



Implementing foreign language curriculum innovation in a Chinese secondary school: An ethnographic study on teacher cognition and classroom practices

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a four-year-long ethnographic study on a curriculum innovation project introducing a weak form of communicative language teaching (CLT) at a Chinese secondary school. A total of ten teachers, who taught twelve project classes were observed across five stages of the project: the pre-project stage, the top-down stage, the bottom-up stage; the exam preparation stage, and the post-project stage, in an attempt to explore the changes that took place in the teacher's receptivity and classroom behaviors. Focusing on a focal informant (Marian, pseudonym), this paper illustrates how teacher cognition changed in accordance with the project goal and highlights how the trajectory of change was much more tangled and complicated than what was initially expected. Changes in the project teacher's teaching practices reflect the consistency between teacher cognition and classroom practices at the pre-project, the bottom-up and the post-project stages. In contrast, at the top-down and the exam stages of the innovation project, changes in teachers' cognition did not conform to changes in her classroom practices. These findings suggest the external pressure caused by top-down imperatives and high-stake exams might have caused the cognition-practices incongruence, which deserves language teacher educators' and administrators' further attention when promoting curriculum innovation.

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1. Introduction

The past 30 years have witnessed the emergence of communicative language teaching (CLT), which deviates from the traditional synthetic approach and aims at preparing language to communicate effectively in English. In Asia, the popularity of CLT has been self-evident as national English curricula and foreign language education policies in different countries have subscribed to CLT principles (Littlewood, 2007; Nunan, 2003). For instance, the National English Curriculum for Basic Education (MOE, 2012) in mainland China claims 'the overall aim [of the course] is to develop learners' all-round competence to use English' (p.8). Nevertheless, despite its omnipresent recognition in officially released documents, teacher educators have reported that the implementation and intake of English education reform has long been a thorny issue (for example, Carless, 2003; Zheng & Borg, 2014). Moreover, while it is widely acknowledged that the diffusion of innovation follows a tortuous,

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winding course, there is a surprising scarcity of studies documenting the introduction of CLT curricula in educational settings over a long time span. Hence it is of apparent significance to supplement the prevalent ‘flash-and-dash’ studies in current literature with an in-depth, longitudinal study exploring the complex dynamics throughout a language curriculum innovation project. The present study documents the Danyang Project, a four-year-long English language curriculum innovation project introducing a weak form of communicative language teaching (CLT) at a Chinese secondary school through university-school partnership.

2. Literature review

2.1. CLT and national english curriculum innovation in mainland China

CLT, a complete departure from the traditional linguistic syllabus, is based on the theoretical underpinning that language teaching aims at ‘using’ the target language rather than learning the ‘usage’ of discrete grammatical structures. Though the definition of CLT varies, a general consensus is that it is a meaning-based and learner-centered approach where priority is given to fluency rather than accuracy (Spada, 2007). However, one controversial issue is whether attention should be paid to linguistic forms; thus there is a distinction between strong form and weak form of CLT (Howatt, 1984). Since 2001, the Ministry of Education of China has adopted a weak form of CLT in national English language curricula for primary and secondary learners, that is, strongly advocating a meaning-oriented approach while including recognition of form-related instruction (MOE, 2001; 2012).

2.2. Teacher cognition and classroom practices

A critical issue pertaining to the implementation of educational reform is whether and how changes take place in a teacher’s cognition or pedagogical behaviors. To address these questions, there has been a burgeoning interest in research on teacher cognition during the last three decades. For the sake of simplicity and conformity, our study adopts the umbrella term “teacher cognition” as “the complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs that language teachers draw on in their work” (Borg, 2006, p. 272). Recently, there has been an emerging tendency to reclaim the relevance of teacher cognition research to teacher professional development and language learners (Borg, 2011; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015).

With regard to the interaction between teacher cognition and classroom practices, a general consensus is that the belief system plays an essential role in shaping teaching practices by informing, motivating, guiding or shaping decision-making process and pedagogical behaviors (Borg, 2003, 2011; Burns, 1992; Fang, 1996; Johnson, 1992). This, however, does not imply that previous research findings have been uniform. Studies addressing the interaction between teacher cognition and practices have produced various findings, from discrepant to highly consistent. For instance, Johnson (1992) investigated how three ESL teachers’ theoretical beliefs corresponded with their respective pedagogical practices, and reported there was a general consistency between literacy instructions and theoretical orientations. Similar results have been revealed in other studies (e.g. Allen, 2002; Farrell & Ives, 2014; Kern, 1995), which appear to be in obvious contrast with studies reporting inconsistency between language teachers’ beliefs and teaching practices (Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Roehler & Duffy, 1991).

Despite the controversy on whether and how language teachers’ belief systems fit their pedagogical practices, researchers tend to agree that these two entities are interactively and dialogically related, rather than being mutually exclusive (Borg, 2003; Fang, 1996). However, there seems to be some confusion about a teacher’s “espoused belief” and “implicit belief”, the latter of which, according to Basturkmen (2012), is much more likely to “correspond to his or her practice” (p. 283). However, teachers’ implicit beliefs are admittedly difficult to tackle unless a researcher stays in the field for a rather long period of time. Thus the present ethnographic study attempts to add some clarity to the somewhat vague conclusion we could have drawn so far.

2.3. Curriculum innovation towards CLT

Curriculum innovation is defined in various ways with the following characteristics in common: (1) targeted at enhancing students’ learning and development, and often managed in a planned manner; (2) enacted through the development and implementation of educational products that reflect new values and ideology; (3) involving possible changes in stakeholders’ beliefs and behaviors; and (4) enacted within a multi-dimensional socio-cultural system (Fullan, 2001; Markee, 1997; Marsh, 2009; Rogers, 2003). Ellis (1997) proposed the distinction between “absolute innovation” and “perceived innovation”, with the former embracing completely new principles yet to be tested in practice and the latter the ideas or practices that are new only to the practitioners (pp. 26–27). He has further observed that the majority of innovations in our field probably fall into the second category (Ellis, 1997).

Despite its theoretical soundness, copious studies in different parts of the world have revealed that the purposes of large-scale CLT (or TBLT) curriculum innovations are rarely achieved fully what the initiators expected. Zheng and Davison (2008) investigated the contrasting pedagogy of three secondary teachers within the national curriculum innovation in mainland China and found that pedagogical changes were an “incremental and pragmatic” process. Situated in primary schools in Hong

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