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# Integrating thinking skills in foreign language learning: What can we learn from teachers' perspectives?

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### ABSTRACT

Teaching thinking is important for learning and social practice and teachers around the world are encouraged to integrate thinking skills in teaching. However, little is known about teachers' conceptions, beliefs and practice about integrating thinking skills in foreign language instruction. This paper addresses this issue by examining teachers' cognition about thinking skills in EFL classrooms in China through the analysis of 473 self-completed questionnaires, four focus group interviews with 18 teachers and a further follow-up classroom observation and video-based reflection of three teachers. Data analysis focuses on bringing all the data together to generate an in-depth understanding about how teachers conceptualise thinking skills and how these skills are perceived to be promoted in subject learning. This study suggests that EFL teachers in China find it difficult to define thinking skills and hold fragmented and insufficient understanding about the concept. The teachers also demonstrated overall positive attitudes towards integrating thinking skills in language classrooms, although they do not believe thinking skills should be promoted specifically in language classrooms. The study also revealed that teachers believe that thinking skills can be taught, and especially through reading, science and maths. Moreover, integrating thinking skills in teaching is closely related to the focus of the English subject, curriculum, class time and textbooks. There is a strong case for arguing for immediate teacher training to develop both content and pedagogical knowledge of teaching thinking skills.

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching thinking is important for learning and social practice to develop global citizens with creativity and innovative capacity (MacDonald, 2005). Policy reports from around the world stress that education for higher level skills, such as problem-solving, creativity and learning to learn together (L2L2), is crucial for future economic growth (e.g., World Bank, 2011), and equally critical thinking, resilience, tolerance and reasonableness are all also essential to personal and collective well-being in an increasingly globalised world (OECD, 2014). In educational research, the development of students' thinking skills has been strongly recommended by many scholars and educators (e.g., Avargil et al., 2012; Li, 2011; Nagappan 2001). At a policy level, there is a trend for including thinking skills in curricula. For example, thinking skills were included as learning goals in educational policy in England in 1999 (Qualification and Curriculum Authority, 1999), in Hong Kong in 2000 (Education Commission, 2000), in Malaysia in 2003 (Abdullah et al., 2003) and in China in 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2001). Similar initiatives can be found in other developing economies including Thailand, Mexico, Russia and Brazil. At a

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practical level, teachers around the world are encouraged to integrate thinking skills into subject instruction and abundant research suggests it is beneficial for developing 21st century learners (e.g. Mercer, 1996, 2004; Wegerif et al., 1999).

In language education, research suggests cognition and language development is closely linked (e.g. Carter, 2004; Cook, 2000); for example, researchers have recognised that developing thinking skills may promote higher levels of language proficiency (Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Renner, 1996; Tarone, 2005). However, integrating thinking in language teaching has been peripheral (Pica, 2000), particularly in foreign language instruction (Ghonsooly & Showqi, 2012; Li, 2011; Soko et al., 2008). It is well-argued in the literature that teachers probably play the most significant role in implementing any innovation in education, it is important to investigate teacher cognition about and practices of teaching thinking skills if any progress of integrating them into language instruction is made. A systematic review of language teacher cognition research to date suggests that there is little research reporting English as a foreign/second (EF/SL) teachers' conceptions of and practice in teaching thinking skills in a curriculum. Recognising this gap in the literature, this article attempts to make the first contribution to the understanding (EFL) teachers' thinking and practice of teaching thinking skills, taking a Chinese context as an example.

## 2. Significance of the study

The significance of this study lies in the following two aspects:

First, in order for any thinking-based curriculum to make a difference to students' foreign language learning, evidence is required to support approaches to teachers' professional learning and curriculum development so that teachers are equipped with knowledge and skills to help language learners become critical and creative thinkers while learning a foreign language. Researching foreign language teachers' conceptions of thinking skills and their attitudes towards implementing these skills in their teaching helps researchers, policy-makers and teachers themselves identify the guiding principles in relation to their classroom work and go beyond description towards an understanding and explanation of teacher actions.

Second, the review of literature of second language education and thinking skills seems to indicate advantages for all types of students through the explicit teaching of thinking skills. However, it has proven difficult to find any studies that specifically investigated language teacher cognition about thinking skills within an English as a foreign language context. This research addresses this deficit in the literature by specifically focusing on how teachers understand the concept and to what degree they implement teaching thinking in their classrooms, and as well as potential factors influencing their decisions. The findings are of interest to educators and researchers interested in the teaching and learning of thinking skills as well as those interested in second language teacher cognition. This might also be of interest to researchers and teachers as well as policy makers in improving second language learning in general. The educational significance of this research is that it provides base-line data from one group of stakeholders that will allow educators and policy makers to answer questions about whether it is worth the time, expense and effort of developing and implementing thinking-based EFL curricula. It provides insight into educational questions about whether teachers are ready and prepared to implement educational innovation; what barriers there might be in the implementation; and, whether there are lessons to be learnt for similar contexts.

## 3. The Chinese context

At the outset, it is crucial to discuss the social, cultural and educational contexts of Chinese learning. Various studies have been published regarding Chinese learners and the culture of Chinese learning, claiming that Chinese learners are obedient and passive, and do not practice higher thinking skills. However, this is not an entirely true reflection of this culture of learning, as the Chinese language engages different kinds of thinking, including reflective thinking. Specifically, Chinese reflective thinking requires learners to reflect in relation to the context they are in and to engage in critical and creative thinking, and in many cases collaborate (Li & Wegerif, 2014; Li, 2015). This said, much teaching and learning in China does involve rote learning and knowledge acquiring and retrieving, rather than *knowledge construction and creation*. This perhaps is due to the education system. In China, students spend six years in primary and six years in secondary school (with three years for junior high and three years for senior high sections). Thus, for an ordinary learner, there are three high-stake examinations which take place at the end of primary school (year six) and at the end of junior high school and senior high school. These three exams are pivotally important for learners because they are selective exams for further education, especially the NCEE (National College Entrance Examination) at the end of senior high school. NCEE determines whether a student can obtain a place at a university. In essence, the NCEE has become the real aim and motivation of high school study (Ding & Lehrer, 2007). The NCEE is also the indicator of the effectiveness of teaching at high school (Luo & Wendel, 1999), and a key influential factor for any education reform (Li, 2008). For all these reasons, Chinese education is known as exam-oriented, and passing exams is a symbol of success (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011).

In 2001, as elsewhere in the globalizing world, developing learners' thinking skills gained an important role in Chinese education reform (Li, 2011). The Chinese government launched a new curriculum and syllabus to encourage students' critical and creative thinking skills, to change the focus on receptive learning, rote-learning, and mechanical drilling and to advocate learner participation, exploration, information collection and comprehension, problem-solving, negotiation and collaboration (Ministry of Education (MOE hereafter), 2001). In terms of foreign language education, the new curriculum emphasizes the application of language in real-life contexts to explore, negotiate, communicate, collaborate and participate.

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