



English Teachers' Use of Resources in Chinese Public Schools

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Introduction

In the new century, China has engaged in a large-scale nation-wide curriculum change initiative across subject matters and levels of schooling. In a more centralized system with one national curriculum for each subject matter throughout the country, the reform started with changes to the national curriculum documents, followed by textbook compilation and teacher training in accordance with the new curriculum ideas. The general goal of the initiative is to shift classroom pedagogy from teacher-centered didacticism to learner-centered constructivism (Liu, 2011). For the English subject in particular, the curriculum change has endorsed a more communicative, constructivist and humanistic view of language teaching (Liu, 2016). The new English curriculum standard for senior high schools, for example, suggests that English teaching should develop students' "language skills, language knowledge, affect and attitude, learning strategies and cultural awareness" (MoE, 2011, p. 4). To do that, teachers are recommended to "create close-to-life language contexts, engage students in practical language activities, and adopt methodologies that stress both the process and outcome of teaching, such as the task-based language teaching, so as to develop students' ability to do things in English" (MoE, 2011, p. 26).

The change is intended to break away from the traditional Chinese pedagogical practices of reception, repetition, review and reproduction (Hu, 2002) that emphasize teachers' central roles in knowledge transmission and learners' roles in information regurgitation (Huang, 2004). In language teaching, many teachers put more emphasis on the delivery of linguistic knowledge at the cost of the development of students' ability in using the language for communication (Wang, 2007). Such pedagogical practices are often seen as the negative washback from high-stakes written exams which are administered in China as an annual meritocratic approach to selecting high achievers for higher levels of schooling in a competitive environment (Liu & Wang, 2020; Zhong, 2006). Given the drastic changes aspired to in the curriculum change initiative, how would the teachers respond in their teaching? To what extent would they adopt the new curriculum ideas? In an ethnographic study on teachers' pedagogical lived experiences against the backdrop of China's ambitious pedagogical reform agenda, our attention was drawn to the resources collectively selected and used in the case study school. What are teachers' pedagogical philosophies behind the resource use? How do such pedagogical philosophies relate to the pedagogical recommendations in the new national curriculum? This paper is an attempt to answer these questions.



Methodology

Instead of treating language teaching as a positivist “validation of what should happen” (Pennycook 1989, p. 594), a qualitative design is best at focusing on teachers’ pedagogical lived experiences as the ontological center (Holliday, 1994). To collect ethnographic data, weekly visits were made to the “English Teaching Research Group” of a senior high school in Beijing for a year. In the Chinese teachers’ professional development tradition, teachers of the same subject are always organized into a “Teaching Research Group” at each school and they share a common office space. They work most of their day in the office, only traveling to students’ dedicated classrooms to teach. There were a total of 15 English teachers in the case study school divided into three teams, each responsible for teaching students in one grade (years 10 to 12). Each team used the same textbooks in their teaching, and they met once a week to prepare for their lessons as a group. Altogether 10 teachers participated in the study and they were from all three different teams.

The data were collected through interviews with teachers, both formal and conversational, with a focus on teachers’ personal philosophies of language teaching; observations in the teachers’ offices, including teachers’ conversations with each other when they were not teaching; observations of two teachers’ teaching in the classrooms toward the end of the year’s fieldwork after much rapport development; resources used by the teachers in their teaching. As a tradition, official textbooks play a central role in teachers’ teaching in China. They are approved and used nation-wide, and they are supposed to reflect the national curriculum ideas. Teachers’ teachings closely revolve around the textbook as the most important teaching resource. Apart from the official textbooks used by the whole school district, teachers in the case study school also used their own collectively developed documents for each unit in the textbook, past university entrance exam questions, and commercially produced English learning newspapers subscribed to by all students.

Findings

The goal of this paper is to glean teachers’ understanding and implementation of the new curriculum ideas by examining what resources are used and how they are used in their classroom teaching. In this section, we will present different kinds of resources used and how they are used.

Textbooks

In line with the pedagogical recommendations in the new national curriculum, the textbooks used (*Senior High English* published by Beijing Normal University Press) are compiled on the basis of the notional syllabus (Wilkins, 1976), focusing on the notions and functions instead of grammar and structures of the target language in teaching. The philosophy of language learning and teaching in this series of textbooks can be seen in the “Key Features” at the beginning of the Teachers’ Book, which include:

- Topic-based units with the basic premise that thematic contents provide a meaningful context for language learning;
- Process approach to skill development with a clear and explicit focus on the actual process of communication;
- Discovery inductive approach to grammar that engages students in discovering grammatical rules themselves;
- A contextual approach to vocabulary in which students deal with lexical items in context.

The series of textbooks includes 11 modules, and each module has 3 units. Each semester covers 2 modules, and in between there is a mid-term exam. In each unit, there are several sections: a Warm-Up, 4 lessons, a Communicative Workshop, a Culture Corner and a Bulletin Board. Typically, each lesson is dealt with in two 40-minute periods. The first period is called by teachers a “skill focus” class, the second a

“language focus” class. The “skill focus” class is more meaning-focused during which the teacher leads students in discussing the content of the text, mostly in English, while the “language focus” class is devoted to the treatment of language forms, when the teachers overtly explain vocabulary and grammatical items, using both Chinese and English. A revision class (2 periods) at the end of each unit is also forms-focused, involving students in the treatment of exercises in the book or in other supplementary teaching resources. Table 1 shows teachers’ time allocation for each unit. So in terms of time allocation, the ratio between meaning-focused and forms-focused teaching is about 5:7. More time is allocated to the forms-focused treatment of the texts.

TABLE 1
Time Allotment on Each Unit in the Textbook

Lessons of each unit	Approximate Time allotment
Lesson 1 (reading)	2 periods (40 mins/ period)
Lesson 2 (listening)	2 periods
Lesson 3 (Reading)	2 periods
Lesson 4 (Reading)	2 periods
Communication Workshop (leading to a writing task)/ Culture Corner/ Bulletin Board	2 periods
Revision	2 periods

The Use of “Pian Zi”

In addition to the two treatments of the textbooks mentioned in Table 1, teachers also prepare and print forms-oriented handouts for students, known as “Pian Zi” at the school. One set of “Pian Zi” handouts are prepared for each unit, which includes a “Language Focus” sheet and a “Phrases” sheet. For the first “Language Focus” sheet, based on group discussions of what linguistic contents to stress in each unit, teachers take turns to pick out important grammatical points, important phrases and sentence structures in each unit, and then turn them into different forms of exercises, such as Chinese-to-English translation, multiple-choice questions, gap-filling exercises, etc. For the second set of Pian Zi (Phrases), teachers print out important phrases, expressions and sentences (about 100 phrases and expressions, 10 sentence structures each unit) for students. All these important phrases, usages and collocations are taken from the textbook. The following are a sample of a “Phrases” sheet (Figure 1) and a “Language Focus” sheet (Figure 2):

Translate the following phrases Chinese or English:	
1. once upon a time	2. 出现
3. knock sb. over	4. 堵住
...	
135. seek sb’s advice on sth.	136. 从那一天起

Learn the following sentences by heart:

1. This particularly sad event *left a deep impression on* Pliny who had lost an uncle in the eruption.
...

10. Only then did Zhuge Liang give the order to sail downstream to Zhouyu’s camp.

Figure 1. Sample “Phrases” sheet.

1. Medical advances **ranged from** discovering the causes of diseases under microscopes to surgical procedures replacing diseased organs with **donated** ones.

1) The library _____ in perfect order. 这个图书馆的书一排一排放得井井有条。

...

7) The present situation is very complex, so I think it will take me some time to _____ its reality. (2009 Hubei)

A. make up B. figure out C. look through D. put off

“Out” related collocations:

1) carry out _____ 2) set out = set off _____

...

25) out of touch _____ 26) out of work _____

“Out” Collocations often tested at university entrance exams:

一、 Multiple Choice

1. —It’s a good idea. But who’s going to _____ the plan?
—I think Tom and Greg will. (2000 Beijing)

A. set aside B. carry out C. take in D. get through

...

14. The news of the mayor’s coming to our school for a visit was _____ on the radio yesterday. (2007 Fujian)

A. turned out B. found out C. given out D. carried out

二、 Fill the blank

1. I knew Dad would be angry if he 41 I’d been watching movies (2004 Hunan 41)

A. realized B. found out C. thought D. figured out

...

12. ... About a month later, I received a letter ... It 57 out that the young fellow that I had helped was its general manager. (2007 Hubei 57)

A. pointed B. turned C. worked D. found

三、 Consolidation practice

1. —Oh, my God! It’s a sea of cars. How can you _____ your car?
—That’s easy. Mine is colored differently from any other one.

A. find out B. pick out C. take out D. get out

...

10. You all say that you kept the secret, but now everyone knows it, who on earth _____ it out?

A. put B. turn C. take D. let

Figure 2. Sample “Language Focus” sheet.

In the Pian Zi practice, the teachers take language points as more discrete items out of the meaning contexts and give them an additional forms-focused treatment, using more traditional approaches such as Translation (from English to Chinese) and Back Translation (from Chinese into English). Students are also expected to memorize some important sentences. They are used both in class and as assignments for students to do after class. Students may be given dictation quizzes to test their memory of the contents recommended for recitation. One author had the opportunity to audit one lesson preparation session of a team during which the teachers collectively and rigorously decided what language points to focus on and have appear on the Unit’s Pian Zi for students.

English Learning Newspaper

In addition to Pian Zi sheets developed by teachers as a group, a commercially published English learning newspaper is also used as supplementary materials for students. The paper is published purposefully for this series of textbooks, with each issue responding to certain lessons in the book (see Table 2). Typically, there are three issues for each unit of the textbook. The first issue corresponds to lesson 1 and lesson 2; the second issue corresponds to lesson 3 and lesson 4; there is another issue for Communication Workshop / Culture Corner / Bulletin Board and exercises for revision. There are two papers in each issue. One paper provides a modal test of the content in the corresponding lessons in the book. The other paper provides focused and in-depth explanation of the grammar points and vocabulary covered in the book.

TABLE 2

Issues of Newspapers in accordance with the Textbook

Lessons	Issues of English papers
Lesson 1	1 issue
Lesson 2	
Lesson 3	1 issue
Lesson 4	
Communication Workshop/ Culture Corner/ Bulletin Board	1 issue
Revision	

In classroom observation, we found the following example of how one teacher uses the paper to complement the exercises in the textbook. The major grammar item of the lesson is verbs followed by “-ing” form vs verbs followed by infinitive. The exercise in the textbook is the following:

③ Look at the blue verbs in the text and classify the verbs below into the correct columns:
Expect, risk, refuse, avoid, advise, suggest, need, enjoy, consider, afford

Verbs + infinitive	Verbs + -ing form

Figure 3. The inductive-style exercises in the textbook.

This exercise can be seen as reflecting an inductive, experiential approach to language teaching as it gives students the opportunity to discover by themselves how these verbs are used in the text. After doing this exercise from the textbook, the teacher showed students six multiple-choice questions from previous university entrance test papers in different provinces in different years provided by the English newspaper for the lesson:

- 1) — There is a story here in the paper about a 110-year-old man.
— My goodness! I can't imagine _____ that old. (2006 Jiangsu)
A. to be B. to have been C. being D. having been
- 2) Susan wanted to be independent of her parents. She tried _____ alone, but she didn't like it and moved back home. (2008 Hunan)
A. living B. to live C. to be living D. having lived
- 3) The parents suggested _____ in the hotel room but their kids were anxious to camp out during the trip. (2006 Shanghai)
A. sleep B. to sleep C. sleeping D. having slept
- 4) China has promised to revise its existing regulations and _____ new policies according to WTO requirements. (2006 Shanghai)
A. forming B. to form C. to be forming D. have formed
- 5) When asked by the police, he said that he remembered ____ at the party, but not _____. (2005 Beijing)
A. to arrive; leaving B. to arrive; to leave
C. arriving; leaving D. arriving; to leave
- 6) — Robert is indeed a wise man.
— Oh, yes. How often I have regretted _____ his advice! (2007 Anhui)
A. to take B. taking C. not to take D. not taking

Figure 4. The deductive-style exercises in the newspaper.

From the above comparison we can see that the exercises provided in the textbook and those provided in the newspaper seem to follow different approaches to grammar teaching. Different from the inductive discovery-based approach in the textbook, the newspaper is more deductive in that they summarize the rules for students first in Chinese and then provide structure-based exercises for students to apply those rules. The teachers use both approaches.

Discussion

Teachers' use of teaching resources is discussed by drawing on teacher interview data. The focus is on teachers' teaching philosophies behind their resource use. The teachers in this study do believe in students' communicative competence as the goal for their teaching, and they do believe that the new national curriculum has brought a positive impact on their teaching. According to a few teachers, they used to do all the talking in class directly transmitting knowledge to students, but now they spend much more time planning classroom activities that could involve students' participation. Reflecting on her own English learning experience, a younger teacher who went to secondary school in the 1990s believes that today's students should be thankful to the new methodologies:

When we were in high school, we only learned basic grammar and vocabulary in class. We would learn the texts in the book sentence by sentence and then recite them. We didn't have opportunities to communicate in English in class. [...] Students' ability to engage in oral communication is much higher these days. They may not speak the best, but they dare to stand up and speak. Due to the use of these new methods, their communicative ability, oral ability, has improved. (Teacher Interview)

According to an older teacher's retrospection of her own teaching experience, her classroom teaching practice has made enormous progress in the past three decades in China:

When I first started teaching (1982), the textbooks we used were very thin and small. There were only eight units (with one reading text per unit) to cover in each semester. The method we used was detailed analysis. We analyzed the reading texts in a very detailed manner, dividing every sentence into minute sections of phrases and vocabulary. [...] We dealt with grammar every day. So what the English students learned at that time was basically “mute” English, because the teacher was doing all the talking. (Teacher Interview)

There is teacher buy-in with regard to the ideas of learner-centeredness and communicative teaching in the new English curriculum, but teachers do not seem to have total faith in language learning taking place only as an accidental byproduct of engaging in communicative language tasks. In other words, they do not seem to believe that meaningful communication alone can take care of form noticing and acquisition. Grammar teaching must be reinforced and consolidated in a deductive way. One teacher said in the interview,

I feel grammar provides the basic framework for your communication. If you don't have solid grammar as the foundation, there is nowhere to build communication. [...] So apart from engaging students in actively using and thinking in the language, we feel we must make them master the necessary English knowledge in a sure and solid way. (Teacher interview)

Given their beliefs in both meaning-focused and forms-focused teaching, the teachers' pedagogical use of teaching resources in this study has also shown eclectic processes. An inductive meaning-based treatment of texts is followed by a deductive forms-focused treatment. A covert discovery-based treatment of vocabulary and grammar exercises is followed by an overt explanation and consolidation of rules. The practice combines Krashen's acquisition and learning processes (Krashen, 1985), Long's form-focused and forms-focused teaching (Long & Robinson, 1998), believing that both processes contribute to learners' communicative competence. The topic-based arrangement of the new textbooks, with authentic materials but no language control, reflects the notional-functional approach to syllabus design and textbook compilation. This seems to have caused some confusion among teachers. One teacher said,

The previous series of textbooks were very well designed, with gradual increase of the number of vocabulary, the length of sentences, and the complexity of grammar items introduced. There were dialogues, but the sentences were short, with only 3 to 4 words in each. There was good control of the length and complexity of the sentences. The sentences became longer only gradually. [...] The new textbooks we are using now have very new and very good contents (topics) which is the best part about this new textbook, but there isn't a good arrangement of the difficulty levels across the modules. (Teacher interview)

The “gradual increase of the number of vocabulary, the length of sentences, and the complexity of grammar items introduced” reflects the dated grammatical or structural approach to syllabus design and textbook writing, which “seeks to teach the language by taking the learner progressively through the forms of the target language” (Wilkins, 1976, p. 18) from perceptively easier ones to more difficult ones. However, teachers seem to be more used to the structural approach and do not understand the notional and functional way. Another teacher experienced similar confusion,

There was one area of his teaching that he was puzzling over all the time. He used to teach grammar separately before the reading text, but the new textbook encouraged teachers to teach grammar while doing the reading passage. And the textbook sometimes left out some grammatical structures in the reading passage for students to fill in. He didn't understand the point, because it was so easy to deal with grammar alone as a separate activity before. It was all very easy and efficient. In addition, he felt that it was hard to grasp what grammar items were required in each

unit. He guessed that the reason was that the compilers of the book wanted to downplay the importance of grammar. (Research journal)

The official curriculum hopes to direct teachers' teaching from forms-focused teaching toward more meaning-focused naturalistic acquisition, but research from the 1970s has shown that curriculum change is a mutual adaptation process between teachers' current practices and official pedagogical recommendations (McLaughlin, 1976). Teachers simply do not blindly follow what is prescribed to them. The official curriculum and official textbooks are only used as resources to inform their teaching. Even in a more centralized system, teachers still exert autonomy in teaching and teach in a way that makes sense to them. Teacher research from the 1980s has also recommended taking teachers as curriculum developers and their teaching as enacted curriculum (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). It is important to take teachers' teaching practices as the ontological center and have a deep understanding of where they are at. A gap between teachers' teaching and the ideals of the curriculum might be the norm, and how to narrow the gap should be taken as the best research question for applied linguistic studies (Liu, 2020). The expectation of teachers' quick compliance of the new curriculum ideas would deprive teachers of their ownership in teaching and thus be damaging.

Conclusion

The new national English curriculum in China endorses a communicative and constructivist approach to language teaching, and the official textbooks follow the principles of notional and functional syllabuses. However, teachers are found to give the textbook materials both a meaning-based treatment and a forms-based treatment. In addition, they use additional forms-focused resources, both self-developed and commercially published, to reinforce students' linguistic knowledge mastery. Behind their ways of resource use are their eclectic views on teaching pedagogies.

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