

English Language Education

Hongying Zheng

Teacher Beliefs as a Complex System: English Language Teachers in China

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Preface

Despite the fact that teachers' beliefs are notoriously difficult to capture and define and that attempts to confirm specific beliefs as stable sources of influence on pedagogical action and decision-making invariably fall short, there has been a growing recognition in recent years by second language education researchers and educationalists of the importance of investigating the role of language teachers' beliefs in shaping classroom practice. Interest in this area of enquiry is probably due to the underlying assumption that it represents the focus for the perennial and unresolved examination of the interface between thought and action in the context of language pedagogy. However, empirical evidence suggests that it is no longer sufficient to view the relationship between beliefs and practice in purely causal and unidirectional terms but rather that it should be seen as a dynamic and reciprocal process which takes place within the wider complex interaction between cognition, action and professional contexts. The framework of complexity theory therefore has the potential to provide a useful perspective through which to carry out such research, and this volume makes an excellent contribution to what is still a growing corpus of empirical studies in this field.

The strength of Hongying Zheng's study lies in the way it provides us with a fine-grained and longitudinal account of the developing belief systems of six English language teachers practising in secondary schools in China in the aftermath of the launch of the National English Curriculum by the Ministry of Education in 2001. From a theoretical point of view, the application of complexity theory provides an illuminating prism through which the teachers' belief systems are analysed. From an empirical point of view, the carefully analysed observations of the teachers' practice and the well-chosen quotations from the interviews shed many insights into the dynamics of English language teachers' beliefs and practice in schools in China.

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I would also like to thank all the teachers who participated in my research. During my study, I have visited far more than six teachers presented in the study. They are my teachers in the sense that they provided me with their most precious teaching experiences. They are also my friends as they even shared their private thoughts about EFL teaching and learning with me. My 6-month research was successfully conducted with their support and cooperation.

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Abbreviations

BAK	Beliefs, Assumptions and Knowledge
BALLI	Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
NECS	The National English Curriculum Standards for Nine-Year Compulsory Education and Senior High School Education
MOE	Ministry of Education
PEP	People's Educational Press
PPC	Presentation, Practice and Consolidation
PPP	Presentation, Practice and Product
TBLT	Task-Based Language Teaching

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Teacher belief, referred to as one of the key issues in teacher cognition, has been attached much importance in teacher education (Borg, 2003, 2006; Johnson, 2006). A substantial amount of research over the past three decades has confirmed that what teachers think, know and believe have much influence on what teachers do in the classroom, teacher beliefs are shaped by teachers' prior learning and teaching experiences, and what teachers do is also influenced by the interaction between teacher belief and educational contexts (e.g. Borg 1998, 1999, 2003, 2006, 2011; Clark and Peterson 1986; Pajares 1992; Johnson 2006). These findings suggest important relationship among teacher belief, teachers' practice, teachers' prior knowledge and educational contexts, which contribute greatly to our understanding of teacher belief. We know that teachers may perform differently from what they claim to believe. We also know that similar beliefs professed by teachers may lead to different behaviours in different educational contexts, while similar behaviours may be underpinned by different beliefs. However, such consistent or inconsistent relationship revealed in many studies ignores the complex features of teacher beliefs and dynamic interactions between belief, practice and context. A further study needs to be conducted to address the complex and dynamic features and further extrapolate the mechanism of the dynamic interactions between teacher belief, practice and context. In this case, despite the fact that teacher belief is a well-established research area, how teacher belief dynamically interact with practice and contexts and mutually inform each other should undoubtedly be put on research agenda for deeper understanding of teacher belief.

As the social settings in which teachers work have a significant impact on their belief and practice, it is important to explore interaction of teacher belief and practice in a specific educational context. Entering the twenty-first century, China launched a nationwide reform in compulsory education, initiating a paradigm shift in terms of educational orientation from the focus on knowledge transmission to that of quality education (MOE 2001). Such a shift challenged teachers' traditional beliefs about EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching and learning, which triggered constant clashes between teachers' beliefs and practices. Moreover, the

introduction of the National English Curriculum Standards (NECS) does not necessarily lead to the change of teacher belief and practice, which presents a dynamic context for the research. Accordingly, setting the research in China may well represent the educational contexts under change. Therefore, adopting a case study of six Chinese state secondary school EFL teachers' beliefs about EFL teaching and learning ('teachers' beliefs' is also used to indicate the teachers' beliefs about EFL teaching and learning) during the time of the National Curriculum Reform, this book aims to contribute to our knowledge about teaching EFL in China by examining the complex nature of EFL teachers' beliefs about EFL teaching and learning, and how the teachers' beliefs interact with mental and actional processes triggered by classroom practice. Moreover, it investigates how the teachers' beliefs coadapt with contexts, which contribute to the stability and order of teachers' belief systems.

Although situated in Chinese educational context, the teaching situations, the clashes between beliefs and practices and influence of contextual issues on teachers are not exclusive to Chinese teachers. Although in the past 30 years the study of language teacher belief and of its relationship to teachers' classroom practices has aroused interests from a wide audience, we have not yet achieved a thorough understanding of teachers' belief system, especially how different components of this system interact with each other (Borg 2006). In this case, my general aim is to provide a comprehensive presentation of how teachers' beliefs with complex features relate to their practice in a dynamic teaching context. Teacher belief is a field of research with wide recognition of its importance in understanding teachers' mind and their classroom teaching. It also has the potential to promote the improvement of teachers' professional development and to inform teacher trainers in their work. In this case, I am interested in teacher beliefs from both teachers' and teacher educators' perspectives and am concerned to make it intelligible to the widest possible audience.

The following sections of this chapter is to frame the book by further elaborating the aims of the book first, and then introducing the methodological design of the study, highlighting the significance of the book and finally providing an overview of the organisation of the book.

1.1 Aims and Rationale

Teacher cognition research is concerned with understanding what teachers think, know and believe, the study of which stretches back over 30 years (Borg 2009). Substantive evidence has indicated that teachers' beliefs have a 'filtering effect' on all aspects of teachers' thoughts, judgments and decisions (Clark and Peterson 1986, p. 283; Munby 1982; Pajares 1992; Pintrich 1990). In this case, even though teachers may think their teaching is spontaneous, their beliefs may have a potential influence on their behaviour, which may become habituated. Thus, teachers'