

CHAPTER ONE  
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

During the last two decades, approaches to curriculum design in China have illustrated the shortcomings and lack of relevance of the grammar-system model of language teaching, which was the traditional norm in Chinese EFL contexts. In contrast to the grammar-based curriculum, where the syllabus was concerned with the grammar and vocabulary of the language, various syllabuses (1978, 1986, 1988, 1992; See Zhou Liuxi, 1995) were proposed under the umbrella of the communicative approach with an attempt to integrate grammar, lexis, functions and notions to enable the students to use language for the purpose of communication. Articulating the rationale for producing JEFCE (Junior English for China), a series of new English books for junior middle schools, which has been used all over China for nine years, Liu Daoyi, the chief editor at the People's Education Press states that the new English course presents the language:

... in meaningful contexts so that the learners can use it for the purpose of communication. The teaching contents are no longer arranged merely according to the system of grammatical structures. The new course

highlights the need of communication and takes into account functions, notions, and topics areas as well as phonetics, lexical and grammatical items, and tries to combine them into an organic whole. It provides language material in real situations that are closely related to the students' lives. This makes it easier to perform various kinds of communicative activities in the classroom, such as role-play and information gap activities, games, making survey and problem solving, etc. These activities give students great pleasure as they have ample chance to use what they have learned and thus gain a sense of achievement. (1996, p. 31)

The communicative approach to English curriculum design may seem congruent with "international good practice", however, within the education system in China where teacher-centered, whole-class teaching styles predominated, the innovation tended to result in a façade of change, but with little noticeable impact on what actually went on in the classroom (Morris, 1992, 1995, cited in Carless, 2001). Although the 1990s has witnessed a "steady improvement", ELT in many of China's schools is "still far from being satisfactory" (Liu Daoyi, 1996, p. 30). WangQiang (1999), one of the members in the English curriculum development project team within the State Education Commission (SEdC), sets out the problems within the English teaching profession in China as follows:

1. In determining the course objectives, there is a dominance of transmission of information and knowledge over the development of language

capabilities.

2. Students, who are driven by the rigid written exams, are seen as receptacles to be filled with knowledge transmitted from the teacher. There is thus an ignorance of the central role of students in the learning process.
3. The teacher-fronted teaching methodology takes little account of student contributions and thus fails to motivate students and promote students' holistic personal growth.
4. The one-dimensional assessment engenders the false belief that the ultimate goal of learning is a language product rather than students' overall development alongside the teaching-learning process. It also places the burden for test performance on both teachers and students.

In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness by EFL researchers and practitioners in China that an educational system should create the conditions whereby "learners might recreate their own knowledge and skills" (Nunan, 2000, p.1). As the famous educator Carl Rogers (1983) puts it:

We are, in my view, faced with an entirely new situation in education where the goal of education, if we are to survive, is the facilitation of change and learning. The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the

process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world." (cited in Finney, 2002, p. 120).

Here a strong plea is being made for learner- and learning-centered learning as the only possible model for education. Informed by such changes in educational ideologies and changes in thinking on language and language learning, a curriculum framework was developed by a research and development team within SEdC as an alternative solution to the current problems in ELT in China. Going through a three-year-planned stage for the curriculum project, 2001 saw the publication of the New English Curriculum (NEC), in which the notion of learner-centeredness was strongly advocated in every element of curriculum development – that is, planning (including needs analysis, goal and objective setting), implementation (including methodology and materials development) and evaluation (Nunan, 1988).

## 1.2 The New English Curriculum in China

NEC (2001) is known as the collective wisdom of English curriculum reform in China's fundamental education, which goes from Primary One (Grade 1) to Senior Secondary Three (Grade 12). Within the curriculum framework nine levels are distinguished which are intended as guides for program planning and the development of objectives (see Appendix A).

The implementation schedule for NEC was an incremental one. Before full implementation, the new curriculum was tried out in the fall semester of 2001 in selected schools in economically and educationally developed areas such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. It was not until 2003 that the new curriculum was introduced to the school where this study took place, which was located in an underdeveloped area in South-west of China.

In summary, there are six primary principles embodied in NEC (2001), which are:

1. Every individual student should be engaged in the learning process, where individual needs are to be met, intrinsic motivation promoted, and self-confidence established and maintained. It is advocated that the students' immediate personal experience is the point of departure for them to become more skilled, independent, creative and responsible persons through a better understanding of the process and of themselves.
2. The curriculum goals are not only to promote students' language skills but also to facilitate all-round development of the students. The objectives, therefore, fall into five domains: language knowledge, language skills, emotions, learning strategies, and cultural awareness. In order to identify the learning outcomes as a graduated sequence of steps, proficiency guidelines in the form of a series of descriptions of proficiency levels for the five domains were published, in which the criteria of "being able to get things done" was used to assess students' language ability. The local

schools and teachers were encouraged to stay flexible about the performance levels according to their students' real situation (see Appendix B for an overall proficiency descriptions of performance levels).

3. The starting point and the ultimate goal of English course is for learners' all-round development. The notion of learner-centeredness should, therefore, be reflected in the formulation of goals, the adoption of methodology and activities, the course evaluation, the material development and all other aspects of English teaching. The implementation of the curriculum should be a teacher-facilitated process for the learners to construct knowledge, improve skills, stimulate creative thinking, develop personalities and broaden minds.
4. Task-based syllabuses are strongly advocated in the new curriculum. The students are encouraged to use real-life needs and activities as learning experiences, through which they construct meanings and develop critical thinking skills. In such meaningful learning processes, the students adjust themselves affectively and strategically to foster a positive learning attitude, which is believed to be a stimulus for the improvement of language ability.
5. A balanced view of summative evaluation and formative evaluation is proposed. However, the latter should be paid more attention because of the hitherto dominant position of the former. It is advocated that the evaluation process should take into account the students' language achievement, cognitive construction, affective growth, learning strategy improvement,

- and development of cultural awareness; and the curriculum participants – the teacher, the student himself and his peers, parents, and the local community should all be involved to inform the evaluation work.
6. English teachers are encouraged to make learning materials relevant to students' lives and at the same time maximize the potential of outside-classroom resources such as videos, TV, magazines and the Internet information. The students are also encouraged to participate in the materials development process.

It will be clear that NEC is, to a large extent, based on current educational philosophies that stress the individual needs of learners, the role of individual experience, and the need to develop awareness, self-reflection, critical thinking, learner strategies, and other qualities and skills that are believed to be important for learners to develop (Richards, 2001). This implies that learners will play a more active and participatory role in the curriculum process. The roles of English teachers, in turn, will be very different from the past. According to the new curriculum, teachers are no longer merely purveyors of knowledge. In addition to empowering students with the subject knowledge, they are curriculum adaptors. Teachers should decide on the teaching contents, design tasks, as well as select and develop materials which they think appropriate for their students.

### 1.3 Aim of the Study

As demonstrated in the preceding part, a major premise of NEC is that students should be provided with opportunities for active involvement in their own learning and in the construction and development of knowledge and ideas. However, within the Chinese context where “didactic teaching is a superior mode because of constraints of public examinations and unwillingness of teachers to change” (Wong, cited in Carless, 2001), it is common, as elsewhere, for teachers to be reluctant to lose their position of supreme authority in the classroom and empower their students to share with them the goals of teaching, methods of teaching, and organization and control of learning. In this practical sense, it may be expected that when faced with the curriculum innovation, which has had a profound impact on English language teaching in China and which offers opportunities but also threats, Chinese EFL teachers would have to adapt themselves to the change in some ways. How do the teachers mould the innovation to their own context? To what extent do they carry out innovations as intended, especially with respect to the learner-centered approach to teaching highlighted in NEC? What strategies do they use during the implementation process and how do their students respond to the innovation? How appropriate is the innovation for local-based EFL contexts? And what factors come into play when managing the curriculum change? I became so preoccupied with these questions that I decided to embark on a study to investigate how well the NEC principles



were being implemented in Chinese EFL classrooms at a grass roots level, focusing in particular on the learner-centered approach to teaching.

The central focus of this study, then, was to explore the extent to which the NEC innovation has actually been implemented in terms of classroom pedagogy. As teachers are at the heart of any innovation within educational systems, the study referred to the teachers and the context in which they worked to inform the innovation process. The research questions that guided the study were as follows:

1. What are teachers' beliefs and assumptions about "learner-centeredness" in implementing NEC?
2. To what extent are the teachers actually implementing NEC principles and what strategies are they using?
3. What are the influencing factors in classroom teachers' implementation of NEC?

#### 1.4 Significance of the Study

Curriculum innovation is both a highly complex phenomenon (Fullan, 1993; Markee, 1997) and one that requires further research and investigation (Markee, 1993; Stoller, 1994). To date, there is insufficient information on the process of the implementation of NEC innovation in a classroom-based context. As Nunan (1988, 2000) suggests, there is always a disparity between the planned curriculum, which is located in the curriculum documents and

the statements of intent of curriculum developers, and the implemented curriculum, i.e. what happens in the moment-by-moment realities of the classroom. By investigating what is actually happening during the teaching learning process, the research may be illuminative and helpful for policy makers in government to recognize problems such as the ease or difficulty, the acceptance or resistance in implementing the NEC innovation. As a result, more informed decisions are most likely to be made about the diffusion of the innovation.

Capturing a clear picture of how a new curriculum has been implemented is a very complex issue. The uniqueness of each classroom setting implies that any proposal needs to be tested and verified and adapted by each teacher in his/her own classroom (Sternhouse, 1975). It is for this reason that Rea-Dickens and Germaine (1992) point out that teachers have a key role to play in the curriculum renewal and development process, not least because "it is the teacher, rather than the 'tester' or the evaluation 'expert', who has most information about specific classroom contexts" (p.25). The present study involves a case study of two English teachers in a junior secondary school in southwest of China, implementing NEC over a three-month period in their Junior 2 classrooms, with students aged 13 to 14. It is hoped that by presenting portraits of different classrooms where teachers have different interpretations of their own classroom decision - making, the study may provide a platform for teachers to make their voices heard

regarding the pedagogical implication of the notion of learner-centeredness highlighted in NEC. It may also provide teachers with insights for conceptualizing both the development and evaluation of innovations in English language teaching, which may promote teacher professional development.

The learner-centered principle emphasizes the active and reflective nature of learning and learners, and it is claimed by many project designers that educational practice will not improve unless the educational system is redesigned with the primary focus on the learner. However, as Nunan (1995) points out, learner-centeredness is not an all-or-nothing concept; it is a relative matter. In particular, the planned innovation needs to be informed by a full understanding of the local environment in which it is to be implemented. If the project designers merely operate from assumptions about education, schools, teachers, and learners without taking sociocultural and educational factors into account, resistance to change is most likely to occur. This is perhaps particularly true to Chinese educational culture which has a "long tradition of unconditional obedience to authority in which the teacher is seen not as a facilitator but as a 'fount of knowledge [to be] delivered'" (Liu, 1998, p. 5). From this much-needed perspective, the present study has the potential significance to acknowledge that beliefs and values rooted in a given society or culture can be an important source of teachers' beliefs, which in turn will determine what teachers choose to change, learn and develop in their

practice.

### 1.5 Organization of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter one is an overview of the background of the present study and considers the aim as well as the significance of the study. Chapter two looks at the theoretical basis for the vision and the various principles suggested in the learner-centered approach. The theoretical notions clarified in this chapter serve as analytical tools for achieving a greater understanding of Chinese EFL teachers' classroom practice informed by learner-centered principles. Chapter three is concerned with the research design and methods used in conducting the study, including the context of the investigation, the participants, and the data collection instruments and procedure. Chapter four sets out the data and provides a descriptive and interpretive account of the data. The salient themes emerging from the data are discussed. Chapter five examines the results of the study on which basis possible implications for change strategy and teacher development are suggested. An evaluation of the study in terms of methodological issues of research design is also included in this chapter.