

THE ROLE OF THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER
IN THE CLASSROOM – THE TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND
ROLE BEHAVIOR VERSUS THE STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS

MAGDALENA KĘBŁOWSKA

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

1. Introduction

Every teacher must have faced the dilemma at one point or another: what should be my role in the classroom? Should I primarily focus on efficient organization of lessons with a careful selection of the language facts to be transmitted to students? Or should I be more flexible and let the lesson flow spontaneously? Should I take full responsibility for the choice of activities, topics, and areas of language (after all, I am familiar with examination requirements, so I do know what my students should cover in class), or perhaps should I always make the effort of giving the learners as much choice as possible? Finally, should I become friends with my students (if it is possible at all), or maybe it's enough to concentrate on the material and evaluation and not expect too much openness and trust from teenagers?

These and many other questions have haunted the teaching profession for years. They have been bothering the author of the present paper since the very beginning of her teaching career and have led her to take a deeper and more systematic interest in the issue of teacher role. In an attempt to gain insights into foreign language teachers' and students' understanding of teacher role in the classroom, two research projects were carried out and then their results were compared.

2. Research on teachers

2.1. Objectives of the research project and techniques of data collection

The purpose of the first research project was to find out how foreign language teachers of English view their role in the classroom. The teachers expressed their opinions in a questionnaire consisting of three open-ended questions:

1. What is the role of the foreign language teacher in the classroom? List and describe at least five functions.
2. Which of the above roles is most important and why?
3. Which of the above roles is most common and why?

The other set of objectives included assessing whether the teachers' answers to the questionnaire were congruent with their role behavior, i.e. the performance of roles. To obtain the information, the lessons of several high school teachers who taught different student levels were observed. During the observations a checklist consisting of the roles that the teachers had enumerated in the questionnaire was used.

2.2. The respondents

The questionnaire was distributed among 76 Polish high school teachers of English, the majority of whom were women (82.2%). Among them, the most numerous group comprised the youngest (under 30) informants (92.2%). There were 9 (11.8%) respondents aged between 30-40, and 8 (10.5%) over 40. Most of them worked in high schools in Poznań, the rest in other big cities or towns in Poland. Quite a few (about 60%) were teacher training college graduates currently doing their MA degree at Adam Mickiewicz University (fifth year students), whereas the remaining ones had completed their studies at the School of English some time before.

The classroom observations were carried out in five different high schools in Poznań. Altogether 8 teachers were observed: 7 women and 1 man. The group consisted of: 3 experienced teachers (i.e. that had been teaching for over 5 years) aged 35-45; 1 teacher with several years of professional practice aged 31; and 4 inexperienced teachers (i.e. that had been teaching for 1-2 years), among them 3 under 30 and 1 aged 40.

Three of the four inexperienced teachers were teacher training college graduates and two of them were doing their MA degree.

The subjects' students ranged from beginners to pre-intermediate, and through intermediate to upper-intermediate. In the case of 3 teachers two different student levels were observed; in all the other cases only one class was examined. In order to receive a fairly comprehensive picture of a given teacher's role behavior 3-4 lessons with the same group of learners were observed, which

makes 34 lessons altogether. This enabled the researcher to see the teacher in various classroom situations: doing grammar practice, checking homework, giving the learners a test, covering a text, etc.

2.3. The results of the questionnaire

The teachers' responses to the questionnaire were by and large extensive and informative. The respondents enumerated as many as 13 roles, thus showing that they are (at least theoretically) aware of the multiple functions of an L2 teacher. Figure 1 below shows all the roles listed by the teachers together with examples of behavior characteristic for a given role. It should be noted that some of the names for roles were supplied by the teachers in question, others were adopted from authors who have written about teacher role (cf. Barnes 1976; Harmer 1983; Wright 1987; Havinghurst and Neugarten 1967), while still others were invented by the researcher.

Figure 1. The roles listed by the teachers and examples of the teacher's role behavior

Types of roles	The roles mentioned by teachers	Examples of behavior
	Organizer	the teacher prepares lessons, selects materials and activities, directs the lessons, coordinates the pupils' behavior, etc.
	Instructor	the teacher transmits knowledge, passes on certain language facts, informs the learners about rules and meanings
	Controller	the teacher controls the students, monitors their interactions, disciplines them, checks homework
Task-related roles	Facilitator	the teacher explains the rule again if the students have forgotten it, provides ideas, words, etc. that they may want to use in interaction
	Counselor	the teacher teaches the students how to learn, trains the students in strategy use, promotes independence
	Participant	the teacher participates in activities as a partner and co-communicator
	Expert, resource	the teacher not only exhibits proficiency in the target language but is able to answer the learners' unexpected questions
	Evaluator	the teacher evaluates the students' performance and progress correcting their mistakes and providing feedback

Interpersonal roles	Creator of conditions conducive to learning	the teacher tries to make the atmosphere in the classroom pleasant and maintains friendly relationships with the learners
	Friend	the teacher is not only interested in the students' linguistic development, but as a human being can help them in their personal problems
	Socializing agent	the teacher serves as a model for behavior, inculcates values and shapes the pupils' personalities, teaches about the world
Special roles	Motivator	the teacher activates the learners' participation by arousing their interest (this function can be performed in any other role)
	Learner	the teacher keeps developing his/her skills and acquiring new knowledge (this function can be performed in any other role)

Figure 2 below illustrates the teachers' responses indicating the number and percentage of respondents who listed a given role.

Figure 2. The foreign language teachers' perception of their role

The roles listed by teachers	Total number of teachers	Most important role (number of teachers)	Most common role (number of teachers)
Organizer	34 (44.7%)	5 (6.6%)	9 (11.8%)
Instructor	45 (59.2%)	16 (21%)	36 (47.4%)
Controller	19 (25%)	—	4 (5.3%)
Facilitator	39 (51.3%)	4 (5.3%)	3 (3.9%)
Counselor	30 (39.5%)	14 (18.4%)	—
Participant	1 (1.3%)	—	—
Expert, resource	37 (48.7%)	6 (7.9%)	10 (13.2%)
Evaluator	32 (42.1%)	2 (2.6%)	10 (13.2%)
Creator of conditions conducive to learning	9 (11.8%)	2 (2.6%)	—
Friend	30 (39.5%)	5 (6.6%)	—
Socializing agent	43 (56.6%)	7 (9.2%)	4 (5.3%)
Motivator	43 (56.6%)	20 (26.3%)	1 (1.3%)
Learner	3 (3.9%)	—	—

It should be stressed that the subjects were able to mention different *types* of roles: those necessary to carry out language *tasks* (cf. *task-related* in Wright 1987), and the ones connected with the *interpersonal* relations in the classroom,

the relationships between the teacher as a person and the learners as persons. The teachers also mentioned the roles of a *motivator* and *learner*, which were put in the separate class of *special roles* because those two teacher functions do not really belong to either of the two main role types, although they can and should be present in all the listed roles. For example, the teacher can *motivate* the students as an *organizer* by selecting appealing materials and activities, as an *evaluator* by concentrating on positive rather than negative feedback, as a *friend* by being open and tolerant to the students etc. The teacher-*learner* should not only look for opportunities to listen to and speak the foreign language in order to improve as an *expert*, *instructor*, and *evaluator*, but also read English language teaching publications to learn more about *organization*, *facilitation*, *counseling*, as well as about how to make the classroom environment more *conducive to learning*.

Although some informants claimed that all the roles listed by them are of equal importance, 20 teachers (26.3%) indicated the functions of *motivator* as the most essential in the learning/teaching process. According to the teachers, this role should exist at all levels of teacher activity because the students' work entirely depends on it. Furthermore, as the teachers put it, motivation constitutes a basis for the third most important role of the teacher – that of *counselor*. In other words, if the learners are motivated, they will be open to strategy training and will assume responsibility for their learning more willingly.

As it could be expected, among the vital teacher roles the respondents also mention what some of them call "teaching itself". The teachers believe that the tasks of an *instructor* is what teaching is all about. Moreover, according to 47.4% of the respondents this role is also the most common one performed by language teachers. It not only requires the least effort and skills (after all, teachers are trained to pass on knowledge), but it is what society *expects* a teacher to do. As many informants put it, an average Pole defines the role of a teacher as transmitting information rather than stimulating the learners to arrive at it themselves.

Similarly, the teachers in question claim that the role of an *evaluator* is both required by society and relatively easy to play. Additionally, it makes the whole process of teaching easier as testing motivates the learners and facilitates maintaining discipline. If the teacher's knowledge and abilities are not enough to ensure him/her a dominant position, then the role of a dispenser of grades definitely enables the teacher to reign in the classroom. In short, according to the majority of the respondents, what the teacher should be primarily concerned with is motivating the students and teaching them not only about the language but also how to learn the language. What the teacher is preoccupied with, however, is sharing his/her knowledge with the learners and checking how well they have managed to take it in.

2.4. The results of the lesson observations

Figure 3 below illustrates the results of the lesson observations. The roles have been classified as those that are *always present* (i.e. every teacher performed those functions at least once during *every* one of the observed lessons), those that are *rarely present* (they occurred no more than 3-4 times during *all* the 34 observed lessons), and those that fall in between the two extremes – the roles that are *not always present*, neither frequent, nor rare¹.

Figure 3. The teachers' role behavior in the classroom

The roles that are always present	The roles that are not always present	The roles that are rarely present
Organizer	Expert and resource	Motivator
Evaluator	Facilitator	Friend
Instructor	Counselor	Participant
Controller	Creator of conditions ...	Learner
	Socializing agent	

What the research project on teachers reveals is that their expectations concerning role are to a considerable degree *incompatible* with what they actually perform in the classroom. Although the respondents are generally *aware* of the multiple roles they can fulfill as foreign language teachers, in practice only four roles dominate. What is more, while for the teachers in question the most significant role they are to fulfill is *motivating* their pupils, classroom observation reveals that only two out of the eight observed subjects managed to do it. Similarly, the second role in importance, that of *counselor*, did not receive due attention. The teachers' opinions about the most frequently performed roles have also proven inaccurate. It is *organization* more than *instruction* that dominates the classroom. Moreover, the teacher far more often *evaluates* the learners than *passes on knowledge*. Generally, all the teachers are preoccupied with task-related functions, treating the aspect of motivation and interpersonal roles as a useful but not an indispensable addition.

3. Research on students

From a sociological point of view, the concept of role is usually defined as expectations for specific behavior (cf. Banton 1965) As we saw in the previous section, teachers hold certain expectations for their role in the classroom, but these expect-

tations are not quite congruent with their role behavior. Is it because the important roles, such as motivating, are at the same time the most difficult to play? Or perhaps it is because teachers are trying to meet the students' requirements rather than their own. The following research material will show the relationship between the teacher's beliefs and role performance, and the learners' expectations.

3.1. The objectives of the research project and techniques of data collection

The main purpose of the research project was to elicit from L2 learners their expectations concerning the role of the foreign language teacher in the classroom. The informants' responses were then compared with the teachers' beliefs and classroom behavior.

High school learners of English were asked to fill in a questionnaire consisting of a list of certain teacher qualities from which they were to choose five in order of importance. The apparent features of L2 teachers in fact corresponded to their *functions* in the classroom. In this way it was possible to find out *which roles* learners considered as *more*, and *which as less important*.

The questionnaire was devised on the basis of the teachers' responses to their questionnaire. It was assumed that the learners would find it difficult to come up with specific roles themselves. Therefore, they were provided with *lists of items* to choose from rather than with open-ended questions. In addition, in order to facilitate the respondents' understanding of a given role, *specific examples of behavior* (not mere labels for teacher functions) more or less adequately illustrating the various roles were provided. The list of teacher qualities comprised the following (in brackets are the roles associated with the qualities):

- a) The teacher shows the students how to learn, which leads to good results achieved by the teacher's students (*counselor*).
- b) The teacher is characterized by a good command of L2 and has an MA degree in L2 (*expert and resource*).
- c) The teacher gains experience by constant learning and improving skills (*learner*).
- d) The teacher is sympathetic and willing to explain when the students still do not understand something (*facilitator*).
- e) The teacher is able to maintain discipline and make the learners do what they should (*controller*).
- f) The teacher systematically evaluates and corrects errors (*evaluator*).
- g) The teacher appreciates the students' efforts, evaluating them objectively (*creator of conditions conducive to learning*).
- h) The teacher is intelligent, is able and willing to talk on any subject (*socializing agent*).
- i) The teacher willingly participates in activities as a member of a group or pair (*participant*).

¹ For a detailed description of the classroom observations with the roles played by the teacher see Kębłowska (1999).

- j) The teacher is involved in the students' personal lives (*friend*).
- k) The teacher has a sense of duty and emphasizes transmitting knowledge (*instructor*).
- l) The teacher is always well prepared for the lesson (*organizer*).
- m) The teacher is enthusiastic and wants to involve the learners and make them interested (*motivator*).

3.2. The student respondents

As it was stated above, teachers of English in five different high schools in Poznań were observed. After being observed, they were interviewed and those teachers' students were asked to fill in the questionnaire. In this way 222 valid questionnaires were collected. Among the student respondents there were 171 females (77%) and 51 males (23%). To obtain a clear picture of the learners' beliefs about teacher roles two student groups were examined: 119 (53.6%) beginners aged 15-16, and 103 (46.4%) intermediate and upper-intermediate learners aged 18-19.

3.3. The results of student questionnaire

From the list of teacher qualities the informants were to choose 5 and number them in order of importance. Figure 4. illustrates the role-set's primary choices (the qualities they selected as the most significant and numbered them as 1), and secondary qualities (those which the respondents put in positions 2-5).

Figure 4. The list of teacher qualities selected by the students

Teacher roles	Primary qualities	Secondary qualities
Organizer	3.1%	30.2%
Instructor	4.5%	14%
Controller	2.2%	7.7%
Facilitator	13.5%	66.2%
Counselor	19%	24.8%
Participant	–	28.8%
Expert, resource	11.7%	13.1%
Evaluator	0.9%	8.5%
Creator of conditions ...	7.7%	68.5%
Friend	–	9.4%
Socializing agent	5.4%	44.6%
Motivator	22.1%	61.7%
Learner	9.9%	22.5%

What is striking in the above sequence of roles is the fact that no quality was chosen by an overwhelming majority of the respondents. The two most vital roles, *motivator* and *counselor*, amounted to 22.1% and 19% support respectively. Although the two functions were selected by most students, the respondents do not seem unanimous in their opinion on the most significant teacher role.

The learners apparently differ less in their perception of secondary teacher functions: from the two lists it is clear that the students emphasize the roles of a *motivator* and a *facilitator*.

The learners' choices do not differ so much depending on their level. Still, quality *l* (organizer) was selected by more advanced than elementary students. On the other hand, feature *j* (friend) was chosen exclusively by beginners. Generally, the roles that received the least attention (as both primary and secondary qualities) were *e* (controller) and *f* (evaluator).

4. The teachers' beliefs and role behavior versus the students' expectations

The students' responses to the questionnaire seem to a high degree congruent with the teachers' beliefs. Both groups point to the roles of a *motivator* and *counselor* as the most vital roles. Unlike the teachers, however, the learners do not perceive instruction as particularly important. Neither do they stress any other of the functions from the "always present" category, i.e. organization, evaluation, and control. Does it mean that the students do not expect the teacher to effectively plan lessons, correct errors and give tests, finally control their classroom performance? Clearly, it cannot be the case. The students simply seem to take these functions for granted, and emphasize that passing on knowledge, selecting materials and activities, carrying out evaluation and control has to be done in such a way so as to motivate the learners and encourage their involvement. Moreover, the pupils realize that language study does not only consist of being made familiar with certain language facts, but it primarily encompasses learning how to internalize these facts and use them. This is why counseling occupies such a high position on the list of primary qualities. What is more, the teacher has to be willing to help the students if they still do not understand something, provide extra practice, assist in pairwork and groupwork if necessary, etc. Thus, the *facilitating* function, as described above, is the third item in the hierarchy of teacher roles. Although the pupils consider the role of an *expert* as quite important (fourth on the list), this function is immediately followed by that of a *learner*. The students seem to value the teacher's expertise and the ability to use the language as high as they appreciate his/her constant development as an L2 user and teacher. Another two roles (still preceding *instruction* and *organization*) indicated by the respondents both belong to the interpersonal group. *Creating conditions conducive to learning*, i.e. being sympathetic, objective, and generally exhibiting a positive attitude to students, appears

slightly more significant than acting as a *socializing agent*, who promotes discussions on various subjects (and often digresses) with the intent to shape the learners' personalities and broaden their horizons. Positions 10 and 11 are occupied by the functions selected by only a few students, while the last two positions are empty. Thus, the roles of an *evaluator*, who corrects mistakes and tests the pupils, and a *controller*, who disciplines them, are relatively unimportant. *Participating* in activities and acting as a *friend* (which would have filled the empty positions) seem not to matter at all.

In conclusion, the teachers who answered the questionnaire seem to be aware of the roles that the students expect them to focus on in the classroom, and, therefore, their opinions about the most important roles are similar to the students'. However, they realize that these vital functions for different reasons do not receive due attention during lessons. This is confirmed by the teachers' choices of the most common roles, which in turn correspond more to the roles actually performed than to the teachers' perceptions of significant functions.

An obvious question that comes to mind is why the teachers' role behavior is so incompatible with their students' expectations. In order to try and address this problem, one needs to take a closer look at the Polish school system. For one thing, Polish secondary school classrooms are overcrowded, and an average of 30 students in one class is often the minimum. In such a numerous group it is extremely difficult to motivate everyone. The problem gets more complicated by the fact that many parents, being often unsatisfied with the few lessons of English their children have at school (2-3 45-minute sessions a week), have the students attend extra language courses. In this way almost every single classroom consists of mixed proficiency and mixed ability learners, with the more advanced ones treating the school lessons as peripheral. Motivating and counseling such a varied group may often appear beyond the teacher's control. Still, a lot of students are in a way motivated by the final exam which most of them take in English. However, what they are evaluated on in the exam is not their interest in English or their strategies of learning or skills, but very often knowledge of grammatical rules and structures. Aware of these exam requirements, teachers focus on the roles that enable them to help their students prepare for the final examination. Therefore, they concentrate on transmitting knowledge and are preoccupied with testing and correctness, while neglecting counseling, facilitation, and motivation. It also has to be noted that generally Polish schools lack qualified teachers of English, low salaries forcing them to seek employment somewhere else. Although the situation is slowly changing now, cases of, say, biology or math teachers teaching English are not infrequent. Such teachers may feel too insecure to be able to focus on other than the basic roles of an organizer, evaluator, and knowledge transmitter. Additionally, they may simply not know how to go beyond these functions and perform other, probably more demanding roles.

Still, there is hope for the teachers' role performance and students' expectations to become more congruent. As Poland is aspiring to join the European Union, numerous reforms, including that in the field of education, are being implemented. First of all, foreign languages are receiving more attention by being obligatorily introduced as early as the 4th grade of primary school (it used to be the 7th grade). Secondly, examination requirements are changing with the focus placed more on skills than language facts. Finally, teachers are beginning to feel the need to develop as now their future careers will by and large depend on their performance and ever-improving qualifications.

In view of the above changes, it would seem interesting to carry out a similar study of teacher roles in a few years' time. It would then be possible to assess how much the new system of education has contributed to changing students' expectations for and teachers' perceptions of roles as well as their role behavior.

REFERENCES

- Banton, Michael
1965 *Roles: An introduction to the study of social relations*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Barnes, Douglas
1976 *From communication to curriculum*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Harmer, Jeremy
1983 *The practice of English language teaching*. London: Longman.
- Havighurst, Robert J. – Bernice L. Neugarten
1967 *Society and education*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Kębłowska, Magdalena
1999 "The role of the foreign language teacher: An analysis of teachers' perceptions and their role behavior", *Network 2*, 2: 19-26.
- Wright, Tony
1987 *Roles of teachers and learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.