CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF DATA

In this chapter I shall set out the data and provide my own descriptive and interpretive account of it. I shall then discuss the salient themes which emerged from the data. As a vast array of data was generated from the research, I have been selective in the choice of the usable data that can provide the readers with enough illustrative detail to support my conclusions.

4.1 Data Analysis Methods and Procedures

In this section of the chapter, I shall explain the techniques I used to manage and analyze the data. The procedure of data management and data analysis is briefly described.

4.1.1 Managing the Data

In this study, each teacher's particular educational belief and strategies to manage the curriculum change was a prominent concern. In order to gather relevant information and to avoid data that were "unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to

be processed"(Merriam, 1988, p. 162), every video-taped lesson and stimulated recall was transcribed at the conclusion of each observation task and the accompanying field notes were carefully examined to determine whether any further data collection was needed. Likewise, between data collection activities, I did some rudimentary analysis of the data produced by interviews and stimulated recalls to develop tentative categories or themes, on which bases the next data collection session was informed.

All the data of case study participants were kept in separate files. In order to easily access specific pieces of the data as needed in both the analysis and the write-up of the findings, I assigned some sort of short-hand designation to various aspects of the data. Each file is thus titled by the type of data (LT, lesson transcript; ON, observation notes; BI, baseline interview; PLI, post lesson interview; SI, summative interview; SR, stimulated recall given in real time; SSI, student interview; PI, parent interview; AI, administrator interview; or SQ, student questionnaire) and the date of collection.

4.1.2 Categorization and Interpretation

The coded data were then processed by means of a constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss,1967) to generate categories of teachers' beliefs. Following the basic strategy of the method, I based my initial readings of the post-lesson interview data on the discovery

of salient themes and patterns using inductive analysis procedures (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glaser & Strauss,1967). By doing so I established a number of tentative categories that were then compared to other instances within the same or another data set until I could formulate a categorization scheme.

As indicated earlier in this thesis, the primary focus of my study was to investigate teachers' beliefs about learner-centered principles and the extent to which they were carrying the principles out. However, it was felt during the ongoing data analysis that a richer description of teachers' belief system could contribute to a fuller understanding of teachers' assumptions about learner-centeredness. Therefore, in addition to the categories of teacher's beliefs about learner-centeredness teaching – subdivided into beliefs about goals, beliefs about learning, beliefs about teaching, and beliefs about evaluation – it was decided to include the categories of teachers' general beliefs, i.e. beliefs about English, beliefs about the program and the curriculum, and beliefs about English teaching as a profession. After the categorization scheme was selected and individual categories were defined, the coded data were accordingly categorized.

Even though these categories help illustrate the teachers' beliefs about learner-centered principles, they are neither a comprehensive nor a prescriptive view of what teachers perceive. Indeed, the vision became more complex when I identified various instructional tensions, which are, in Freeman's words, "competing demands within their [the teachers']

teaching" that represent "divergences among different forces or elements in the teacher's understanding of the school context, the subject matter, or the students" (1993, p. 488). These divergences are embedded within tensions as overlapping layers. As such, "tensions obstruct teacher's ability to develop practice that is compatible with their intentions" (Golombek, 1998, p. 452). Acknowledging this, I attempted to analyze the teachers' beliefs to identify each teacher's particular tension and the strategies used in response to that tension. This may also account for teachers' classroom behaviors which are sometimes not consistent with their beliefs.

Following the analysis of teachers' beliefs and assumptions about learner-centeredness and their classroom strategies to manage the innovation, an analysis of a wider range of factors within the educational institution, the educational environment and the society is provided. This analysis was intended to yield "thick description" (Geertz, 1993) of the whole phenomenon of learner-centeredness in the particular EFL context where the study took place. Holliday (1994) notes that much of what goes on within the classroom is influenced by the values and ideologies brought by students and teachers from outside the classroom, so such a "macro view of the social context of teaching and learning" (ibid.) should help us gain a better understanding of how the two Chinese EFL teachers in question respond to a learner-centered approach to teaching. The multi-perspectival analysis in this section involves the description and interpretation of

attitudes towards the adoption of the learner-centered approach on the part of the students, the parents, and the educational administrators in this particular cultural context.

4.1.3 Use of Metaphors

Metaphors were used to capture the essence of each teacher's strategies for managing the change. Miles and Huberman (1984) suggest that metaphor offers the researcher two important qualities: a) Metaphors can reduce data by taking a number of particulars and making a generalization; and b) it also can create a pattern, pulling together separate bits of information. Because the two case study teachers, Lu and Dan, frequently talked about their experiences using the phrases "slap and candy" and "balance beam" (BI: January 15, 2005; PLI: February 23, 2005), respectively, I characterized their respective strategies by these two terms.

4.2 Findings

In this section I shall present the data yielded by the study and provide my interpretation of those data. The first part of this section, which is also the main findings of the study, focuses on teachers' beliefs and practice with respect to the leaner-centered innovation. The second part focuses on the socio-cultural context in which the innovation took place.

4.2.1 Classroom Events: Beliefs Informing Practice

This section of the chapter reports on the two case study teachers'

expressed attitudes and beliefs about the learner-centered approach to

teaching embodied in the NEC innovation. It also provides some evidence

from the classroom to illustrate the pattern of each individual teacher's

teaching style, which is largely influenced by their particular educational

beliefs. As the key concern is understanding the phenomenon from the

teachers' perspectives, this section develops an insider's interpretation of the

events, derived from the teachers' remarks in the interviews, post-lesson

conferences and stimulated recall process.

4.2.1.1 The Slap and Candy Giver: Lu's Beliefs

Lu obviously belonged to the backbone of the teaching staff in the

school under investigation. After NEC was introduced to this province, she

was selected as the representative of the English teachers in her school to go

to the capital city of her province for a short-term teacher training program,

which was initiated by the provincial education commission to "update

English teachers' knowledge base, especially in the area of educational

philosophy" (BI: January 14, 2005). Talking about her experience of

participating this teacher training program, Lu confessed that such

professional activities are not as illuminating as she expected.

You are at first fascinated to see so many famous people face to face.

You think there will be lots of wonderful ideas to help you improve

your teaching. And there are some there - to be fair. The point is the

more you listen to them, the more you get confused. Why is that so?

Simply because they do not know who you are, where you come from,

and who your students are. I think every teacher has their own way to

work things out. (BI: January 14, 2005)

Lu then expressed her own beliefs about the so-called educational

philosophy.

From my experience of being an English teacher for more than 15 years,

I believe what work best for me, and for my students also, is the Chinese

traditional rule, which goes like to slap him and then give him a piece of

candy. This means when I teach, I am always very strict with my

students but at the same time I do care about them. I don't know

whether it can be called a "learner-centered" practice, but I know I am

doing good for my students. That's enough. Isn't it? (BI: January 16,

2005)

4.2.1.1.1 English

As in many other countries in the world, there is a widespread belief in

China's society that knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin's

lamp, which permits one to open the linguistic gates to international

business, technology, science, and education. Surprisingly, as an English

teacher herself, Lu showed a rather negative attitude toward the status of

English in the community she lived in.

> English is overemphasized for some political reasons... I might appear
> as an extremist. But I am telling the truth. Just think about our own
> situation. Sure, English might be useful for some of the students. Just for
> some of them, I mean. Because for some others, if they fail the public
> examination, they leave school, which means for the rest of their lives,
> they might have no chance to use English. So why bother to force them
> to learn something useless? It might be better to spend more time
> learning some survival skills, which are more beneficial for their future
> life. (BI: January 16, 2005)

What Lu claimed was true in one sense. According to the official

documents I read, one of the problems of second- level education in this

specific area was the inadequate enrollment in senior secondary schools. The

figures reported in the documents showed that each year there are more

than 4000 junior high school graduates in this area, but only 10% can be

enrolled to the senior secondary school, which is actually the only one senior

secondary school in the area. For those who fail the entrance examination,

some of them go to technical schools, nursing schools, or commercial

schools, but the majority of them become a part of the job-seeking

population. This is the severe educational problem all members of the

society have to face in this geographical area.

4.2.1.1.2 The Program and the Curriculum

When asked about her beliefs about the current English program and the curriculum, Lu articulated that she was in an extremely confused state of mind.

I think my confidence in myself as a teacher has been taken away by the curriculum reform. Sometimes I feel so tired and so aimless, which never occurred to me before. I know any reform moves forward in a good direction. And I do believe the current English curriculum is a good thing. Or, should I say "theoretically good"? Because at least to me, it is unrealistic in three ways. First, there is no support to the teachers. All you are given is the textbook. Okay, go and teach it. How can that be? Second, it is too demanding to the teachers. As an English teacher myself, I can't understand some of the "new language" appear in the textbooks, let alone the "new ideas" of teaching such as multi-dimensional evaluation and task-based teaching model. Third, the new curriculum is to me a kind of "fashion", designed by the experts and imposed by "the above". How can the above people know your situation? Even though they see the problem, it is just a phenomenon to them, how do they know all your struggles to fight with the problem? (SI: March 21,2005)

Lu's highly critical remarks here reveal that the introduction of the new curriculum into the current educational system was an undertaking fraught

with potential difficulties. Seeing little scope for dealing with those difficulties, Lu was thrown into a situation where she felt completely at a loss.

4.2.1.1.3 English Teaching as a Profession

Lu used to be a very successful English teacher. Every year the proportion of students entering the senior secondary school from her class ranked among the highest in the area. A few years ago, five students from her class, with whom she worked closely, were chosen to participate in a national held Olympic English competition for secondary students, all the students had excellent performance and they won first prize, second prize and special prize respectively. She was a very reflective teacher too. Some of her research papers have been published in academic journals, which was very unusual for secondary school teachers because many of them claim to have no professional ability to conduct research. It was her passion for teaching and the subsequent professional achievement that motivated her to view her profession as a career with goals and career opportunities. But now she said her present situation made her feel "so discouraged" that she "almost wanted to give up" (PLI: February 16, 2005).

Lu's beliefs about schooling, English program and curriculum consist of both subjective and objective dimensions. Some are fairly simple – for example, her somewhat strong personality. While some are deeply

It is clear at this point that Lu's educational beliefs, which were largely shaped by the educational culture in which she was in, and her knowledge of instruction – in particular, the communicative approach to teaching, form competing demands in her teaching and many aspects of her teaching were thus embedded within this instructional tension. This became more explicit when she was asked about her beliefs and assumptions about the learner-centeredness principles embodied in NEC.

4.2.1.1.4 The Instructional Goals

With regard to the feasibility of making goal-setting a negotiative activity between teachers and students in Chinese educational context, Lu made a strong statement.

I don't see any feasibility or necessity of doing this. Above all, both teachers and students have to face the reality – to pass the exam. That is the only solution for students if they want to have a better life. And maybe the only solution for teachers too if they don't want to lose their job. That is our goal, a non-negotiable goal, which determines the classroom life. (SI: March 20, 2005)

When asked about if any form of needs analysis had ever been conducted in her class, she confessed all she did was to look through the test scores passed over to her before she met her students. But she also admitted that learning about and from the students is an important job for language

teachers. She articulated the tension as follows:

> I admit there needs to be some communication with the students. And
> I feel like it is my responsibility to know my students better. But there
> are many other problems you have to have. For example, timing
> problem, class size problem, technology problems. So on and so forth.
> So what I do is to do it occasionally. I ask them what they like or
> dislike. Just orally in the class. If I think they have good ideas, I will do
> it accordingly. If not, I will just use "violence" to make them obedient
> (laughter). (SI: March 21, 2005)

Lu also mentioned the students were not mature enough to know how
to plan for their study objectively.

> They are just kids at an age of pursuing fun and cute things. How can
> they have any goals about themselves? According to my experience,
> only a small portion of them study for themselves. For the rest, they just
> study for the teachers and the parents. Teachers and parents set goals
> for them. It is lucky enough for teachers and parents if the kids do what
> they are told to do. (SI: March 21,2005)

4.2.1.1.5 Learning

Lu exhibited a strong tendency to be in favor of the behaviorist view of
learning. She expressed her understanding of language learning by
frequently talking about her past experience of learning English as a student.

At the time I was in the college, my teacher asked me to rote memorize the dictionary pages. At first I thought it was a stupid idea. I was a human being, not a machine. But then when I had to do it as the teacher required, I gradually changed my idea. It was an effective way to learn language. By memorizing the word entries, the example sentences, again and again, my language skills were improved. I learned from that that language learning is a battle with your memory. (PLI: January 28, 2005)

Lu also believed language learning is a process of habit-formation. According to her, what came into play in this process were two important concepts: frequency and intensity. Again, she explained this by referring to her past experiences.

I noted down everything which I thought was useful for me. Phrases, sentences, poetry, song verses, grammar exercise samples, everything. Then whenever I was free, I would open my notebooks and read them through. It was during this day-by-day process all the stuffs written on the notebooks became knowledge of mine. You know, it is just a matter of forming language habits. You can't tell how many notebooks I had got by the time I finished my study. A pile of them! (PLI: January 28, 2005)

Lu's personal practical knowledge of language learning had informed her practice; in other words, how she understood the primacy of language

learning was shaped by her experiences as a learner and resulted in practice in which she attempted to reinforce her students' "language habit" by every possible means. One example was her classroom routine of asking the students to copy each of the newly learnt vocabulary items twenty times. A dictation, which took the form of the teacher reading out the Chinese meanings while student wrote down the English words, was then done at the opening of the next lesson to check how well students memorized the new words. For those who misspelled the words, they would be "punished" by having to copy each misspelled word another fifty times.

Another classroom routine in Lu's class was for the students to recite the texts from their textbooks line by line. This was required as an after-school activity. Most of the time the students did it individually with Lu. If she had other business to do, she would assign a few students who were good at English to take care of other students' reciting. If anyone failed to recite the text learnt on that particular day, they would be "punished" by having to read it fifty times.

Lu's practice may look a rather traditional way to language teaching. However, from time to time, she speculated that the activities were too "mechanical" and the students may become demotivated because of the "harsh trainings". As she reflected on and articulated her experiences in relation to her tension, she realized that she "focused too much on content and product". She also expressed her worries of developing instructional

strategies to design learning activities for students to construct meaning in a more active way.

> I know I am a little too harsh sometimes, even though I have good intentions. Sometimes I feel sorry for my students because they really, really have no fun in my class. But then I think they would understand me because of the pressure of the exam... I know that can be an excuse, but not always. The real reason I use traditional method all the time is it gives me a feeling of "everything is in control". Frankly speaking, I have no confidence at all to organize students if they become the center of the classroom. This is particularly true for the current English program. There are such enormous demands on teachers - not only on their language skills, but also on their organizational skills.
>
> (PLI: March 1, 2005)

4.2.1.1.6 Teaching

Although Lu articulated the instructional tension she faced – in particular, the competing demands of focusing on a structured system of grammatical patterns and focusing on communication, she did not develop alternative strategies but grounded her strategies in the established practice of "serving the common good."

> So I think I'd rather not use the new method if I can't use it in a good way. After all, the students get more grammatical knowledge out of the

traditional method, which is good to prepare them for the "overwhelmingly important" exam. I think that can be another interpretation of "learner-centeredness". (PIL: March 1, 2005)

Throughout the data, there is evidence that everything that was said and done in the lesson, and all comments on the lesson, are underpinned by beliefs about the nature of language, learning, and teaching. In order to provide a flavor of how Lu's beliefs about learning had informed her classroom strategies, I will describe a reading lesson in Lu's classroom observed in the second cycle of observation. The topic of the story was about a little girl looking for her lost dog. The target language structure for the lesson was the usage of adverbial clause with past continuous. This reading lesson can be divided into three stages. In the pre-reading stage, Lu used the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) discourse format (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Mehan, 1979; Heap, 1985) to highlight the language points exemplified in the short reading passage. Then she asked the students to read aloud the five pre-reading questions provided by the textbook and the class was given five minutes to read the text silently and find answers from the text to the five questions by underlying relevant parts in the text. This constituted the reading stage. In the post-reading stage, Lu briefly checked the answers. For questions students were not certain about the answers, she provided her own answers and asked students to compared theirs with hers. After that she asked the students to read aloud the text twice. This was followed by a

word-by-word translation. Then she wrote a number of prompt words on the blackboard and asked the students to use them to retell the story. However, most of the students didn't follow Lu's instruction to "retell" the story. Instead, they still looked at their textbooks and "reread" the story. This activity was repeated twice.

In this observation, I had noted the repetitious reading-aloud activity in the following field-note record.

This (the reading-aloud activity) goes on for over fifteen minutes. All students do is to read the lines out, without any interaction between the lines and themselves... The students begin to seem rather restive. I wonder why the teacher does not insist on her initial plan to retell the story. That will be better.

Here an implicit criticism of the behaviorist nature of the learning activities is being made. In the post-lesson debriefing, when asked for a commentary on this part of the lesson, Lu reported:

You see, this is a reading lesson. There are two main purposes of this reading lesson. One is to understand the messages, the other is to "digest" the important language patterns embedded in the text. The first goal is not difficult to achieve because the things being talked about are kind of "common sense" for the kids. You know, kids are animal lovers. For the second goal, you have to ask them to read the text again and again until the salient parts sink into their brains... Yes, they didn't do

exactly what I wanted them to do, but I think it is simply because

they are not very familiar with the patterns. That's why I allowed them

to read it for another two times. (SR: February 23, 2005)

In the following excerpt taken from the pre-reading stage in the same

reading lesson, Lu was asking the students to describe their actions at a

particular given time. It is particularly notable that a primary focus was

placed on students' utterances of correct grammatical forms. When no

response was forthcoming in the IRF discourse, Lu either switched

consciously to use more referential questions or elaborated the questions in

Mandarin to maintain control over the class.

T (*Points to S1*): Were you standing outside of the classroom when the bell

   rang?

S1: Yes.

T: Don't do that again. (laughter)

T (*points to S2*): Were you writing when we had the dictation just now?

S2: Yes.

T: What were you doing when we had the dictation?

S2: ...

T (*in Mandarin*): I asked what you were doing when we had the dictation.

T (*points to S3*): What were you doing when I asked them questions?

S3: I ...

T (*uses gesture*)

S3: I listen…

T: I was listening. Repeat after me. I was listening when the teacher asked

them questions.

T (*points to S4*): Were you sleeping at twelve o'clock yesterday evening?

S4: Yes.

T (*points to S5*): What were you doing at seven o'clock this morning?

S5: I was going to the school on my bike.

T (*points to S6*): What were you doing at eight o'clock this morning?

S6: I was having class.

T: What kind of class? Chinese? Math? Biology?

S6: Math.

T (*to the class*): Oh, he was having a math class at eight o'clock this morning.[1]

In the above-described whole-class teacher-fronted interactions, most of

Lu's follow-up, which was the third part of the I-R-F cycle, had an evaluative

pedagogical role (Cullen, 2002). The purpose of the evaluative F-move was

to provide feedback to individual students about their performance and its

focus was on the form of students' response and it co-occurred with 'display'

questions in the I-move which were asked by the teacher to elicit a

pre-determined response. In many cases of Lu's lessons I observed, this

pedagogical device was used to transmit and construct knowledge.

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[1] Transcription conventions: T=teacher; S1,S2 etc=individual student;
Ss=whole class choral; (*in italics*)=commentary; …=pause.

Although Lu had not learned about IRF terminology, she personalized this

term as a way of talking about her experiences of teaching in the "large

class" situation:

> What can you do with fifty-nine students learning English in a forty-five
>
> minutes class period? Remember they are learning a language, not math
>
> or chemistry or biology. They have to speak. At the same time they have
>
> to hear good English, not bad English. Therefore the best source is the
>
> teacher. The teacher asks questions, checks answers, and provides
>
> feedback. In this way, at least half of the students can have the
>
> opportunity to speak some English. For the rest, if they concentrate
>
> enough on class work, they are not wasting their time because they are
>
> actually practicing their listening. (PLI: March 15, 2005)

When asked about what is meant by "good English", Lu explained that

it referred to good pronunciation and correct grammar. For Lu, not only did

the three components of a language, namely pronunciation, grammar, and

vocabulary build on each other and become more challenging to create a

coherent whole, but teachers were required to deliver the knowledge clearly

and correctly to the students. She believed the teacher had the primary

responsibility for taking charge of the learning process. Her view of teacher

roles represents aspects of her beliefs about teaching.

> I don't know if it is because I always behave in an assertive way... But I
>
> do believe "teacher knows best" and I also believe teachers have the

main responsibility to provide correct information in class. After all, for most of the students, the classroom is the only place they are exposed to English. If the class time is devoted to learner-centered activities, one can hardly tell how much the students can benefit from each other in terms of language knowledge. (PLI: March 18, 2005)

Lu's voice here reveals several things. First, it dramatizes Lu's beliefs that students' linguistic competence is the desired goal of teaching. The target linguistic system, which "attends to structure and form more than meaning" (Richards and Rodgers, 2001), will be learnt through the overt teaching of the patterns of the system. Second, it shows that accuracy, in terms of formal correctness, is a primary concern in Lu's class. Third, it reveals Lu's uncertainty about the unpredictable language the students will use in the control-free activities, which implies the teacher has the responsibility to control the students and prevent them from producing any language that conflicts with the standardized language.

As demonstrated earlier, Lu had a strong belief that "language is habit". In the entire data base, drilling was a central technique used in Lu's class. The rigid drills and exercises usually occupied as much as two- third of the class time. In several cases, Lu made an effort to integrate communicative elements into the classroom activities. But all ended up with either timing problem or students' reluctance to participate in the activities. Lu articulated her tension of being communicative or non-communicative as follows:

Actually there is no need to argue how important communicative

activities are to language learning. They are important, of course.

Everybody knows that... But the point is how far you can go... Timing

is a big problem. If calculated by hours, we only have about four hours

per week. However, we are required to cover one unit within the four

class hours. Not to mention the target structures in every lesson, only

the new vocabulary items can be as many as sixty! In this case, how

many minutes do you think you can hand over to the students? Another

problem is about the technique. Some people are born to be

extrovert. For them to create a relaxed and amusing atmosphere is very

easy. For me it is not easy at all, maybe I am too serious, maybe I am too

old. (laughter) (SI: March 22, 2005)

In the summative interview, when asked about her understanding of the

notion of learner-centeredness, Lu expressed that she believed

learner-centeredness was "in relation to communicative teaching". But she

claimed in a firm tone that "It is impossible to carry it out in the educational

context I am in, at least in my class." In addition to the two above -

mentioned problems, she described another problem.

Maybe it is a deeper level problem. Sometimes I feel it but I don't want

to face it. When I ask myself the question "Are you really a competent

teacher?", my heart is full of fear. In other people's eyes, I am a

successful teacher, full of energy and confidence. But what they see is

the surface... They don't know what is hiding behind this is the fact that

I can't manage things well. Sometimes I even can't use proper English

to organize the class so I have to use Mandarin...I want to be a

communicative teacher, I want to try learner-centered teaching, but I

have a real fear that if people find how inexperienced I am, they will no

longer respect me as a "good teacher". (SI: March 22, 2005)

Here another layer of Lu's instructional tension is revealed. On the one

hand, she has her professional development needs and she shows a

willingness to face the professional challenges at a time when competing

language teaching ideologies are shared, widespread, and enormously

influential among language teachers. On the other hand, being aware of the

fact that she is less prepared in a wider array of knowledge and skills, she is

careful to not to disturb her emotional and psychological well-being, which

means she chooses to switch back to a "safe mode" with which she feels

comfortable. Taken from the guide-in stage of one lesson in Lu's classroom,

the lesson excerpt below provides an example of how she managed the

tension. The lesson was about talking about problems and giving advice.

T (*does actions*): Ouch! I've got a stomachache!

Ss: ... (no response)

T (*in Mandarin*): What can you say in this situation? You could say "What's

the matter?" or "What's wrong with you?"

Ss (*mumble*): What's the matter?... What' wrong with you?

T: I've got a stomachache. Please give me some advice.

S1: You should go to the doctor.

T: All right. What else?

S2: You should take some medicine.

T: Good. What else?

S3: You should sit down.

T: Yes, that's a good idea.

(Then she asks the students to open their books and turn to the page where four

pictures were drawn to illustrate people's problems. She begins to ask questions

about the first picture, in which an anxious-looking girl is looking at herself in the

mirror)

T: Look, what's wrong with her in this picture?

S4 *(in Mandarin)*: She suffers from the pimples on her face.

T: No, her clothes are out of style. Read after me "out of style".

Ss: Out of style.

T: Again, out of style.

Ss: Out of style.

T: Okay, now let's look at picture two. What's wrong with them? They are

arguing. Read after me "argue".

Ss: Argue.

(Students look confused about the form of this new word. Some say "argue",

some say "arguing").

T (*points to the same picture*): What's wrong with them?

Ss: They are arguing.

(*Again students show uncertainty about the tense of the verb.*)

T: Listen to me please. They argued. They argued.

Ss: They argued.

T: Good. Now let's see picture three.

……….

The classroom interaction provides another example how the follow-up moves in the I-R-F discourse functioned as an evaluative feedback to confirm or disconfirm students' linguistic performance. Another striking point, however, is the avoidance strategy Lu used to assert her psychological self as an authority figure. In her initial plan, Lu had intended to elicit from the class one of the target language "what's wrong with you" by doing actions. The students, however, didn't respond in the way she expected. So she immediately changed her mind to use Mandarin to specify the language to be used in this lesson. In another incident, she had the same intention to use the pictures as visual aids to present the new vocabulary. But when she found what one student called out was quite "off-track", she appeared to be a little embarrassed and once again, she chose to bring the students back to the "right track" by telling them the words directly. I remarked on this in my observation notes with a query. In the post-lesson stimulated recall, on reviewing the lesson transpired, Lu justified my interpretations of the

particular classroom events.

LSH: I'm wondering if you were a little disappointed when the student

mentioned about the pimples on the girl's face.

Lu: Absolutely. Actually I had a feeling of kind of panic. Okay, if I knew

how to say "pimple" in English, it might be easier for me to give her

some feedback. Something like "Did you see pimples on her face?

Maybe. But what other problems can you see?" But the point was I

did not know how to say this word. And I did not want to look stupid

in front of the students.

LSH: So you decided to win back more control.

Lu: Yes. For me that was the best way to handle the situation. If I allowed

the students to continue imagining what happened, they would have

created more unanticipated problems. (laughter) So it's better to stop

them. Better to save time for what should be done.

LSH: It seemed you made a decision to depart from your intended plan.

You had intended to invite the students to express their ideas about

the pictures. But it turned out to be the opposite. What you did was

actually to dominate the class.

Lu: Well, maybe you are right. I've never thought about that, really… I

mean it is quite natural that what you plan is one thing, and what you

do is another thing. That happens everyday. Even with the students

you are very familiar with, you can't tell confidently if what they

think and what they do today will be different from that of yesterday. That's why you have to drop some activities sometimes.

4.2.1.1.7 Evaluation

A recurrent issue to emerge from the classroom data was the dominant role that standardized testing played in teaching and learning and its tremendous impact on instruction. An interesting phenomenon here was when I elicited information from the educational officers involved in this study, they all showed a strong attitude to de-emphasize the role of standardized testing, which seemed to be congruent with one of the NEC principles. When asked about the management strategies to balance the need to respond to the innovation and the public examination at the same time, the school principal answered "there was no such need" because as long as the teachers acted upon the guidance of NEC, which was supported by "an effective and theoretically sound basis for teaching and learning", the teachers would know how to evaluate students' work "scientifically and effectively". However, what teachers perceived the evaluation based on their experiences was a quite different picture. In the following remarks, Lu reported the high-stake testing was one of the major professional challenges she faced.

In the training program, we were told that we needed to update our knowledge about evaluation. In the demonstrate lessons the procedures

of how to conduct summative evaluation such as using portfolios were demonstrated. I think it is quite a good idea basically. But again, there is little possibility to apply it to your teaching. For most Chinese secondary schools, I might say, the only way to evaluate students' school work is to see how well they score in the standardized tests at the national, provincial, or municipal levels. What's more, the teachers' teaching is also evaluated by the students' test and examination scores. That's very challenging. (SI: March 22, 2005)

For Lu, the challenge represents two things. First, she believed a responsible teacher should try her best to help the students get through the public examination otherwise she would feel guilty because the students will have to find some sources of livelihood after they finish their nine years' compulsory education. Lu thought they were "too young to make a life" so they need to be given the opportunity for a higher level education. Second, as a teacher who has a good reputation in the professional field, Lu has to convince everybody of her ability by getting her students to score higher than the other teachers. It is because of this examination-driven context that Lu believed the multi-dimensional evaluation framework proposed in NEC is "impossible" in classroom reality.

4.2.1.2 The Balance Beam Player: Dan's Beliefs

Dan graduated from a three-years' English program offered by the

teachers' college where I teach in China. At the time she was in the school, she impressed me as a diligent student of nice personality. After graduation, she was assigned to work in a secondary school in a rural area. During that time she got a bachelor degree through a long-distance program provided by a provincial university. Six years after she worked in that school, she was transferred to the case study school because of her reputation for excellence in teaching. In 2002 and 2003, she won two English teaching competitions held by the prefecture and was awarded second prize and first prize respectively.

4.2.1.2.1 English

Dan's attitude towards English was in sharp contrast to that of Lu's. She believed English is an important language because it is "the gateway to a better education, a better future". She reflected on her own experiences of learning English and articulated she "had been loving English since the first contact with it". The various reasons she listed for her loving with English included "the beautiful melody", "different cultural experience", "arts and literature" and so on. Compared to the stereotypical impressions of the underlying beliefs many Chinese English teachers hold about English, Dan's perceptions of English seemed to be an exception. She tended to focus more on the functional and communicative potential of language rather than the mere structural aspects of language. When asked about how her beliefs

about English influence her classroom practice, she reported:

I think there is lots of fun in learning English. I love English personally

so I do hope I can help my students fall in love with English too... I

always try to make my class interesting. I believe if students find

learning English is interesting and fun, they will fall in love with it. I am

so proud of my students, and myself too. (laughter) Every time when

they are asked which subject is the one they like best, they all answer

"English. We love English"... That is really rewarding. (BLI: January 16,

2005)

4.2.1.2.2 English Teaching as a Profession

Dan's voice here reveals her beliefs about English teaching profession as

a valued career choice, offering a high level of job satisfaction. She said it

was this "sense of achievement" that motivated her to be a "more

responsible teacher". Nevertheless, although Dan showed her willingness to

assume professional responsibilities, she also expressed her worries about

the working conditions and the career prospects available to English teachers

in the community. Two particular things she mentioned were teachers'

workload and administrative support of teacher professional development.

Dan thought English teachers were "overloaded" - they had many extra

tasks to do besides their normal job responsibilities. For example, they had to

teach at weekends to help students do simulated examination papers. They

had to come to school very early every morning for an extra morning lesson. She also talked about the problem of the very few opportunities for teacher training were provided to English teachers, which, according to her, resulted in "teachers' lack of confidence in managing change."

I think it's really important for teachers to "recharge batteries". Otherwise they will soon lag behind the changing situation. If teachers are regularly provided the opportunities to update their language skills and ideas about teaching, they will have more self-confidence when they face the curriculum change. (SI: March 21, 2005)

She speculated on her own experiences of coping with such "change" when NEC was first introduced to her school.

I was in a panic for a whole week, having absolutely no idea about what to teach or how to teach. All I was given was the textbook. The syllabus is different. The content is different. The focus is different too. But I could not tell exactly in what ways they are different... Actually no one would blame me if I just grabbed the textbook and taught in a way that people were accustomed to. But I felt that was not what I should do as a responsible teacher...(SI: March 21,2005)

4.2.1.2.3 The Program and the Curriculum

Despite the fact that Dan was sometimes "upset and discouraged", her commitment to the teaching profession made her view the curriculum

change as both "challenging and promising". She expressed her beliefs about the program and the curriculum as follows.

Although I feel I am still not ready to implement the new curriculum, I think NEC has many merits. First of all, it gives students more chances to use English. Secondly, it provides more lively language and more interesting topics. Thirdly, it gives teachers more space for creativity. I think if teachers are made known more about the overall philosophy of the program, more effective teaching and learning will occur. But, of course, one central premise is the teachers are freed from the pressure of public examinations. (SI: March 22, 2005)

4.2.1.2.4 The Instructional Goals

From the data, it seemed that Dan was faced with the same instructional tension as Lu, which was the competing demands of learner-based instruction and accountability. Although these two teachers had different beliefs about the new English curriculum and the program they work in, they both articulated they had to edge their ways into a balance of the competing forces. This is explicit in Dan's comments on the learner-directed instructional goals proposed in NEC.

I do believe students can contribute to the process of setting instructional goals. Some people say the students are too young to take charge of their learning. I would say if you trust them and show your

respect for them, you will be surprised to find they have many wonderful ideas about what to learn and how to learn... But the problem is how much you can use their ideas in your teaching, because it is not uncommon for students' expectations about learning to be incompatible with the evaluation system. So it is really a matter of balance. (SI: March 22, 2005)

According to Dan, the technique she used for needs analysis was to ask students write short notes to her at regular intervals every semester. The students were encouraged to comment on the lessons and articulate their learning needs such as their preferred activities, content and study modes. She would then make an overall plan, taking every possible element into consideration - for example, to review the latest examination guidelines, to check the content of the textbook, to reflect on her lesson plans, and to consult the panel chair about teaching pace. After that she would make her decisions about what actions she should take to accommodate students' needs.

Dan seemed to be more strategic in managing the tension. On the one hand, she was well aware of the fact that as a teacher, she was accountable for her clients (students, parents, school, etc.) so it was important that she could support her claim of effectiveness with systematic evidence of student achievement. On the other hand, she acknowledged the importance of making her curricular planning logical and coherent, and meet the needs of

the students. Overall, Dan's expressed attitudes towards the formulation of learning goals seemed to be congruent with the leaner-centered principles highlighted in NEC.

4.2.1.2.5 Learning

One significant element of Dan's beliefs about language learning can be described as the communication principle. In the baseline interview, she explicitly expressed her beliefs that activities that involve communication promote learning.

> If there is any secret why my students like English more than any other subjects, it must because of the interesting experiences of using English as a tool to express their ideas and feelings. I never force my students to memorize grammar rules. What I do is to provide language input for them to work on in a communicative way. The learning outcome is surprising – most students are smart enough to figure out the grammar rules on their own. (BLI: January 16, 2005)

In an examination-driven context, teachers are usually confronted with many constraints on conducting communicative activities. As Dan described this problem, she articulated the strategies she used to manage the tension.

> Some teachers believe conducting class activities such as pair work, group work, and role play in large class is a waste of time, which will result in students' inadequate mastery of the language system. I feel the

pressure sometimes when I find I can not keep up with the teaching pace which is agreed upon among the teaching staff. However, I learnt from my experiences that it is worth "sacrificing" time to do activities, simply because once students find English learning is an interesting experience, they will learn even faster. This may explain why the mean scores in my classes for almost every test are the highest among the fourteen classes at the same level. (PLI: January 27, 2005)

It can be inferred from Dan's statements that she views learning as a process of students acquiring learning skills, social and communication skills through encountering experience, which is congruent with the constructivist view of learning espoused in the NEC principle. One example is the class opening activity in Dan's class. At the beginning of every lesson the students rotated duties to tell the class a short story of their own choice. The peer students then were invited to ask questions about this story or just said anything interested them. Although this opening activity only lasted for several minutes, Dan thought these were "critical moments" because it created an "interactive tone in the class" and more importantly, it encouraged "self-inquiry" by the students. Dan's emphasis on process rather than on product can be discerned in some of her classroom practices too. Here is an example of how she engaged the students in a self-discovering process of learning. The content was the same as in one of Lu's lessons which was described above (p. 77), with language goals of talking about problems

and giving advice.

(Dan invites five students to come to the front and gives each of them a card. The students read the instructions on the cards and mime accordingly)

T: Okay, class, now let's see what happened to them.

S1 *(mimes)*: Oh, today is cold. I need to wear a warm coat. But look at my clothes, they are out of style.

T *(to the class)*: What's wrong with her?

Ss: ...

T: Her clothes are out of style. Out of style... Means no more beautiful, no more new, no more...cool. Understand?

Ss: Yes.

T: She is unhappy because her clothes are out of style. She wants to buy some new and beautiful clothes. Now let's see what happen to these two boys.

(S2 pretends to step on S3's foot. They pretend to fight with each other)

S2 *(to S3, in Mandarin)*: How can you be so rude!

T: What's wrong with them?

Ss: They are fighting.

T: Yes, they fought with each other. And they argued. They argued with each other.

(Further demonstration and practice)

(S4 mimes picking up a loudspeaker, playing one of Beethoven's best known works)

S5 (*to S4*): Please stop that. That's too noisy.

T: What's wrong with them?

Ss: He play music…

T: Yes, he played CD too loud.

(*The class does a chain drilling to practice the new phrases. Then the teacher takes out a pair of gloves and tells the class they are going to watch a puppet show. She then mimes a short conversation in which the target language "What should I do?" "Maybe you should… " are used. Some drills are assigned to familiarize the students with the language structure. Then the teacher asks the students to talk with their deskmates about their own problems and give each other some advice. Ten minutes later, the students are asked to perform their conversations in front of the class.*)

Although the methodology of this lesson may seem typical of international ELT practice, in comparison with the traditional norms prevalent in Chinese secondary schools, it represents an innovative approach consistent with NEC principles. In the debriefing, Dan explained her rationale for designing the activities.

It may be easier to use pictures in the textbook to present the new language. But I chose not to do that because I want my students know the language is everywhere in our real life, not solely in their textbooks. Kids at this age may have many life problems so I feel confident that they would be interested in knowing how to express these problems

using another language. And I think if they are provided life situations in which they experience the language, and find out what to say in these situations, the language would become live language, not dead language written on the textbooks. Of course, this must be reinforced by a large amount of practice. (PLI: February 21, 2005)

What Dan claims here represents an alternative learning theory that Johnson (1984) and Littlewood (1984) see as compatible with CLT – a skill-learning model of learning. According to this theory, the acquisition of communicative competence in a language is an example of skill development, which involves both a cognitive and a behavioral aspect. Two other noticeable features emerge from the above classroom data are the tolerance for errors and the use of the mother tongue. This is more explicit in another classroom interaction that occurred in a reading lesson observed in the first cycle of observation. In this incident, the students were involved in group discussion and role play as pre-reading activities to a reading passage named "Do you think you will have your own robot?" The two discussion questions asked by the teacher were "Do you want to have a robot?" and "What can robots do for people?"

S1 (*in Mandarin*): I don't know how to say it in English.

T: That doesn't matter. You can speak Chinese.

S1 (*in Mandarin*): I don't want to have a robot because I am afraid the robot would be out of control.

T: Oh, that must be very terrible. (*to the class*) Will you be frightened if the

robot is out of control?

Ss: Yes.

T: How about good robots? What can good robots do for people?

S2: Robots can help me do my homework.

T: Ah, lazy girl. (*laughter*)

S3: Robots can clean my room for me.

T: Hmm, that's a good idea.

S4: Robots can make me wake in the morning.

T: Yes, another good idea. Robots can wake you up in the morning. Right?

....

(*Three volunteer students stands in the front. Two girls act as the owners of a robot,*

one boy acts as the robot.)

Boy (*makes funny faces*): Teacher, I am out of battery.

Girl 1 (*to gilr2, in Mandarin*): Let's recharge the battery for him. (*laughter*)

Girl 1 (*to the boy*): Sweep floor.

Girl 2 (*to the boy*): Water the flower.

Girl 1 (*to the boy*): Open the door. Go out.

Girl 2 (*to the boy*): Come in. Close the door.

The students had lots of fun in this class. There was joking, laughter,

and a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom. Although some errors were

made, Dan sometimes chose to ignore them and sometimes she provided

discoursal follow-up (Cullen, 2002) by "picking up students contributions and building on the ideas that students express in their responses" and thus developed "a meaningful dialogue between the teacher and the class". As she explained in the post-lesson interview, she expressed her ideas that errors are always corrected at the price of students' motivation and self-confidence. So error correction should be used in a more appropriate way.

As I observed this interaction I noted the use of mother tongue: Seems a too loose policy here. The result might be students' heavy reliance on the use of mother tongue. Will it be better to provide assistance when needed?

In the post-lesson debriefing, Dan provided the following explanation: When they were doing the activities, meaning was the primary concern. As long as meaning was conveyed, the goal of the activities was achieved. So I did not mind too much if they used some Chinese. I think an active classroom is nonetheless better than a dull classroom… Moreover, I felt if I interrupted them, the flow of the interaction would be affected. (PLI: March 2, 2005)

Here is an illustration that language learning is a process in which students construct meaning through their immediate personal experience. Although Dan has not learned much about the notions of NEC, she has touched on a number of NEC elements, for example, meaning construction,

active involvement of students, maintenance of students' motivation.

Another interesting point is that as Lu, Dan confessed that apart from her primary concern of a "supportive learning atmosphere", her "limited language knowledge" is another reason for her strategy to " keep silence" when the students turned to their mother tongue. She expressed her worries about the immediate need to update her language knowledge.

Like most English teachers in secondary schools, I find my English level has greatly slipped back. Probably because our only exposure to English is the textbooks and the examination papers. (laughter) For many new vocabulary we have to learn together with the students... In the class the students' utterances are always unpredictable, especially when you have less control over them. So if the students can't find a proper word to express their meanings, and I can't either, I will always allow them to speak Chinese. But most of the time I will check it up in a dictionary later on... I think one necessary condition of implementing NEC is to update teachers' language knowledge. (SI: March 23, 2005)

In Chinese EFL teaching contexts, it is common that classroom is the place for delivering lectures and students' linguistic performance is paramount. Non-linguistic aspects of learning such as emotions are always neglected. Dan's class seemed to be an exception. In her classroom interpersonal and affective aspects are conveyed. In one of the lessons I observed, she was asking one boy the question "What were you doing while

the bell rang?" while one girl, the boy's neighbor, spoke out loudly "He was singing songs". According to Chinese classroom policy, if what the girl said was true, the boy should be considered to have misbehaved, and the girl herself misbehaved too because she stole a turn. However, Dan reacted to this event in an entertaining way: "Really? I didn't know you like singing. Could you please sing a song for us?" Surprisingly, the shy boy began to sing an English love song named "Don't take away my heart" for the class. The students were so amused that the lethargy after lunch was all gone. In the post-lesson conference with Dan, she reported the dynamic tension she felt in making on-the-spot decisions which influenced the time available to cover her lesson plan. Her remarks also illustrated the "whole-person development" principle embodied in NEC. The following transcript is from the stimulated recall protocol.

LSH: Okay, you asked the boy the question, he didn't answer. Instead the girl called out an answer but I felt she was a bit naughty going off on her own. How were you feeling about the students' behaviors at that point?

D: Well, that's often the case when you teach... Of course you need to plan what you will say and do in the lesson, but sometimes your plans will end up being impossible to carry out. Students are human beings, not computer programs. You can't expect everything to be in neat order... I know the girl was being naughty, trying to amuse her friends. But that's kids. They need jokes, humors, and laughter. So why not let it happen?

LSH: The whole event lasted about ten minutes. How were you feeling about your timing?

D: Yeah, that's the point. I realized this was an abrupt change of pace... But I felt it would be harmful to them if I just said "Okay, time is running out. I have to keep the pace moving along". I felt I needed to show my respect to them as persons, not merely as students. So I decided to invite the boy to sing a song for us and I think it was worthwhile to sacrifice ten minutes. The students enjoyed it a lot.

Here is another example of classroom interaction which illustrated students' affective needs were taken into account in Dan's overall goals and objectives. In this instance, the students were supposed to read a short article named "Maybe you should learn to relax". In order to help students relate their personal experiences with the text for a better understanding, Dan asked the students to share their experiences of reducing stress. This gave rise to the following interaction.

T: In this school, students work very hard. Are you tired? Tell me about your feelings.

S1: Yes, I am always tired. We have too many homework. We have no sleep time.

S2: We study everyday only.

S3: We sleep late everyday. We wake up very early everyday.

T: Oh, what time do you go to bed?

S3: Twelve o'clock.

T: Twelve o'clock in the evening? That's too late. Why are you so late?

S3: I do my homework.

T (*to the class*): What kind of homework?

Ss: Math, Chinese, English, Biology…

T: Wow, what time do you get up?

Ss: Six, six-thirty.

T: Me too. I have to get up very early. We are both tired. We both feel

pressure. So what should we do? Tell me what do you do when you feel

pressure.

S4: When I feel pressure I always eat many food.

T: Be careful, you will get fatter and fatter if you eat too much food.

S5: When I feel pressure, I paint and I listen to music.

T: Oh, what kind of painting?

S5: …

S6: When I feel pressure, I go out and go to my best friend's house and ask

for help.

T: Okay…

S7: When I feel pressure, I take a relaxing shower.

T (*laugh*): Can you tell us how to take a relaxing shower?

S7 (*laugh*)…

S8: When I feel pressure, I always sleep in the sun.

T: Oh, interesting…

S9: When I feel pressure, I always take a walk with my dog.

S10: When I feel pressure, I always surf the Internet and chat with my QQ

friends.

T: Oh, who are your QQ friends?

Ss (*laugh*): His girlfriend…

T: Mmm…When you feel pressure, you can do many things. But when I feel

pressure, I can no nothing because I have no time. I have no time to take a

walk. I have no time to listen to music. I have no time to take a "relaxing

shower" (*laughter*)…

The students seemed to be very involved in this activity. It is notable

that in the teacher-student interaction, although Dan may give implicit

feedback by reformulating students' utterances in a linguistically more

acceptable form, the emphasis of her follow-up was on content rather than

form, which was not evaluative in the same way as with Lu. By picking up

students' contributions and building on the ideas that students expressed in

their responses, a meaningful dialogue was developed between the teacher

and the students. This pre-reading activity lasted as long as twenty minutes.

As I observed this interaction I noted:

> The teacher keeps on inviting questions. Actually she told me her
>
> intended plan for this reading passage was to teach the reading strategy
>
> of using a learner's dictionary. What is her point in continuing a

pre-reading activity for twenty minutes?

In our post-lesson conference, Dan explained why she made the

decision to let the activity continue:

Yes, I realized the timing problem. But then I decided to cut off the

dictionary part. I think I can do that in the next lesson. Because at that

moment I found the students were so eager to express their emotions. I

was happy to see the English class had become a good outlet for their

anxious thoughts... I think one principle of teaching would be that you

see your students are very engaged in the activity. When the class seems

interested and very engaged, you are flexible with time.

4.2.1.2.6 Teaching

Here we may interpret Dan's on-the-spot decision to depart from her

lesson plan is based partially on her intuitive perception of the scope for

flexibility in teaching. She teaches in such a way that her predetermined

plans are open to modification according to the changing needs of students.

Throughout the data, there is evidence that Dan believes students (their

experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capabilities, and

needs) are more salient than the "lesson" (the available knowledge and how

it is transmitted). One example arose at the end of a reading lesson when

Dan asked two comprehension questions to check students' understanding. I

noticed the two questions she asked were not among the five comprehension

questions required by the textbook. My experience told me this was kind of unusual because in Chinese EFL teaching context, many teachers make significant use of published textbooks and "teach to the book", letting the textbooks make many of their instructional decisions. I remarked on this in my observation notes with a query. In the post-lesson debriefing, Dan gave the following explanation.

> I dropped the questions in the textbook because they are a little bit difficult for some students in this class (type B class). What I want them to do is to understand the main ideas of the passage... But I use those questions in another class (type A class) because their level is higher than this class. I think teaching should be around students, not around textbooks. (PLI, March 2, 2005)

Dan's beliefs about learner-centered teaching are also reflected in her adoption of teaching methodology. She articulated her understanding of "best method" in Chinese EFL contexts as follows:

> I think the best method is the one that works best in your situation. I know my situation is students' poor exposure to English and relatively low proficiency level, the pressure from public examination, and so on...I am basically in favor of communicative language teaching, but as I know my situation, I do integrate elements of traditional method in my teaching. For example, I believe mechanical practice is a very important pre-stage for communication. Sometimes I do use the translation

method because it helps students understand some difficult concepts.

(PLI: February 25, 2005)

In retrospect, Dan seems to work pragmatically towards balance and synthesis. She is eclectic in her approach, and her eclecticism is principled – that is, teach *for the students*.

4.2.1.2.7 Evaluation

Dan's assumptions about evaluation are similar to Lu's. According to her, teachers' perceptions of the evaluation framework of an innovation in a particular context are crucial in determining the ultimate success or failure of that innovation. Since the traditional norm prevalent in Chinese EFL teaching contexts is still standardized testing orientation, the evaluation framework in NEC innovation can hardly find its place in current practice. Dan claimed that "if teachers' creativity continue to be hindered by the traditional evaluation system, resistance to the NEC innovation is most likely to occur."

4.2.2 The Classroom and Beyond: Understanding the Local Needs

In the previous section, I mainly presented how teachers as key players in language teaching innovations respond to the learner-centered principles espoused in the NEC framework. In this section, I shall attempt to characterize how other various players involved in the innovation process –

students, parents, the school principal, and educational administrators

construe learner-centeredness. The analysis is intended to address the wider

social sources which influence teachers' classroom behaviors, and to take a

broad view of how the latter are in turn influenced by social sources from

outside the classroom.

4.2.2.1 What Students Think

Here I shall examine students' beliefs and attitudes about the selection

of content and learning experiences. Both quantitative data from

questionnaire and qualitative data from interviews are used for illustration.

4.2.2.1.1 What to Learn?

Traditionally, English grammar is believed to be a major obstacle for

Chinese EFL students, which result in their favor of grammar-based teaching.

It has been discovered in this study that among the 119 case study students,

a large portion of them rated grammar as "very important" (see Table 5).

Nevertheless, when asked about the amount of grammar practice they

hoped to do in class, only a small portion voted for "extensive" (see Table 6).

Table 5 Students' Responses to the Question "How Important Is Grammar to You?" (N= 119)

| Not important | | Neutral | | Very important |
1	2	3	4	5
0.8%	1.7%	10.1%	16.8%	60.5%

Table 6 Students' Responses to the Question "How Much Practice of Grammar Do You Expect to Get in Class?" (N = 119)

| None | | Moderate | | Extensive |
1	2	3	4	5
0.8%	4.2%	21%	32.8%	29.4%

The results indicates that although grammar plays a very important role for Chinese EFL students in their English language learning, they don't want to be occupied with doing grammar exercises all the time, as in the case of the immersion strategy for grammar teaching in Chinese EFL context. This inevitably creates a challenge for the teachers, that is, how to consult students' needs to work out an appropriate approach to the teaching of grammar.

When the students were asked how important listening, speaking, reading, and writing were to their English learning, it turned out that a high percentage of them rated the four language skills as "very important" (see Table 7). A reasonable inference here is that if the students believed the four skills were important, they should have expected to receive more practice.

Surprisingly, when asked about how much practice they hoped to get in class, the rating of the four skills that they needed to practice dropped significantly (see Table 8).

Table 7 Students' Responses to the Question "How Important Are Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing to You?"   (N = 119)

	Not important		Neutral		Very important
	1	2	3	4	5
LISTENING	0%	0%	15.1%	19.3%	53.8%
SPEAKING	0%	1.7%	10.9%	23.5%	53.8%
READING	0.8%	1.7%	15.1%	25.2%	45.4%
WRITING	0%	2.5%	11.8%	21%	52.1%

Table 8 Students' Responses to the Question "How Much Practice of Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing Do You Expect to Get in Class?" (N = 119)

	None		Moderate		Extensive
	1	2	3	4	5
LISTENING	0%	3.4%	18.5%	28.6%	39.5%
SPEAKING	0.8%	2.5%	20.2%	31.9%	32.8%
READING	0%	2.5%	15.9%	31.9%	37.8%
WRITING	0%	2.5%	18.5%	27.7%	36.9%

The results imply that although the students perceive the four language skills to be important aspect of English learning, they don't expect much class time to be devoted to practicing these skills. If we refer back to the earlier illustration of the instructional tension both Dan and Lu experienced in their classroom practice, it would be fair to say the students, too, were confronted with the same tension: the competing demands of developing

communicative competence and passing grammar-based examinations. This

may account for students' inconsistent responses to the specific assumptions

about the nature of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. And the

students' conflicting needs, in turn, became a source of the teachers'

instructional tension.

4.2.2.1.2 How to Learn?

Owing to Chinese cultural and educational traditions, Chinese students

behave in an obedient and unquestioning way. From this perspective, it is

difficult to expect learning to be a negotiative process between teachers and

students in the Chinese EFL context, which is one of the learner-centered

principles. However, the interview data show that out of the 6 participants, 4

exhibited a positive attitude towards their shared responsibility in the choice

of learning objectives, content and methods. This is illustrated in the

following statements made by the interview students when they were asked

whether they would be willing to discuss with their teachers about learning

pace, learning content and learning activities:

"I'd love to do this because it is a new idea breaking the traditional

convention. What's more, I believe if students are involved in making

comments on the syllabus, it will turn out to be more suitable for the

students" (SSI, March 16, 2005).

"By doing this we can work out what is the most effective method of

both learning and teaching" (SSI, March 16, 2005).

"Only when the teacher knows about our needs, can she instruct us with a sound method" (SSI, March 17, 2005).

"The teacher is like my parents. It is a precious chance for me to do what the teacher invites me to do" (SSI, March 17,2005).

Both of the students who said they would not like to be involved in such teacher-student negotiative activities gave the reason of "having no idea about how to do it".

It is also discovered that out of the six interview students, five claimed they preferred an interactive way of learning. When the students were asked whether they thought doing pair work, group work and discussion was a waste of time, they gave the various answers:

"These activities help us to communicate with each other"
(SSI, March 18, 2005).

"These activities can motivate us to learn English in a relaxed atmosphere" (SSI, March 18, 2005).

"It is not a waste of time for me because my speaking skill is improved through these activities" (SSI, March 18, 2005).

The student who thought doing pair work, group work and discussion was a waste of time provided the following reason:

"It will depend on which group members you are with. Like my group, nobody speaks when the teacher asks us to do group work. So it is a waste of

time for me" (SSI, March 18, 2005).

As indicated earlier, the six interview students were chosen according to their academic levels to represent a wider sample of the students, it is therefore inferred that the majority of the students would prefer communicative learning activities. However, in relation to the same issue, the questionnaire data painted a different picture. When the students were asked about the most helpful learning activities, among the highest rankings were: memorizing word list, studying grammar rules, doing grammar exercises, reciting texts, and doing translation exercises. Again, the contradictory data reveal that although the students have an intuitive perception of a communicative way of learning, the standardized testing has brought constant pressure to bear on the way they learn English so they have to resort to the traditional rote learning.

The students' view of learning is also reflected in their assumptions about the roles the teacher plays in the learning process (see Table 9). In general, the students considered the teacher to be a facilitator rather than a knowledge provider.

Table 9 Students' Responses to Selected Questionnaire Statements About Teacher Roles (N = 119)

	Agree (%)
The teacher is the "authority" in the classroom.	15.1
The teacher teaches the textbooks only.	23.5
The teacher gives lectures and delivers knowledge.	35.3
The teacher gives time for student talk.	50.4
The teacher tries different activities in class.	62.2
The teacher should create a harmonious and pleasant learning environment.	73.9
The teacher teaches the students some learning strategies.	66.4

If we compare this finding with the findings with respect to learning activities, we can confirm that the students are in a dilemma about how to learn English and about the kinds of activities and approaches they believe to be useful. On the one hand, they long for a learning atmosphere of shared partnership and a learning experience of using their autonomous learning potential to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers. On the other hand, they see the practical purpose of making a success of the standardized testing, so again, they withdraw to a secure pattern "to be spooned with facts from an all-knowing 'fount of knowledge'" (Littlewood, 2000). The students' assumptions about learning as such would inevitably have a tremendous impact on the teachers' classroom decision making.

4.2.2.1.3 How to Assess?

As indicated in the previous discussions, the dominant discourse of teaching in this specific school was people's adherence to accountability. The outcome was students were seen in terns of "a set of pre-defined, measurable competences and skills" (Holliday, 2001). The proposed multi-dimensional evaluation framework seemed to take no root in this situation. This is revealed by students' responses to questions about testing and evaluation (see Table 10). As we can see from the findings, the students' perception of evaluation and assessment split into half. That is, some of them thought the existing examination system was fine with them while the others thought their progress could be assessed by other sources and channels rather than the standardized testing only.

Table 10 Students' Perceptions of Testing and Evaluation (N = 119)

Variables	(%) = 119 N
Usefulness of standardized testing	
Useful and necessary	44.5
Necessary but not useful	33.6
Useless and unnecessary	5.8
Methods to assess progress	
Test scores	42
Teachers' process-based evaluation	39.5
Self-reflection	29.4
Frequency of taking a test	
Once a week	35.3
Once a month	26.9
Twice a semester	14.3
Never	10.1

When the 6 interview students were asked about their opinions on self-assessment, 4 of them reported they would like to try it. The various statements they made include:

"I think I know myself better than anybody else. My progress can be judged by whether I understand the message and whether I can apply it to other situations" (SSI, March 21, 2005)

"Your test scores do not necessarily stand for your real level. Only you know which level you are at" (SSI, March 21, 2005).

"I can assess my own progress because I have confidence in myself" (SSI, March 22, 2005).

"I can do it because I've been learning English for two years" (SSI, March 22, 2005).

Again, the other two students who didn't vote for self-assessment claimed they "have no ability to do so".

The students' voices here reveal one thing. On the one hand, the students in this particular EFL learning context are instrumentally motivated by the product-oriented assessment system because it provides "psychometrically valid measures of students' performance" (Richards & Renandya, 2002) by which the students' chances for receiving a higher-level education are increased. On the other hand, the students cast doubts on the efficacy of the practice of promoting learning by frequent examinations. They no longer want to see tests and marks as controlling. Rather, they

expect an alternative way of assessment with which they become more involved in their learning. Apparently, to solve this paradox or tension, the teachers have to develop an adaptive strategy in their classroom practice.

4.2.2.2 What Parents Think

In this section I look at the interview data focused on parents' perception of the current English curriculum reform and schooling. To provide a flavor of the parents' viewpoints on the issues, extracts from the parents' remarks were quoted.

During the interviews, all the 6 parents emphasized the importance of keeping the students under control. According to them, their children are too young to be responsible for their own learning. What' more, they are not trained to develop self-awareness of learning goals and options. Therefore, the parents think the teachers should execute their responsibility to create a learning environment where "everything is in neat order." The following account is an example of the importance the parents placed on teachers' control.

The teacher has to act like a king giving orders. Otherwise the students will have no idea about what to do next. Take my son as an example. He is doing okay with his school work, but I know he is kind of forced to do so. If he was given the chance to work independently, he would do nothing. So I'd rather he is dependent on the teacher.

(PI, March 25, 2005)

When the parents were asked about their opinions on schooling, 5 out of the 6 parents articulated that what they wished was the teachers do whatever they can to send their children to senior secondary school. Only one of the parents said she hoped her child have an enjoyable learning experience. She also expressed her hope that the teachers can help her child develop learning strategies.

All the parents claimed they had not had any information about the English curriculum reform. However, they didn't show much interest in the new English curriculum. They seemed to put their trust in the school and the teachers and they believe every policy the school adopts must be good for their children. As one of the parents said:

I know English is important not only because it is a required subject, but also it is useful in this competitive society. But I don't know much about English and English teaching. I think I've done my job sending my daughter to this school, which is the best in this region. So the school and the teachers should take care of her. Any reform is fine as long as my child can learn knowledge and can go to the college eventually.

(PI, March 26, 2005)

The parent's remarks indicate a problem of school-parent communication. On the one side, the school fails to convey messages concerning educational goals and methods to the parents. On the other side,

the parents form a misconception that education is the sole responsibility of the school and the teachers. The lack of mutual communication results in parents' withdrawal of their support, which is one of the important elements contributing to the children's success. Furthermore, beyond the surface trust in the teachers, the parents place the burden for all aspects of teaching on the teacher.

4.2.2.3 What Administrators Think

As indicated earlier, I obtained initial data from regional inspectors by requesting detailed written reports on the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the English program under NEC. I also conducted interviews with the school principal and two educational officials from the administrative region. For the moment I shall call them both administrators in that they are the ones who traditionally take the decisions about the change that teachers have to implement. In this section I look at both of the documentary data and the interview data regarding the implementation of the new curriculum, viewed from the perspective of the administrators. The analysis is to illustrate how teachers' classroom strategies to manage the change are influenced by the political and bureaucratic institutions within the wider society.

According to the official documents, the new curriculum "has brought some changes to teachers' educational ideologies and teaching

methodologies". In terms of classroom teaching, the teachers' new behaviors have been described as "moving away from the center of the front of the classroom", "bowing to and smiling at the students", and "allowing the students to open their mouths". The descriptions here imply a shift from the traditional teacher-fronted class to a learner-centered class. When asked about how the impression of a learner-centered class was originated, one of the inspectors reported that the main channel was the professional activities they arranged such as demonstration lessons and teaching competition. She also mentioned another measure was the quality control program conducted by the regional educational administration on a yearly basis. What they did was to sign a contract with the school in which the evaluation objectives for each subject was specified. The school then worked at an intermediate level between the teachers and the educational administration, monitoring and evaluating teachers' work on the basis of the evaluation framework proposed by the educational administration.

Various weaknesses of teachers' classroom teaching have also been pointed out in the documents. One notable thing was the teachers' perceived "incapability to update their educational ideology as well as knowledge base" to adapt themselves to the dramatic changes brought by the curriculum reform. The problems identified by the inspectors included the teachers' incompetence for: a) making good use of teaching resources; b) self-reflecting on their own teaching; c) improving teaching skills, and d)

helping students to change their learning styles. These judgments were verified by the administrators' responses to the interview questions. During the interviews, all of the 4 administrators emphasized that teachers' readiness to face the professional challenge to update their educational ideology and knowledge was the most important factor that facilitated the successful implementation of the new curriculum. This is illustrated in the following remarks.

As a school principal, I know clearly the teachers are experiencing a difficult time to adjust themselves to the new situation. I know some of them are even complaining. But the point is they are not acting upon the principles of the new curriculum. If they do, they can overcome every difficulty. (AI, March 14, 2005)

When asked about what actions were taken to support change and to help teachers cope with change, the administrators claimed they were not provided sufficient funds by the government to operate teacher training programs so they could not do much. They also mentioned the limited resources available in this administrative region such as a favorable institutional environment, teaching materials and so on.

When they were asked about their opinions on the dilemma that the teachers had to "teach for the examinations", they commented that this was "a bureaucratic policy" which was out of their control. All they could do was to adopt this policy and carry it out accordingly. However, they said they

were "looking forward to a more mature examination system which is in line

with the NEC principles".