# Teacher's Roles in Computer Based College English Collaborative Learning

Zhuo Ma

*Foreign Languages and Cultures Department, 10049 Beijing Wuzi University, China*

**Abstract.** With computer and network as setting in collaborative learning, due to the changes on learning environment and mode, the roles of teachers online are faced with challenges. This study is to examine functions of online teachers' roles in computer based college English collaborative learning. In the test carried in college English writing course, teachers perform roles of guide, assistant, facilitator, coordinator, etc. in collaborative learning procedure, namely the steps of Imputing, Drafting, Revising, Final drafting and Final evaluation. For functions of teachers' online and effects of the test, questionnaires on students' recognition, understanding, satisfaction and expectations of teachers' roles are employed respectively. From results of questionnaires and interviews, students' response prove that most learners' have already confirmed online teachers' roles, yet to fully realize their responsibilities, adequate measures and strategies must be taken to enrich teachers' online serving experiences.

## 1 Introduction

Collaboration is "a coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem" [1]. And collaborative writing involves active participation of the project members, shared editing, reading and group writing strategies, revisions, peer-review, and group evaluations of contributions [2].

Foreign languages collaborative learning under computer environment has become an innovative learning mode these years. It refers that language learners employ online communicative media and tools, by way of group interaction, with help of computer technology, to carry out language learning experience and achieve knowledge construction. Students may participate into group activities to learn collaboratively in different time and place, instead of being confined to traditional classrooms. As a result, learners' abilities of language communication, autonomous and collaborative learning are effectively fostered. The new learning strategy embodies students-centered teaching methodology; however, it cannot work well without teachers' support and aid.

With the development of online teaching, studies on teachers' roles in computer based instruction have been increasing. Generally speaking, teachers under computer based collaborative learning, directly communicate with students via computer and websites, to support and facilitate individual learning and process of group study. For conventional teaching, the role of teachers is to design lessons, devise tasks and objectives, guarantee quality of class and arrange process of lectures. While with online learning, the role of teachers has changed greatly, from instructing to guiding, from teaching center to students-focused stimulator, assistant and facilitator. However, in practical collaborative learning, there is still gap between teacher's roles and learners' expectations. Teachers' functions haven't been fully realized, and teachers' managing skills are to be enhanced. Therefore, the study on teacher's role in computer based collaborative learning, is the indispensable perspective for online education. This paper is to examine role of teachers in a computer aided college English writing course, and learners' satisfaction and expectations upon this role, by following detailed composing procedure and investigating results of questionnaires. It is expected that this study would provide online teachers with necessary guidance and training, so as to raise the quality of online collaborative learning.

## 2 Teacher's roles in computer based writing course

College English writing course based on collaborative learning under computer environment, takes multimedia and websites as platform, adopts process-oriented teaching methodology, and instructs students to fulfill writing tasks by group participation, division of labor, sharing resources and community intelligence. To meet the objective of English online and collaborative writing, the corresponding writing mode is devised. In this approach, teachers perform roles of guide, participant and aid, whose main duty is to assign writing tasks, introduce writing strategy, analyze students' characters and abilities so as to group them, guide and involve in group

---

[a] Corresponding author: mazhuo@bwu.edu.cn

discussions, evaluate final drafts, timely send feedbacks, and interact with learners' through email or Blog. Students are center of whole teaching process, as well as active learning participants, cooperators, explorers of problems solving, donators and sharers of community intelligence and resources. They are expected to take on writing tasks, play roles in groups, collect and assort information, take part in discussing, commenting and editing, perfect drafts, till summit final drafts. The whole writing procedure takes four steps and teacher's roles are presented likewise.

## 2.1 Imputing step

Firstly, brainstorming is adopted so students could freely exchanges opinions in pleasant, casual and relaxing atmosphere, in which the collective intelligence can be brought out, and the originality and inspiration of learners are hence stimulated. In this phase, teachers as guide and instructor, encourage students to think actively and critically, communicate with them to dig out any relevant message to all kinds of writing subjects, so as to formulate flow of thoughts and outline in written form.

Teachers then release a topic and have students in groups talk about it. A student in charge in each group is appointed to coordinate discussions, persuade members to speak, generalize collective viewpoints, and note down key points. Teachers themselves also join in students' activities in order to monitor and guarantee learner's involvement. This group discussion as communication can stimulate writers' creative desire, and help them to correctly express ideas.

When computer and websites are available for writers to search, store and internalize related writing information, it is responsibility of teachers to introduce helpful writing training websites, or any useful reading pages. At the same time, they should recommend students browse e-magazines or e-book to cultivate good sense of language, take in more amounts of inputs, enhance competence of sentences making and vocabularies selecting.

## 2.2 Drafting step

After class and online activities, students are pretty clear about writing objectives, and move into drafting period. Teachers need to inform writers of synthesizing all useful materials to sort out flow of thoughts and set up specific writing contents. While in writing, teachers advise students to take down whatever occurring in minds, without stopping to pick up such mistakes as grammar, spelling, or punctuation. Besides, instructors will remind them that the faster and quicker they write, the better, because checking will interrupt thoughts and destroy its fluency. After the first draft is completed, writers then may examine whether their ideas are clear, writing objectives are definite, as well as contents and style are coordinated.

## 2.3 Revising step

Peers feedback ensued since the first draft comes out. Teachers proceed to organize students to exchange drafts online, through email or QQ, and direct them to read others with patience and send feedbacks by underlining or commenting. For the first time evaluation, teachers suggest readers focus checking perspective on general aspects, e.g. ideas, structure, contents, and writing techniques.

Under computer environment, it is convenient for students to manipulate such functions as cutting, pasting, adding, mistakes checking, searching, etc. Teachers now serve as technicians, teaching and assisting computer users to apply all necessary functions to revising exercises.

## 2.4 Final drafting step

Accordingly writers read others' feedbacks online and rewrite the first draft, which may be homework after class since students would spend considerable amount of time on it. Yet before leaving language labs, teachers need to propose certain guidance and directions. For example, typical revising samples are exhibited through multi-media approach, including peer feedbacks and teacher feedbacks, for both students and tutors to analyze, discuss and explore the contents, structure, sentence patterns, and language usage. In this procedure, instructors should build up active class atmosphere, encourage learners to talk frankly and sincerely, and confirm positive aspects of samples in order to raise students' writing enthusiasm. Final drafts are then submitted to online discussion board of Blogs, or any other online space to upload, paste, store, edit, and delete messages. For instance, for New Horizon College English Online Learning System, *Discussion Board for Teachers and Students* provide room for anyone involved in this task to donate resources, edit, and submit final drafts.

## 2.5 Final evaluation step

Teachers and peers will respond online in time to students' finals by underlining proper corrected points and suitable employment of language. Besides, under the final version, teachers' comments and suggestions should be adequate and inspiring enough to maintain students' composing energy and spirits. At last, all excellent products and typical problems are submitted online on *Appreciation Corpus*, for the former to be followed, and the latter to be avoided. One thing that teachers ought to be aware of is that models are to be coupled with teachers' feedbacks, while typical errors couldn't be tied with students' identity. Otherwise learners' writing motivation and passion would be greatly stricken.

## 3 Questionnaires and discussions

The computer based English writing collaborative mode is utilized by 85 first-year non-English majors from Beijing Wuzi University for a whole semester. Right after the course drew to end, students were asked to fill out

two pieces of questionnaire, respectively on recognition and understanding of teacher's roles, and students' satisfaction and expectation of such roles.

**Table 1.** Frequency on Students' Recognition and Understanding of Teacher's Roles

| Questions | SA% | A% | U% | D% | SD% |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.I believe online teacher's roles are greatly different from those in traditional classrooms. | 43 | 33 | 6 | 9 | 9 |
| 2.Teacher online plays important roles in computer based collaborative learning | 41 | 27 | 11 | 11 | 10 |
| 3. In online collaborative study, the roles of teacher online are greatly challenged | 35 | 36 | 14 | 7 | 8 |
| 4. I am still not clear about roles of teacher online. | 29 | 21 | 15 | 17 | 18 |
| 5. I believe teacher online is one member of group, therefore should join in team discussion and study | 46 | 33 | 9 | 8 | 4 |
| 6. I believe teacher online should mainly afford support and aid, and could only involve in our discussions when needed. | 55 | 21 | 12 | 7 | 5 |

SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, U=Unclear, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree.

For statistics drawn from the above questionnaire, it is obvious that compared to old writing mode held in classrooms in which teacher's role is simply to assign writing tasks and give written feedbacks, majority of students (43%+33%=76%) could feel teacher's participation and help in process of writing. As for the significance of teacher's roles in collaborative learning, 68%(41%+27%=68%) students have realized the reason why collaboration benefits whole procedure of writing is mainly due to teacher's coordination and facilitation, while 21% students haven't recognized such roles. From interviews carried afterwards, it is learned that occasionally some inactive students are neglected so that group activities cannot run smoothly. Similarly, when asked whether teacher's roles are challenged immensely for online learning, 71% (35%+36=71%) students vote for positive answer, which indicates that for a trial of online learning, there is still certain space for teacher to strive and develop. From Question 4, it is gathered that half subjects are not aware of definite roles of online teacher. For one side, the figure shows different expectations on teachers; for the other, the recognition of collaborative learning and teacher's roles are not impressive enough for learners after the first round of experiment. Contrary to students' discussions, computer aided collaborative communications take teacher as a group member who listens, argues, thinks, and comments as students do, which is welcomed and accepted by overwhelming students. And the fact that 55% students is in strong agreement to Question 6 once more prove that teacher is only expected to perform role of participator instead of instructor or organizer in collaborative activities. In other words, they would neither act as onlookers nor controllers, but serve when needed.

In Table 2, statistics of frequency of students' satisfaction and expectation on teacher's roles are presented.

**Table 2.** Frequency of Students' Satisfaction and Expectation on Teacher's Roles

| Questions | SA% | A% | U% | D % | SD % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Teacher online adopts so many effective methods in our collaboration and discussion, that collaborative discussion run smoothly. | 21 | 25 | 17 | 20 | 17 |
| 2. The timely response from teacher online encourages me to actively take part in online communication. | 45 | 25 | 11 | 12 | 7 |
| 3. In group cooperation, teacher is the authority and leader of discussion. | 16 | 19 | 15 | 24 | 26 |
| 4. In group cooperation, teacher is the onlooker and intervener. | 12 | 15 | 19 | 24 | 30 |
| 5. I wish teacher online is like our friends to study together. | 77 | 14 | 5 | 2 | 2 |
| 6. I wish teacher online can evaluate my work positively and fairly so I won't give up the practice. | 69 | 21 | 5 | 3 | 2 |

SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, U=Unclear, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree.

Generally speaking, for students' opinion on variety of coordinative approaches invented by teachers, nearly half of students (21%+25%=47%) express their satisfaction, while 37% (20%+17%=37%) students feel disappointed with teacher's performance, which shows

that there is still distance between functions of teachers online and students' expectations. As for practical roles teacher online plays in group interaction, 70% (45%+25%=70%) students believe teachers' immediate reply is the force and support to maintain enthusiasm in collaboration. Though online learning is asynchronous, learners still expect direct communications with teachers and face-to-face reactions in traditional classrooms. Since students haven't adjusted to new online writing mode, teacher's fast online feedback is crucial especially for the first phase of collaborative study. According to the computer assisted writing methodology, the role of teacher online should be directed from the unique lecturer to supplementary duties. However, 35% (16%+19%=35%) subjects hold that in their online writing course, teacher still takes control of whole procession instead of providing chances for learners to take charge, which is a sign that further training and practice for teachers is a must. Similarly, teachers also cannot act as absolute outsider or strict intervener, but to participate at proper time, which is convinced by over half students (24%+30%=54%). As for students' expectation on teachers, students overwhelmingly wish their tutors can be friendly, easygoing and generous enough to afford help. For the last item in this questionnaire, altogether 90% students regard teachers' positive and just feedback as a drive sticking to online writing activity. Likewise, it could be seen that some online teachers are not considerate enough in judging students' efforts, or indifferent to certain inactive learners, who would be definitely disheartened.

## 4 Conclusions

In computer based online teaching, teachers should take hold of measures with which their roles extend or withdraw. When learners feel free to try and explore in collaborative cognition, teachers need to play six roles, namely the deviser of context (to design tasks closely related to learners' life, challenging, and worthy to investigate), the provider of information and clues (to guarantee efficient online surfing), the guide of division of workload in collaboration (to distribute duties reasonably and properly to ensure quality of group work), the facilitator of knowledge inquiry (to keep learners follow set goals without disorientation, and to stimulate them to explore deeply rather than superficially), the organizer of exchanging opinions and feedbacks (to keep communications on right way), and the evaluator (to inspire, motivate and encourage learners) [3]. All in all, with computer and network as setting in collaborative learning, due to the changes on learning environment, mode, and its features, the roles of teachers are faced with challenges, therefore are multiple and comprehensive. For variety of roles endowed, teachers should be able to timely shift roles according to different steps of learning, and problems and difficulties students encounter in collaboration. From results of questionnaires and interviews, students' response on recognition, understanding, expectation and satisfaction on teacher's roles prove that, most learners' have already confirmed

online teachers' roles, yet to fully realize their responsibilities, adequate measures and strategies must be taken to enrich teachers' online serving experiences.

## References

1. J. Roschelle & S. D.Teasley. The construction of shared knowledge in collaborative problem solving. *Computer Supported Collaborative Learning*. 69-97(1995)
2. T. Judd et G. Kennedy et S. Cropper. Using wikis for collaborative learning: Assessing collaboration through contribution. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology,* 26(2010)
3. On College English Writing Teaching under Online Environment. *Journal of Mudanjiang Teachers University (Philosophy Social Sciences Edition,*5:21*),.*