

Exploring teacher beliefs and practice in the implementation of a new English language curriculum in China: Case studies

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Abstract: This paper reports on two case studies of teacher beliefs and practice in the process of implementing the new English language curriculum for senior secondary school in China. The two teachers were from two schools of different standing in Guangzhou City. The study probed into their beliefs about the English language and its teaching and learning and their classroom practice. Data were collected with two semi-structured interviews and fourteen classroom observations. An analysis of the data suggested that the two teachers' beliefs and practice were largely consistent in terms of teaching activities and teaching methods. Some inconsistency might be attributed to both internal factors, for example, teachers' sense of self-efficacy and external factors such as students' language proficiency. Questions for future research were also raised in this paper.

Keywords: teacher beliefs, classroom teaching, curriculum implementation

Introduction

It has been recognized that teachers are at the core of the process of implementing an educational innovation (Adams, 2000; Hargreaves, 1998; Fullan, 2001) and that teacher beliefs are a significant factor that “may have the greatest impact on what teachers do in the classroom, the way they conceptualize their instruction, and learn from experience” (Brody, 1998, p.25). A number of studies have linked teachers' beliefs to the implementation of some innovative methods in language teaching such as the whole language approach (Anders & Richardson, 1991), cooperative learning method (Ghaith, 2004), and task-based language teaching (Careless, 2001; Todd, 2005).

It has also been pointed out that beliefs are related to the social context of a country (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Survey studies have been conducted with language teachers in China concerning their beliefs about language teaching and learning, for example, Xia (2001) and Lam (2005a). In the current context of China, as language curricula are being revised, one of the central concerns is whether language teachers are sufficiently oriented to implement new ideas incorporated in new curricula (Lam, 2005a, p.1). It is necessary to explore teachers' beliefs narrated from their own perspectives. This paper reports on such an exploratory study of teachers' beliefs and practice as they implement the new English language curriculum in senior secondary school.

The new curriculum in senior secondary school, approved by the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People's Republic of China (PRC), was published by People's Education Press in April 2003. Its piloting began in September 2004 in four provinces (Guangdong, Hainan,

Shandong and Ningxia) in China. This is a major development in English language education in China at the senior secondary level. The new curriculum has recognized the humanistic value of English as a foreign language in fostering students' growth as people as well as its instrumental value in providing access to scientific knowledge and economic development (Wang & Lam, 2006). It represents a departure from the traditional, teacher-centered teaching and learning to a learner-centered, enquiry-oriented teaching and learning (Wu, 2005), incorporating linguistic knowledge, linguistic skills, affect, learning strategy, and cultural awareness. It aims to develop students' critical thinking ability, their information gathering and analysis ability, and their language use ability with a view to bringing about life-long learning and whole-person development. It has been argued that the new curriculum is demanding on the part of teachers (Wang & Lam, 2006; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). However, few empirical studies have been conducted to find out whether this is really so and to what extent this is related to teachers' beliefs. A study on the process of its implementation with a focus on teachers' beliefs and practice is therefore timely.

Two questions are to be answered in this study: 1) what beliefs do teachers hold about the English language and its learning and teaching? and 2) Are teachers' beliefs and practice consistent as they implement the new curriculum?

Literature Review

Different terms have been used to refer to the ideas that learners and teachers have about language and language learning. Pajares (1992) proposed the idea of a belief system, formed by an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and values, and suggested that belief systems and knowledge are inextricably intertwined. Barcelos (2003) regards belief as a form of thought that "covers all the matters of which we have no sure knowledge and yet which we are sufficiently confident of to act upon and also the matters that we now accept as certainly true, as knowledge, but which nevertheless may be questioned in the future ..." (p.10). In the study of teachers of English as a second language, Woods (1996) proposed an integrated network of beliefs, assumptions and knowledge (BAK) as he found the distinction between knowledge and beliefs untenable, and the terms knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs not referring to distinct concepts, but points on a spectrum of meaning. Riley holds that teachers bring their "set of representations, values and beliefs which include expert knowledge about the language-learning process" to the learning situation (1997, p.122). Ghaith (2004) defines teacher beliefs as "comprehensive of several dimensions relative to beliefs about learning, teaching, program and curriculum, and the teaching profession more generally" (p.280). These beliefs constitute the 'culture of teaching' and are founded on the goals, values, and views of teachers regarding the content and process of teaching and on their understanding of their roles within the systems in which they work (Ghaith, 2004).

In this study English teachers' beliefs refer to their opinions and ideas about the English language and its teaching and learning. They are shaped by teachers' cultural backgrounds and social contexts.

Regarding the relationship between teacher beliefs and practice, reviews support the notion of a reciprocal nature (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996). "Beliefs are thought to drive actions; experience and reflection on action may lead to change in and/or addition to beliefs" (Richardson, 1996, p.104). Empirical studies (for example, Ghaith, 2004; Todd, 2005) have affirmed this relationship. One of the aims of this study is to explore the relationship in a context of curriculum implementation in China.

Research Method

Six teachers from two schools of different standing in Guangzhou City participated in the study. They were all Grade One teachers and had been teaching the new curriculum since September 2005. This is a longitudinal study extending over an academic year. The first-stage data collection was done in April and May, 2006. The six teachers were interviewed individually and five to seven English lessons of each teacher were observed. This paper reports the findings on two participants, Ye and Yang, both of which are pseudonyms. The following table provides personal information of Ye and Yang and their school contexts.

Table 1: *Personal information of the two participants*

Name	Ye	Yang
Gender	Female	Male
Age	27	49
Qualification	BA in English Language and Literature in a provincial teachers university	Associate Degree in TEFL in a local teachers college
Professional degree	Junior instructor	Senior instructor
Years teaching	3 years	27 years
School standing	Top	Bottom
School location	Urban	Urban
School size	3,000	1,000
Class size	56	48

Interviews

The interview with Ye lasted 45 minutes and that of Yang lasted 30 minutes. Both interviews were semi-structured, conducted in Chinese, voice-pen recorded, and transcribed and translated into English. The interview questions were centered around their beliefs about

the English language, English language teaching and learning and their attitudes towards the new curriculum.

Classroom observation

Seven consecutive English lessons taught by each of the two teachers were observed. Each of the seven lessons had its own focus, being reading, language points, grammar, listening, or exercises. Overlaps and combinations of the above teaching content did occur. All lessons were voice-pen recorded. This paper is based on the analysis of their reading lessons.

Both qualitative data and quantitative data were collected from classroom observation. The qualitative data were collected in the classroom while the teaching was conducted with a record of the teaching and learning activities. Notes were also taken about the classroom atmosphere and students' reaction. The quantitative data were gathered through the Classroom Observation Scheme (Spada & Frohlich, 1995; Careless, 2001), after the observation when the recording of the classes was coded. The focus was on teaching activities and teacher talk, such as teacher questions and teacher feedback. This paper reports on findings from the qualitative data.

Data analysis

The data was dealt with thematic analysis: coding and categorization guided by research questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995). Individual teachers' experience was reported as their semi-biography (Benson & Nunan, 2005; Lam, 2005b).

Findings and Discussion

Ye's teaching beliefs

About the English language

Ye believed that English is a tool and medium for knowledge acquisition and information gathering. It can help students know the world and broaden their horizon. She emphasized an extensive use of English in the world during the interview.

English is an international language spoken in many countries. Many books are written in English; many conferences are conducted in English; many international affairs and the latest developments in the world are reported in English.

About English language learning

Ye believed that, to learn English well, students need to be interested, highly motivated and perseverant. They need to have a learning environment and use the language in a context. Memorization is important in learning English. She highlighted during the interview that:

If students do more reading, listening and practice, they will use the language more skillfully; if they use it in a context, they will memorize it more easily and turn short-term memory into long-term memory. English has much to memorize, for

example, vocabulary. If you do not memorize words, you are like a building without bricks.

About the teacher's role

Ye believed that the teacher is mainly a guide playing different roles in different activities. She explained in the interview that:

At the beginning of the class, the teacher is a presenter of the topic or knowledge. In group discussion, the teacher is a coordinator, supervisor and organizer. To make sure that students do their homework, the teacher is a warden. If students come up with questions, the teacher is a tutor. When they know more than I do and tell me something new, we are communicators.

Ye's attitude towards the new curriculum

Ye held a positive attitude towards the new curriculum and believed that the new curriculum can arouse students' interest and develop their communicative competence. She expressed her attitude explicitly in the interview.

I like the new curriculum as it engages students more than the one I experienced in secondary school. We had communication in the class with questions and answers. But the communication was not substantial. The teacher knew the answer and could control what we would say. We had little chance for free speech and there were no open-ended questions. Teaching the new curriculum, I find the class more lively and it can attract students' interest and develop their competence. The assessment is not merely summative or teacher assessment. Students can do group assessment, mutual or self assessment. This leaves them a deeper impression of what they have learnt and also enhances their sense of aesthetics and their assessment ability.

Ye's classroom teaching

The teaching activities conducted in Ye's reading class is summarized in Table 2. The unit she taught was *Women of Great Achievement*.

Table 2: *Teaching activities in Ye's reading class*

Sequence	Activity	Content	Duration (Min.)
1	Dictation	10 words and phrases from Chinese to English	5
2	Language game	Students guessed the names of two women being described by the teacher. One was Madam Curie and the other was Wu Zetian, the only empress of China	10
3	Filling in the blanks	Six short passages introducing six women of great achievement including Jane Goodall	8

	orally	and Song Qingling	
4	Group discussion	What makes a great woman?	10
5	Q & A	Do you think the six women are great? Why?	5
6	A revision on the six women	Their achievements	2
7	Q & A	Do you think your mother is a great woman? Why?	4
8	Predicting	Students predicted the content from the title and the pictures in the textbook	2
9	Fast reading	Life story of Elizabeth Fry	4
10	Detailed reading	1) Reading comprehension exercise in the textbook 2) Summarizing the main idea for each paragraph 3) Filling in a table with the ambition, achievements, sacrifices of Elizabeth Fry	25

Consistency of Ye's teaching beliefs, practice and the implemented curriculum

An analysis of Ye's interview data, classroom observation data (teaching and learning activities), and the curriculum documents suggested that Ye's beliefs and practice were largely consistent in her teaching of the new curriculum.

Ye believed that English is a tool for knowledge acquisition and information gathering. This belief was exemplified in the reading activities in her class. Both reading for specific information and reading for general ideas could have developed students' reading strategies and skills. These activities could also have fostered students' information ability and critical thinking ability.

Ye believed that memorization is important in learning English. In practice she asked students to do dictation. She mentioned in the interview that:

I often ask my students to do dictation though we have limited teaching hours, because dictation will help them remember the words. Otherwise, they will forget all of them.

Ye believed that students need to be interested in learning English. In her class, Ye designed a guessing game at the beginning, asking students to guess the woman being described. She also showed pictures of the woman with PowerPoint Slides. The women being

described were Madam Curie and Wu Zetian, both influential figures in the world history. Then she asked students to fill in the blanks orally for some short passages introducing six great women including Elisabeth Fry and Jon of Art in the West, Song Qingling and Lin Qiaozhi in China. These activities could have not only developed students' listening and speaking skills, information ability and language use ability but also attended students' affect and raised their intercultural awareness.

Ye believed that to learn English well, students need to use the language in a context. In her classroom teaching, a meaningful context is created for some activities such as the language game, filling the blanks orally, group discussion on what makes a great woman and question and answer on whether students think their mothers are great women. These contextualized activities provide students with chances to learn and use the language. Doing these activities, students could have developed their linguistic knowledge, linguistic skills and affect. Meanwhile their critical thinking ability could also have been developed.

Ye believed that students need to have a learning environment. Correspondingly she asked her students to do group discussion and there was frequent interaction between teacher and students and among students. The classroom atmosphere was lovely and pleasant. The teacher's words were warm and encouraging. For example, at the beginning of the class Ye said: "We are going to learn a new unit in a new book. A good beginning makes a good end. So let's work hard." In the class students were active and cooperative and the teaching had been conducted smoothly.

Ye believed that the teacher is a guide. This role was performed to the full with the questions Ye asked to lead the students in reading, the language game and predicting. For instance, in summarizing the main idea of each paragraph, Ye asked students to find the words that describe time in the first paragraph and the verbs in the second paragraph, which provided clues for the summarization.

Ye believed that there is more substantial communication in the new curriculum. This is clearly reflected in the active interaction between teacher and students and among students. Among all the questions the teacher raised, 47% were open-ended, which activated students' thinking and participation. Learner-centeredness characterized Ye's teaching in the observed class.

Yang's teaching beliefs

About English learning

Yang believed that, to learn English well, students need to be interested in learning. They need to lay a solid base in linguistic knowledge. The textbook design and the teaching need to cater for learner differences in English language proficiency. He said during the interview that:

Students should first of all have interest in learning the language. The textbook and the teacher should consider students' background. Our students are poor learners and the new textbooks have too many new words.

About the teacher's role

Yang believed that the teacher is a facilitator. He elaborated this view in the interview.

The teacher should arouse students' interest and encourage them to learn actively. The teacher and students are equal. As a facilitator, the teacher should ask students to do a task or some work and help them finish the task and find out questions or problems.

Yang's attitude towards the new curriculum

Yang held a positive attitude towards the new curriculum. He believed that the new curriculum has good concepts and ideas but found it difficult to implement in his school due to the poor English proficiency of his students and his own incompetence in teaching. This attitude is expressed explicitly in the interview.

I think the concepts of the new textbook, task-based teaching and cooperative learning are all good. But they are difficult to implement in different schools. The new textbook is suitable for students with above-intermediate English proficiency. But it's difficult for our students. The discussion in the warming up is a bit hard for us. The reading materials are difficult and students cannot understand most of the reading materials as the materials have too many new words. With many years of teaching experience, I have some good ideas. But it's hard for me to use something new. I have to prepare a lot for the new curriculum and keep pace with the students in class. This is a bit beyond me.

Yang's teaching practice

The teaching activities conducted in Yang's reading class are summarized in Table 3. The unit he taught was *Working the Land*.

Table 3: *Teaching activities in Yang's reading class*

Sequence	Activity	Content	Duration (Min.)
1	Dictation	10 words and phrases from Chinese to English	5
2	Vocabulary reading	Students read aloud the new words in this unit together	4
3	Poem reading	The teacher read a poem <i>The peasant's lot</i>	2
4	Reading	Reading comprehension exercise in the textbook	8

		Reading for specific information	16
		Reading for the main idea of each paragraph	8
5	Q & A	1) What does the title “Working the land” mean? 2) What have you learnt from working on the farm?	8
6	Pair work	Discussion on questions in <i>Warming-up</i> 1) Have you ever grown any plants? If so what did you do to grow them? 2) Have you ever been to the countryside? What did you do there?	8

Consistency of Yang’s teaching beliefs, practice and the implemented curriculum

An analysis of Yang’s interview data, classroom observation data (teaching and learning activities), and the curriculum documents suggests that Yang’ beliefs and practice were consistent in general as he taught the new curriculum.

Yang believed that, to learn English well, students need to be interested in learning English. Knowing that students had visited a farm before, Yang designed three activities in the class: teacher presentation of a poem: *The peasant’s lot*; pair work on questions concerning students’ experience in growing plants and their experience of being to the countryside; and questions and answers about students’ knowledge on farming. In doing these activates students developed their listening and speaking skills. The poem *The peasant’s lot* and a discussion of students’ life experience made the teaching affective. Meanwhile students’ critical thinking ability and language use ability could have been developed in these activities.

Yang believed that students need to build a solid base in linguistic knowledge when learning English. In practice he asked students to do dictation and read the words together in order to consolidate their linguistic knowledge.

Yang believed that the teacher is a facilitator. During fast reading and detailed reading activities Yang facilitated the reading with questions asking students the key words that could summarize the main idea of each paragraph. In doing so, students’ reading strategy and reading skills could have been developed. Their information gathering and analysis ability and critical thinking ability could also have been enhanced.

Some inconsistency has also been found between Yang’s teaching beliefs and practice in the observed lesson. Yang believed that teaching needs to cater for learner differences in English language proficiency. Some topics he designed in the class, however, were too

difficult for students, for example, topics concerning students' experience in growing plants and their experience in farming, though the students, having been brought up in the city, did pay a visit to a farm before.

Yang believed that the teacher is a facilitator and should develop students' interest in learning and encourage them to learn actively. In the observed class, however, he worked more as a responsible warden who aimed to make sure that the students followed him closely and did not conduct any deeds inappropriately. His voice was rigid and he seldom smiled in the class making the classroom atmosphere rather tense. This might be explained by the saying in Chinese *Yanshi Chu Gaotu*, meaning strict teachers can produce master students. Besides, there is little interaction between teacher and students. This might be attributed to the teacher's sense of self-efficacy, as he believed that he could not follow students in free interaction. He expressed this worry in the interview.

It's hard for me to use something new. I have to prepare a lot for the new curriculum and keep pace with the students in class. This is a bit beyond me.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the teaching beliefs and classroom practice of two English teachers from two secondary schools in Guangzhou City as they implemented the new curriculum. An analysis of the data collected through interviews and classroom observation suggested that teachers' beliefs about the English language and its learning and teaching were consistent with their practice in general regarding teaching activities and teaching methods as they taught the new curriculum. Some inconsistency might be attributed to both internal factors, for example, teachers' sense of self-efficacy and external factors such as the students' language proficiency. To implement the new curriculum, teacher training is needed to inculcate teachers' beliefs as well as develop their competence in English and English language teaching and enhance their sense of self-efficacy.

As Thomson (1992) points out, belief systems are dynamic in nature, undergoing change and restructuring as individuals evaluate their beliefs against their experiences. The following questions are therefore worth studying in future research: 1. How do teacher beliefs change? 2. How does the change affect their practice as they implement the new curriculum? and 3. What is the model illustrating the interplay of teachers' beliefs, practice and other internal and external factors in the implementation of an educational innovation in the Chinese context?

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