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Jannette Wei-Ting Wang

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# **How Adult Educators' Positionality Impact the Learners in the Literacy Programs for Foreign Spouses in Taipei County, Taiwan**

Jannette Wei-Ting Wang  
Department of English Language and Culture  
University of Tamkang University-Lanyang Campus, TAIWAN

Keywords: Adult Literacy Program, Positionality, Multicultural Education, Southeast Asian Foreign Spouse

**Abstract:** The purpose of this qualitative study is to critically examine and explore the “positionalities” including the gender, race and class of adult educators who taught the literacy program of foreign spouses in Taiwan. Furthermore, the effect of positionalities such as gender awareness on a teaching environment will also be studied. The first research question is: How do literacy educators of foreign spouses position themselves and how do they position the new immigrant learners? The second question is: How do literacy educators of foreign spouses teach learners to face the negative stereotypes about them in Taiwan’s society?

## **Study Results**

This paper summarizes a few preliminary conclusions for these two research questions. 1. The interaction between the literate teacher of foreign spouses and his or her students; 2. How the teacher deals with the negative stories about foreign spouses.

## **Instruction-Based and Supplemented by a Q & A Section and a Discussion Section as Teaching Method**

During the teaching course, the instructions will be mainly based on lectures and will guide the students on how to transcribe text, organize notes and do some home reading. Such practices with text and reading can help students increase their literacy and pronunciation. Moreover, it can also help future convergence go smoothly. In order to make teaching activities more active, the teaching atmosphere should be more entertaining; it is not enough to just instill knowledge without any communication and interaction.

Teacher E said, “It might be possible that everyone discusses some issues, and then read the text to me during the last half hour” (Teacher E-329~330). Alternatively, Teacher F mentioned the learning of basic life knowledge and the exchanging of mother tongues of the students in order to add some entertainment in the classroom.

For example, sometimes I would promote the “113 Maternal and Child” line or anti-fraud hotline. Once they became aware of it, they would say, “Yeah, we often received telephone fraud in Taiwan.” Sometimes, I would also deliberately ask them how to say, “I wish you happiness” in Vietnamese and try to interact with them so they wouldn’t feel bored. Simultaneously, I am also able to learn some foreign languages during the class (Teacher F-236 ~ 239).

Through interaction with the students, the course will be designed as Q&A and discussion, which allows students to think and speak out; instead of having the teachers conduct a lecture for

an entire hour. At the same time, teachers can also follow up on the students' learning situations, promote the students' learning motivation, and to adjust the teaching content and teaching pace if needed. Moreover, it can also lure students to continue to participate and feel motivated to learn.

**The Interaction between the Teacher and the Student after Class Worried about the cause of misunderstanding due to poor communication.** Although some teachers want to interact with the students after school, there are some fears that conflict might occur between both sides due to miscommunication, misunderstanding of tone of speech or text, thereby, the teachers are sometimes afraid of speaking to them. Teacher E mentioned,

Because they are not accustomed to the language, and if we chat with them or sometimes when the conversation becomes longer, I am afraid that they will misunderstand what I meant..... If it is misunderstood due to their ability to express being lesser than ours.....they might interpret our words according to their understanding or based on what they heard which might not be the same as what we meant ..... so I try to avoid talking about some of the details in life with them, like their private lives..... I am afraid. (Teacher E -412~413, 415, 419, 421, 425)

So Teacher E will only focus on the students' questions, his area of expertise or to answer or respond in a rather passive way. Teacher E said, "I will not take the initiative to ask about the problems in their lives or other similar questions. I will never initiate these questions" (Teacher E -409 to 410).

Although Teacher E himself is very willing to answer to students' queries, sometimes due to his lack of life experience, he might give them suggestions that would only create little effect, or simply have no direct answer to the question. Therefore, we will sometimes ask the officers for help, or ask other female teachers to provide assistance. It could not only successfully resolve the students' issues, but also lessen any unnecessary misunderstanding between both sides. In addition, the teacher will also allow them to have discussions with their peers to aid the students in solving their doubts or problems. For example,

I'll ask a student what she thinks...then ask another student. Based on what she thinks, I will give the student the opportunity to discuss with her peers and she might also inspire others with her idea. I won't respond to them, but only guide them in expressing their opinions and have discussions on their own, right right right. But if I really have to give my opinion, I may...not conclude it! I will not give a conclusion. (Teacher E -531 ~ 534)

Teacher E thinks there can be different ways to solve the students' problems through discussion. But if it is about the student's privacy issues, Teacher E wouldn't dare to get involved.

From above, there is no doubt that Teacher E is eager to help solving the students' problems, but he has a limit in identity, gender, life experiences, etc., causing many obstacles when he tries to help. Therefore, asking officers or other teachers to assist the students is a good way to successfully solve their problems.

**Topics discussed between teachers and students.** Unlike Teacher E and the students' ways of interaction, other teachers' ways of interaction with other students also have sites.

According to the conversations between teachers and students, researchers divided them into three different directions. They are respectively, the usage of money and male perspective, problems with the in-laws, and others.

***The usage of money and male perspective.*** In Teacher F and students' conversations, what impresses me is the usage of money and Taiwanese men's point of view. One of the students reacted to the teacher and said sometimes they would quarrel just because she asked her husband for money. How can this problem be solved? Teacher F teacher replied,

I told her to think of the purpose for getting the money. If the purpose is expenditure in households, you can change the way you ask for the money. For example, you can tell your husband that there is no more money for household expenditure and tell him the reasons for why you need the money. Subtly ask him whether he can provide you with some of the money. She then said right right right. It is much better to say it this way.(Teacher F-202 ~ 205)

Maybe students want to ask for the perspectives and roles of a male through male teachers and ask about related problems to seek answers. Although there are not many questions, undoubtedly, the students' purpose is to find answers through teachers' responses to have a better understanding of their husband or of Taiwanese men.

***In-law issues.*** During the interview, two female teachers mentioned that students raised questions about the problem of how to get along with their parents-in-law, hoping to get the answers through a discussion with the teacher. The two teachers' responses were very similar in that the problems with parents-in-law occurs in each family. Since ancient times, there was always a lack of harmony between parents-in-law and their son's wife. Therefore, the teachers hope that the students would be patient when enduring this kind of problem. Teacher C responded,

As I said, this is just one of the family's faces! Of course, let the elders be the first! We must respect the elders in order to have a more peaceful family and so that the family will last long. (Teacher C310 to 312)

Teacher D also responded,

Then I would tell them that sometimes the elders are like that. They would shout at you just like my mother and my grandmother who had this kind of problem before. Right. Then I will tell her that the problem between you and your mother-in-law is hard to avoid. ....It's also hard even if she is a Taiwanese mother and her son has a Taiwanese wife. So just be tolerant on this issue! And then just listen to what the elders say...don't try to defend them and don't get mad at them. (Teacher D)

Although both teachers try to defuse the discontent between the students and the elders, they both handled the problem in a more calm way to appease the students' emotions. Hoping that the students would be more considerate of their elders, to respect them, and to avoid embarrassing

situations that the students' husbands might face. Through the solution of both teachers, researchers believe that both of the teachers also use the same solution to deal with the problems they face in their families. Furthermore, they fear that developing more feminism awareness might affect family harmony, therefore, the main way to solve the problem is based on a more considerate attitude towards the elders.

**Other aspects.** In the interview, the teacher mentioned that after school, students are often discontent with their lives and express their dissatisfaction to the teacher. They sometimes also sing together while learning Mandarin or Chinese characters and communicate through music to express their feelings. Students also have the opportunity to discuss their job so that teachers will have a better understanding of their situation.

Teacher D responded by saying that during the course of discussion, he will stand in a friend's position to respond to the students' questions and to comfort them. For instance, I think the least I can do is to listen to them in their distress, then comfort her (Teacher D-921).

We have this group of students that would be like a family to each other. Whenever she has overcome any problems or difficulties, she can come to the class and complain. Though we may not be able to provide her any particular solutions, at least we can let her ease her own emotions and give her a shelter to express her feelings. (Teacher D)

Teacher C then mentioned the contribution of music and how to learn from each other. They can also learn by understanding the content of the lyrics and realizing what the song is trying to convey to them. For example,

They will ask the teacher to sing with them because they had learnt some Taiwanese songs before. Then they will say that they can teach me how to sing Vietnamese songs and I teach them how to sing Taiwanese or Mandarin songs. But there was an instance that I taught them a song called "After Home" (Taiwanese Song). I would explain the meaning of the song to them and discuss it with them after a while. Because the song is talking about a woman that is married to a man and the things that happened, it is a bit like talking about how to act out the role of a wife. Then I would discuss the meaning of the lyrics with them (Teacher A).

In addition to the above responses, there is also a teacher that mentioned students discussing working conditions, communication problems with their husbands, or just simply little conversations with their husbands. Although the direction and types of the issues are not many, we can still understand that students want to use our spare time to discuss with the teachers and peers, exchange opinions in order to solve their own problems or want to acknowledge more perspectives of Taiwanese people and to easily integrate into Taiwanese families. Yet the teachers' positions and the students' opinions are very important because students absorb ideas and acknowledge more Taiwanese society, customs, and ways of thinking from both teachers and students. Therefore, teachers have to be careful of the tone of their voice, attitude, position, and point of view to avoid misunderstanding.

**Through discussions during the next class, dinner reunions, and the students' children, they can learn more about the students of literacy class.** During the interview

process, there are two teachers referred to using other ways to understand more about the students. By applying those ways, they are able to understand more about them. Teacher E said,

Honestly, when the class is about to be dismissed at nine, they miss home more than I do ... Sometimes they go straight home after class and leave the discussion until the next class, where they will come to me directly to have a discussion. (Teacher E-378,380 ~ 381)

However, Teacher C applies a different way to understand his or her students. Since the parents of the children are students in the foreign spouses literacy class, I can take advantage of the PTA meeting to chat with the students or have a dining reunion with them before the end of the semester to have a more clear understanding of the learning condition of the students and to help them identify their difficulties while learning.

### **Teachers Deal with the Negative Stories about Foreign Spouses**

Although foreign spouses have already been in Taiwan for many years, the news tends to report more of the negative aspects. The instructors have different issues to face and different problems to solve. Look at each of the following descriptions below.

From the data, the researchers found that there are three interviewed teachers that had discussed the case of negative news with the students, but the teachers had said that the times of discussion were only few and such issues were also not purposely mentioned. The teachers might worry that they are sensitive topics for the students. Therefore, they seldom discuss it. For example, Teacher C said that she had doubt about the news report for fear that it may affect everyone's mood, so she rarely mentioned it. She said, "We feel that that there should be doubt in the newspapers or magazines. .... We should try to say, when the news is reported negatively, they will affect everyone's mood" (Teacher C 517, 519 to 520). Teacher C then took advantage of media reports to interact with the students and convey a more accurate way to facilitate them to fight for their rights. She said,

Sometimes they say they would like to mention it... if there are any chances to fight for that job, then I would ask them, ... Have you guys encountered such problems? Then they would also tell me and say that indeed, there are some things that are limited to them ... They would ask me a question and ask whether it works out or not. They would have such behaviors. So would there be any results? ... And then of course we aren't able to give them a definitive answer, but maybe there are better ways for us to instruct them, hoping that they can use a more correct way to fight for the rights they deserve (Teacher C 271 to 280).

Yet Teacher D thinks that it is too sensitive for the students to discuss the negative reports, therefore, she is less likely to initiate a talk about the reports and discuss it with the students. She said,

They would also discuss ... talk, speaking of news that they had heard about today and would talk about their opinions. I would also talk with them about the news, but not very often,.....I would rather not intentionally bring up the topic because I think it is sometimes a sensitive topic, hence I don't mention it on purpose. However, they would initiatively

talk to me about it...I would say, "Oh, really? Then I'll talk with them and just do some chatting, right (Teacher D 474 - 481).

Through the interview with the teachers, we can realize that when encountering negative news report, the teachers usually discuss it with the students in a more passive way. Moreover, through chatting, they hope to give students a more correct way to fight for the rights they deserve and to help them as much as they can. However, other respondents commented that such things are not discussed with the students, or that they even haven't dealt with such a situation before. So, they can't respond. Teacher C said in response,

Actually, we rarely discussed those issues in class because we only have two hours a week of class time ... we can talk more about other things with them rather than the negative media coverage. We rarely discussed the media with them (Teacher C).

In addition, two of the interviewees responded that because they haven't experienced it so they can't comment or no students complain or talk about such problems. Therefore, they haven't had the experience to solve those kinds of issues. It can be seen that the situation faced by each teacher is not the same. But the teachers indeed tried their best to help the students solve their problems.

### **Conclusion**

The results show that, "Adult education is not only the transmission of knowledge, but plays a very important role in the distribution of social, economic and political power. We shouldn't believe that any adult education activities are neutral under the condition of sequences of struggle in power and knowledge."(Cervero, Wilson, & Associates, 2001, p. xv) With the increasing of new immigrants every year, every teacher that provides basic adult education or literacy classes for foreign spouses should clearly analyze their position: gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation, and so on. They need to view whether they see their own standard of culture more superior to the Southeast Asian countries and whether their own ethnic doctrine is consciously affecting a bias of education philosophy in the classroom. As a female or female adult educator, when imparting literacy education, it is important to interpret the negative evaluation towards the new inhabitants of women in the society.

This research indicates that power inequality occurs when the "positions" of adult educators and their learners differ, but the question of whether or not such educational activities really lead to the "empowerment" of spouses (Li Ying, 2006) still needs a group of adult educators and learners to construct what they accordingly believe as true knowledge.