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Pre-service teachers' changing beliefs in the teaching practicum: Three cases in an EFL context

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ABSTRACT

In second language teacher education, while much attention has been centered on the "content" of teachers' cognitions, the "process" of language teachers' cognitive change has remained relatively unexplored. To fill this gap, this study investigated the process of belief change among three pre-service language teachers during the teaching practicum in a university in China. The findings of the study show that student teachers' beliefs experienced different processes of change during the practicum, including *confirmation*, *realization*, *disagreement*, *elaboration*, *integration*, and *modification*. The sociocultural factors that contributed to these changes are also discussed. The paper concludes that in order to facilitate the belief change process and promote student teachers' cognitive development, an open and supportive environment is needed to maximize their practice and learning during the teaching practicum.

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1. Introduction

In initial teacher education, teaching practicum lies at the heart of student teachers' professional training and learning (Gebhard, 2009; Tang, 2004). It is a journey towards more complex forms of thinking about teaching with the purpose of preparing student teachers to better cope with classroom realities in the future (Fang, 1996; Grudnoff, 2011). By carrying out classroom tasks and teaching under the supervision of mentoring teachers, student teachers can enhance their teaching knowledge and skills and interrogate and reflect on their deeply held values and beliefs, which can contribute to their cognitive learning and development (Cheng, Cheng, & Tang, 2010; Gebhard, 2009).

In L2 teacher education research, while much attention has been centered on the "content" of teachers' cognitions, the "process" of language teachers' cognitive change has remained relatively unexplored (Borg, 2006, 2009). In particular, there is a paucity of research that focuses on the content and process of student teachers' belief change during the teaching practicum. For student teachers, their professional learning starts from a set of beliefs about learning and teaching they have developed through the "apprentice of observation" (Lortie, 1975), given all the years they spend observing and learning in schools. These beliefs form their initial conceptualizations as a teacher and are likely to continue to influence their cognitive learning and teaching practice throughout their career (Cheng et al., 2010). Given the importance of teaching practicum in pre-service teacher education (Tang, 2004) as well as the pivotal role of teacher beliefs in student teachers' cognitive development (Borg, 2006; Johnson, 1999), a study on student teachers' belief change during their teaching practice is important, which can

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add to our limited knowledge of pre-service teachers' professional learning in second language teacher education (Wright, 2010). Informed by sociocultural perspectives and Cabaroglu and Roberts' (2000) framework on teacher belief change, and using data from interviews, student teachers' written reflections, classroom observation and stimulated recall interviews, this study examines three pre-service EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' beliefs during the teaching practicum in China. It not only demonstrates the complex processes of student teachers' belief change, but it also sheds light on the various sociocultural factors that play a part in the processes. Such findings can improve our understanding of pre-service teachers' cognitive learning at the practicum site and generate useful implications about how such learning can be facilitated and supported in teacher education programs in similar EFL contexts.

2. Literature review

Teacher beliefs, defined as teachers' "implicit assumptions about students, learning, classroom, and the subject matter to be taught" (Kagan, 1992, p. 66), are generally considered to have a powerful impact on teachers' reasoning and practice (Borg, 2003; Pajares, 1992; Tang, Lee, & Chun, 2012). The way in which teachers come to conceptualize themselves as teachers and develop explanations for their own classroom practices tend to be filtered through their beliefs (Johnson, 1999). In pre-service teacher education, while some researchers have pointed out the inflexibility of student teachers' beliefs in teacher education programs (e.g., Kagan, 1992; Peacock, 2001), a large number of studies have claimed that teacher education does impact on pre-service teachers' beliefs, particularly over the teaching practicum (e.g., Borg, 1999; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000; Tang et al., 2012; Tillema, 2006). Based on the conflicting research results, Borg (2009) argues that much existing literature about the stability of trainees' cognitions (i.e., beliefs, knowledge, attitudes) has primarily explored the "content" of these cognitions, while work examining the "processes" of cognitive development suggests that significant change in teacher trainees' beliefs do take place during teacher education. Further research focusing on the processes of cognitive (belief) change in their situated socio-cultural context is therefore needed to add to our understanding of the process of learning to teach among pre-service teachers.

The present study investigates three EFL pre-service teachers' change in beliefs during the teaching practicum and how such change can be explained by sociocultural forces within their context. Teachers' cognitive learning, according to sociocultural perspectives, emerges out of and is constructed by their participation within the socio-cultural settings within which they work (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2006; Kelly, 2006). As human cognition is formed through their social activities and organized through various culturally constructed artifacts (Lantolf, 2004; Vygotsky, 1987), socio-cultural perspectives emphasize the dynamic, interactive and agentive nature of teachers' cognitive development which is conceptualized as moving from external, socially mediated activity to internal mediation controlled by individual teachers (Hawkins, 2004; Johnson & Golombek, 2003; Thorne, 2005). Thus on the one hand, teachers' knowledge and beliefs derived from prior experiences can be mediated by "the normative ways of thinking, talking, and acting" (Johnson, 2009, p. 17) that have been historically and culturally embedded in school communities. For instance, the prescribed curriculum and textbooks as well as the established school policy and culture can play an influential role in teachers' cognitive learning. On the other hand, sociocultural perspectives also highlight the importance of agency in teachers' cognitive development, which refers to their abilities to influence and change their immediate settings through using resources that are culturally, socially, and historically developed (Lasky, 2005; Wertsch, Tulviste, & Hagstrom, 1993). By exercising their agency, teachers can appropriate various cultural artifacts (e.g., curriculum guidelines and innovative teaching methods) and reconstruct their social practices and interaction within their situated communities, which opens up opportunities for the development of their personal systems of teacher beliefs and knowledge (Freeman, 2004; Johnson, 2006). Also, teachers' cognitive learning can be achieved by the "dialogic mediation" that can occur in their professional work and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). While dialogic mediation involves contributions and discoveries by individual teachers, it attaches much importance to the assistance of an "expert" collaborator, e.g., their mentors and colleagues, who can provide information and scaffolding for their cognitive learning (Lantolf, 2000). Through dialogic mediation, teachers can examine their pre-existing beliefs and practice in a new light, acquire deep understanding of new teaching concepts, and develop self-regulated control over their own practice (Johnson & Golombek, 2003).

From socio-cultural perspectives, student teachers' beliefs can experience various changes through their interaction and practice during the teaching practicum (e.g., Borg, 1999; Ng, Nicholas, & Williams, 2010; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). First of all, student teachers' beliefs can be largely influenced by their participation and interaction with different members (e.g., students, mentors and other school colleagues) in the school community. In Ng et al.'s (2010) study, student teachers' perceptions about good teaching evolved from a belief in being in control through expertise (teacher-centered) to a belief in being in control through charisma and building relationship with the students (student-centered) given their classroom observation and communication with colleagues in the field schools. Similarly, in Stevens, Cliff Hodges, Gibbons, Hunt, and Turvey's (2006) study, student teachers developed new ways of thinking about the subject and students by engaging in collaborative work with the school teachers during the practicum. Classroom teaching can also play a mediating role in student teachers' belief development (Borg, 1999). Particularly, by critically examining their values and beliefs in classroom actions (Farrell, 1999, 2007), student teachers could become more aware of the possible convergence and disparity between their beliefs and practice so that their belief systems could be constructed and transformed to guide their teaching. Further, student teachers can also engage in dialogic reflection with their mentors in their teaching practice where different ideas and understanding can be shared and developed, which can exert great influence on their belief transformation (Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). However, Mattheoudakis (2007) points out that while "student teachers seem to be going through a slow and gradual process of developing and modifying their beliefs" (p. 1281), their participation in teaching practicum may have a low impact