

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to gauge the extent to which the NEC innovation has actually been implemented at the level of classroom pedagogy. As Bailey and Nunan (1996) point out, "In order to make sense of the complexities of the curriculum in action, one needs to triangulate data from a number of sources" (p. 7). Informed by this principle, the study aimed to achieve the research purpose through the use of the most well known form of triangulation (Denzin, 1970), namely, data triangulation, drawing data from multiple sources including the teachers, the students, the parents, and the educational administrators. The study also made use of "methodological triangulation" (ibid.) such as the use of classroom observation, stimulated recall, interview and questionnaire to confirm the validity of the process. The data yielded by the study, therefore, fall into six types: observation fieldnotes, lesson transcripts, interview data, stimulated recall protocol, questionnaire data and documents. However, triangulation in this study was more than a "technological solution for ensuring validity" (Mathison, 1988): it provided a "holistic understanding" of the situation to construct "plausible explanations about the phenomena being studied" (p.17).

For practical reasons, it was difficult to undertake a large-scale survey to understand the process of curriculum implementation at the classroom level. In order to facilitate detailed discussion, the study focused on one junior secondary school and a qualitative case study design was used to explore how two Chinese EFL teachers in this particular school responded to the innovations of a learner-centered approach. Merriam (1988) defines a qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description of a single instance, phenomenon or social unit [which] is particularistic, descriptive and heuristic ” (p.34). The case study design was particularly suited to my proposed study as this research was potentially particularistic, descriptive and heuristic. It was particularistic as it focused on the particular phenomenon of learner-centeredness in a particular context of English language teaching in a junior secondary school in southwest China. The study also sought to be descriptive to provide a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the context studied and the teachers’ beliefs and practice regarding learner-centeredness. It was likewise heuristic, as the purpose of this study was to illuminate the reader’s understanding of the case study teachers’ educational beliefs and how they could influence classroom practice.

The case study approach also facilitated to investigate how curriculum innovations were or were not implemented in the classroom context because it “investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context;

when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (Yin, cited in Nunan, 1992). It provided an ethnographic research tool by which the contextual variables were investigated in order to understand how all these contextual variables interrelated and constituted a rich and thick account of the phenomenon under investigation. In particular, the approach enabled the development of an understanding of the phenomenon from the teacher's point of view. This teacher perspective was crucial because "teachers are the key element in the implementation process, in that they are the individuals who will implement faithfully, reinvent or reject an innovation" (Carless, 2001, p. 266).

The research design and methods used in conducting the present study, including the context of the investigation, the participants, and the data collection instruments and procedure, are discussed in this chapter.

3.1 Setting

This study was set in a developing area of southwest China where the case study school was located. Except for the interviews conducted with the administrators and the parents for outside sources, the main part of the study was carried out in this particular junior secondary school, which at the time of the study served a student population of 2750, with ages ranging

from 13 to 16. All the students, like students at other junior secondary school campuses in China, must fulfill academic requirements in 10 subject areas in order to complete their 9 years' compulsory education, which goes from Primary One (Grade 1) to Junior Secondary Three (Grade 9).

Secondary schools in China go from Junior Secondary One (Grade 7) to three (Grade 9), after which a proficiency test for all subjects is required so that the students who score highly may have the opportunity to take a three years' Senior Secondary school study, referred to as Senior Secondary One (Grade 10), Two (Grade 11), and Three (Grade 12). The schools are classified into six bands according to the academic ability of the students. The school in the present study was officially designated as a 'Band Two School', which is the best in the whole area, a county inhabited by a population of 320,278. The school consists of 42 classes. The average class size is 60 to 65 students.

Compared to students studying at other junior secondary schools in the same area, students in this school are considered to be of academic excellence. They are placed into classes by scores on a placement test when they are first enrolled, which are referred as Type A Class, Type B Class, and Type C Class. Type A is the best and Type C is the poorest. Opportunities for the students to transfer from classes of poorer learning resources to classes of better learning resources (or vice versa) are offered at the end of each academic year on the basis of their academic performance in the final term

examination.

English is one of the core courses taught in this school. Each English class meets six hours per week. The majority of the students have had no prior experience of learning English before they start their junior secondary school study, yet about 30% of the students had taken an English course when they were in primary schools. This is largely due to the absence of teachers to open English classes in most primary schools (especially in rural areas).

There are 21 non-native Chinese English teachers in this school, among whom two are male. Each teacher is responsible for teaching English to two classes. The teachers vary greatly in their professional backgrounds and length of experience. One has been practicing for less than five years. The others range in experience from five to twenty five years.

Two years' after NEC was initiated and tested out in some schools in advanced areas such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, in the fall semester of 2003, NEC was introduced at the grade 7 level for the first time in this school. The curriculum renewal included the development of textbooks, teacher guides, sets of supplementary materials, audio and video materials and teacher development programs. By the time this study was conducted, the new curriculum had been implemented in this school for one and half years.

3.2 Participants

Data triangulation in this study is used to confirm the emerging findings (Denzin, 1970). In order to obtain an accurate picture of the phenomenon under investigation, the present case study research uses several sources of data to generate a multiplicity of viewpoints and offer support to alternative interpretations. Data were drawn from a number of sources: teachers, students, parents, school principal and regional inspectors.

3.2.1 Regional Inspectors

To facilitate the collection of initial data, I arranged to meet two educational inspectors in each of the administrative regions (one was at a county level and the other at a prefecture level), whose jobs were to handle all issues concerning the teaching, learning, and testing of English in the area where the present study took place. Both of the two inspectors had been working in this area for a number of years and were familiar with both the old curriculum and the new one. They had to conduct regular advisory visits to English teachers to observe their classroom teaching. They were thus in a position to provide an impressionistic opinion on the change or non-change of teachers' classroom behaviors in implementing NEC. The meetings with them were somewhat uncomfortable at first, probably because in Chinese culture people tend to be sensitive to be asked by an outsider to address

issues within their professions. However, after I explained the purpose of the study and affirmed that it was the responsibility of me as the researcher that the data gained from this study would be confidentially dealt with, they showed more willingness to reflect on the issues that would be focused on during the interviews.

3.2.2 Teachers

From among the 21 English teachers, two were selected on the basis of the following criteria: 1) both of the teachers were well-qualified academically in comparison with the other English teachers in the same school, as indicated by their students' test and examination scores and also by an annual anonymous student evaluation of teaching; 2) both of them showed a positive attitude towards professional development and had an interest in participating in the study, 3) they had been involved in the curriculum innovation since it was first introduced to this school and thus had relatively richer experience of teaching English under NEC, 4) they taught the same level and same types of classes, 5) they had similar educational background and were of similar age, and 6) one of them was my former student and the other was a personal friend of mine, and it was thus expected that an open, friendly, and collaborative atmosphere was more easily to be built between me as a researcher and the teacher participants. In

the discussion that follows, the two teachers are referred as Dan and Lu (pseudonyms). Data on each teacher are set out in Table 3.

Table 3 Teachers and Classes in the Study

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Length of experience</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Class</i>	<i>Class size</i>
Dan	Female	30	10 yrs	B.Ed. holder	Class 1 (Type B)	60
Lu	Female	37	16 yrs	B.Ed. holder	Class 2 (Type B)	59

3.2.3 Students

There are a total number of 119 students who participated in the study. They were in Junior Secondary Two (Grade 8) and were between 15 and 16 years of age when the data were collected. They were selected as informants for the study on the following grounds: 1) they were among the 833 students who had gone through one and half years' instruction under NEC since it was introduced to the school, 2) they were at a similar English proficiency level, and 3) they were taught by the two case study teachers. As mentioned earlier, the students in the school were placed into classes by scores on a placement test for four core courses, namely Chinese, mathematics, English, and politics. Information about the classes involved in the study and the results of the placement test for English subject administered at the end of 2003-2004 academic year, which was also the criterion by which the students were placed into different classes, is given in Table 4.

Table 4 Classes in the Study

<i>Class</i>	<i>Class type</i>	<i>Class size</i>	<i>Total score</i>	<i>Mean</i>
1	B	60	5304	88.40
2	B	59	4872	82.58

3.2.4 Parents

Parents were not initially taken into consideration as informants for this study. However, during the process of data collection, an ongoing analysis of the data helped me to reformulate the “working hypothesis” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) grounded in the data in the particular context. I found from the existing data that there appeared to be disparities between what teachers believe happened in class and what actually happened, and I recognized that parents’ viewpoint, which was one of the sources of teachers’ beliefs and values may partly account for that. It was for this reason that an interview was done with parents. Because of scheduling problems, it was difficult to arrange for a face-to-face interview so the interview had to be done by a telephone. The 6 parents, whom were chosen to participate in this study based on their children’s academic levels (top, average, and weak respectively) in each of the above mentioned classes, generally showed a willingness to address issues that arose from the process of implementing NEC in the school where their children were studying.

3.2.5 School Principal

The school principal was interviewed to investigate from what perspectives the local school institution viewed the curriculum change and what leadership was available within the school to support change and to help teachers cope with change. The principal had just moved from another school at the time of this study, yet she had had nearly 20 years' working experiences as a school principal.

3.3 Data Collection

As indicated earlier, data collection and analysis sometimes proceeded at the same time in this study. Analysis during data collection "helps the fieldworker cycle back and forth between thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new data" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 50). Through "emergent design" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), data collection methods were expanded and modified during data analysis. Below is a description of how the data collection methods used for this study, which comprised a review of written reports, classroom observations, stimulated recall, focused interviews, and questionnaires, were generated and processed.

3.3.1 Review of Documents

The first step for the data collection was to examine any existing documentary data, especially those containing information on the success or failure of the NEC curriculum renewal perceived by administrative institutions. Before the research was conducted on site, I reviewed written reports on what the regional inspectors during the 2003-2004 academic year considered to be the strengths and weaknesses of English teaching under NEC in this specific area. According to the inspectors, the reports were written to provide evidences for a quality control program conducted by the regional educational administration on a yearly basis.

3.3.2 Classroom Observations

Observation is an effective research technique to directly elicit the data in the context being investigated. Selinker (1974) claims that “[from] the only observable data in meaningful performance situations we can establish legitimate judgment” (p. 35). On the other hand, Cohen (1998) points out that observation does not enable the researcher to examine internal mental events and strategies such as reasoning and decision making. It was not until a few lessons were observed that I acknowledged such a deficiency of classroom observation. Therefore, I expanded data collection methods to include stimulated recall (Gass & Mackey, 2000; Nunan, 1992) to compensate for the

drawback of observation.

Another possible drawback of observation is that any observational schemes or schedules are predetermined and thus may limit how the observer views the teachers' strategy use and teaching processes. Since the study aimed to explore teachers' beliefs and pedagogical strategies with regard to NEC principles, observations were "unstructured" (Punch, 1998) in that no predetermined observation checklist was utilized.

Classroom observations in this study were conducted for five consecutive English lessons for each of the two teachers in three separate cycles during the spring semester of 2005, totaling 15 video-taped observations per teacher. Observation notes were taken to assist in the transcription process. The video-taped lessons were subsequently viewed and commented upon by the teachers in respect of the options considered, decisions made and actions taken in the classrooms.

3.3.3 Stimulated Recall

As mentioned above, a central research technique used in this study was stimulated recall, in which the researcher prompted the teachers' interpretation of events by focusing their attention on data collected in their own classrooms. The stimulated recall technique aimed to elicit from teachers their various interpretations of what was going on in the classrooms

(Nunan, 1992).

Stimulated recall in this study involved the following two-stage process:

- 1) A lesson was videotaped and subsequently viewed and commented upon by the teacher in relation to the options considered, decisions made and actions taken in the classroom. The teacher was allowed to stop and/or rewind the tape if she wished.
- 2) The researcher replayed the recording, stopping the tape at various points to draw the teacher's attention to specific points of her classroom teaching and probe for further details about how/why she made those decisions.

3.3.4 Interviews

Interviews enabled the researcher to gain more in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives, which other methods could not identify. "We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe... The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (Patton, 1990, p. 196). In this study, the semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers, the students, the parents, and the administrative officers respectively in a non-threatening atmosphere to gain open-ended responses. All interviews were done in Chinese. To facilitate more focused data, a series of written interview

schedules were used while leading questions were carefully designed to avoid “a bias or an assumption that the researcher is making, which may not be held by the participant” (Merriam, 1998, p. 78). Meanwhile, in the actual process of interviewing, the researcher was attentive to the concerns of the participants and was ready to probe by way of asking for details and clarification to specify or to enquire in depth about participants’ responses. The interviews used in this study are described below.

3.3.4.1 Teacher Interviews

A series of three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the two teachers. A baseline interview, prior to the commencement of classroom observation, collected relevant background information about the teachers. Post-observation interviews, carried out at the end of each cycle of observation, focused primarily on the lessons that had just been observed. In order to probe into some of the main issues arising from the classroom observations and the ongoing data analysis, a summative interview was conducted at the conclusion of the data collection (see Appendix C and Appendix D for teacher interview questions). All interviews were audio-taped and were transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

3.3.4.2 Student Interviews

A number of focused interviews were conducted with a sample of six students to explore their beliefs and understandings of the notion of “learner-centeredness”. These students were chosen from the two case study classes (three from each class) and they ranked differently in academic ability in their classes (top, average, and weak respectively). Twelve open-ended interview questions, which were closely related to the theme of “learner-centeredness” in practical terms, were used to “locate each respondent’s answer to the same question rather quickly and to organize questions and answers that are similar” (Patton, 1990, p. 285) (See Appendix E for student interview questions). The interviews were conducted with each individual student in a less formal way without audio-recording. Instead, notes were taken by the researcher and were used to reconstruct the interview at a later date.

3.3.4.3 Parent Interviews

It was not until the societal influence on curriculum innovation emerged and stood prominently in the ongoing data analysis that I decided to carry out an oral interview with the parents at the conclusion of the data collection. A small group of six parents, three from each of the case study classes, were chosen to participate in the interview based on their children’s school grades.

The reason for choosing the participants on these grounds is that in Chinese educational context, it is commonplace for parents to be highly motivated by their children's school grades --- the better their children do in school work, the higher expectations they have for their children and the school system. It was thus expected that parents' viewpoints may vary according to their children's school grades and they may have different ideas and assumptions about a learner-centered approach to teaching.

Because of a timing problem, the interview had to be conducted over the telephone. The parents were informed in advance by the two case study teachers about the objectives of the interview, which helped me to gain trust and cooperation in the actual conduct of the interview. Considering the nature of telephone interview, where an indistinct relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is always to be found, the researcher wished to exert a greater control over the content of the interview so three leading interview questions were used to predetermine the agenda (see Appendix F).

3.3.4.4 Administrator Interviews

Two educational inspectors in the local area and the school principal - those who were responsible for organizing, monitoring and evaluating the implementation of curriculum renewal at different levels - were interviewed to investigate their attitudes towards the impact NEC has had on English

teaching in the specific area, focusing on an exploration of their perceptions of “learner-centeredness” as a primary concern in the new curriculum (see Appendix G for regional inspector interview questions, and Appendix H for school principal interview questions).

As an inexperienced researcher myself, I was initially not very confident in dealing with the political issues the research might involve, and I was aware that this might affect the validity and reliability of the research. However, I believed it was possible to minimize the negative effect of political variables if a number of key elements were delineated. According to Cohen and Manion (cited in Nunan, 1992), one of the key elements of conducting an interview is briefing and explanation, and the other is questioning. So before the interviews began, I explained the nature of my research and the purpose of the interview to the interviewees and answered questions they asked. I also told them how the data were to be used. In the interviewing process, I tried to use a range of question types to encourage the respondent to recount their experiences and opinions. Although some of their accounts may still be interpreted as “politically correct”, the interviews were basically productive.

3.3.5 Questionnaire

Student questionnaire in this study was also an “emergent design”.

When I was gradually accepted by both the teachers and the students as a “participant” rather than an “outsider”, I was surprised to find out that although the teachers and their students had been working together for one and half years, the teachers had nearly no access to such information as students’ prior learning experiences, students’ language needs and learning preference, and so on. All the teachers were provided with before the students entered the program was a list of examination scores. And during the process of their instruction, both the case study teachers claimed either “no time” or “no academic ability” to conduct needs analysis in a systematic way. It was for this reason that I was prompted to administer a questionnaire to the two case study students to learn about their language needs and their opinions on English teaching and learning, with an emphasis on their assumptions about “learner-centeredness”. The questionnaire aimed to investigate whether there is any mismatch between learners’ beliefs and teachers’ beliefs, which might partly account for teachers’ classroom actions.

The questionnaire was composed of four parts. Each part elicited different information from different perspectives (see Appendix I for student questionnaire). Part one was concerned with biographical data. Part two was an attempt to investigate from a linguistic perspective what elements of English language should be covered in the course and what skills should be given priority according to the students’ agenda. Part three focused on the

students' cognitive processing mechanism for language learning. The various issues concerned with this respect included students' preferred learning styles and strategies; students' preferred methodology and activities; students' expectation of teacher role and learner role; students' view of learning resources; and students' view of evaluation and assessment. Part four looked from an affective perspective to investigate the students' motivation, attitude, and interest toward learning English.

3.4 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter is concerned with the research design and methods used in conducting the present study. A rationale is provided to explain why and how data triangulation and methodological triangulation were used in this study to achieve the research purpose of exploring the extent to which NEC has been implemented at the classroom level. To facilitate detailed discussion, the study made use of a qualitative case study design to focus on two Chinese EFL teachers' implementation of learner-centeredness at a junior secondary school in southwest China. Various merits of the case study approach are thus discussed to explain how it was particularly suited to the proposed study. To explain how this study was carried out, a detailed description of the setting, the participants, and the data collection instruments and procedure is included. In this study, data were drawn from

a number of sources: teachers, students, parents, school principal and regional inspectors. The data collection methods used for this study comprised a review of documents, classroom observations, stimulated recall, focused interviews, and questionnaires.

PAYAP UNIVERSITY