

Challenges and Role Transformation of College Foreign Language Teachers in the AI Era

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Abstract: In the AI era, the teaching environment, methods, and evaluation in foreign language education have undergone structural changes, presenting three major challenges to the professional development of college foreign language teachers: the risk of marginalization, the need for continuous learning of AI technology, and the weakening of humanistic value orientation. To address these challenges, teachers must actively change their perspectives, and learn to become the facilitators of language learning, the collaborative learning designers in the classroom, the innovators in foreign language education, and the learners of intelligent technology. Through these changes, college foreign language teachers can proactively respond to the challenges of AI, and seize new educational opportunities, to achieve improvements in both personal professional growth and the quality of foreign language education.

1. Introduction

Since Artificial Intelligence (AI) was first proposed at the Dartmouth Conference in 1956, AI technology has developed over the past half-century into a major driving force in science and technology^[1]. The impact of AI extends beyond the tech industry, deeply influencing various aspects of society and transforming the operational models of many industries. Its application has become increasingly widespread and profound, especially in the education sector. As technology continues to advance, AI is demonstrating its immense potential in driving educational innovation, which has become a significant force in the modernization of education. Against this backdrop, college foreign language teaching has undergone substantial changes in academic philosophy, tools, methods, and content. For example, innovations such as Microlecture and MOOCs have become integral to foreign language education, and platforms like DingTalk, Zoom, and TikTok have served as essential online teaching tools. These developments pose new challenges to the professional development of college foreign language teachers, but also present tremendous opportunities, making it highly relevant to their professional growth^[2].

2. The Impact of AI on College Foreign Language Teaching

China's foreign language education informatization has gone through a 70-year developmental journey, which is divided into three phases: using modern electronic technology to carry out

education and teaching activities, computer-assisted language learning, and the deep integration of information technology and foreign language education. Currently, the development of foreign language education is in the third phase, which is further divided into “Internet plus Foreign Language Education” and “AI+ Foreign Language Education”^[3]. AI is expected to lead foreign language education into deeper structural changes, forming a new teaching model characterized by integration, openness, interactivity, and sharing.

Under the impetus of AI technology, foreign language education is undergoing unprecedented transformation and reconstruction. Compared to the previous two phases, foreign language education in the current phase involves improvements in tools and platforms and also profound changes in teaching philosophy and methods. AI technology, through big data analysis, intelligent recommendation, and personalized learning paths, allows for a more precise match between educational resources and learners’ needs. Moreover, intelligent learning environments provide students with more interactive learning experiences, fostering cross-cultural communication and collaboration. This new teaching model not only removes the spatial restraints of traditional classrooms but also enhances educational equity and teaching effectiveness.

3. Challenges Facing College Foreign Language Teachers in the AI Era

As AI advances rapidly, foreign language education is experiencing unprecedented transformative changes. However, teachers need to stay rational with a positive attitude. On one hand, they should avoid falling into self-doubt. It’s not necessary to be concerned about the potential career replacement crisis brought by technological innovation. On the other hand, they should not be overly complacent, underestimating or ignoring AI’s profound impact on educational models. Teachers should objectively evaluate its strengths while calmly analyzing its limitations and challenges in practical applications. By embracing and adapting to this transformation, teachers can seize new educational opportunities brought by AI, to achieve both personal professional growth and improved foreign language education quality.

In late November 2022, OpenAI, an American AI research lab, launched ChatGPT, a large language model that represents a significant application of Generative AI technology. Its emergence is expected to drastically enhance human language learning and usage capabilities, with a comprehensive impact on China’s higher education in foreign languages^[4]. Historically, teachers have taken responsibility for imparting truth, wisdom, and knowledge and solving students’ doubts. Language intelligence technologies represented by ChatGPT will influence foreign language education with an irresistible trend. This means that it will bring unlimited opportunities to the development of foreign language education. However, it also poses significant challenges to college foreign language teachers^[5]. The advent of AI has further exacerbated teachers’ sense of urgency and crisis.

3.1 The Risk of Marginalization for College Foreign Language Teachers

As technology is racing ahead, AI is flooding all industries at an unprecedented rate. Internet and education are integrating deeply and upgrading continuously. Thus, through a series of cutting-edge technologies such as voice recognition, high-precision machine resolution, and advanced visual analysis technology, their integration and application not only greatly enrich the teaching means, but also unconsciously change the nature and form of education.

Florian Znaniecki, in his book *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge*^[6], noted that the social role of man of knowledge was divided into technical adviser, sages, scholar, and new knowledge explorer by Znaniecki. Teachers serve as the role of “knowledge transmitters” within the scholar type in the framework of man of knowledge. In the past, teachers, as the primary transmitters and

directors of knowledge during the students' learning processes, held an irreplaceable position. However, with the continuous maturity and widespread adoption of AI technology, this situation has begun to change subtly. AI, with its powerful data processing capabilities, precise learning behavior analysis, and personalized teaching plan design, can simulate and even surpass certain teaching functions of human teachers to some extent, showing the potential to replace some teacher functions in specific contexts.

Students can access a wealth of foreign language education resources through more intelligent carriers or tools such as computers, mobile phones, and smart robots. They can complete a full range of foreign language learning activities through online education platforms. These intelligent technologies and products enable students to acquire foreign language knowledge through various channels, which makes college foreign language teachers no longer the only channel for students to acquire knowledge. This means teachers no longer have the “discourse hegemony” of knowledge, and the authority of knowledge transmitters is facing unprecedented challenges^[5].

3.2 The Need for College Foreign Language Teachers to Continuously Learn AI Technology

To maintain educational advancement and effectiveness, teachers must continuously update their knowledge and skills, particularly in deeply understanding and flexibly applying AI technology. On one hand, college foreign language teachers need to systematically study the basic knowledge of AI, including its principles, algorithms, and application scenarios, to accurately understand the potential and limitations of AI in education. By participating in professional training, reading cutting-edge literature, and engaging in academic exchanges, teachers can continuously enhance their technical literacy, laying a solid foundation for integrating AI technology into teaching practices. On the other hand, more importantly, teachers need to effectively incorporate AI into their daily foreign language teaching practices. This calls for teachers to go beyond merely mastering the technical aspects of AI; they must also deeply explore how to leverage AI technology to optimize teaching processes, elevate the quality of education, and inspire students' interest and creativity in learning. Moreover, college foreign language teachers need to continuously explore how to integrate AI technology with traditional teaching methods, forming a teaching model with their characteristics to meet the needs of today's classroom development. This undoubtedly presents a significant challenge for them.

3.3 The Diminishing Influence of Humanistic Values in College Foreign Language Teaching

In traditional education, teachers, as Social Representatives, are characterized by “social norms”. This role requires teachers to convey and impart the cultural essence that reflects these norms, including belief systems, values, behavioral attitudes, and practical models. It also needs teachers to serve as living examples that holistically shape and nurture students' cultural understanding^[7].

However, with the widespread adoption of technology, AI algorithms and big data analysis have become the primary tools for college foreign language teachers in making teaching decisions. Students are increasingly viewed as quantifiable data, while teachers themselves have become “quantifiable entities” governed by algorithms. The interactions between teachers and students have shifted from personal exchanges to data-driven and algorithmic interactions^[8].

While this transformation has enhanced efficiency, it has inevitably diminished the emotional exchange that is crucial in language teaching. This shift makes it challenging to connect with and evoke learners' emotional resonance and cultural identity. It neglects the deep concern for vitality and value rationality in education, resulting in a loss of “human warmth” in foreign language education. Consequently, the learning process seems cold and soulless, which is unable to meet the needs for students' holistic development and deep cultural understanding.

Given this, college foreign language teachers must face the threat posed by AI, seize

development opportunities, and reassess their identity and roles to establish effective partnerships with AI. They need to leverage this advanced teaching technology to facilitate their role transformation^[2].

4. Role Transformation for College Foreign Language Teachers in the Context of AI

A Guide to College English Teaching (2020 Edition) highlights that artificial intelligence (AI) has become a crucial tool and means in foreign language education^[9]. AI technology not only offers personalized learning paths for language learners but also significantly enhances teaching efficiency and quality, driving innovation in teaching models. In college foreign language classrooms, AI-assisted tools such as intelligent translation systems, language learning platforms, and online teaching resources are increasingly utilized. These tools have a profound impact on teaching methods, content, and outcomes, making access to resources more convenient and abundant. They also enhance the interaction between teachers and students and personalize the learning experience. In the AI era, education takes on new missions, features, and functions, leading to a redefinition of the roles of college foreign language teachers. Teachers are gradually shifting from the traditional role of “knowledge transmitters” to “facilitators” and “innovators”. In this process, teachers need to develop stronger adaptability, emphasize exploration, communication, collaboration, reflection, and integration in their professional development, and actively adjust their mindsets to turn challenges into opportunities^[10].

4.1 The Facilitator of Language Learning

With the rapid advancement of AI technology, the education sector is experiencing profound changes. In this evolving landscape, the role of teachers is shifting from merely imparting knowledge to becoming facilitators of learning. Teachers now leverage intelligent technology to provide personalized guidance to students, helping them to more effectively acquire knowledge and skills. AI, with its powerful data processing and personalized learning algorithms, provides customized learning paths for basic knowledge, thereby alleviating the burden on teachers to deliver basic content. AI technology also offers robust support for teaching and research, enabling educators to better analyze teaching effectiveness, optimize teaching design, and further enhance educational quality. Moreover, teachers need to become partners and guides in students’ learning processes, offering emotional support, motivation, and strategic guidance. This helps students build confidence, overcome learning barriers, and promote their holistic development.

4.2 The Collaborative Learning Designers in the Classroom

In traditional classrooms, teachers often play a dominant role, controlling the pace and content of teaching. However, in an AI-assisted educational environment, this pattern is changing. AI can assist teachers in designing course content, intelligently recommending learning resources based on students’ learning data, and optimizing learning paths. Teachers increasingly take on the role of collaborative learning designers, working with students to set learning goals and design challenging learning tasks to promote collaborative learning and knowledge sharing among students. Additionally, teachers serve as supervisors, ensuring the smooth progress of learning activities, providing timely feedback, and adjusting teaching strategies to meet students’ learning needs. This shift not only boosts students’ initiative and engagement but also fosters deeper interaction and mutual respect between teachers and students.

4.3 The Innovators in Foreign Language Education

In an AI-assisted teaching environment, teachers need not only to master the use of AI tools but also to possess critical thinking and innovative teaching skills. This entails the ability to think independently and assess the educational value and effectiveness of AI technology to avoid blindly following trends or over-relying on AI tools. At the same time, teachers should actively explore new teaching models and methods, integrating AI technology with traditional approaches to innovate teaching design and enhance teaching effectiveness. For example, teachers can use AI to implement flipped classrooms, project-based learning, and other teaching models that stimulate students' interest and motivation in education, and cultivate their ability to learn independently and collaboratively.

4.4 The Learners of Intelligent Technology

Facing the widespread application of AI, teachers must possess a certain level of technological literacy and master AI tools. They should emphasize teaching reflection, and continuously optimizing teaching strategies to meet students' learning needs and characteristics. Today, smart teaching tools such as Yun Banke, Yu Classroom, and You Xuepai are emerging. Teachers can utilize these tools to deliver personalized foreign language teaching resources and customize learning paths based on students' learning data and interests. At the same time, teachers need to be proficient in the relevant technical modules of these tools, such as resource sharing, assignment grading, and academic performance statistics to optimize teaching models, reduce teachers' workload, improve assignment accuracy, and save time^[11]. Additionally, teachers should keep up with the latest AI developments, continuously updating their knowledge to meet the requirements of educational informatization. By participating in professional training, workshops, online courses, and other methods, teachers can effectively enhance their technological literacy, laying a solid foundation for better utilizing AI to serve teaching.

5. Conclusion

Looking forward, foreign language education will enter a new era of collaboration between teachers and artificial intelligence. In this era, foreign language teachers and AI will each play to their strengths, deeply integrating language teaching, skill enhancement, and value-oriented education to meet the personalized development needs of students, thereby significantly improving the overall quality and effectiveness of foreign language talent cultivation. As new opportunities and challenges arise, college foreign language teachers should stay attuned to the latest trends, embrace intelligent technology, and continuously learn and master its core aspects. By doing so, they can infuse new vitality into foreign language education, avoiding marginalization in the AI era, and drive the field toward deeper, higher-quality, and more innovative development.

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