



# Beliefs of Rural Primary Teachers About the Communicative English Teaching Transformation in North China

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## Abstract

*Traditional drill-based English lessons are often viewed by Chinese students as a dreary learning process. Recently, there has been a growing awareness of this, and some more communicative and task-based alternatives to traditional pedagogy could be the antidote. However, it remains underexplored to what extent this is being developed at the grassroots level. A large proportion of primary students in China live outside major metropolitan areas with bare academic attention because of urban-oriented education policies. This gap makes it even more imperative to investigate the condition of alternative pedagogies implementation in a rural context. Teachers' beliefs can reflect their attitudes towards a teaching method, so knowing how teachers theoretically and practically perceive innovative approaches could be useful. Therefore, this study aims to investigate in-service teachers' beliefs about novel teaching with communicative tasks in one North-China rural area. Semi-structured interviews with 6 interviewees from a questionnaire survey were used. The results show that communicative teaching has started unfolding both in classrooms and at all echelons of the education system in the target area, and those practitioners all present positive attitudes. Still, they have not formulated a specific perception of approaches, which means that teachers need more training opportunities to learn theories and practice. Exam-oriented assessment is also a factor impeding innovation. The current research helps to explore the state of local pedagogy reform and teachers' voices, which indicates some possible directions for foreign language education development. Eclecticism that advocates combining both traditional and novel means might be a feasible option.*

**Keywords:** *conflicts in policy reform, communicative approaches, teachers' beliefs, EFL pedagogy, rural China*

## 1. Introduction

As globalisation took off in the 1970s, the status of English as the primary international language was reinforced, playing a critical role in global affairs [1]. Learning additional languages, especially English, became a prevalent trend worldwide, and "learning for communication" gradually spread to many traditional teaching contexts, such as Asia. China, as the largest English learning market in the world, is one of the typical contexts and worthwhile to give adequate attention in terms of its current practice. There are signs showing China's effort, such as the Reform of the English Curriculum Standard, but some challenges still remain. One is the rural-urban gap in Chinese education, which causes a considerable disparity in the educational resources between students in cities and the countryside [2]. Regional differences are also a significant problem. Students in developed areas can receive a better education in a more suitable environment. Therefore, it's necessary to consider English policy implementation in China regionally and locally rather than one-fits-all. Rural area is the focus here, which has received scarce attention yet.

Teachers play a critical role in language education. Knowing how teachers, the practitioners implementing teaching methods and strategies, consider and practice these new pedagogical trails is an efficient means to investigate the status of language policy implementation in the target area. With these considerations, this study investigates the status quo of English education and teachers' beliefs about the new policy implementation in rural China.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 China's Curriculum Standard Reform

In 2022, China's Ministry of Education (MOE) published the latest English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education. This aligns with the "Double Reduction" policy issued in 2021, which aims to ease the burden of study for students in compulsory and secondary education [3].

The new standard emphasis is on four "core competencies":



- Language Competence (i.e., the ability to exert language and non-language strategies to comprehend and express);
- Cultural Awareness (i.e., the ability to understand excellent Chinese and foreign cultures and transcultural consciousness);
- Thinking Quality (i.e., characteristics and features of the learner's mindset); and,
- Learning Competence (i.e., the ability and awareness to positively and properly utilise learning strategies, expand learning means and improve learning efficiency).

These competence definitions, although seemingly broad, manifest that China's educational officiality is striving to transform English education from traditional and grammatical to communicative and used-based.

## **2.2 Teachers' beliefs**

Many scholars have defined "beliefs" theoretically but in different research realms. For example, Pajares raises that "belief is based on evaluation and judgment; knowledge is based on objective fact" [4]. Beliefs can also refer to a means that people contextually manipulate their knowledge on a cognitive level [5]. Others also focus on how beliefs affect people's actions. These two aspects, knowledge and practices, are quite significant in discussing teachers' beliefs.

Teachers' beliefs generally touch on educational aspects: investigating teachers' beliefs in language teaching is to elicit their attitudes, judgement, and perception toward a particular language teaching method, model or theory [6]. A multitude of factors may play a role in formulating and alternating teachers' beliefs. Many theorists acknowledge that previous learning and teaching experience is a crucial factor affecting teachers' beliefs. Other factors include socio-educational contexts (e.g., class size and time, institutional situation and educational policy) and teacher training programs.

It will help improve teachers' practice and training programs to understand teachers' beliefs, which are individually differentiated and changeable [7]. Hence, teachers' beliefs of the language policy conduction and implementation are indispensable for the current study.

## **2.3 Factors influencing policy implementation**

Teachers are one of the central roles. Some main issues are teachers' language proficiency and qualifications, large workload and limited time and teachers' understanding of the principles. These are often attributed to teachers but may also be connected to the language educational system.

Many also emphasised the significance of teacher education and training. Also, language policies and curricula cannot be neglected: teachers under top-down policy implementation are at the lowest position in the power conduction and usually have to follow instructions from those higher roles [8]. These restrain teachers from deciding which methods or activities should be used to some extent.

Students' status have been centralised in the classroom for decades, so it's essential to highlight their roles as well. Similar to teachers, students' language proficiency is also a consideration. Teachers in previous studies have reported that students do not have adequate language competency to benefit from communicative pedagogy. Other issues are also highlighted, such as low motivation, passive style, resistance to activities, etc.

In this study, a relatively new stance was added - parent-related factors. Parents play a critical role in students' academic development in school [9] which is highly relevant to young learners' language development, including multilingual competence [10]. However, little attention has to date been paid to its position in China's FL learning context.

## **3. Methodology**

This study is part of a Master's dissertation and was conducted in a rural North-China region with a qualitative research method. Considering the research aims and the desirability of obtaining a suitable sample size, participants were recruited to satisfy two criteria: 1. they must be in-service to ensure that participants are aware of the latest English teaching situations; 2. they must have experience teaching English in local rural primary schools. Six teachers who showed their consent in an online survey participated in the semi-structured interviews. The interview was a follow-up phase from mid to late August. Semi-structured interviews were designed to investigate the teachers' beliefs about new approach implementation and influential factors because it is "sufficiently structured to address specific topics related to the phenomenon of study while leaving space for participants to offer new meanings to the study focus" [11].

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Chinese and then translated into English. The researcher inspected appropriateness and made some adjustments after both



transcription and translation work. This study used thematic analysis, which is a method that "focus[es] on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes" [12]. Teachers' perspectives on communicative teaching approaches and influencing factors discovered by previous studies were referenced for the coding work. Finally, there are 341 codes within four categories: basic cognition, policy implementation, teacher agency, and suggestions.

#### **4. Results and discussion**

In the semi-structured interviews, all six teachers showed positive attitudes towards the novel communicative teaching options. When they were asked about the differences between the communicative and traditional ones they used, most of them were able to point out certain ideas. For instance, T1 thought traditional teaching is to learn more "systematically", while communicative is to "learn as native speakers" and "be in the context". Another teacher T3 mentioned a merged way of using both sides in practice: "Our current so-called audiolingual has been improved [...] we previously proposed a task-based method [...] teachers assign a task [...] [asking] students to read [the text] [...] audiolingual teaching is merging with situational approaches". This indicates that these participants are trying to accept and apply the new pedagogy, even though they have not figured out a clear understanding of it.

Also, there are obstacles to new policy implementation emphasised in the interviews. One is the exam-oriented scheme, which has been discussed many times in previous findings. Nevertheless, based on China's condition, the conflict between communicative language education and the current assessing system, especially the *Gaokao* (a national college entrance exam), is inextricable. The latter cannot be cancelled or replaced in the short term due to its speciality: *Gaokao*, as one of the representatives, has been looking for "a selection mechanism relatively fair and objective" for decades. Another is teachers' misconceptions about the word 'communicative'. T1 thought that it demands more communication between teachers and students. This comment reveals that this teacher was still thinking from a teacher-centred angle. "The so-called communicative teaching has no communicative functionality [...] [because] some teachers' understanding is one-side and not profound enough, [...] including me", T6 criticised. Other factors are also mentioned indirectly, such as teachers' language proficiency, students' individual differences, and students' motivation.

Benefited by the semi-structured form, many teachers presented some unexpected insights, and one surprising facet is about the parents of learners. This topic used to be frequently connected to learners' first language development and bi- or multilingual acquisition. However, under China's traditional parenting style, parents conspicuously leverage Chinese students' studies, including English learning. A tight bond between parents and class was shed light on by T4: they highly care about their children's academic performance in school. However, those parents, who are primarily exam-oriented, "usually focus more on students' scores than on communicative competence", T5 commented. Teachers shared that some parents initially could comprehend these new policies until they got some positive feedback from teachers or their children. Apart from the parents' attitude, their language proficiency is another consideration. T6 contributed to this point: "Generally, those parents in the target rural area had not received tertiary or secondary education, and some had not even completed elementary school." Thus, they even have no idea what is English communicative competence, so they can't get involved in this process.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The findings from the current study illustrate that although many teachers might not be well prepared to embrace the new teaching alternatives, they presented optimistic attitudes toward these. Regarding the new policy still being conducted from the top hierarchy following a top-down manner, teachers still need time to know and practice. Moreover, this study revealed a series of problems and proposed solutions. For example, teachers' competence deficiency, misconceptions and limited agency, students' low proficiency and motivation, parents' over-emphasis on scores and insufficient communication chances are all influential. However, these are all closely related to the policies and institutions. The foremost suggestion given here is to promote and refine the teacher training system. Furthermore, based on China's condition, it is better to mediate and balance the connections between the exam-oriented assessing system and communicative teacher approaches. Research results also suggest that the influence of parents' attitudes and roles is also considerable. Within the EFL context, learners normally spend the most extracurricular time in the family. Thus, parents might be critical in young learners' FL (i.e., English) development. Therefore, how parents as a factor interact with other factors in language policy-making and implementing process needs more exploration and explanation.



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