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## **Exploring the dynamic relationship between teachers' EFL (English as a foreign Language) teaching and learning beliefs and practices**

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### **Background**

In the last 15 years, the study of teachers' beliefs has emerged as a major area of enquiry in the field of language teaching. Substantive evidence has indicated that teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning exert a powerful influence on all aspects of teachers' thoughts, decisions and actions. This has provided the groundwork for many studies on teachers' beliefs.

One strand of these studies has focused on the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their practices. A sophisticated two-way relationship has been established not only by affirming cognition as a key factor in shaping classroom events, but also by recognising the fact that classroom events in turn shape subsequent cognition. Further studies have explored the extent to which teachers' stated beliefs correspond with what they do in the classroom, which leads to a recurring research theme of 'consistency' and 'inconsistency' between the teachers' beliefs and practices.

However, the existing research that adopts cognitive or socio-cognitive perspective has an important limitation. It fails to address the constructive role of contexts in understanding the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices. According to socio-cultural theory, teachers' beliefs are subjective interpretations of culturally influenced social relationships, while teachers' practices are at the core of the objective characterization of culture both at the level of local interaction as well as that of society. Under the above assumptions, my study aims to illuminate the dynamic relationship between Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning and their instructional practice. In the context of curriculum reform in China, the study explores how such a relationship is constructed as teachers involve themselves in the social interaction manifested in a classroom context.

### **Research Questions**

In the scope of this research study, I address the following three questions:

- 1. What are the explicit beliefs influencing a sample of Chinese secondary school EFL teachers' instructional practice?
- 2. How do the Chinese secondary school EFL teachers' explanations of their instructional practice reveal their beliefs about EFL teaching and learning?
- 3. How do the Chinese secondary school EFL teachers' instructional practices reveal their emergent implicit beliefs?

### **Methods**

This is a case study examining three teachers in their respective workplaces, assuming an interpretive theoretical perspective. Participants were voluntary sample of three Chinese secondary school EFL teachers, whose EFL teaching experience ranged from 10 to 20 years. The data was collected over a period of three months using semi-structured interviews, observations and stimulated recall interviews, which not only allowed for triangulation of findings, but also supported a genuine dialogue between the researcher and the teachers to elicit authentic information. The data was collected continuously, from one teacher to another. One-hour semi-structured interview was first conducted within a planned framework of themes on EFL teaching and learning before classroom observation. Mostly ethnographic interview questions were used to elicit responses based on the teachers' experiences, which better predicted future behaviour than abstract professed beliefs. Then

the teacher was observed eight times throughout their teaching of one unit, each followed by a stimulated recall interview after each observation. These interviews aimed to elicit the teachers' explanations of their teaching practices, which revealed their conceptualisation of their practices. Both the pre-observation interview and stimulated recall interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Observations were video-recorded and the episodes of the teachers' practices mentioned in the stimulated recall interviews were also transcribed.

## **Frame**

Both content and thematic analyses were adopted by the researcher, the purpose of which was to avoid either imposing premature categories of analysis or losing focus when dealing with large amounts of data. Three steps were taken to analyse the data for the first research question. Firstly, initial coding was based on five categories of significant beliefs about EFL teaching and learning obtained from literature (i.e. teachers' beliefs about EFL, EFL teaching, EFL learning and learners, EFL teachers' role and their professional development). Secondly, further coding aimed to obtain emerging new categories (e.g. teachers' beliefs about the national curriculum). Thirdly, final coding identified recurring themes in the teachers' explicit beliefs. In order to explore how the teachers interpret their practice and how their practice reveals their implicit beliefs, their practices were matched with the teachers' professed explicit beliefs, their commentaries of their practices and their implicit beliefs manifested in practices.

## **Research findings**

Three major findings were extrapolated from the research. First of all, the analysis of the teachers' explicit beliefs revealed five major tensions, which were further exemplified in relation to the teachers' practices. The research shows that the teachers' explicit awareness of these tensions exerted direct influences on their practices. Next, the teachers' explanations of their practices revealed ten thematic beliefs, which revealed a dynamic relationship between their beliefs. They were either compatible in underpinning certain practice or contradictory with each other, thus indicating the distinction between core beliefs and peripheral beliefs. That is, when beliefs underpinning certain practice served or were not at odds with core beliefs, they were compatible in underpinning the teachers' action. When contradiction happened, the beliefs that corresponded with the teachers' core beliefs may take priority in influencing practices. To be exact, the teachers' practice reflected their beliefs that learning is enhanced when expectations of learning are met and learners' learning is controlled. These beliefs exerted a more powerful influence on the teachers' work than their beliefs about the limited value of teacher-controlled communication, de-contextualised grammar teaching, mechanical drills and repetitions. In this case, the dynamic relationship between the teachers' beliefs and practices was closely related to that between core and peripheral beliefs. Finally, three relationships were revealed between the teachers' beliefs and practices. If beliefs were explicitly professed and recalled, they could lead to consistency in practices. When beliefs were explicitly expressed in theory but obscurely conducted in practice, it could be due to partial or even false understanding of certain concepts. In addition, if beliefs were tacit both in theory and practice, further stimulation could reveal that their deep-rooted beliefs might go against general trend of EFL teaching and learning advocated in the curriculum.