

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

This study investigated how the innovative ideas of learner-centeredness embodied in the New English Curriculum in China have been carried out at the classroom level in an underdeveloped area of South-west China. It focused on two Chinese EFL teachers teaching in one secondary school in this specific geographical area to investigate their beliefs and assumptions about learner-centeredness in implementing the new curriculum, and their classroom strategies to revise, refine, or change the proposed learner-centered principles to fit into their own contexts. The study also included others involved in the innovation process – the students, the parents, the school principal, and the educational administrators to investigate how the values, standards and goals from other parties concerned were woven together to shape the teachers' beliefs about learner-centeredness, which in turn informed their classroom practice. It is now time to return to the questions around which this study revolves: a) What are teachers' beliefs and assumptions about "learner-centeredness" in implementing NEC? and b) To what extent are the teachers actually implementing NEC principles and what strategies are they using? and c)

What are the influencing factors in classroom teachers' implementation of NEC? In examining the results of this study, I shall widen the discussion to draw out some of the possible implications for change strategy and teacher development. Finally, I shall reflect on my experience of conducting the research as a source to evaluate the case study research. I shall mainly be concerned with the methodological issues that emerged during the course of the study, by which I hope the strengths and weaknesses of the study are explained.

5.1 Teachers' Differing Beliefs

From the study, we can see that although the two EFL teachers taught the same EFL course and worked in the same school culture, they held different theoretical orientations, so that their beliefs and decisions differed dramatically along a number of specifiable dimensions. One of the two teachers, Dan, seemed to have a more positive attitude towards the curriculum innovation. Although she was faced with the dilemma of trying to reconcile the competing demands of preparing students for the public examination with pursuing professional development, she still perceived students' needs and contributions as an important factor to promote teaching and learning. She believed when teachers make decisions in planning and carrying out the course, they must get to know the students on a number of counts, in particular with respect to their preferred learning

styles and their attitudes to or experience of language learning. On this basis, they can use their professional judgment to “select a teaching-learning mode that seems likely to hit the right chord with students” (Tudor, 1993, p. 27). In contrast, Lu, the other EFL teacher, showed a less favorable attitude towards learner-centered principles. To her, the innovative idea may be well grounded in theory but is alien to classroom practice within the traditional Chinese EFL context where teacher-fronted, whole-class teaching styles predominate. Furthermore, she believed that teachers’ deep-seated values and motives, which are shaped by the prevailing public examination, are not compatible with the principles of the innovation, so that it is therefore difficult to make teachers think differently about certain issues.

5.2 Socio-Educational Influences – An Important Source of Teachers’ Beliefs

It has been shown that when confronted with the difficulties of implementing the learner-centered principles in their working context in which many constraints such as large class size and standardized testing were imposed on them, each teacher’s educational attitudes and theories, although sometimes unconsciously held, have provided “the underlying framework or schema which guides the teacher’s classroom actions” (Richards, 1994, p. 29). This study of teachers’ educational beliefs coincides with the findings of research studies illustrating that teachers’ belief systems

are derived from a number of different sources, namely, their own experience as language learners; experience of what works best; established practice; personality factors; educationally based or research-based principles; and principles derived from an approach or method (Kindsvatter, Willen, and Ishler, 1998; Richards and Lockhart, 1994). Most obviously in this study the teachers' beliefs and theories were shaped by well-established theories of language learning and teaching which in turn were the product of the socially constructed teaching and learning experiences, prejudices, and beliefs of members of the public. From this study, we can see that Lu's educational beliefs were heavily influenced by traditional norms of Chinese educational culture such as teachers' classroom authority and the transmission mode of teaching. Moreover, the influences from the outside sources, for example, the parents' adherence to the teacher-controlled instruction, the rigid pattern of evaluating teachers' work based on their students' test performance (a result of administrative decisions): all have had a tremendous impact on her classroom strategy to manage the change. Compared to Lu, Dan's expressed beliefs and attitudes seemed to be largely congruent with the learner-centered principles espoused in the NEC framework and those linked to communicative approaches to ELT. However, it has also been discovered that she sometimes chose to reconcile her educational beliefs with external constraints that placed limits on learner-centeredness - most obviously in the form of an external pressure

from other interested parties (students, parents, school principals, etc.) - to meet the requirements of the public examination. For example, although her classroom practice revealed that she acknowledged the students' communicative needs of language learning, she also exhibited a positive attitude towards the students' practical needs, that is, to score more highly in the examinations.

5.3 The Disparity Between Theory and Practice - Causes and Implications

In this study I have attempted to place the learner-centered principles within their wider socio-educational context as well as viewing them from the perspectives of the teachers who are supposed to "change" as a result (Hayes, 1997). From this exploratory research it is suggested that, on the whole the teachers were not prepared to accept and implement the curriculum innovation in their classrooms. In terms of classroom pedagogy, Lu's classroom practice deviated considerably from the principles of learner-centeredness. Dan was in a more favorable position in implementing the innovation, yet she tended to follow an eclectic approach, exhibiting features of both traditional and learner-centered approaches in her classroom practice (though the latter featuring more frequently than the former). Overall, there seemed to exist a mismatch between what was planned (the planned curriculum) and what actually occurs in the classroom (the implemented curriculum) (Nunan, 1988).

Generalizing the findings of a case study is not possible, but at this point it is worth widening the discussion to address broader issues of change strategy (both at personal level and administrative level) and teacher development. This may yield insights into the causes of the disparity between prescribed theory and actual classroom practice, with wider implications for the diffusion of curriculum innovation in the Chinese EFL teaching context.

5.3.1 The Personal Change Strategy

The teachers' own personal disposition towards change may be a key factor that accounts for the disparity between the planned curriculum and the implemented curriculum. When an innovation is introduced, teachers are most likely to ask this question "What do the changes mean to me and my students?" They tend to make educational judgment on the basis of their personal perceptions of the merits and demerits of the change. As Bishop (1986) comments:

It is important to understand that innovations are not adopted by people on the basis of the intrinsic value of the innovation, but rather on the basis of the adopter's perception of the changes they personally will be required to make. Those designing, administrating and advising projects do not generally have to make very many changes *themselves*. *Their* task remains the same. It is *others* who will have to modify their

behaviors and very often to modify them rapidly in fairly significant ways, and with little previous or even gradual preparation. (p. 136)

It should be clear, then, that in this study, when the teachers saw that certain principles of the learner-centered innovation (e.g. the proposed multi-dimensional evaluation framework) were likely to disturb the status quo with possibly damaging consequences, they tended to interpret new information in the light of their own theories and to adapt the innovative ideas to conform to their own style of teaching.

5.3.2 The Administrative Change Strategy

Another important factor that may lead to resistance to the proposal, or mere "surface-level" acceptance, is the lack of a change strategy that is collaborative and problem-solving in nature and acknowledges the social context of teaching and learning when the innovative ideas are introduced. From the study, we can see that the NEC innovation has intended to avoid a "power-coercive strategy" for change (Chin and Benne, 1970, cited in Kennedy, 1987). For example, it has been explicitly stated in the NEC guidelines that local schools and teachers are encouraged to stay flexible about the performance levels (see Appendix 1) according to their students' real situation. However, in the actual implementation process the teachers were supposed to implement the hierarchically-made decisions about the change while little administrative support was available to convey the

meaning of learner-centeredness to the community within which innovation was to take place (parents, teachers, students). Furthermore, the teachers' classroom behaviors were thought to be determined solely by patterns of rewards and punishment whereas "the character, motivations, attitudes, and values of the actors" (Carew and Lightfoot, 1979, p. 21, cited in Hayes, 2000) were ignored. The result was the teachers had to perform their teaching tasks under conditions of reduced autonomy, which led to their reluctance and/or unwillingness to adopt the change.

This discussion leads to the suggestion that in an examination-driven context particularly, the implementation of learner-centeredness should not be evaluated by the traditional method of language learning and teaching, which is largely product-oriented. The teachers should not be considered as technicians who perform specific actions on their students. Rather, a full understanding of the teachers' personal biography within its socio-educational context can help us arrive at a plausible explanation of why and how changes may or may not occur at the classroom level. Moreover, if the change strategy - in Chin and Benne's definition, the normative-re-educative strategy - is used to involve the teachers and address the difficulties they encounter in implementing the change, continuing interest in further change and innovation is most likely to occur (Chin and Benne, 1970, cited in Kennedy, 1987).

5.3.3 Teacher's Professional Development

Last but not least, for teachers' professional development, support from those in power at all levels is essential for a project's survival, and the neglect of this dimension may result in teachers' negative attitudes and decreased likelihood of participation in the innovation. Actually the issue of teacher development in the curriculum management process should be an integral part of the change strategy, which was discussed above. It is included here as a separate point in its own right because it emerged as salient in the study.

We have seen that the new curriculum was imposed on the teachers as a *fait accompli*. The teachers were not consulted to see if they saw the need for change – they were merely expected to make changes in their classroom behaviors. Little administrative support was available to provide the teachers with opportunities (e.g. the running of seminars, the creation of a newsletter, and other professional activities) to understand why and how this change occurs in terms of its underlying principles. The teachers had very heavy teaching loads and there was a tendency for the new approach to be seen as creating an even heavier workload. This problem was compounded by teachers' inadequate training: to meet the demands the new curriculum created, the teachers had an urgent need to acquire a much wider array of language knowledge and teaching skills.

The study shows that successful curriculum implementation cannot be

achieved without teacher development. To improve the quality and effectiveness of curriculum renewal, teachers should be given the opportunity and the framework to “explore their own resources and resourcefulness” (Kouraogo, 1987, p. 175), and thus to promote their “self-initiated, self-sustained growth and development” (ibid.).

5.4 Evaluation of the Study

In this section I shall briefly discuss the strengths and limitations of this study in terms of methodological issues of research design. As Merriam (1998) points out, “The merits of a particular design are inherently related to the rationale for selecting it as the most appropriate plan for addressing the research problem” (p.41). Because of the nature of the research problem addressed in the current study, a case study design is the best plan for answering the research questions; its strengths outweigh its limitations. Reflecting on the procedure used, I would argue that qualitative case studies of curriculum change, such as this, can provide a means of investigating the complexity of curriculum in action. By exploring multiple variables of potential importance in the process of curriculum implementation, a better understanding of the phenomenon is conveyed. Since a case study focuses on understanding the meaning people construct in its real-life situations, it yields a rich account of the phenomenon, which “offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers’ experiences” (ibid., 41).

Another strength of this study is that it provides a framework for understanding the phenomenon under investigation from the participants' perspectives – not the researcher's. To a large extent the study documents the insider perspectives of the teachers themselves, as they discussed the principles and philosophies that led to their decisions as to how to plan lessons, how to teach their classes, and how they viewed those lessons in retrospect. It is teachers' interpretations of their classroom strategies that is significant, not the externally defined outsider's view.

The case study as a method of research nevertheless presents certain limitations. As the case study researcher, I was "the primary instrument for data collection and analysis" throughout the study (ibid., 7). Most of the data collected – the observation data, the interview data, and the stimulated recall protocols – were mediated through me. This had its advantage in that it enabled me to stay responsive to the context in the whole process and to adapt techniques to the circumstances. However, since I was an inexperienced researcher, having little knowledge of using a sufficiently operational set of research techniques in the fieldwork, I had to rely on my own instincts throughout most of this research effort. This naturally resulted in some subjective judgments in collecting the data.

The study is limited, too, by the ethical dimensions of qualitative case study research. Although ethical issues were taken into consideration in this study – for example, at the outset of the study I clarified the purpose of the

research to the participants and I tried to build an interactive and collaborative relationship with them - there still existed biases that were clearly related to the inherently political nature of the Chinese educational context. Take the two case study teachers as an example. As my main informants, they in general responded readily to the study. However, within the Chinese educational context, it is not uncommon for teachers to be observed by people who have power over them, based on which their work is to be evaluated. Such a preoccupation may make my appearance as an outsider threatening to the teachers. To protect their privacy, the teachers may subconsciously choose to tell things that they had never intended to reveal. So there is reason to assume that there were discrepancies between what they appeared to be doing and what in fact they were doing.

Lastly, as with all case studies, this study has the limitation of involving the issues of reliability and validity. In this case study, understanding the particular case is the primary rationale for the investigation so there is no ultimate interest in generalizing the particular findings to other instances. And as human behaviors are always dynamic, the reliability of this case study research should not and cannot be established by taking repeated measures. For this reason, I shall only focus my discussions on the limitations of internal validity of this study. According to Merriam (1998), "internal validity is a definite strength of qualitative research" (p.203) if we take the view that the researchers are closely involved in reality so that they

are in a best position to understand the perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, although most investigations were anchored in real-life situations, which enabled me as a researcher to uncover the complexity of human behavior in a contextual framework, internal validity of the study is hardly guaranteed because, as discussed above, the ethical problems and the extent to which the researcher was a valid and reliable instrument for data collection and analysis may be factors that reduce internal validity. Acknowledging this, some strategies were used to enhance internal validity, for instance, multiple sources of data and data collection over a period of time. Overall, although the findings should be treated with caution, the study nevertheless can properly claim to have validity because sufficient evidence has been provided to answer the research questions.