

The Significance of Teacher Leadership in College English Teaching

Xiaohui Li

Sichuan University of Media and Communications, Chengdu, Sichuan, China.

How to cite this paper: Xiaohui Li. (2024). The Significance of Teacher Leadership in College English Teaching. *The Educational Review, USA*, 8(4), 571-574.
DOI: 10.26855/er.2024.04.014

Received: March 26, 2024

Accepted: April 24, 2024

Published: May 20, 2024

Corresponding author: Xiaohui Li, Sichuan University of Media and Communications, Chengdu, Sichuan, China.

Abstract

Teacher leadership plays a critical role in the learning and development of students. Based on students' experiences, this study aims to describe teacher leadership among college English teachers by examining the impact they have on their students. Fifty third-year students at Sichuan University of Media and Communications (SUMC) in China participated in a qualitative study. They were asked three questions regarding the English instructors who had the most significant influence on them during their first two years of English learning in college. The findings of the study indicate that the level of leadership exhibited by English teachers has a significant impact on students' motivation and performance in their English learning, as well as on how well they develop as individuals and perceive the world. The results identify four non-exclusive leadership traits or styles: sympathetic leadership, exemplary leadership, motivating leadership, and wise leadership. The study emphasizes the significance of teacher leadership in college English teaching.

Keywords

Teacher leadership, college English teacher, motivation and performance, personal growth, college students

1. Teacher leadership

Teacher leadership has gained increasing attention in education since the early 1980s (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). York-Barr and Duke (2004) propose that teacher leadership is the process by which educators individually or collectively persuade principals, fellow educators, and other members of the school community to enhance teaching and learning practices with the goal of improving student learning and achievement.

According to theoretical understandings of teacher leadership, the terms “influence” and “relationship” are integral to the definition of teacher leadership (Johansson-Fua, 2004). The goal of teacher leadership is to improve teaching and learning, primarily for the benefit of the students (Contreras, 2016). Academic achievement, student motivation, professional development, personal growth, and job satisfaction are all correlated with teacher leadership (Schott et al., 2020). Students have stronger moral growth when teachers connect with them, show attention, care, and concern, and assist them in finding meaning and purpose during challenging times. In this study, we took the college student's viewpoint and experience into consideration in studying teacher leadership. We inquired third-year students in SUMC about the specific traits of instructors that meet the above-described criteria of teacher leadership using an open-ended questionnaire.

The purpose of the questions were to determine whether teacher leadership had an impact on students' motivation and performance in English learning. The qualities of teacher leadership that selected educators exhibit, the ways how they influence students are expected to be revealed with the discoveries of the study as well.

2. Objectives

By looking at the characteristics and teaching styles of the most influential English teachers chosen by college students, this study aims to investigate the essence of teacher leadership. The main objective is to comprehend the relationship between teacher leadership and students' academic motivation and achievement and how significant effects teacher leadership has on college students. The study specifically attempts to clarify the following aspects of teacher leadership: the particular characteristics that students recognize as being most influential possessed by exceptional teachers; the methods and styles that effective teachers use; and the main lessons that students learn from their experience of studying English in the first two years in college.

3. Materials and methods

The research was conducted with a qualitative methodology based on Denzin and Lincoln (2011). 50 third-year university students were given a questionnaire consisting of three open-ended questions. These students have finished all English courses in the first two years. Thus, they are able to offer an objective evaluation of the instructors who have influenced them most with their English learning experience. The intended demographic for the study was 1630 third-year C-level students enrolled at SUMC. A simple random probability sample was performed. The research adhered to academic rigor and ethical standards of data privacy. (Fernández, 2023). A survey was developed through the Questionnaire Star application and distributed to the student database with an invitation to freely respond. Participants in this study were the first 50 students who responded to the questionnaire.

Three questions were designed to: extract the top three qualities or attributes of the selected English teacher that had the biggest impact on the student; describe how (what did he/she say/do?) the teacher affected the student; name two things they took away from this English teacher.

To analyze the data acquired, the stages indicated by Taylor and Bogdan (1987) were followed. For the coding of the data, all the responses from Questionnaire Star were collected in an Excel table. For each question, an Excel document containing the 50 responses was created. As advised by Taylor and Bogdan (1987), the responses to each question were examined one by one in order to spot emerging themes, create typologies, and code the data.

4. Results

4.1 Characteristics of the sample

Of the teachers selected by the students in the questionnaire, 52% were female and 48% male. Teachers aged 36-45 years accounted for 50%; 46-55 years for 28%; 25-35 years for 18%; 56-65 years for 6%. According to the result of the study, gender did not appear to be a significant factor in students' choice of teachers. It is suggested that teachers have the same effect on their students regardless of their gender. Interestingly, results indicated that the age range of 36-55 had the biggest influence on students. They, on the other hand, did not think that teachers aged 25-35 and 56-65 had as much influence. There was no obvious correlation between these factors and the survey responses.

4.2 Results of the first question

In the first question, participants were asked to list the three qualities or attributes of their preferred teacher that have had the biggest impact on them. Three distinct but related categories were used to categorize the responses: the teacher's values and personality features; the way the instructor relates to the pupils; and the way the teacher teaches in the classroom. According to 32% of the respondents, the primary qualities of the selected teachers are related to their methods of instruction, followed by their values and personality traits (40%), and their interactions with the students (28%). When it comes to teaching, students give preference to instructors who demonstrate a strong work ethic, are highly motivated, have a love for what they do, and communicate clearly and professionally. Additionally, teachers who involve students in the learning process through dynamic and active teaching approaches are valued by their students. According to the research, students place a high importance on instructors' personal traits and values, college students have high expectations for a certain set of traits they think are desirable in their professors. These include having a positive and jovial attitude, along with a strong sense of devotion and a responsible work ethic. Students tend to be influenced by and look up to instructors who live according to the values of intelligence and integrity. When it comes to the teacher-student connection. Kindness and support were frequently cited as essential elements among them. Students also appreciated teachers who showed them interest outside of the classroom.

4.3 Results of the second question

Four categories of teacher leadership practice were identified from the responses to the second question, which inquired how the teacher had influenced the learner.

The first kind, “empathetic leadership,” advocates a mutual understanding between the instructor and the student. The instructor shows a sincere interest in the students, recognizes their special talents, and actively interacts with them both within and outside the classroom. “Because he showed me that he knows how to listen and understand” is one of the comments that best describes this leadership style. “He gave me direct assistance. He expressed concern for me.”, “Because I found a confidant and someone with whom I could talk without fear of judgment.” etc. Teachers that inspire and motivate their students to realize their full potentials and find purpose in their actions are the embodiment of the second kind of leadership, known as “motivational leadership”. “In class, she said things that made me think and reflect on how I acted.”, “I learned from her that there were chances that I could reach what I dream of, and she encouraged me to make every effort to achieve what I could achieve.” These are just a few of the student replies that best represent this style. “She helped me achieve my goals and made positive changes in my life.” “She pushed me to pass CET--4 and CET--6, which I had never been able to imagine.”, “She inspired me in a way no one else ever did before.” “Exemplary leadership” is a category that the third leadership style falls under. The teacher works as a role model for the students is the characteristic of this leadership style. Students would emulate the teacher’s actions and behaviors. The following are some examples of reactions that best represent this leadership style: “He was the greatest at what he did”, “I admired him”, “It is advisable to emulate him”, “He is an individual who battles for his aspirations and what he believes in”, “She had an influence on me because I saw someone I wanted to be like her”. The teacher’s capacity to not only instruct but also captivate the students with what he or she says or does is what defines the forth leadership style, “wise leadership”. This type of leadership is regarded as wise since the instructor arouses the student’s curiosity and desire to learn with his or her wisdom and quick wit. The following are a few quotes that highlight this leadership style: “Because of the way he teaches, I became passionate about English learning”, “He showed me that learning can be enjoyable”, “He established a highly engaging and interactive environment, making English my favorite subject”.

4.4 Results of the third question

The students’ answers to the last question, which asked them to describe their most memorable lessons from the selected teacher, were divided into two categories: academic and real-world learning. The findings show that in addition to academic learning (45%), the majority of students (62%) cited life learning as their main source of knowledge learned from the chosen teacher. Students place the highest value on inspiration and encouragement about life or values-related topics, such as those that are connected to finding their life’s purpose and solving existential issues. In particular, many of the responses suggest that the most important lessons learned were interpersonal connections (3), work, endurance, and self-control to reach their goals (14), but most importantly, understanding and taking responsibility for one’s own life’s purpose (9). Personal security and self-esteem are two other crucial lessons that are discussed (5). When it comes to learning English, the terms “broadened horizon/vision,” “globalization,” “culture exchange”, and “a tool for communication” were reported to be the most commonly referred phrases by chosen teachers.

5. Conclusions

We are able to draw the following conclusions from the research: Students view teachers as leaders because of the way that teachers relate to their students, how they educate in the classroom, or just because they have positive personalities. These three descriptions of teacher leadership are connected to each other. The level of leadership exhibited by English teachers has a significant impact on students’ motivation and performance in their English learning as well as how well they develop as individuals. Teacher leadership is adaptable. It can take on several forms. Based on student replies, we have determined the following patterns of leadership practice: Leadership that is empathetic, and capable of relating to and understanding the students. Motivational leadership is the ability to provide learners with direction, meaning, and inspiration. Exemplary leadership: capable of serving as a role model to students. Wise leadership, capable of offering solutions and capture students attention on the topic. To sum up, a teacher-leader is wise in their use of empathy, motivation, modeling, and demand.

It is suggested that learning which helps kids become more motivated to learn, cultivate moral character, and find purpose in their life is more valued by students than academic success in English classes. This learning happens at random times and isn’t always connected to the curriculum. To assist the students in finding the meaning or answers to their questions, the instructor demonstrates good leadership. There are situations when a teacher leads without realizing it.

6. Discussion

The findings from this study provide insight into teacher leadership from the perspective of the students. The level of leadership exhibited by English teachers not only influences students' motivation and performance in the classroom, but also has a significant impact on the development of their moral values and characteristics. Effective leadership in English teaching helps students achieve greater academic success in language acquisition while also helping them find purpose in life and live it to the fullest. We conclude from this data that educators need to incorporate these learning goals into their lesson plans. Additionally, they have to believe that the job they do as educators is connected to a larger purpose, which is educating students to live, prosper, and fulfill their potentials.

Personal qualities such as virtues and ideals are highly valued by students in their professors and have had an impact on them. Without even realizing it, teachers set an example for students by their behaviors. Other studies on teacher behavior and character education (Berkowitz et al., 2017) are supported by this finding. It is common knowledge that role models play a crucial role in character education (Brooks et al., 2019). Our findings support this theory as well. Instructors must be cognizant of this and receive training in this area of teacher leadership. Programs for teacher development can incorporate it. Instructors need to have the time and environment at the school to develop deep connections with both students and other instructors.

Fernández & López (2021) claimed that the goal of teaching connects teacher and student in a way that supports their mutual growth and provides direction and meaning to the teaching-learning process. Given that the teacher learns from these interactions as well, this growth is probably reciprocal, and both parties would benefit from this relationship. Teachers need to be aware of that an interpersonal connection and an experience with the student that promotes growth and flourishing are necessary for teacher leadership. It can be taken into teacher development programmes.

Despite being purely exploratory in nature, due to the limit of its methodology and small sample size, our study suggests the significance of teacher leadership for teachers to exert influence on students in college English teaching.

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