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Chapter One: (6966)

English language teaching in China: Teacher Agency in Response to Curricular Innovations

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Biodata

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Abstract

This chapter explores the unique history of English Language Teaching in China, and the role of teacher agency in response to curricular changes. This study employed survey methodology with 72 Chinese English language teachers to understand the ways in which they adapt their curriculum within their local contexts. Interviews with five teachers and one teacher educator selected through purposeful sampling revealed additional factors that contributed to the teachers' sense of agency. The complexity of the translation of theory into practice is revealed in light of the current ecological systems in which teachers and students are situated.

Key Words: English Language Teaching, China, Policy, Teacher Agency

Introduction

Positioning the teaching of English globally requires teachers to have a sense of critical consciousness, informed by a “socioculturally-sensitive pedagogy” (Mckay & Heng, 2008; Alsagoff, McKay, Hu & Renandya, 2012). Though many of these discussions reside in inner circle English speaking countries where teachers are preparing to teach overseas, discussions on how to make English language teaching relevant to the local population by local teachers remains limited. Countries such as China have recognized the importance of English for dialogizing in the global context and have reformed their English language education programs to reflect these needs. The intention behind these efforts have been noble in the sense that the reform movements have sought to provide a better outcome for the students in terms of their English proficiency. However, with the changing curriculum, the influx of new textbooks, the integration of novel approaches and methods and a variety of backgrounds that the teachers bring to the classroom, the translation of these changes into intended practice appears to have created some tension within the particularities of the contexts in which they teach. This chapter explores the unique history of English Language Teaching in China, and the perceptions of Chinese English language teachers on their role in making ELT locally relevant for their students in light of curricular reform. The literature on teacher education now positions teachers at the center of their classroom, not as knowledge transmitters, but as decision makers constantly engaging in the process of constructing meaning and making sense of their knowledge and experiences as they interact with the broader contexts (Crookes, 2007). In addition, Kumaravadivelu (2012) calls for a shift from the teaching of methods and strategies to empowering teachers to theorize about teaching practice through understanding the needs that continually manifest within their own teaching contexts, integrating changes to support those needs, analyzing their teaching practice and student learning and finally, reflecting on the impact of their teaching. Through 72 surveys and five qualitative interviews with Chinese English language teachers and one teacher educator, this chapter presents an analysis of both internal and external factors that nurture or hamper the teachers’ sense of agency as they attempt to navigate the contextual influences on their teaching practice.

Literature Review

In this review, I focus on the literature on teacher agency to expand on the complexities involved in negotiating pedagogical change as teachers attempt to translate theory into practice followed by a brief history of the English Language Education movement in China. With every reform movement, there

are inevitable cascading effects, not only on the redesign of the learning outcomes, but also on the influx of new textbooks and materials with implicit expectations towards shifting teaching approaches and learning expectations. Nevertheless, the power of the English language in meeting both academic and professional goals has continued to be acknowledged and reflected in the sheer number of students enrolled in English as a foreign language courses in China.

Teacher Agency

Teachers have long been “de-professionalized,” having to follow a prescribed curriculum and having their worth and that of their students be defined by standardized testing and other prescriptive measures. The notion of teacher agency has gained momentum in recent years whereby teachers are not seen as mere transmitters of knowledge, but as agents of change. Priestly, Edwards, Miller, & Priestly (2012) found that the existing literature often lumps agent and change in the same category and is a highly under-theorized area of research. They propose an ecological view of teacher agency and argue that, “the extent to which teachers are able to achieve agency varies from context to context based upon certain environmental conditions of possibility and constraint, and that an important factor in this lies in the beliefs, values and attributes that teachers mobilize in relation to particular situations” (p. 191). Strikius (2003) also found in his case study on teacher agency that a teacher’s history and identity play a significant role in how they respond to language policy changes. Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2013) present a complex model of teacher agency building on the work of previous researchers in this area. Their framework grounded in the work of Emirbayer & Mische (1998) consists of three temporal processes including personal and professional histories from the past, projections onto the future motivated by a desire for change, and the conceptualization about oneself, the environment in which one resides, and the resources available in the present that may help or hinder the enactment of change. They found that teacher agency is influenced by their perception of their students, themselves as teachers and the teaching profession, the purpose of education, and the professional relationships embedded within the social structure of their environment. In addition, the language that they use in their discourse about instructional practice plays a role in how they see themselves as change agents. For example, if their language is centered around policy, which Priestley et al. (2013) believe “limit their potential to envisage different futures” (p. 197), it will result in reducing their sense of agency.

As teachers attempt to enact change in the classroom, it is important to recognize that their learners,

who are often at the center of these changes, may resist these changes. As important stakeholders in the process of change, Toohey (2007) utilizes the sociocultural theoretical model to describe how learner autonomy and agency are situated within a larger “social world” (p. 232), consisting of the learner’s historical experiences, how they perceive themselves, their resources and practices in their “figured world” (p. 241). Likewise, with curricular reform, the teachers’ “figured world” may play an important role in supporting or hampering new initiatives. As presented earlier, Priestly and his associates’ (2013) model on teacher agency does not define agency from a sociological perspective, but from an ecological perspective. They state, “While agency can be defined as the way in which actors ‘critically shape their responses to problematic situations’ (Biesta and Tedder, 2006, p. 11), it is important not to see agency as a capacity residing in individuals, but rather to conceive of it as something that is achieved through engagement with very specific contextual conditions (p. 188).

Several studies have looked into the role of teacher agency in response to the shifting ELT landscape in China. For example, Yang (2012) explores the notion of teacher agency from the perspective of mediation as derived from activity theory and the sociocultural perspectives. He found that teachers are influenced by a multitude of factors such as their teaching objectives, classroom artifacts (curriculum, textbooks), their beliefs and knowledge about instructional practice, the classroom and institutional contexts as well as their own previous experiences, which appears to be encompassed by the ecological perspective described above. Hongzhi (2012) suggests that in order for teachers to act as change agents in light of curricular reform, they need to be involved from the grass-roots level through capacity-building and sustained training as stakeholders, where teachers are provided with the support and encouragement to implement policy changes and make sense of them as they consider the new approaches in light of their own experiences and beliefs. In essence, he cautions us that change takes time and that teachers need the space to interpret and accommodate these changes within their own belief systems as informed by their experiences.

A Brief History of ELT in China

This following table identifies some of the highlights in the history of ELT in China bearing in mind this complexity. Wang (2007) recognizes the relationship between historical developments and the

movements in ELT where he states, “The national English curriculum, in the past 20 years, has seen some major changes along with the country’s social, political, and economic developments. Changes in the English curriculum have had a profound influence on the methodological approaches to ELT in Chinese schools” (p. 87).

Table 1. Historical highlights of the English Language Movement in China

Timeline	Highlights
1957	The English curriculum became a requirement for junior secondary education.
1960s	The English curriculum became a requirement for tertiary education. However, the majority of the students still pursued Russian on through college.
1962	English became a subject to be tested in Gaokao (The National Higher Education Entrance Exam).
1964	The seven-year program for Foreign Language Teaching was launched.
1966-1976	The Cultural Revolution banned all foreign materials and replaced them with politically charged textbooks on ideologies they wished to perpetuate. Foreign language teaching was banned nationwide.
1978	Deng Xiaoping re-enacted the four goals known as “Four Modernizations” originally developed in 1963 by Zhou Enlai. These four goals included the development of 1) agriculture, 2) industry, 3) defense and 4) science and technology.
1980	Economic reform and development led to increased motivation for learning English.
1983	English exam became a formal requirement for entering a university.
1986	New English Syllabus focused on English not for instrumental, but for communication and educational purposes.
1988	A large-scale study revealed that students were not as proficient as envisioned through the reform movements and there was an impetus for further development of the curriculum, syllabus and textbooks to support the alignment of theory and practice. Communicative Language Teaching approaches began to emerge within the curriculum.
1993	1993 Syllabus focused on the value of English for modernization and communication.
2001	The English curriculum became a requirement for primary schools from Grade 3.
2001 to present	New National Curriculum for the 21 st century focuses on the whole person through language teaching where language includes not only the four skills, but language use,

In the late 50s, the English curriculum returned to junior secondary curriculum (Ross, 1992) and became a requirement for tertiary education with a focus on oral language development and reading comprehension using the thematic and structural approaches from the early 1960s (Hu, 2002). Before China turned to English, Russian was a popular foreign language in China due to their historical and ideological ties. The language teaching methods at this time closely followed the Russian model where the teaching was “teacher-dominated and textbooks centered with a focus on grammar and vocabulary” (Hu, 2002, p. 17). Hu (2002) goes on to explain that as this relationship became strained due to ideological differences, interest in the English language gained momentum as it was seen as the language that would provide access to scientific and technological knowledge that would support Chinese modernization initiatives. The Direct Method, where teachers would teach without the use of the first language, was introduced in the late 1950s and was recognized in the early 1960s. However, due to the teachers’ own lack of confidence related to their own proficiency levels and the students’ inability to grasp entire lectures in the foreign language, the direct method faded in popularity. During this time, the grammar translation method became very prominent in schools, where it provided an avenue for students to learn about foreign cultures through the study of literary classics (Adamson & Morris, 1997).

The Cultural Revolution that lasted from 1966 to 1976 banned all foreign materials and replaced them with politically charged textbooks often based on ideologies they wished to perpetuate. Language textbooks were also used as vehicles to promote and perpetuate these ideologies and were not grounded in theories of language acquisition and learning. When Deng Xiaoping gained power in 1978, he re-enacted the four goals known as “Four Modernizations” originally developed in 1963. These four goals included the development of 1) agriculture, 2) industry, 3) defense and 4) science and technology (Evens, 1995). The Open Door Policy in 1979 and the economic reforms in the early 1980s brought with it an influx of international companies and exchange of commercial and cultural ideas, which led to the growing interest in English (Hu, 2002, p. 40). During this time, the grammar-translation method was still very much ingrained in the foreign language teaching methodologies, however, the audio-lingual method also gained popularity followed by the introduction of the functional methods. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, elements of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) began to surface

within the curricular changes in China. CLT has met with its share of controversy in China, where teachers both resisted and accepted this new approach to instruction (Ng & Tang, 1997). However, as teachers tried to shift their instructional practice from their traditional forms of instruction to CLT, they would often feel frustrated, lose their enthusiasm and resort back to the traditional methods they knew (Campbell & Zhao, 1993). For this reason, researchers raised concerns over the export of Western methodologies without taking into consideration the local learning-contexts, the cultures and learner variables in which these methodologies were used (Holliday, 1994; McKay, 2002; Bax, 2003).

The New Curriculum

The current curriculum attempts to counter the over-emphasis on vocabulary and grammar and aims to foster comprehensive language competence, which emphasizes language use in authentic contexts. In order to achieve this goal, the new curriculum promotes Task Based Language Teaching methods embedded in cooperative and experiential learning processes. In addition, the curriculum also stresses the importance of increasing student motivation, developing positive attitudes and thinking skills, as well as raising cultural awareness of English speaking countries (Shaanxi Institute of Education, October 2005).

In this curriculum, comprehensive language competence consists of five areas of focus: language knowledge (eg. vocabulary, grammar), language skills or use, positive attitudes towards learning, language learning strategies, and cultural awareness (These areas have been integrated into English language textbooks for teachers to implement in their classrooms (Shaanxi Institute of Education, 2005).



Figure 1. The five objectives for comprehensive language competence (Shaanxi Institute of Education, 2005).

Summary

As with attempting to understand ELT in any country, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of the Chinese context, which is dynamic with many variations and exceptions, however, there are some general trends that serve as heuristic devices to inform our discussion on the history and status of ELT in China.

On the national level, China has experienced rapid growth in the area of economic development, which has provided an impetus for international exchange in the areas of not only commodities, but also, ideas. English has become the international language for access to and participation in these global exchanges. As a result, the Ministry of Education has invested immense efforts and considerable amount of energies and funds around developing policies and reform initiatives to improve English language education in their country. It must be noted that the Ministry encourages feedback from the teachers and suggestions for improvement. However well-intentioned these reform movements have been, at the grassroots level where teachers and students engage in daily teaching and learning of the English language, there resides various levels of tensions between the implementation of the curriculum informed by these policies and the particularities of their classrooms, possibly because of the lack of attention paid to pedagogy in policy contexts (Liddicoat, 2014, Yang, 2012).

Methodology

Of particular interest in this study is uncovering some of these tensions that have been alluded to in the literature from the perspective of teachers. As such, the research question that guided this study was,

“How are Chinese teachers negotiating the different forms of tensions that emerge between policy and practice, particularly in light of the current emphasis on language skills?”

72 surveys were administered to teachers from elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, university and private language programs in China. Five in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers representing each sector namely, an elementary school teacher, a middle school teacher, a high school teacher, a college instructor and a teacher who teaches in a private language school. In addition, one interview was conducted with a teacher educator to provide an additional perspective on the experiences of teachers.

Participants

The participants were all Chinese teachers of English. Their ages ranged from 25 to 52 ($\bar{x} = 36.6$). Their years of teacher experiences ranged from 6 months to 33 years ($\bar{x} = 13.9$). Two teachers did not indicate their length of time teaching, so they were omitted in the calculation of the mean. There were 6 males and 65 females and one participant who did not indicate gender. The majority of the participants were English teachers from public schools with representation from elementary, middle and high schools. In addition, three respondents were teachers at a private English language school and four were English teachers at a university. 17 of these teachers received English training from a 1-2 week program through a training agency, six teachers had a TEFL/TESOL certificate in addition to the 1-2 week training program, four teachers had a TEFL/TESOL certificate, 22 teachers had a bachelor's degree in TESOL or a language related area, five teachers had their bachelors in a TESOL or language related area with a TEFL/TESOL certificate, five teachers had her master's degree, and two teachers graduated from an English teacher training school. Seven teachers indicated “other” for their training program, but did not indicate the nature of their program. In addition, three participants did not respond to this question.

Findings

In this section of the chapter, I highlight some of the tension points that emerged from the surveys and interviews. These include the trickle down effects of these reform movements on the curriculum and

texts utilized in the classrooms and the various levels of tensions that emerged within the teachers themselves and between the teachers attempting to implement these changes in their classrooms and their perceptions of the push-back they receive to enact change from the students, parents, institutional and environmental contexts in which their classrooms are situated.

Tension Points

The following section presents the ways in which the teachers adapted their instruction in response to some of the challenges they experienced. The levels of teacher agency in adapting their materials and methods were different based on their institutions. While three teachers indicated that they do not make any adaptations to their curriculum, the rest of the teachers had stated that they make some adjustments though the degrees of these adjustments differed significantly between public schools, the university and private language companies and even amongst teachers within the same institution.

Policy enactment within institutions

It became clear that the institutions, departments, and programs, and grade levels in which the teachers worked had different expectations. One teacher summarized her concerns around the diverse ways in which policy is filtered through the institutions as follows:

Each school I worked for has their rules and requirements for the teachers and the students. They can care too much about either how much money they make (usually for language training schools) or how much score their students get in exams (for schools in the general education system), so that some of the rules may aiming only for student performance instead of competence. They can even potentially do harm to the students.

Curriculum and textbooks

For the most part, public school teachers used curriculum that was prescribed by their schools. The majority of the teachers used English books published by the People's Education Press (PEP) Ltd. and Lingo Learning Inc. These books contain 6 units each and cover topics such as sports, school, family, and jobs. The focus is on daily life. Each unit consists of two sections including words, phrases, dialogues and readings. For secondary schools, many public school teachers reported using "Go For It!" which includes a textbook and exercise books, and "New Yinlin English" which is a "[c]urriculum offered by school, involving lots of short stories for supplemental reading." At one of the universities,

the teacher reported that “for [the] core courses, [the] textbooks are selected by the school and [that] the curriculum should follow the textbook’s main content strictly.” In a follow-up interview, she reported, that the reason for the strict adherence to the text is because of the department’s common final exams designed for each section teaching the “intensive reading” and “extensive reading” courses.

Universities in Shanghai and Beijing were reported to have more flexibility in determining their own curriculum as they were considered to be the forerunners of innovative educational ideas.

A private-language school teacher stated that she used an online courseware provided by her company called “Let’s go!” developed by DynEd with pre-designed lesson plans included. According to the DynEd website, this textbook is focused on “vocabulary and language structures needed for everyday communication.” Another teacher who has taught various levels of students in the private sector appeared to have more freedom in the selection of her materials. She used materials developed by ETS (Educational Testing Services) to help her adult students enrolled in her TOEFL and IELTS courses and for children, she used Longman’s “Side-by-Side,” a common textbook used for ESOL students in English speaking countries. The same teacher now teaching at the university does not have the same freedom to design her own materials as, in her own words, she has “a prescribed curriculum” to follow.

On the curricular level, it appears that teachers did not believe they had the power to enact change, however, many of them shared some minor adaptations to the content of their lessons within the confines of the existing curriculum. One teacher noted that though “the curriculum is offered by the school,” she was able to design the course calendar, where she had some level of control over the sequence and duration of her lessons. A teacher working at a university said that for the core courses at her university, the curriculum is set, however, she also states that “for some optional courses, [the] teachers can choose [the] textbook and design [the] curriculum by themselves, but the teaching targets should fit the direction given by the department.” For instance, “teachers can choose the latest news as teaching materials for the course in Journalism.” Several public school teachers also spoke and wrote about adding materials to their textbooks or “deleting some content as needed.” Another teacher said that she “sometimes combined units” if there was insufficient time to go over the material. A teacher working in a private language school also stated that she made adaptations to the content of her textbook because her students were not interested in the topic. For example, she said that one chapter

in her textbook was about the structure of the pyramid and the architecture of Egypt. She felt that this was “too complex” and that her students lacked interest. She further states, “If they are not interested, they don’t respond.” Therefore, she tries “to adapt the materials into authentic daily conversations” and integrate content “more related to the students’ life experience” since “many of them plan to travel or live in a foreign country.” She also finds that some of the content in the book is “childish” for the adults she teaches, and will “informally skip some textbook things.”

Time

Teachers also felt that they did not have enough time to teach the language with one teacher stating that she “only [had] 50-minute class sessions 3-4 days a week.” Several teachers did not feel that they had time to integrate additional materials to engage the students because of the focus on examinations. In relation to this, one teacher said, “We don’t have much time to play game or have the lesson as we like because students have to take exams. There is not a lot of room left for the teachers to design their courses, and for some schools, even their way of teaching.”

Student examinations and teacher assessment

According to the teachers in this study, one of the primary goals for learning English was to pass examinations to secure an opportunity to go to a good high school and university for those in middle and high school respectively, and for those at the university level there was a wide array of responses where the teachers felt that some students just wanted to pass their course and get their diplomas, where others want to improve themselves and their potential for careers in the international business sector where English is an important commodity. For example, one public school teacher said that her students only participate in speaking “some key phrases and sentences in order to pass the final exam.” Another teacher sums up what many teachers reported, where he stated, “most of them learn English because it is one of the necessary subjects. They just want to pass the exam and get good grades.”

With the curricular changes emphasizing communicative language skills, the teachers reported challenges in implementing the new approaches in their classrooms because the exams continued to focus on “traditional reading, writing, and some listening sections.” Changes from the Ministry of

Education and the institutions to integrate the communicative skills have been considered for these exams, but challenges in assessing these skills and the time to assess these skills have been difficult to navigate. Teachers have been asked to use a variety of assessment practices in their classrooms to measure student growth in English, however, as one teacher said in her interview, “We try to employ new ideas, but at the end of the day, you are assessed on scores, so we have to focus on tests.” She goes on to discuss how teachers are assessed based on their student scores and how the principal shares these scores publicly in meetings with the teachers names revealed. For newer teachers, it is expected that their students will have lower scores, but for experienced teachers, she said, this could be really embarrassing. Another teacher talked about integrating communicative language teaching in her classes, but because her students “want to get high marks on the examinations,” she had to “spend time explaining exercises in class.” A teacher teaching in a private language company stated that her responsibility to her students was to help them pass “all kinds of English exams” and therefore, her focus was on “grammar and reading rather than speaking and listening.” Another teacher at a private language school said that parents enroll their children at an early age in these private language schools with plans to send them “overseas [for] high school” or “universities” in English speaking countries for secondary and college students, so the focus is on taking the “TOEFL” or “IELTS” exams, which are both English proficiency exams often required by universities in English speaking countries. Some teachers believed that this “testing model” and the “exam-oriented instruction” contributed to the lack of interest or motivation on the part of the students to learn English in general or to participate in “communicative activities that do not show up on their exams.

Teaching approaches

In the public school system, the majority of the teachers reported using what they called the “combination” method, which closely aligns with the “eclectic” discussion in the literature review section. They defined “combination” in terms of using both English and Chinese and in using a variety of methods or approaches. In terms of “translation” which many teachers noted, one teacher wrote, “I try to use English only in class, but sometimes to translate some terms or difficult words, I use Chinese.” Several teachers also wrote that they used “Chinese to teach grammar.” In terms of methods, teachers broadly defined this term where they indicated a range of approaches such as “task-based instruction,” “audio-lingual method,” “total physical response,” “communicative language teaching,” “situational teaching method,” and the “scene teaching method.” The “situational teaching approach” appeared to

resemble the principles of “task-based instruction,” and the “scene teaching method” appeared to include the use of role-plays to highlight main ideas. An important point to note here is that they used “grammar” and “translation” separately where “grammar” indicated a focus on grammatical forms and explanations and “translation” referred to the use of Chinese in the classroom. There did not appear to be an explicit reference to the traditional “grammar translation method” as used in the literature. Also important in the example above referencing “grammar,” the teachers appeared to understand the term “method” as being synonymous with “focus.” For example, teachers listed “reading,” “vocabulary,” and “test-taking skills” when asked about what method they used, which appears to indicate a focus on reading and a focus on vocabulary development. Another definition of methods included a wide-variety of activities such as “games,” “songs,” and “movies/films,” use of technology such as “powerpoint” and “multi-media” and the use of “interaction/group work” to accomplish some of these tasks. The uses of songs were more prevalent responses in teachers with younger students, but “competition” through “games” appeared for teachers throughout the public school system. Some teachers stated that when trying implement communicative activities, their students would not participate because they were “shy” and unwilling to “take a risk” or “make a mistake” in front of their peers. The most common attribute prescribed to the students were that they were “bored,” “not interested,” and “not motivated” and this they believed was because of the testing culture and disconnect students felt with the language, particularly outside the classroom.

In response to student “lack of interest,” “lack of motivation,” and “boredom,” teachers frequently talked about including “movies,” “songs,” “games” and “competitions.” They also wrote about designing tasks and group work activities to get more students involved in making contributions in class. One teacher described the ways in which she provides students with the freedom to choose a portion of the text to perform in class or work in pairs to create their own dialogues. In an interview with one public school teacher, she stated that she “adds popular events to the examples or uses some events to draw their attention.” She also tells them some “interesting stories.” Mostly, she said, she tries “to communicate with them and encourage them to love English.” However, the large class sizes, particularly in the public school system contributed to teachers’ inability to enact these actions. One secondary school English teacher said in relation to size, that “it’s hard to get a balance between class discipline and making the class interesting.”

The inner and external vulnerabilities and challenges related to proficiency levels

Another tension point expressed by the teachers involved their perceptions of their own proficiency levels and the wide range of proficiency levels represented by the students in their classroom. Teachers often found that their students struggled to comprehend their lectures due to their low proficiency levels. One teacher stated, “Some students’ English proficiency is so low that they almost can’t understand anything I say.” According to one teacher, her school tried to implement classes based on English proficiency levels, but they reverted back to the original placement policy because the students all needed to pass the same English exam at the end of the term. This would leave the teacher with students of the lowest proficiency level at a disadvantage because the teacher was assessed based on her students’ scores on these tests. At her university, she explained that the cause of this wide range of proficiency levels was “because they were not enrolled based on their English scores in Gaokao (The National Higher Education Entrance Exam), but the total scores of at least 6 subjects.”

In terms of addressing the diverse proficiencies represented in the classrooms, one teacher wrote that she, “lower[s] the difficulty of the teaching materials according to the language levels of the students.” Another teacher said that she continues with her lesson for those students who are able to understand the material and “make[s] up the missed lesson after class for [the] others.” Other teacher adjustments included “mak[ing] the materials easier to meet the students who [are] not good at English,” “mak[ing] different tasks,” and “slow[ing] down.” Several teachers noted that they use their students’ feedback to adjust their lessons, though they did not indicate how.

Many teachers also pointed to their own vulnerabilities as a language teacher where they indicated that they felt their own proficiency levels were not strong enough to lecture in English.

In class, I speak simple English to make my students understand me. But after class, I have no chance to speak English. So day-by-day, my English level, including words and oral English is lower and lower. Most of the time, we learn English by explaining in Chinese in English class. So, my students are not good at speaking English.

Some teachers often blamed themselves for their students’ weak oral proficiency levels. One teacher said, “I think I must improve my oral English and teaching skills.” Another said, “As a forty-year old teacher, I am not so active as before. I can’t speak English well, because of the lack of vocabulary.”

Several teachers discussed ways in which they continued to improve their own English language skills through “reading magazines to brush up on vocabulary,” “watch movies or TV programs in English,” “read books about teaching methods,” “browse websites for self-study,” and participate in professional development opportunities. Several teachers wanted to improve their own English so that they could “to help the students to think in English” and “solve all kinds of English questions.” However, they also made reference to their need for professional development. For example, one teacher stated that she “[w]ants better teach[ing] methods and teaching materials” and another wanted to learn how to “[o]rganize activities and authentic tasks to get most students involved in and make [a] contribution in class.”

English language support and access beyond the classroom

Another area teachers struggled with was the lack of access to English outside the classroom where students did not see an opportunity for communication beyond the classroom which then contributed to the students’ lack of motivation for learning the language. Because of this, a teacher said that her students are “Not active in class, they don’t want to think about English.” Teachers also felt that the students struggled to learn and use “vocabulary” because they had difficulties “remembering new words” in an environment where English was not spoken beyond the classroom. In addition to the lack of opportunities to use English outside the classroom, many teachers wrote about the lack of support from the parents either because they were not confident in the language themselves or, in particular, if the family is from the countryside, the lack the resources to provide support for their children in this regard.

Discussion

English language teaching in China has a complex history and there have been tremendous efforts to support students in developing their English proficiency levels, particularly in the areas of listening and speaking. It appears that the reform initiatives from the policy levels as it flows down through the institutional levels and then to the classroom levels often finds a have a variety of tensions that prevent the immediate translation of policy into practice. The following figure illustrates some of the tensions mentioned in this chapter resulting from the complexity of the contextual influences.

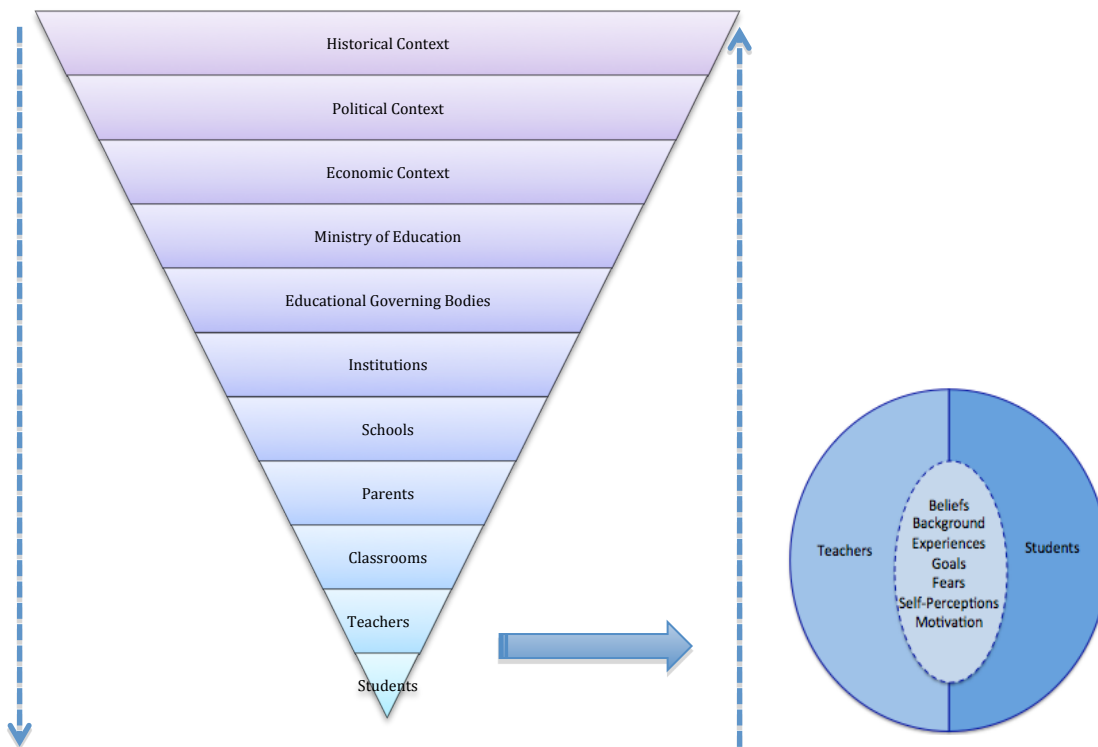


Figure 2. External and internal contextual influences on teaching practice

In order to arouse student interest, teachers felt that they tried to integrate communicative games, but were often met with the reality of exams that their students needed to pass. One teacher reported her frustration in not being able to integrate some of the listening and speaking activities through games where she said, “We don’t have time to play games. There are too many lessons and too many exams for students. So they don’t have so much time for fun.” Teachers described how the younger students enjoyed speaking up in class, but as they moved up into higher grades, their interest in speaking has decreased with their sole focus on getting good grades and passing the exam. For example one teacher wrote, “When they [were] in Grade 7, they liked to open their mouths, they liked making dialogues, they like watching English movies and singing English songs, and they [were] active... but now they are students about to graduate, and they don’t like making dialogues.” One teacher interviewed stated that age and adherence to traditional beliefs of language teaching also contributed to a teacher’s willingness to make adaptations. In her opinion, she said, “younger teachers are willing to make adaptations, whereas the older teachers pay more attention to traditional methods of repetition and memorization.” However, according to another interviewee, she felt that the experienced teachers have tried and tested methods in the past and have decided to use traditional methods that work for their students in helping them with scoring well on the exams which are focused on reading and writing and

some listening skills. The performance of their students on these tests is how the teachers are evaluated in their schools. Therefore, though teachers may know and try curricular innovations based on new language policies, they inevitably return to the methods they feel help their students score well on these exams and in turn help them do well in their professions. Another teacher described the problem with having a teacher shift their teaching style midstream as the students have become accustomed to a certain teaching model and often resist new approaches to teaching. Some teachers make the shift, but continue to have students practice for the exams. As such, there were many challenges teachers described in their attempts to enact change on the microcosmic level, however, the series and levels of contextual factors at the macrocosmic level often contributed to teachers' inability to implement changes in their own classrooms to the extent they would have liked.

Conclusion

In light of the historical development and changes in the curriculum and texts, Wang (2003) notes the immense expectations placed on teachers where they are expected to shift their views from traditional knowledge based, transmission model to the competence based, "multi-role educator," taking into consideration student affective needs and developing their learning strategies as well as global cultural awareness and competence through the process of language learning. In translating these views into teaching practice then, they would also need to learn to design and implement activities that are student-centered and meet the communicative goals set forth by the curriculum with the large number of students often between 55-60 student in the allotted time they have to cover an immense amount of material.

For secondary students in particular, English is a component of the National College Entrance Exams, which is a crucial determiner of their future academic and career pursuits (Hertling, 1996). In 1992, the testing of English shifted from a primary focus on phonetics, spelling grammar and vocabulary and integrated listening to dialogues, reading comprehension and the writing of compositions (Xiao & Carless, 2013). However, given these changes in the classroom, Li (1984) and Wang (2007) emphasized the need for the testing of communicative competencies, though the test still falls short in assessing these skills. This discrepancy led many teachers to teach to the test rather than continue to learn about and integrate CLT into their instructional practice. In other words, because the focus of

these tests are on the discrete knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and the immense societal and institutional pressures to do well on these tests, the teachers tend to ensure that students have acquired these key tested items before embarking on the integration of other items that are not tested such as sociolinguistic and strategic competence embedded within the new textbook design. As a result, it appears that the eclectic approach with a blend of traditional and new methods as it serves their local contexts appears to be the way in which teachers reconciled these differences (Rao, 1996; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hu, 2002; Xiao, 1998). There were some initiatives made to integrate formative assessments to assess their student learning rather than focus on the traditional summative assessments only, however, because the summative tests were more often emphasized, such initiatives also lost momentum. This is what Priestley and his associates (2013) refer to as the practical/evaluative component in their three-pronged model of teacher agency. In order to enact change, the teacher can have the personal and professional experiences from the past and may be motivated to see an alternative future, but structural processes and forces in the present may inhibit their ability to enact change.

With all of these changes, teachers felt “insecure, vulnerable and under pressure” (Wang, 2007, p. 102) where they were concerned not only about their abilities in shifting their views and adapting their teaching and assessment methods, but also their own lack of proficiency in English, and the lack of support from stakeholders and their institutions to support them with these vulnerabilities (Wang, 2007; Xi & Garland, 2013). Not only do the constraints imposed by their current contextual situation influence their movement towards change, but as Stritikus (2003) found in his study on response to policy change, a teacher’s perception of their professional identity also plays a significant role.

There also appears to be a lack of fluidity or disconnect between policy changes and curricular reform and teachers beliefs about teaching and the implied teaching methods encouraged in the new textbooks, where teachers filter new methods through their existing systems or beliefs (Niu-Cooper, 2012; Yan, 2012; Yan & He, 2012). This is not to say that teachers in China are holding strongly to their traditional methods or that the newer methods are in some way superior, but that within Chinese teachers, there is a wide array of beliefs in their approaches towards ELT. For example, Zhang & Fengjuan (2014) found in their questionnaires and interviews with teachers that some teachers

possessed constructivist beliefs, traditional beliefs, or both and that the complexity of the classroom realities, including both cultural and teaching realities, influenced the use these approaches.

Kumaravadivelu (2002) describes this dialectical process that teachers use where they theorize about teaching practice and in turn, have their teaching practice influence their theories about teaching. In addition to the particularities of the classroom context and central to this particularity are the students who play a significant role in framing the teacher's conceptualization about theory and teaching practice.

Understanding teacher agency in the context of ELT curricular reform in China from an ecological perspective (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) can help to frame some of these tensions experienced by English language teachers in China. Focusing on the micro-cosmic levels, we can see that there are again multiple layers of complexities inherent in a teacher's attempt to manifest this theory into action. This could include the teachers' understanding regarding the principles undergirding reform movements and curricular innovations, their beliefs about teaching and language learning, their vulnerabilities with their own proficiency levels in English and attempting new approaches, their students and parents' beliefs and expectations about language learning and teaching, institutional beliefs and expectations about teacher performance and assessment, and the institutional and classroom contexts that contribute to the teacher's ability and willingness to enact action.

Including teachers as invaluable resources in understanding the goals of the new curricular innovations, implementing them in practice within their respective contexts and in a way that makes sense to them, appears to be an important piece to bridge the gap between theory and practice. If teachers are to be empowered as central stakeholders in the teaching and learning process (Crookes, 2007) immersed in the cyclical process of identifying student needs, designing instructional practice to support those needs, and reflecting on the impact of their instructional practice (Kumaravadivelu, 2012), then it appears to be paramount that they have the opportunity to partake in each step of the dialogue and include their voices in decisions about policy reform from its conception to its delivery as an iterative process. In addition, creating dialogical learning spaces (Molina, 2015) with stakeholders vested in the future of English education where teachers can 1) bring to the forefront their personal and professional identities, 2) acknowledge their vulnerabilities, 3) seek personal and professional development opportunities to cultivate and nurture areas of need and 4) understand their sense of agency in light of the ecological

system in which they are situated might be an important consideration.

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