A pilot study: Chinese English teachers' theoretical orientations in language teaching and its implications

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Abstract: In 2001, within the field of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) among Chinese primary and secondary schools, the Chinese Ministry of Education promulgated a new edition of national *English Language Curriculum Standards*. In this new syllabus a task-based approach (TBA) is recommended for teachers to adopt in their classrooms. Therefore, in order to facilitate teachers' behavioural change in their classroom teaching, this thesis research attempts to provide a professional development program for in-service English teachers. It intends to achieve the following purposes: 1) assist teachers to build a common understanding of TBA; 2) enhance English teachers' understanding of TBA and pedagogical practices in classroom teaching; 3) and improve students' communicative competence, particularly oral communication. This project seeks to merge the newly mandated top-down syllabus with classroom activities. It may help inform the process of implementing the recommended TBA in the national English syllabus.

In this article, a pilot study is conducted to explore teachers' theoretical orientation in language teaching. On the basis of these data, a questionnaire will be validated concerning the relationship between teachers' theoretical orientation and their pedagogical decision–making. Specific suggestions for teacher professional development programs regarding methods for aligning teachers' belief systems with the theoretical underpinning of TBA are anticipated.

Keywords: a pilot study, theoretical orientation (BAK), language teaching, classroom activities

Introduction

As in many other countries, in Mainland China teaching English as a foreign language in primary and secondary schools has changed dramatically in the last few decades, especially after the adoption of the China's open-door policy. After the founding of People's Republic of China, a variety of methods and approaches has been borrowed and used to teach English, first with grammar-translation approach being officially phased out in the 1950s and communicative approach in the early 1980s(Adamson, 2004). After 2001, communicative approach is giving its way to task-based approach (TBA).

The shift from traditional approaches (i.e. grammar-translation approach) to communicative approaches (i.e. communicative approach and TBA) requires that teachers make different pedagogical decision-making in their classrooms. So, the purpose of this paper is to examine the question of what determines the sorts of activities Chinese English language teachers employ in their classrooms.

Research shows (Jiang, 2006; Yanzhizu, 2002) that Chinese teachers typically employ traditional approaches, mainly grammar-translation approach, to English language teaching, particularly in middle schools, and they focus more on reading and writing than they do on speaking and listening. This grammar-translation approach is supported by the assumption

that language is rule-based and can be analyzed on the basis of grammatical and lexical items(Caroll, 1966, cited by Johnson, 1992). The task for language learners is to internalize these rules for use and production of language in use in real life situations(Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It stresses correct grammatical form and translation with the aim of developing learners' language intelligence, improving learners' reading ability(Richards, 2001). The classroom, where this model of teaching is carried out, is typified by teacher-centeredness. Normally, the teacher stands at the front of the classroom and reads the textbooks while students take notes without any peer interaction. Teachers are viewed as sages or savants, possessing unique wisdom (Widdowson, 2003). This classroom-teaching model goes through a locked step of presenting, practicing and producing new knowledge to the language learners. It is assumed that these classroom techniques will guarantee that learners master new language items in an additive way. If a learner makes an error in language learning, the error is considered a deficiency in the learner's capability; such transgressions demonstrate that learners have not mastered the new knowledge. As a result, errors need to be pointed out and clarified by teachers.

There are many reasons for teachers' continuous use of this approach. *Firstly*, in the macro-world of the Chinese society, when this approach was brought in, it has been deeply rooted in the Chinese long-established Confucian idea of education, which emphasizes silent reading, memorization and practice. The teacher-student relationship is considered as that of a parent and a child. This approach, to a large extent, is congruent with the Chinese culture. Although many attempts and endeavours to introduce 'progressive' approaches (e.g. communicative approach & TBA) into China, these approaches are challenged by the traditional Chinese culture(e.g. Hu, 2002). There are persistent resistance against these new pedagogical approaches and constraining, such as lack of qualified English teachers, who have a good understanding of English pedagogies and theories about language and language learning(Hu, 2002; Yu, 2001). In addition, though Chinese government made great endeavour to reform China's matriculation examination system, adding listening items in the examination for instance, still the point-scale examination system is much oriented to testing students' language ability (i.e. reading and writing), which in turn has a great "washback" (Taylor, 2005) effect or determining effect on classroom English teaching(Cheng & Wang, 2004). It is not surprising for teachers to adopt traditional approach, which focus on memorizing and analysing grammatical and lexical items. In sum, this approach is in an agreement with the Chinese culture and existing examination system.

Secondly, in the micro-world of schools, where English teachers are teaching, teachers are assessed or promoted by students' scores(Cheng & Wang, 2004) in the regional or national entrance examination to key junior middle schools, key senior middle schools and key universities.

Last but not least, on the part of teachers themselves, in the classroom where grammar-translation approach is adopted, they feel safe and secure to control new knowledge and classroom activities, because they have privileged access to pre-planned teaching/learning materials required by the syllabus. Thus, their language ability and authority are not threatened. Moreover, they are teaching English in the way when they were taught by their teachers(Cheng & Wang, 2004; Lortie, 1975; Zhan, 2004), who used the traditional approach to teach them.

Such weaknesses of the continuous use of the traditional approach have been identified as "a heavy emphasis on transmitting knowledge about grammar and vocabulary and neglecting

to improve students' proficiency in practical language use" (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.1), oral communication in particular. Therefore, there is a move in China to encourage teachers to employ more progressive approaches to teaching and to shift their focus more towards the development of speaking and listening skills. The Chinese government has mandated the use of TBA in order to better develop the oral communicative competence of Chinese school students. TBA was introduced and officially promoted in the Chinese new national *English Language Curriculum Standards* (Ministry of Education, 2001). This current syllabus document, which was developed on the basis of wide consultation with key stakeholders in China from 1999-2000, has made the concept of TBA as the core conceptual framework for the curriculum.

TBA is supported by the idea of language that is function-based (Hymes, 1974). The assumption seemed to be that it is not sufficient for language teaching to focus only on the forms and structure, as grammar-translation approach does. Instead, it is recognized that there is a strong need to be concerned about how to develop learners' capacity to express meaning in communication in the target language (i.e. English). Language teaching is thought to be about communication and for communication (Widdowson, 1978). Information-gap activities or simulated task-based activities in the real world are organized to drive learners to negotiate meaning in English with their peers(Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1989, 2004; Willis, 1996). TBA with its authentic purpose and context requires extensive interactive classroom activities. In pair/group activities teacher hands over his/her power to students, who take responsibility for their studies. They are offered free choices in the use of language and topic to be explored. While performing these tasks, they take risks, explore questions and resolve them with their peers. Students are experimenters and innovators.

However, evidence (Cheng & Wang, 2004; Hu, 2005; Hui, 1997; Yu, 2001; Zhan, 2004) suggests that teachers are not changing much their practice as is expected by the function-based approach (i.e. TBA). In order to understand why change is not occurring it is necessary to develop a better understanding of teachers' theoretical orientation in language teaching, namely, what teachers' belief, assumption and knowledge about English language and its development (BAK) (Woods, 1996) they have, what aspects of English language competence they are trying to develop (i.e. reading, listening, speaking and writing) and the sorts of classroom activities they employ.

Method

A pilot study of the present thesis study is conducted to explore the above-mentioned issues by employing questionnaire. The details of the study are described in the following paragraphs.

Subjects

A total number of 64 in-service senior English middle school teachers completed the questionnaire, who enrolled in a workshop in July of 2006 provided by the Research Office of Baoding Education. Among them 81% were females. There was considerable age differences: 15% under 25 years old, 43% 26-30, 33% 36-40, 10% 40 or more years old. 97% of teachers were specialist English teachers. Some 38% teachers graduated from normal college with teaching certificate, while 52% got university diploma and 10% teacher graduated from other kinds of university (i.e. open university). 94% taught in public schools as opposed to in private schools. Among these schools, 13% was located in the city, 78% in regional towns, 9% in rural areas. 91% teachers had over 50 students in their class. 81%

teachers had students, who took standardised municipal, provincial or national tests of English language competence.

<u>Measures</u>

The analysis reported below was based on three groups of measures which were designed to assess teachers' belief, knowledge and assumption about English language and its development, the English language skills that they focus on in class, and the types of teaching activities they employ. The questionnaires were written in English but translated into Mandarin.

Firstly, teachers were asked to indicate how often children in their class were required to engage in activities that aimed to develop their competence with written English (reading, writing) and with spoken English (listening, speaking). Responses concerning the four underlying competencies were made using 5-point Likert scales (never [1], rarely [2], sometimes [3], frequently [4], always [5]).

Secondly, teachers were asked to indicate how frequently they used particular classroom teaching activities when conducting lessons to develop their student's English language competencies. The list of was comprised of 18 activities, including 10 items designed by Evans(1997). These items were categorised as representing either traditional or progressive practice. Both the traditional scale ($\alpha=0.651$) and the progressive scale ($\alpha=0.769$) were found to have moderate reliability.

Finally, a 20-item questionnaire, based on the work of Johnson (1992), was used to measure a teacher's BAK about English language and its development. The items were statements that described 10 aspects of language development from two different theoretical perspectives, a rule -based perspective and a function- based perspective. The aspects included teachers' beliefs, assumptions and knowledge about
- what language is
- how language develops
- how language is best learnt
- their goals for language teaching
- what constitutes good language behaviour
- the characteristics of optimal instructional procedures
- their approach to error correction
- their selection of appropriate instructional materials
- the characteristics of the learning environment that optimises language growth
- the criteria best used to determine language growth

To respond, teachers indicated their level of agreement with each statement on a 5- point Likert scale (strongly disagree [1], disagree [2], uncertain; [3], agree [4], strongly agree [5]). The reliability for both the rule- based ($\alpha=0.372$) and function -based ($\alpha=0.496$) was low. This indicates that the theorised structure, namely a simple contrast between two opposing theoretical orientations, does not adequately describe the beliefs, assumptions and knowledge of teachers in Baoding. Despite this the analysis proceeded with these theoretically describe scales because this is what was planned and because the use of factor analytic techniques to clarify the true underlying structure requires a much larger sample that the present one to be valid.

Results

This analysis employed a multiple regression approach to examine a simple model which relates a teacher's BAK to language acquisition (rule -based, function- based), the English language skills they focus on in class (reading, writing, listening, speaking) and types of teaching activities they employ to develop these skills (traditional versus progressive); namely, that the English language skills a teacher focuses on depends on their BAK and the sorts of activities they use in class depends on the language skills they are trying to develop.

A teacher's BAK does not predict the frequency of written English related activities ($F_{2,56}=0.694$, $p=0.504$) or the frequency of spoken English related activities ($F_{2,56}=0.846$, $p=0.435$) that occur in their class.

The frequency of traditional teaching activities depends on the frequency of written English related activities ($F_{2,52}=3.451$) but not on the frequency of speech related activities ($F_{2,52}=1.706$, $p=0.192$) or the teacher's BAK ($F_{2,52}=0.094$, $p=0.910$). Further, subsequent testing revealed that both the frequency of speech related activities and the teacher's BAK can safely be omitted from the model ($F_{4,52}=0.908$, $p=0.466$). Analysis of the final reduced model suggests that it is the frequency of writing related activities ($t_{56}=2.389$, $p=0.020$) rather than the frequency of reading activities ($t_{56}=1.218$, $p=0.228$) that predicts the frequency of traditional teaching activities.

The frequency of progressive activities depends on the frequency of spoken English related activities ($F_{2,52}=7.527$, $p=0.001$) but not on the frequency of written English related activities ($F_{2,52}=1.869$, $p=0.184$) or the teacher's BAK ($F_{2,52}=0.151$, $p=0.860$). Further, subsequent testing revealed that both the frequency of written English related activities and the teacher's BAK can safely be omitted from the model ($F_{4,52}=1.009$, $p=0.411$). Analysis of the final reduced model reveals that the frequency of both listening ($t_{56}=2.645$, $p=0.011$) and speaking ($t_{56}=2.733$, $p=0.008$) predicts the frequency of progressive teaching activities.

Discussion

In summary, this pilot study serves as a first step to understand this group of English teachers with their BAK about English language and its development and their pedagogical behaviours in the classroom within the Chinese context of educational change. Within this context, fewer empirical studies have been conducted to explore teachers' landscape of mental world and examine whether there is a link between teachers' existing belief system and pedagogical decision-making. This study will function as a point of departure, from which a questionnaire will be validated in the future study concerning the relationship of teachers' belief system and their pedagogical decision-making in their class teaching. Furthermore, in order to merge the top-down rational paper policy and teachers' actual practice in the language classroom, rich implication for language teacher development program will be made to answer the call for influencing teachers' belief system in the program by language educators (e.g. Freeman, 2001, 2002; Johnson, 1996, 1999).

Overall, in this study BAK had no effect on either the teachers' focus on language skills or on the type of classroom activities they employ. This may be because these things are determined largely by factors external to the teachers, such as existing regional or national examination system, and therefore internal factors such as BAK are unimportant, but it is more likely that the model on which the BAK measure was based, namely a simple contrast between rule- based and function- based approaches, does not reflect the beliefs, assumptions

and knowledge of teachers in Baoding. Clarification of this issue can only be achieved by studying a larger more representative sample of teachers. This study is currently underway.

The observed relationships between skills and activities is readily interpretable, teachers employ traditional activities more frequently when it is their intention to develop reading and writing related skills, and they employ more progressive activities when it is their intention to develop listening and speaking related skills. These results may seem self evident however they are important for those who wish to improve the teaching of English in China through the use of TBA

Despite the fact that previous research suggests that Chinese teachers are not implementing TBA, the present findings suggest that there are in fact teachers who are, or at least claim to be, teaching listening and speaking with more progressive techniques. The future study must find these teachers and study their practice so that researchers can better understand what their practice is and whether it is indeed consistent with TBA. Researchers also need to understand what led them to increase their focus on listening and speaking. This requires a better description of their beliefs, assumptions and knowledge about English language and its development as well as on the external factors that may act as barriers to change. This work is currently underway.

The pilot study also suggests that the future research also needs to connect these teachers in a professional development program so that they can further refine their practice and so that they can share their practice with their more traditionally oriented colleagues.

Therefore, this new/larger study aims to study the beliefs, assumptions and knowledge of a larger more representative groups of teachers from Baoding and to create within them a professional learning community which brings together progressive and traditional teachers with the goal of improving the English communicative learning of students through the implementation of TBA in their classroom, and to evaluate whether this goal has been achieved.

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