

Student-centredness in urban schools in China

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This study investigates how teachers understand and implement the emphasis on student-centredness in the new English curriculum in secondary classrooms in urban areas of China and the factors affecting implementation. It focuses on whether the advantages (greater access to resources, better trained teachers, and so on) of the urban context make implementation easier than in rural areas. Data from lesson observations and reflective statements by teachers in urban schools show that their understanding of the notion of student-centredness is superficial and that the well-resourced urban schools find reform as challenging as rural schools.

Keywords: curriculum reform; student-centredness; pedagogy; English language teaching

Introduction

The urban–rural divide in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has been acknowledged by the government as a major obstacle to national development. Although precise calculations are difficult, economists estimate that per capita income in urban areas is more than double that in rural areas (Sicular *et al.*, 2006). Although urbanization has improved the lot of hundreds of millions who formerly lived in rural areas, issues of social equity remain as the household registration (*hukou*) system limits the ability of rural residents to move to urban areas, which means that just under 50 per cent of the population has restricted access to the benefits of economic modernization in the PRC. This modernization started in 1978 when the government embarked upon an ambitious programme of economic reform. A central strategy was the Open Door Policy that created opportunities for foreign companies and investors to establish joint ventures or similar enterprises to benefit from the abundant human resources and from access to the potentially huge market of the world’s most populous nation. The challenge issued by the government in the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–15) is to prepare the Chinese economy for a shift from being manufacturing-oriented to being service-oriented.

To support economic development at a time of globalization and to promote the PRC’s international status, national leaders have ascribed important roles to education, with student-centredness and competence in the English language as important goals (Adamson, 2002, 2004). Student-centredness is associated with developing traits such as independence, problem-solving, creativity, and similar soft skills for the new economic profile, while English is seen as a conduit to knowledge and technological advancement and as the language of globalization par excellence (Bamgbose, 2003). These curricular initiatives would appear, on the surface, to pose particular problems for rural schools. Their low socio-economic status means that they lack educational resources and are unable to attract well-trained teachers who are familiar with the theoretical and practical aspects of student-centredness and communicative approaches to English language teaching. This paper explores whether the urban–rural divide is significant in the implementation of student-centredness in the English curriculum.

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English language, student-centredness and economic development

Economic development and English are explicitly linked in the rhetoric of secondary school curriculum documents. For instance, the 1986 syllabus states:

Our country has adopted the Open Door Policy; the reforms of our country's economics, politics, technology and education are being wholeheartedly implemented; throughout the world, new technological reforms are booming. ... We need to nurture a large number of experts who are goal-oriented and ethical, possessing culture, discipline and, to different extents, competence in various aspects of foreign languages. Under these circumstances, the value of foreign languages as important tools becomes greater. (People's Education Press, 1986: 1, authors' translation)

These sentiments were echoed in the 1993 syllabus:

For the purpose of meeting the needs of our Open Door Policy and speeding up socialist modernisation, efforts should be made to enable as many people as possible to acquire command of one or more foreign languages. (People's Education Press, 1993: 1, authors' translation)

During the period of reforms, the scale of English learning has increased in the formal education system. From 2002 English has been taught in primary schools, starting in Grade 3 where resources permit (Adamson and Feng, 2014). The use of English as the medium of instruction to teach mathematics, science, and other subjects has become popular in major cities. Among the innovations in English language teaching (ELT) promoted in the nine-year compulsory education system and three-year senior secondary schools is student-centred pedagogy:

Students' development is the starting and finishing point in the English curriculum. In setting the aims, teaching, evaluating the course and using teaching resources, English lessons must reflect the spirit of student-centredness. (Ministry of Education, 2001: 2, authors' translation)

In the latest English curriculum, student individualism, the need for students to use the language, and assessment of students' integrated language competence are emphasized (Ministry of Education, 2011). The curriculum documents argue that English is learnt effectively when students are given opportunities to produce communicative language and thus become active participants in the learning process (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2011). Six principles explicitly linked to the notion of student-centredness are presented:

- (1) orient teaching towards all students and pay attention to quality education
- (2) design the lesson's goals integrally, with flexibility and openness
- (3) regard student learning as the main priority and respect individual differences
- (4) design activities that incorporate experiential and participatory learning
- (5) pay attention to the evaluation of the process, in order to boost students' development
- (6) make full use of curricular resources and expand the channels for students to study and use the language. (Ministry of Education, 2001: 2, authors' translation)

The student-centred teaching approach is grounded on the premise that students actively construct their own learning, as proposed by educational theorists such as Dewey (1897, 1902, 1916, 1938), Piaget (1985), and Vygotsky (1978). In contrast to the traditional teacher-centred approach, which tends to focus on teaching curriculum content, a student-centred approach is focused on the students' needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles, with the teacher as a facilitator of learning. In the student-centred classroom, students are required to be active, responsible participants in their own learning. Student-centred learning can 'give students greater autonomy and control over choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study' (Gibbs, 1992: 23). According to the Interpretation of the Standards for English (Chen *et al.*, 2002), student-centredness can be realized in ELT in the form of a task-based language

teaching approach. By carrying out tasks (activities that require holistic communication rather than focusing on the practice of discrete language items), students could improve their English competence through experiencing realistic language, communicating with peers, and sharing the sense of success arising from task completion. Active learning thus has the potential to enhance student motivation (Ministry of Education, 2001).

The reforms address a recurring dissatisfaction with the formal education system's perceived failure to produce students sufficiently competent in English, prompting disquiet that ELT is failing in its contribution to economic construction and social development (Ministry of Education, 2001). According to a large-scale survey conducted by the State Education Commission between 1986 and 1987, the English proficiency of senior secondary students was disappointingly low, even after six years of study (Higher Education Research Centre, 1993). The majority had fragmentary knowledge of English, low recognition of vocabulary, and a very poor level of communicative competence in the language. In an overview of reforms from the 1970s to 2005, Hu (2005) found that ELT had been considerably strengthened, but that numerous problems remained. Contextual factors, such as examination pressure, a lack of appropriate resources and supportive linguistic environment, and large class sizes hinder the effective implementation of the reforms (Hu, 2005).

The promotion of student-centredness might create tensions between the various factors that contribute to the teacher-centred model and the demands of the new pedagogy. For instance, Zhang and Adamson (2007) used documentary analysis, classroom observations, and interviews to trace the implementation of the pedagogical approach advocated in the 2002 curriculum. Their study demonstrates how the top-down innovation was interpreted and reconstructed by all levels of change agents, from top-level policymakers and disseminators to middle-level school leaders, and finally to grass roots teachers and learners in an urban setting. The results show that the thrust of the innovation becomes progressively weaker as it passes through the various levels of stakeholders. The study finds that there was only sporadic dissemination of the new approaches in textbooks, teacher's guides, and multimedia materials, which serve to translate policy into resources for teaching and learning (Zhang and Adamson, 2007), and limited dissemination and support to prepare schools and teachers for the practical implementation of the reforms. In addition, studies by Lee *et al.* (2008) and Fu (2006) show that parental pressure for examination success and the need for the school to achieve such success for the purposes of accountability to inspectors and other authorities restrict the commitment of schools to the goals of the reform.

How teachers of English in the PRC resolve curricular tensions that arise from the conflict between the existing context and practices and the changes advocated in the new curriculum has been the subject of a number of studies (for example, Lam, 2002, 2005; Zheng and Adamson, 2003; Hu, 2005; Zhang and Adamson, 2007). In a case study by Zheng and Adamson (2003), the teacher reconciled his own pedagogical beliefs, which were oriented towards grammar teaching, with some experimentation in the innovative methodology promoted by the curriculum reforms, while, at the same time, accommodating the need to prepare the students explicitly for the English component of the secondary school graduation examination that would impact upon their life chances.

Some researchers argue that the urban-rural disparity leads to rural schools being less efficacious in implementing curricular reforms (Fu, 2007; Wang, 2009). A number of studies (for example, Fu, 2007; Wang, 2009; Wang, 2011) show that new curricular initiatives have been implemented effectively in most urban schools, while rural schools have struggled. Wang's study (2009) suggested that the rate of adopting the new reform declined from a high of 89.2 per cent in major urban schools to 65.3 per cent in schools located in smaller towns and 48.3 per cent in rural schools. These differences are ascribed to the fact that urban schools are more affluent

and able to afford better teachers and resources. However, Zhu (2007) claimed that many junior English teachers in Guangzhou, one of the most developed cities in China, had great difficulty in implementing the new English curriculum. Halstead and Zhu (2009) also found that senior high school teachers in the capital city, Beijing, failed to implement an approach that promoted learner autonomy because it conflicted with their views of the role of a teacher and with their preferred ways of preparing students for the high-stakes national college entrance examination. This contradictory evidence prompted the present study on the implementation of student-centredness in urban schools.

The study

This study investigates how urban secondary English teachers understand and implement student-centredness in their practices in the PRC. It also identifies some of the factors affecting their decisions. It raises issues regarding the gap between policy and practices by exploring the following questions:

- (1) How do urban English teachers understand the concept of student-centredness?
- (2) How do urban English teachers implement student-centredness in their teaching practice in secondary English classrooms?
- (3) What are the major factors affecting the implementation of student-centredness in urban secondary schools?

To answer these questions, the analysis of data from the study was framed around the categorization by Fullan (2007) of factors that influence curriculum implementation. He identifies nine critical factors grouped into three main areas: external factors; the characteristics of the local context; and the characteristics of the innovation. External factors encompass the functions and actions of the national government in shaping and communicating the reform agenda. The characteristics of the local context include the role played by the community, education bureau, and school principals in the district in disseminating and supporting reform, as well the perceptions and dispositions of teachers at the implementation stage. The characteristics of the innovation include the need for change, the clarity with which the details of the change are communicated, the complexity of the reform, and its quality and practicality.

Underpinning Fullan's categories is a view of curriculum implementation that matches our own perspectives on the apparent failure of the state reforms to be implemented faithfully at the grass roots. Instead of curriculum reform being a rational, linear progression from policy formulation to implementation, systemic and local contextual factors distort or reorient the policy as it is implemented. Embedded in Fullan's framework are teachers as the gatekeepers of reform, because responsibility for designing and conducting the teaching and learning activities in the classroom largely rests with them. For this reason, the present study focuses on teachers' perceptions of the initiative to promote student-centredness in ELT, and uses Fullan's categories as the analytical framework.

Three urban schools representing different levels of reputation (elite and ordinary) and school size (student numbers and years of schooling) were selected as research sites in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong Province in southern China (Table 1). As Guangzhou is one of the most developed areas in the PRC, the economic conditions and the quality of schools are higher than in most areas of the country.

Table 1: Background information about the schools and teachers

Participant	Age and gender	Years of teaching	Educational background and major	School category	No. of students in school and class size	School grades taught	Observed teaching grade
Teacher 1 (T1)	32, Female	8	University graduate, English	State-run elite high school	1,865 (50–55)	Senior High (Grades 10–12)	Senior 1 (Grade 10)
Teacher 2 (T2)	32, Female	8	University graduate, English	State-run ordinary high school	1,250 (50–55)	Senior High (Grades 10–12)	Senior 3 (Grade 12)
Teacher 3 (T3)	43, Female	20	University graduate, English	State-run ordinary secondary school	1,080 (50–55)	Junior High (Grades 7–9)	Junior 2 (Grade 8)

Within the schools, three secondary English teachers were chosen by purposeful sampling. The teachers are representative of experienced English teachers in middle schools in Guangzhou in terms of age (in their 30s and 40s), years of teaching (between 8 and 20 years), academic background (all three teachers are graduates of English from universities specializing in teacher education), and gender (in the selected schools, male teachers make up only about 8 per cent of English teachers, which reflects the national situation; therefore all the participants in this study are female). One of the teachers works in an elite school that caters to the top 20 per cent of elementary school graduates, one in senior high school (Years 10 to 12 of schooling) and the other in junior high school (Years 7 to 9). The class size in all of the three participants' schools is between 50 and 55, which is common in most state-run middle schools in China. Table 1 summarizes the background information of the three participants.

The data were collected in May 2010, nearly ten years after the new curriculum reform was launched. Data comprised official documents such as curriculum reform documents and the present secondary English textbooks and teachers' reference books; in-depth interviews with teachers; classroom observations; and teacher reflective reports. All interviews, which were conducted in Cantonese, were audio-recorded with the interviewees' permission. Relevant extracts from the transcripts were then translated into English for this paper. Three English classes (one per participant) were video-recorded for analysis. The observation protocol concentrated on the participants' lesson aims, pedagogy, and use of teaching materials. Each participant was also asked to write a self-evaluation of their lesson after the class. These reflective reports provided insights into their pedagogical principles, their understanding of the curriculum reform, and their classroom practices.

Findings

Teachers' understanding of the theory of student-centredness

Different interpretations of the pedagogical reforms at the policy-making, curriculum design, and classroom teaching levels could lead to different teaching behaviours in the classroom (Zhang and Adamson, 2007). Therefore, before investigating how teachers implement the ELT reforms

in urban secondary schools, it is necessary to investigate how they understand the theory of student-centredness.

To support the implementation of the new curriculum, school-based training, district-based training, and seminars had been organized by government and commercial agencies. Therefore, when asked about student-centredness, the participants mentioned that they had heard much about the idea and had a clearer understanding after so many years of dissemination. However, when asked about the teaching principles advocated in the reform, all participants admitted that they had little idea. None could elucidate the principles, except T2, who demonstrated vague knowledge of task-based learning. The teachers revealed that, though copies of the new English curriculum had been distributed to schools, not every teacher could get one. Furthermore, there was no follow-up by school leaders to ensure that teachers actually read and digested the contents. T1, who had not read the curriculum, did not see this as problematic:

I am more concerned about the requirements for the examination than the implementation of the theories in the new curriculum. In my opinion, these theories and principles are always too theoretical and abstract for practical application in our daily teaching and they are useful for us only when we want to write essays about teaching. ... Even when we write a reflective report after class, we focus more on what students have learned in the lesson and what we can do to improve the effectiveness of the class and how we can do better to help students to get higher marks in the exam. I seldom think about what teaching principles or theory I used in my classroom. (T1)

When asked to explain the concept of student-centredness, the teachers associated it with active learning:

In my opinion, student-centredness means that students should have more activities in the classroom while teachers should act as guides for students' learning. Teachers should let students finish their learning tasks by themselves and explore the answers to the questions. (T1)

I think student-centredness means that, in the classroom, teachers would speak less while students speak more and do more exercises. Those students who are good at learning will help those who are poor in learning. In a word, student-centredness means asking students to learn by themselves in the classroom. (T3)

When asked about the applicability of student-centred approaches in the classroom, the teachers displayed some diffidence:

Student-centredness is a buzzword. If you don't mention it, you are out. This method can really make students active in class. When time permits, I will try it. But in the end, we teachers have to teach the syllabus content. (T1)

It is said that the theory of student-centredness comes from western countries and is regarded as the most effective teaching method. But as you see, this method takes a lot of class time. That is impossible for senior three students. Our time is limited and priceless for preparing for the national examination. (T2)

Our students really like to do some activities in class. But I am afraid that I can't finish the teaching process and teach all the contents in the textbook. What shall I do if our students can't understand the readings and exercise in textbook? (T3)

Implementation

The analysis of how teachers implement the theory of student-centredness is divided into four aspects: the teacher's aims for the lesson; teaching procedures and pedagogy; teaching materials used; and teachers' self-evaluation of their classroom teaching.

Lesson focus

The teacher's choice of lesson focus will determine the kind of activity or strategy she will use in class. From the participants' teaching plans and the classroom observations, the main lesson focuses appeared to be:

- (1) to learn and review some vocabulary and sentence structures
- (2) to improve the students' skills in reading and writing
- (3) to help students understand the reading text fully
- (4) to prepare students for the final examination, for example by presenting strategies for reading, writing, and listening.

The focus for the observed lessons (extracted from each participant's teaching plan and recorded from the class observation) is set out in Table 2. The lesson focuses vary according to the school setting and the grade the teacher was teaching. In T2's lessons in Senior 3, the teacher prepared the students for the national college entrance examination. In Senior 1 and Junior 2, the teachers felt less examination pressure and concentrated on helping students to understand reading strategies. At the beginning of T3's class, two students were invited to tell a story in English as if in a talent show. Overall, however, the teachers paid more attention to the language items than to students' language practice. None of the lesson focuses explicitly mentioned students' individual differences or interests.

Table 2: Illustration of teachers' lesson focus

Teacher	Lesson focus
T1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) To train students' reading skills, including the skills of speed reading, scanning, skimming, and describing characters with adjectives 2) To enable students to have a deeper understanding of and admiration for some great historical figures, and the determination and motivation to succeed
T2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) To review words and phrases, and teach students how to use them in sentences and discourse 2) To teach students how to use these words and sentences in composition writing according to the requirements of the college entrance examination
T3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) To enable students to be more familiar with the unit topic, science fiction, by reading a story of Kelly, who encounters an extraterrestrial visitor 2) To help students understand the text with some reading comprehension strategies 3) To broaden students' vision through various forms of reading activities and tasks

Teaching procedures and pedagogy

Teaching procedures represent the teacher's management of the instructional process and also reflect the teacher's beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes effective teaching. From the classroom observations, it appeared that all four classes had similar teaching procedures:

- (1) revision: review the previous, prerequisite learning
- (2) warm-up: introduce students to the topic of the new lesson
- (3) presentation: present new material in small steps, with student practice after each step
- (4) instruction: give clear and detailed instructions and explanations
- (5) practice: provide integrated practice for all students, such as translation, reading, and writing exercises.

The teaching procedures and pedagogy are illustrated in Table 3. The data show that teacher-centred teaching methods, such as teacher explanation, translation, and language drills, were still popular in classrooms. Pedagogy associated with student-centredness, such as discussions, tasks, and cooperative learning were not observed.

Table 3: Illustration of teachers' teaching procedure and pedagogy

Teacher	Teaching procedure	Pedagogy
T1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. revision 2. warm up (brainstorming) 3. reading skills (speed reading, scanning, reading for detail) 4. discussion 5. homework assignment 	Student practice, teacher explanation
T2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. review of new words and phrases 2. consolidate the new words and phrases with translation exercises 3. help the students learn some key words and phrases with sentence completion and translation exercises 4. composition writing 	Student practice, autonomous learning
T3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. review the phrase learned in the previous lesson 2. introduce the new lesson and main points 3. teach the new words through pictures and help the students to read the new words 4. guide students to read the text and analyse key words for them 5. assign homework 	Student practice

When asked why they did not change their teaching methods, the teachers responded:

At normal university and in professional development in school and/or at the district level, we are always immersed in this form of teaching. It is promoted as the standard teaching procedure. (T1)

It is not practical to let students practise English all the time. I have to explain some language points to them. You know, these students are not good at English. They need to do more exercises to prepare for the final examination. I must take a responsible attitude towards them. (T2)

Students are not used to this teaching style. When teachers ask students to talk or discuss among themselves in the classroom, the students usually ask teachers to explain everything. They think they learn more if their teachers explain all to them. What's more, not all the students are willing to cooperate with others in learning. Top students think it is a waste of their time to learn in this way, and weak students lack the confidence to contribute. (T3)

Teaching resources

ELT materials provided by educational publishers in the PRC typically comprise textbooks, a teacher's book, and auxiliary materials such as reading and writing books. From Table 4 we can see that textbooks were used as the main teaching resource by all participants. Another common resource was auxiliary teaching materials, especially in Secondary 3. Pictures were occasionally used. Two teachers referred to the teacher's book. According to the Ministry of Education (2001), schools and teachers should actively use external resources such as television programmes, videos, internet resources, newspapers, magazines, and library books. However, constrained by the

assessment system, which focuses more on language items than on communicative competence, and by a shortage of time, the teachers preferred to work with just the educational resources. In the observed lessons, only one teacher used resources downloaded from the internet and only one teacher created exercises herself. None of the teachers used resources produced by the students or specifically tailored resources to match their students' characteristics, interests, and needs. From these lessons, the advantages of urban schools in possessing better resources are not clearly demonstrated.

Table 4: Resources used by the participants in their lesson

Teacher	Students' book	Teachers' book	Auxiliary teaching materials	Download from internet	Picture	Created by teacher	Others
T1	*	*	*	*			
T2	*		**			*	
T3	*	*			*		

Note: * indicates the relative frequency of using the resources

Teachers' self-evaluation

In her reflective report, T1 expressed satisfaction at achieving her teaching objectives, but felt she missed some opportunities for providing the students with more writing practice and for varying her teaching approach. She notes that the public examination is influential in her decisions:

[A]s these students are required to take the oral test in the final examination, I encouraged them to express their ideas about the reading passage. (T1)

T2 felt her lesson had taken her students' needs and interests into account:

I think the selection of teaching content in this lesson is reasonable; the teaching objective is clear. The teaching plan was designed in accordance with the purpose of this lesson and the students' practical level in English. The teaching resources are also diverse and selected according to the topics of students' interest. (T2)

T3's reflection showed her satisfaction with her lesson:

In this lesson, I selected the key words and phrases in the reading passage as the teaching content and the volume of the teaching content is relatively large. In terms of teaching objectives, students' reading comprehension was enhanced by reading activities. The challenges and the lesson focus are quite clear. (T3)

The priority for all the teachers appears to be the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, as they felt that mastery of these linguistic aspects was very important for obtaining higher marks in the final examination. In the reflections, only T1 mentioned developing students' ability in communication. T2 and T3 indicated that memorization of words and phrases was a learning strategy that they encouraged in their students.

Factors affecting successful implementation

The analysis in this section is framed around the categorization by Fullan (2007) of factors that influence curriculum implementation listed above. The data in this study support Fullan's view

of curriculum implementation as a process that is susceptible to distortion or reorientation by systemic and local contextual factors.

The characteristics of the innovation

From the data, all teachers demonstrated only a superficial grasp of student-centredness. They complained that new pedagogical ideas were too theoretical, foreign, and abstract for practical application in their daily teaching. And from the interviews it appears that teachers have not been well prepared for the complexity and difficulties of implementation. They have taken it for granted that once they had a conception of student-centredness, this could automatically be transferred into their teaching behaviour in class. The quality of implementation is still a big challenge for educators.

The characteristics of the local context

In the local context, principals are considered as a critical factor affecting the quality of innovation (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Fullan, 2007). The teachers reported that the cadres in the district education bureau vigorously promoted innovation in the classroom to improve the quality of teaching, and most principals voiced their support. However, rhetoric did not necessarily result in effective implementation, especially when other systemic characteristics came into play:

As our school is an elite school, it is dangerous to attempt the new change. Unsurprisingly, the principal pays more attention to the marks your students get in the examination rather than your teaching methods. ... The policy of assessment and the demands of the examination constrain teachers in attempting the change. Even if students' ability to communicate is developed, they will not get high marks in the examination. The present mode of examining English must change. (T1)

Although schools encouraged teachers to attempt the new change, the teachers said there were no specific requirements or pathways for them to follow. When they encountered difficulties in practice, there was no support or directions from the principal, external experts, or other superintendent authorities. The two younger teachers (T1 and T2) expected more training opportunities to achieve a clear understanding and effective implementation of student-centredness. They suggested making visits to schools which had implemented student-centredness well so as to gain a more concrete impression of how to carry out the change. T2 felt that there was a shortage of investment in professional development for teachers:

I hope the government can provide more funds for in-service teacher training. I want to attend some systematic training on the new curriculum – both the theory and practical classroom teaching. But our school always complains that we lack the funds to support teachers attending these training courses. (T2)

A scarcity of appropriate resources proved problematic in some contexts:

The environment for language learning in our school is still poor; we lack tape-recorders, multi-media resources, computers and so on. If we had the same equipment as the elite schools, our students would have more interest in learning. (T3)

Another critical characteristic of local context is the quality of teachers. Although it can be seen from Table 1 that the teachers' subject content knowledge is not poor, this does not automatically mean that their capacity to introduce student-centred approaches is high because this capacity was also curtailed by issues of their own professional identity and competence,

which incorporates their understanding of student-centredness, their beliefs about ELT, and their view of the role of teachers in the learning process, *inter alia*. For example, in all the classrooms it was observed that teachers' competence in English was good. However, all three teachers expressed reluctance at giving up the authoritarian role that a teacher-centred approach afforded them: they predicted chaos if students were given too much freedom in the classroom.

In addition, the class size of more than 50 students was often mentioned by participants as a practical factor affecting the implementation of student-centred pedagogy. T3 complained that:

In such a big class with more than 50 students, it is impossible to let students talk or discuss in class. Students would make a lot of noise and become out of control if they are allowed to talk. Some of them would even chat about other things irrelevant to the lesson and fight with each other. If this happens, the principal and other teachers would think I am poor in managing the classroom. (T3)

T2 suggested that student-centred approaches would be possible to implement if class sizes were smaller, for instance if there were only about 30 students.

External factors

The teachers also commented that there was top-down pressure to implement the reforms. These criticisms mainly concern the work of the Ministry of Education in the national government, and are related to external factors. Although the teaching materials are much better than in rural schools, the teachers complained that the investment in teacher training, especially high-quality training programmes, was still insufficient:

Although there are one or two opportunities in a year for some of us to attend some short-term teacher training sessions in the city, not all of us can go. What's more, most of these training sessions are not so good or practical. We hope to have more chance to attend some high-quality teacher training programmes which could really improve our level of teaching and understanding of the new curriculum. (T1)

In particular, the teachers who teach senior grade 3, the year in which students will sit the national college entrance examination, rarely have a chance to attend these training sessions because they cannot spare the time to stop teaching to attend professional development courses. (T2)

Discussion

The pedagogical reforms proposed in the English curriculum in the PRC represent an ambitious attempt at the macro-level to change the nature of teaching and learning at the micro-level. Identifying weaknesses in the conventional approach to achieving the desired levels of communicative competence in students, the curriculum documents call for a student-centred pedagogy that would involve teachers in tailoring the curriculum to meet the needs, interests, and abilities of the students, and to provide them with learning opportunities that require the students' active participation (thereby enhancing the chances for them to engage in realistic communicative use of the target language). However, this study shows that the impact of the reforms on actual classroom practices has been quite weak for a variety of reasons, even in well-resourced urban schools.

First, the communication of the ideas underpinning the curriculum was ineffectual. Teachers were not required to read the curricular documents, nor were they provided with adequate training or support in understanding the need for reform and the complexities of the initiatives.

As a result, the teachers were able to brush off the calls to change their pedagogy by labelling the reforms as over-theoretical and impractical. Teacher competence impacts upon effective implementation of the reforms, as poorly prepared teachers cannot make sense of the changes. This suggests a need to strengthen leadership at the national, district, and school levels, to provide an environment that ensures the teachers engage with the reforms. Financial investment would be required for professional development and, in poorer areas, for providing adequate resources.

Second, the reforms entailed a major ideological shift in the classroom, with teachers being expected to surrender some of their traditional authority by empowering students, and to take on unfamiliar facilitative roles rather than acting as the main focus of attention in lessons. The question arises whether the reforms fail to take sufficient account of the cultural context in which the implementers actually work. The teachers in the study show reluctance to make major changes to their teaching styles. If the reforms do not match their pedagogical beliefs or preferred practices, teachers tend to react by either ignoring or paying lip-service to them (Lo, 2002).

The third – and most frequently mentioned – factor that constrained the implementation of the reforms is the national college entrance system. Assessment, together with content and pedagogy, form the components of curriculum alignment set out by Biggs and Tang (2007). If – as appears to be the case with English in secondary schools in the PRC – the assessment is out of kilter with the promoted curricular contents and pedagogy, then teachers are faced with a significant tension in their work. As the public examinations for entry to senior high school and to tertiary education are very competitive, schools' reputations, teachers' promotion prospects, and the expectations of parents, students, and other stakeholders tend to pressurize teachers towards prioritizing examination success rather than radical changes to their pedagogical approaches. It appears that reforms are required to the examination system to align it more closely with the new content and pedagogy. However, assessment reform that permits a greater degree of student-centredness is often controversial as it is seen as reducing objectivity and uniformity – the 'level playing field' of standardized examinations (Adamson, 2011), and therefore has to be designed and implemented with circumspection.

Overall, this study matches the findings in Halstead and Zhu (2009) regarding the systemic constraints that hinder effective implementation of reform. The teachers' handling of the pedagogical dilemma that they faced is reminiscent of how teachers depicted in the studies by Zheng (2005), Zheng and Adamson (2003), and Zheng and Davison (2008) reacted to the same reforms. In the case study of an English teacher, Mr Yang, Zheng and Adamson (2003) observed that his pedagogy was a resolution of the tensions arising from the interplay of his personal beliefs and contextual factors operating at the local level (the needs of his students and collegial interaction) and at the macro-level (state policy). In the present study, the major barriers were deep-rooted in China's educational traditions – the importance attached to standardized examinations and the teachers' sense that a teacher-centred approach suited their students best. However, to lay the blame entirely at the door of the teachers would be to ignore the shortcomings of leaders at the national, district, and school levels, as well as of the reform itself.

The over-ambitious goals of the reform; the top-down, poorly communicated dissemination; the lack of comprehensive, aligned curricular change; and the weak support and leadership from various supervisory bodies, meant that the impetus for reform was dissipated. The promotion of student-centredness by the Ministry of Education tended to be a rhetorical and symbolic act (Yanow, 1996). Successful reform, as Fullan (2007) suggests, requires policymakers to move away from a rational view of a one-size-fits-all reform. Change needs to be coherent, incremental, and comprehensively supported. Above all, it needs to acknowledge that systemic contradictions

and poor implementation strategies affect not just poorer rural schools but also affluent urban schools.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the teachers and school authorities who assisted us with this research. We also received valuable feedback from two anonymous reviewers.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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