styles, with one student recalling "I can't forget my high school teacher's words, and I feel uncomfortable and angry every time I think about them" (20240123-11-F). These findings suggest that gender differences may lead to varying perceptions of teachers' language styles among male and female students.

Nearly half of the incoming first-year college students perceived the communication style of their high school teachers as exerting negative pressure, feeling that it subtly imposed invisible expectations on them. 'If you don't work hard, you won't get into college, and no one will hire you' - our high school teacher would admonish us with such remarks during class meetings" (20240125-8-F). Other students found the language style of their high school teachers to be excessively severe and unforgiving, leading to emotional fluctuations including feelings of sadness and anger: "My teacher always singles me out, making me feel like I'm constantly in trouble in class, being the first one approached whenever something goes wrong; even though I act tough on the outside, it still hurts inside and I resent it" (20240119-5-M). While these perceptions were common among first-year students, by their junior and senior years many students had come to appreciate their teachers' good intentions: "I didn't really understand those teachers before; I used to find their lectures annoying but now I realize they also want us to succeed without having to compete against each other" (20240128-19-F).

4.3. Perceptions of university teachers' language style

Regarding gender differentiation, the attitudes of students from both genders towards the language styles of university teachers exhibit significant variance from the data mentioned above. The survey indicates that while there is a tendency for both genders to hold similar views on the language styles of university teachers, there are only a few instances where differentiation is observed. Close to 60% of students perceive the language style of university teachers as approachable, with no discernible distinction between seniority and inferiority. This perception remains consistent across all academic levels, from freshmen to seniors. These findings support the perpetuation of traditional teacher-student relationships, while also indicating a shift in the conventional concept of hierarchy towards a more egalitarian teacher-student dynamic under modern university education systems. Consequently, this transformation shapes the image of teachers from authoritative and strict figures to nurturing partners.

Based on the interview results, there is minimal disparity in the language styles of male and female students towards university teachers, unlike their attitudes towards secondary school teachers. This can be attributed to two factors. Firstly, as students mature and approach adulthood, gender-specific subjective thinking gives way to more rational thought processes. For instance, a female interviewee remarked, "university teachers are outstanding, soft-spoken and easy-going, always encouraging us and going along with our ideas" (20240128-1-F), a sentiment echoed by most male interviewees. Secondly, the reduced interaction with university teachers compared to secondary school educators may contribute to this phenomenon. The high-pressure environment of secondary education necessitates frequent teacher-student contact leading to intimate relationships; however, in the university setting, such interactions are less frequent with some teachers only engaging with students once per week. In certain cases, communication between teachers and students is even more challenging due to limited class time resulting in a relationship akin to 'familiar strangers'. For example, one interviewee said, "There are fewer classes in the university,

"and I am always skipping classes; I don't even know the teacher's face for a whole semester" (20240122-7-M). Another stated, "I feel that university teachers are not as attentive as secondary school teachers; except for those who are particularly close-knit there is minimal communication during class - it's up to us to be self-motivated" (20240120-4-F).

4.4. Analysis of differences in perceptions of language styles at different stages of teaching and learning

The language style of secondary school teachers did not significantly differ from that of university teachers, taking into account the subjective factor of students' own judgment and the objective factor of changes in the teaching environment. The change in teachers' language style shifted from harshness to gentleness, as evidenced by statistical data. Furthermore, the perception of teachers has evolved from that of a strict authority figure to an approachable mentor. The convergence of language styles between the two also signifies the emergence of a new type of teacher-student relationship and the decline of traditional concepts.

According to the findings of the interviews, students in the southern region of China appear to be relatively indifferent towards the shift in teachers' language styles between primary and secondary school. For instance, a respondent from Hunan mentioned, "We have a good teacher here. I haven't been disciplined much by teachers since elementary school, and our teacher is also good at communication. As long as we behave well, he is kind and caring" (20240123) (20240123-8-F). In contrast, students from the northern region perceived that teachers' language style at the secondary school level was often characterized by negativity and derogatory remarks. For example, a respondent from Shandong stated, "Teachers in junior high school tend to scold students. I attended school in a rural area where teachers were very strict with students; they would scold or even physically discipline them daily" (20240129-3-M-F, 20240123-8-F). 20240129-3-M).

5. Discussion and recommendations

5.1. Discussion and reflection

Teachers' language styles and image construction follow their own internal logic, and this study examines the attribution of teachers' image construction based on college students' perceptions at different stages, in accordance with the logical direction of motivation-process results. Changes in teachers' language styles are influenced not only by shifts in the academic system, but also by gender differences, which may be associated with variations in emotional and rational thinking between men and women. This study has prompted the following discussion and reflection through a thorough analysis of the findings

(1) The variation in the language style of teachers elicits diverse responses among students of varying ages, indicating a shift in students' perceptions of teacher language and image as they mature. Teachers must adapt their language styles according to contextual factors and adaptively across different educational stages. Furthermore, the impact of teacher language styles on student psychology should be accurately assessed through the lens of educational psychology, thereby shaping the image of teachers throughout the teaching and learning process

(2) Students' perceptions of university teachers' language styles exhibit greater consistency between genders, indicating that teachers tend to adopt a more tranquil language style in the relatively less stressful environment of the university level. The disparity between the university and secondary school education systems has resulted in a more diverse and distinct portrayal of university teachers, diverging from the public's stereotypical view of secondary school teachers as strict and intimidating. Therefore, it is imperative to focus on shaping the language style of teachers within the secondary education system to alleviate students' negative psychological responses to teacher communication within high-pressure learning environments. Simultaneously, there is a need for reflection on how teachers' perception has shifted from being 'familiar figures' to 'familiar strangers' due to the significant transition from secondary education to university-level education, leading to an increasingly distant relationship between teachers and students.

(3) The distinction in language styles between university and secondary school teachers is gradually diminishing, leading to a convergence of the two. This trend may be attributed to the evolution of the modern education system, wherein teachers' communication with students has shifted from being harsh to gentle and kind.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the compilation and analysis of the survey results regarding the language style and image shaping of current teachers, this study presents the following recommendations to enhance the quality of classroom teaching in contemporary times and improve the image shaping of teachers in secondary schools and universities.

(1) A comprehensive teacher ethics protection system should be established to eliminate negative behaviors such as pressure and verbal violence by systematically guiding the change of teachers' language styles. The change of teachers' language style should be not only reflected in classroom teaching, but also in the daily life of the class, which can be:

- Increase the number of ways for teachers and students to communicate, e.g., class meetings, online communication, etc;
- Teachers' behaviour is regulated through lectures, training conferences, etc., and their emotional responsibility is reinforced;
- Emphasis on providing emotional support for teachers, fostering a positive and trusting environment within the organization, and mitigating the unconscious influence of teacher-student dynamics by addressing teachers' stress, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the professional reputation of secondary school educators and challenging public stereotypes.

(2) University educators should enhance their communication with students. The interaction between university educators and students is relatively limited, leading to a lack of close and positive teacher-student relationships. University educators can begin by adjusting their language style to improve their professional image as teachers

- Enabling teachers and students to achieve mutual support and symbiosis in the collision of thinking through teacher-student exchange classes, inter-school joint teaching and research, etc., and promoting the improvement of the relationship between them
- Instead of the typical gentle and kind demeanor of university instructors, they can appropriately adopt a stern yet caring tone towards students, aiming to cultivate a new type of teacher-student relationship with authority.

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