

The Impact of Teachers' Beliefs and Educational Experiences on EFL Classroom Practices in Secondary Schools

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This article reports on an investigation into the beliefs and educational experiences of secondary EFL teachers in Macau SAR, China. The chief questions addressed are: What beliefs and educational experiences do the teachers have? How do they influence teaching? To what extent are conceptions about effective teaching and learning influenced by the social and work environment? Results show that teacher education has a strong influence on teacher beliefs, but also that there are often even stronger external pressures that constrain teachers in the exercise of beliefs. The issues raised in this article are likely to resemble those in other educational environments in the region, suggesting a degree of generalizability in the findings.

Introduction

Teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning lie at the heart of their practice. Whether consciously held or not, these beliefs have an appreciable impact on teachers' professional lives. If beliefs are given freedom of expression, they maintain morale and give teachers the reassurance that they can bring about effective learning; if they are suppressed or challenged, morale may suffer, teachers may not feel they are giving their best to the learners, and the workplace may seem unrewarding.

Where do these beliefs come from? What factors influence them? To what extent do these factors affect teachers' beliefs and practice? These are the general questions that preoccupy us in the research we present here.

The setting for this research is Macau and in particular ELT in the middle school system. Although, as we shall make clear, the Macau educational environment has certain unique characteristics, there are sufficient similarities to the situation in other countries in north and southeast Asia to persuade us that our findings and conclusions may be applicable elsewhere. What is common to Macau and a number of other educational regimes is the reality that future teachers learn in a highly traditional teacher-centered school; they study teacher education in programs where they are confronted with new approaches to teaching and learning, influenced by trends in Western countries; and then they return as practicing teachers to traditional schools where they commonly face various impediments to the practice of those new approaches.

Research Background

Teacher education is supposed to enhance the effectiveness of teachers' work. However, in education and language education research, it appears that many teachers rely more on their deeply held beliefs about teaching than on the knowledge and skills that they learn from teacher education and professional development programs.

There have been investigations of beliefs of language teachers in Hong Kong, but there are no major studies about Macau language teachers, their beliefs and experience in particular, to date. In fact, throughout the pre- and post-transition period in Macau, there has been very little research at all on second language teaching and second language teachers. Research on teaching has been limited to the areas of Mathematics, History, Ethics and Civic Education, and Primary Education. Why is there a need for research in this area? There are three major reasons.

First, the University of Macau teacher education program has been undertaking periodic curriculum revision. Yet changes are often not informed by local research. The need for a responsive teacher education curriculum is referred to by Li and Kwo (1999) in their study of teacher education in Macau: "It is time to restructure and innovate the curriculum and content of teacher education so that all trained primary and secondary school teachers may be competent and effective teachers equipped with

enough professional knowledge, information technology and professional ethics to face the challenge of change in education” (p. 73).

Second, there has been government intervention to improve Macau education since the 1990s. The government’s Department of Education and the Teacher Education faculty have collaborated to intensify the improvement of teacher quality and expertise. In language teacher education, the government has subsidized professional development courses conducted locally and abroad. Educational change tends to come from above, but despite this, outmoded practices still prevail. Bray, Butler, Hui, Kwo, and Mang (2002) observe:

The 1990s brought much government intervention, support and coordination; but long standing features cannot be changed instantly, and the schools display many characteristics from the past. It is also important to raise teachers’ awareness about their important role in present day Macau and about the need to develop a flexible teaching behavior responsive to new changes. (p. 16)

These researchers further note that the “achievements and constraints” (p. 16) in Macau’s higher education institutions greatly hinge on the “quantity and quality of outputs” (p. 16) from their local schools.

Last of all, from our experience, we note that Macau teachers—both practicing and student teachers—commonly express their frustration in not being able to apply what they have learned from teacher education courses. They often speak of difficulties of implementation. Information on the challenges Macau language teachers face regarding their beliefs and knowledge about teaching English can provide insights that will strengthen the relationship between teacher education practices and Macau English teachers’ professional reality.

Education in Macau

Most of the schools in Macau, whether primary or secondary, are privately run or government subsidized. Private schools, many of them long-established Catholic institutions, are in the majority and only a few are public or government schools. Macau does not have a universal educational system. Secondary schools follow different educational policies according to their objectives, philosophy, and vision. The three most important subjects in secondary schools are English, Chinese, and Mathematics.

This emphasis is reflected in the degrees offered in the Faculty of Education. The four-year Bachelor of Education (Arts and Science) program offers three major specializations: Chinese, English, and Mathematics with minor subjects in IT (Information Technology) and History. The Bachelor of Education (BEd, English Education) is jointly run by the Education Faculty (FED) and the Science and Humanities Faculty (FSH). The majority of the courses for English majors are taught in FSH by lecturers and professors who are mostly native speakers from the UK, the USA, Australia, and Canada, while in FED teaching methodology and education courses such as psychology, sociology, and curriculum are generally taught by foreign-educated local academics. Student teachers get full exposure to English as well as Western approaches to teaching and learning.

The BEd program has a strong focus on language and study skills, language acquisition, linguistics, literary studies, teaching methodology and technology, and it offers two three-week blocks of school teaching experience in the last year of study. In the language teaching methodology courses, student teachers gain knowledge, skills, and practice in different teaching techniques with strong emphasis on the application of learner-centered teaching and other non-traditional approaches.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, the construct of teachers' beliefs makes reference to implicit theories (Marland, 1995) and draws on the definition of beliefs as personal reasoning, evaluation, and judgment intertwined with values, perceptions, and experience. Teachers' beliefs offer teachers a source of alternatives or possibilities during the process of projective thinking in which a teacher is constantly engaged in a process of looking inward, recognizing familiar patterns (beliefs as well as past and present experiences, memories) and looking around (classroom realities, institutional, social, cultural expectations) to find a "fit" to make judgments about what works for a particular group of learners in a particular location.

Richards (1998) identifies two kinds of knowledge that influence teachers' understanding of their work. One kind relates to subject matter and the curriculum as well as how the content of a lesson is conceptualized; another relates to teachers' implicit theories of teaching—"their personal and subjective philosophy and their understanding of what constitutes good teaching" (Richards, 1998, p. 51). Both kinds of knowledge appear to

be manifested in the reflections offered by teachers in this study. They talk about the way they approach their syllabus, the planning and execution of their lessons, and their views on what they do (not always approving). But they also refer to their “philosophy”—the theories they developed from their experience as learners, as students of education, and as practicing teachers.

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes that teachers’ implicit theories and beliefs influence their perception, judgment, and behavior. Johnson (1994, p. 439) summarizes common assumptions of research on teachers’ beliefs. First, teachers’ beliefs influence both perception and judgment, which, in turn, affect what teachers say and do in classrooms. Second, teachers’ beliefs play a critical role in how teachers learn to teach, that is, how they interpret new information about learning and teaching and how the information is translated into classroom practices. Finally, understanding teachers’ beliefs is essential to improving teaching practices and professional teacher preparation programs.

Teachers’ prior beliefs and experience evidently have an effect on present beliefs. It is well documented in both general teacher education and language teacher education that teachers’ school experience, the years spent in classrooms as a pupil and learner, form early conceptions about teaching and learning, referred to as the “the apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975, cited in Richards & Lockhart, 1994, p. 30). These beliefs are sometimes found to be impervious to influence.

Teachers’ early understandings are further shaped by the dominant values of the cultural context. The pressure to conform to expectations about appropriate behavior may compel teachers’ adherence to conservative behavior. There are unrecognized cultural and societal forces in the classroom that influence teachers’ work. As Yero (2002) explains, “The culture of a school is the set of complex relationships among the people in the school—the students, teachers, administrators, support, staff, parents, members of the school board. Each teacher within that culture has personal values. It is difficult to avoid buying into those values” (p. 29). Those values and expectations influence teachers’ conceptions of how teaching should proceed.

Practical imperatives play a significant role in the implementation of beliefs. For example, Brown (2000) reports that teachers cannot easily accommodate new practices, e.g., adopting communicative language teaching (CLT) techniques, because of such realities as class size, teaching materials, textbooks, and pressure from local tradition. The interpretation

of the role of a teacher as an explainer rather than as a guide or facilitator is an instance of the effect of local tradition. Other realities such as prescribed curriculum, lack of resources, and students' level of ability are also very likely to prevent application of beliefs.

All of the above factors can exert powerful influence on teacher belief and practice; in our study, we will see their role revealed by two Macau teachers. It will be seen that early experience of school, as children and adolescents, has a very strong impact on the teachers, even if those teachers feel they have to reject the values that characterized teaching and learning in their early years. School culture frequently restricts independence, and the "realities" evoked by Brown (2000) and Yero (2002) clearly weigh on the teachers, perhaps more heavily so than on teachers in other environments.

Methodology

The approach adopted in the research is essentially ethnographic, providing "a description and an interpretive explanatory account of what people do in a setting, the outcome of their interactions, and the way they understand what they are doing" (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 576). In order to probe teachers' beliefs and experiences, data were gathered from detailed interviews of pre-service and in-service teachers.

The first group of subjects, 30 in number, was drawn from fourth-year pre-service student teachers enrolled in the BEd (English Education) program for secondary school teaching at the University of Macau. They had just finished the second of the two three-week blocks of teaching practice at selected Macau secondary schools. Their ages were between 23 and 25, all female. The second group of subjects consisted of 27 in-service English teachers currently employed at Macau secondary schools, some known to one of the researchers, others not. Their ages ranged from 23 to 35, with years of teaching experience from one to ten. Of the 27, 4 were males, 23 females. Semi-structured open-ended interviews of teachers in the two groups were conducted, with individuals or small groups. Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. Interviews were audio-recorded and written notes were taken during the conversation. Since the focus of this study is a general consideration of teachers' belief systems to gain a greater understanding of language teaching in Macau, the exploration began with past experiences—how those past experiences may have accounted for the formation of beliefs and how those beliefs may relate to their present teaching.

What follows is an overview of the results of the interview study: the major themes and common perceptions. We then offer two short “case studies” of participating teachers, one from each cohort. These teachers are not necessarily “typical” of their cohort—no teacher is—but they certainly express themes that recur throughout the interview data.

Results

Teachers' experience of school and university plays a very significant role in the formation of beliefs about teaching, even if the teachers emerge as critical of their own educational background. Interview questions began with this topic.

All participants studied under a traditional, teacher-dominated, textbook-dependent, grammar-oriented, examination-driven regime at high school. Grammar-translation was the common teaching approach, and there was little experience of learning or practicing the target language through interactive tasks. The emphasis was on structural competence and preparation for and success in tests and examinations.

Both cohorts reported very different experiences at university from those at school, acknowledging their tertiary education as valuable. The two cohorts had slightly varied perceptions, however. The pre-service student teachers credited the Education program with developing their proficiency in English and providing them with the skills to teach innovatively. The in-service teachers, meanwhile, made reference to teaching theories and methodologies (CLT prominent among them), learner-centered approaches and field experience and observation. Some teachers in each cohort worried about the brevity of teaching practice (TP).

The interviewees were asked, “Do you think the way you were taught influences the way you teach now?” The intention was to find out whether the participants adhered to ideas from teacher education or those drawn from prior learning experiences.

Within the pre-service cohort, reactions to the questions were diverse. Seven teachers affirmed the need for grammar input before learning the functional use of language and accepted grammar-translation as an effective teaching method: in this sense they reviewed their earlier learning experience favorably. But they also talked about the importance of *language use* and thus mentioned less traditional activities like games, storytelling, and discussions. Ten teachers referred to the negative influence of past experiences and showed disdain for such practices as

memorizing and copying words, oral repetition, dominance of teacher talk, and the use of translation in the teaching of reading. Eleven teachers claimed that they did not have time to reflect on beliefs because in their TP they were too busy managing test preparation and making sure they satisfied the expectation of mentors, students, and the school.

Interestingly, over half of the in-service teachers believed in the efficacy of traditional instruction, evident in the value they placed on grammar-oriented teaching, which entailed memorization of rules and error correction. Only four teachers rejected the way they were taught at high school and preferred the sort of innovative approaches they learned at university. Others, still a minority, expressed a readiness for compromise: they prized the knowledge of language they gained from school but, influenced by teacher education, acknowledged that mere knowledge of language was insufficient to function in real communication. Despite this ambivalence, they still thought traditional teaching best served them to meet contextual demands and realities.

This last point turns out to be highly significant for our study, for it appears again, with frequent illustrations, in the great majority of both cohorts' responses to the question "To what extent does social and work environment affect your practice?"

One in-service teacher reflected a view, pervasive among her colleagues, that the work was "really difficult, killing, and suffocating." Some of the frustrating realities were large classes; overloaded curriculum content; pressure of examinations leaving no time for creative teaching; pressure of expectations of students, fellow teachers, and parents; poor motivation of students; disciplining the students and attending to their "morality." The pre-service teachers had their own list of contextual constraints: they too mentioned the problem of large class size and discipline (for example, noisy students doing communicative activities might attract the principal's displeasure). Some added that the allotted time for the lesson was too short to allow creative activities and forced them to stick more closely to the syllabus. Teachers found the students unfamiliar with and resistant to CLT because, for instance, the other teachers did not practice it and the students' proficiency was too low for it to work.

Ultimately, both cohorts felt much in the daily work that was beyond their control. The clear result of these realities is the frustration they could not do all that they wished to do in their teaching. Thus, the matter of whether their beliefs were largely traditional, non-traditional, or a

compromise is to a certain extent irrelevant: the external constraints guided them in their professional practice. Those teachers who would have liked to implement CLT, as promoted in their teacher education program, found it hard or impossible to do.

Two Case Studies

In this section, we present case studies of Renee and Ina (pseudonyms). At the time of the interview, Renee had just completed her second three-week period of EFL teaching practice at a typical Macau secondary school, fulfilling the requirements of her BEd at the University of Macau. Ina has worked as a qualified EFL teacher for two years, also at a typical secondary school. She is a graduate of the University of Macau.

Case Study 1: Renee

Experiences and Emergence of Beliefs

At high school. Renee reported that at high school she had two “totally” different learning experiences studying in the two sections of the same school, Chinese-medium and English-medium:

In Chinese section, we have to memorize the questions, for example, just memorize the questions and the exercise behind ... at the back of the passage. When we have the test and the answer and the question and the answer is the same as in the book. It is very easy to get a high mark. So I just think I have confidence with my English, but when I go to English section I think ... it's very different. We have to make use of the language. We have to speak and write in English but in high school we don't have the chance to speak English very much because I think the teaching model is quite traditional....

Renee viewed her overall high school learning experience in English as “traditional,” because, even in the English section, using the target language was only for the purpose of accomplishing reading and writing tasks, and innovative teaching and learning activities were absent. The focus of teaching was to prepare students for tests and exams, and learning was evaluated in a brisk question-and-answer exchange: “They just ask, you just pick up the chips, and [they] ask you to answer all the questions one by one ... we do all the exercises. No games, no competitions. Just very, very traditional and actually we learned English by ourselves because we have the test.”

However, she felt learning experiences in both sections had some beneficial effect on her as a learner. In the Chinese section, faithful memorization gave her high marks, which built up her confidence in learning the language. In the English section, she noticed a remarkable improvement in her proficiency, which she attributes to total exposure to the target language. She felt she was “forced” to learn the language since all subjects were taught through the medium of English.

At the university. When asked about her learning experiences at the university, Renee reported that she had expected to be taught the way she was taught by teachers in the past: “Before we go to UMAC [the University of Macau], I think teaching is just like that, it’s just like what we were taught in high school.” In the teacher education program, she learned that there are different ways to go about teaching and bring about good teaching: “After we entered and studied in the Faculty of Education, there is a lot of methods, we can do a lot more, actually, but I can see quality lesson. I’m impressed.”

Giving her overall impression about the learning she gained from the university, Renee said that she appreciated the knowledge and skills she acquired and chose what was applicable in her teaching situation when she did her actual teaching practice. She claimed that the language methodology course made her understand the practical application of innovative approaches, and during her practice she used those practical ideas. She valued both the theoretical and practical knowledge and emphasized how she grew to recognize the value of using only English in the class, an important tenet of CLT. From her reflections about her learning experience at the university, Renee appeared to be stimulated and inspired by new teaching and learning experiences.

Influence of Beliefs on Teaching

Probed about her beliefs, Renee was asked: “To what extent do you think your past learning experiences influence the way you teach now?” She responded that experiences of both school and university were important. For example, she now believed, as she learnt at the university, that English should be used to teach English, and acknowledged the negative experience of her high school when English was taught through Chinese. Renee recounted the difficulty she has had teaching in a Chinese school where she felt that her new beliefs conflicted with the teaching

expectations of her students. For example, she started teaching her class using “80%” English, but the students complained to her mentor. She reports that in a Chinese school “they [the students] refuse to listen to English and they just think it’s a waste of time,” and every time she used English “they just sleep and talk and sometimes fight.” She strongly believed that using more English in teaching is useful for improving her students’ proficiency as well as her own, but insisted that the students’ poor proficiency level and lack of interest in participation made it difficult to conduct the lesson and its various activities (e.g., mind-mapping) using only English. She then reverted to using Chinese. From this experience emerged the belief that “you [teachers] can actually teach more things if you [they] use Chinese.” Renee therefore faced a dilemma in applying her beliefs: “If I use Chinese I think it is quite in conflict with what I was taught in the university, because you have to use English [to teach English], but they don’t understand, so I don’t know how to do it.”

Renee also mentioned another instance when she felt tension in her beliefs. She believed that promoting new and (for her students) unfamiliar reading strategies is “ideal” for developing reading skills, but she found that students refused to engage in this kind of learning so she felt the futility of the attempt. In the end she only applied it when the students were consciously better behaved, that is, when her teaching practice supervisor came to visit the school. In short, Renee felt that her new beliefs were difficult to implement, thwarted by her students’ own beliefs, expectations, and the routine practices in the school.

Other Influences on Teaching

In addition to the above constraining factors, there were “significant people” whose expectations Renee could not ignore. One was her school-appointed mentor whose power she felt strongly. Though the mentor was supportive and tried to make Renee understand the reality and not be crushed by it—not feel discouraged if she could not apply all her new teaching ideas, she appeared to be trying to attune Renee’s teaching to the expectations of the students and the school conventions. It appears that the mentor felt she was helping Renee to understand the local teaching realities that should not be challenged. An additional pressure came from her university-based TP supervisor who naturally expected that Renee would apply what she learned from the teacher education program. Because Renee’s teaching ability was evaluated against a list of categories of

teaching skills and knowledge reflecting the program's conception of teaching competence, Renee had to carefully rehearse her teaching approach before the teaching observation visit. The TP threw into relief the disparity between what she was supposed to achieve and what she actually did from day to day. Her principal was also a cause of strain for Renee: she knew he was interested in supporting the sort of innovative teaching that she valued, but she felt her priority was to finish the chapters assigned by the mentor, which left no time for any interesting new approaches. A more significant stress factor was the administrative demand to complete the school syllabus, to cover all the material at the proper pace and by the right time. These complex demands from different sources left Renee frustrated. As she confessed, "I just feel quite depressed at the beginning but later I feel bad because I have to make adjustments between myself and my teaching and my school."

Conclusion: Renee

All in all, Renee had compromised on the beliefs that she carried with her into TP and would probably regard herself now as more "realistic." As she said, "They [mentors] told you that you have to face the reality. You can have your own fantasy, you have your dream, but there is always a line between the fantasy and reality. Maybe when we become a [full-time] teacher, we can have good control of the class." Yet she had not abandoned innovativeness in teaching: "I will not just follow my mentor's instructions when I become a teacher in the future, I will have my own way and then I will combine them, their ways too." She knew that compromise is necessary and appeared not to be disheartened by the prospect. Despite the sense of defeat that she occasionally expressed, she maintained her professional commitment. She said, "I think before you really engage in teaching you really must ensure that you are really hardworking and a responsible person, and you have to teach with your brain and heart." The self-perception that emerged from the interview with Renee suggested that she would view herself as hardworking and responsible.

Case Study 2: Ina

Ina has two years' experience teaching English at an exclusive religious school. She teaches all English subjects in the junior secondary level forms and also teaches a non-language subject at the senior level. She herself studied at a religious school in Macau.

Experience and Emergence of Beliefs

At high school. Ina spent her high school years at an English-medium secondary school. However, the program was not what most educationists would regard as “enlightened.” She reported studying English under grammar-oriented instruction in which heavy emphasis was given to grammar mastery and memorization of rules. Her prior learning experience was encapsulated thus: “The way I learned in secondary, rules and rules and rules, which I think is actually quite boring and not really useful because ... you can remember the rules very well ... but you don’t know how to use it [sic].”

Ina seemed to disapprove of grammar-oriented teaching that focused heavily on mastery and memorization of grammar rules for test or examination purposes. She viewed this approach “boring” and “not useful.” She questioned the grammar teaching approach that did not provide practice in language use. If students could not apply the rules to exercises, then, she thought, memorization of grammar rules was illogical. As a result of this experience at high school, Ina expressed the belief that in grammar teaching, the teaching of rules had no use. This belief manifested itself in her classroom teaching: “For (teaching) grammar, I don’t like explaining rules; I think drills are better, I try to give them more examples, a lot of exercises, and a lot of drills, sometimes play games.”

At the university. When asked to talk about her learning experiences in the teacher education program, Ina acknowledged the value of language teaching theories she learned: “It influenced me a lot.” She described how the learning experiences in the program enhanced her understanding of teaching: “a lot of conscious [thinking] inside my mind.” It seems that Ina left the university seeing herself as an English teacher equipped with a host of new ideas and skills: “I have a lot of dreams that I am going to play games with them, a lot of teaching aids.”

Influence of Beliefs on Teaching

Ina was asked about the extent to which the ways she was taught or learned English in the past affect her present practice. It appeared from her response that she takes a dim view of her past experience: “I learned from the past that I should not do that again, because, for example, not just reading the text, not just all those boring stuff, because you know, I was a student before and I know it doesn’t work, because students are so bored

daydreaming. You can't get their attention and that's useless ... you are wasting students' time."

In the light of experience, Ina stated that she now feels that teaching focusing only on superficial coverage of the syllabus does not promote effective learning. For instance, teaching reading was not simply about "just reading the text," that is, getting students to read the text quietly in their seats and answer basic comprehension questions so that one gets to the end of the syllabus on time and apparently ready for the big test. She added, "If you are going to rush, students can't get [learn] anything." Ina explained that now when she teaches, for example, a vocabulary lesson, she is more flexible with time and gives students opportunities to talk about their interests before she starts the main content of the lesson.

The learner-centered and humanistic approaches fostered in teacher education had a profound effect on Ina. She said she has become more learner-centered in her teaching, consciously employing communication-oriented teaching strategies. For example, she uses role-play because she believes that it enhances the speaking ability of the learners as it offers them the chance to "speak aloud," that is, to practice saying words or sentences confidently in the target language, regardless of their mistakes in grammar and pronunciation. She stated that this strategy worked for the majority of her students while songs worked for the shy ones.

Ina also believed that marks are useful incentives in building the self-confidence of students and getting their participation. She knew that students value marks, and she recognized the importance of encouraging student participation through this incentive. Ina also thought that learning of the target language should not be confined to learning English from the textbook, so she brought in other resources such as pictures designed to enliven textbook teaching by providing a context for discussion of topics close to their lives. She found the textbook "terrible" and noted that it contained mistakes. In sum, Ina's language teaching strategies revealed an instructional approach that tries to develop learners' interest in the language and get them to talk.

Indeed, raising learners' motivation seemed to be a very important project for Ina. She believed that liking English is a condition of being good at it: "You have to like something before you learn it." She compared language learning to gaining skill in sports (e.g., learning to play football or learning how to ride a bicycle).

But at the start of her teaching experience what Ina found was that, confronting her ideas of motivation, her students "hated" English: "They

don't like it and they are scared of it." The students demanded the use of Chinese, claiming they did not understand her when she used English only in her teaching. So she used the strategy described above of choosing topics and references close to the students' lives. For instance, since she was teaching teenage boys, she introduced the discussion topic of dating foreign girls. She said that she uses only English in class, refusing to give in to students' demand for Chinese, and uses "easy words" to assist comprehension of difficult material.

Other Influences on Teaching

Despite this success, Ina claimed that it was far from easy for her to implement beliefs and skills gained from the teacher education program: "If you're really in the classroom I think it's really hard to ... use the theories, because we don't have the time." Ina thought that many beginning teachers have various plans, derived from their Education courses, about how to go about teaching, but the "system" confronted them, and they found that some of the things they wanted to do were not allowed:

The first year when I go, I am full of dreams, the second year, no more, because when you say you want to do that, no, no, it's not allowed, so there's a lot of problems about that, especially when in Form Two, three teachers teaching four classes and I'm teaching two classes, it's really hard for you to make certain decisions, so it's really hard to force, to do something that sometimes I don't really like, so sometimes I'm not really happy, but whenever I am with my students, I am happy again.

In her second year of teaching, Ina persisted with her beliefs, though with less struggle. Sometimes she felt the pressure of succumbing to practices she disapproves of, for example, getting students to memorize grammar rules or giving more homework to students. As regards the latter, she believed that giving homework is a waste of time since students just copy from each other, but, she lamented, parents complain if their children are not given "enough" homework.

It was no surprise then that Ina has found it very hard to initiate innovative teaching and change in the established school practices. She noted that there are too many constraining factors in the system—tests, exams, assignments and rigid syllabus, not to mention the disapproval of older, disapproving colleagues. However, she stated that she does manage to make changes in her own classroom.

Conclusion: Ina

Ina found that applying her beliefs from past experiences was not easy. But to her, “the teacher should believe in oneself even if the system and fellow teachers aren’t helpful. That way, you can still achieve your goals, dreams as a teacher.”

Ina reported that, throughout her classroom teaching experience, she has tried out her beliefs and knowledge, and from these efforts, she has formed personal teaching principles about successful learning of English. She evidently felt that motivation is significant above all: you have to like it before you can learn it.

The interview revealed that Ina sees herself as an innovator who has tenacious beliefs about English and definite views on effective and ineffective ways of teaching and learning it. She had a strong determination to implement her CLT-oriented beliefs despite obstacles. As she advised future teachers, “There will be a lot of things around you, trying to disturb you ... what you believe. You have to believe, you have to be really strong....” Ina became more flexible with her practice after two years of teaching, having wrestled with the sort of challenges that Renee encountered, and thought she would adhere to what she believes: “I’ll try my best to stay the way I am.”

Discussion and Implications

Both participants revealed that prior learning experiences as well-remembered events have shaped their views about teaching and learning. They narrated with strong emotion and clarity how they were taught or learned English in high school: “rules, rules, rules,” “boring,” “I know I should not do that again,” “[teachers] ask you to answer all the questions one by one,” “no games, no competitions.”

The case studies demonstrated that teachers’ beliefs may be influenced by their reaction to values within the culture. Ina, for example, did not believe in giving too much homework since students simply copy from each other without understanding, but parents demand more homework as a measure of “learning.” Teachers might thus find it difficult to accept the values that encircle them.

In addition, we found that teachers’ beliefs are undoubtedly influenced by classroom experience. According to Marland (1995), “Whereas opinion is divided as to the impact of on-campus components of pre-service

programs on implicit theories, there is no such ambivalence about the effects of classroom experience" (p. 133). Renee provided an example of this influence in her belief that "you can actually teach more if you use Chinese" for teaching English. Though an idea not endorsed by her university teachers, it emerged from her practicum classroom experience when she realized that using English slowed down her coverage of the syllabus.

In this study it was also found that all teachers faced constraints coming from teaching and school realities. This finding is consistent with evidence in educational literature of "social, psychological and environmental realities that constrain teachers' ability to practice what they believe" (Borg, 2003, p. 94). As regards specific evidence of hindrance, both Renee and Ina mentioned factors that prevent application of new ways of teaching and learning. Examples of such factors included large class size; textbook teaching; exam-driven curriculum; the learners' instinct to memorize and try to master knowledge through repetition; the learners' pressure on the teacher to use Chinese instead of English. Ina also reported external social forces, such as parents' expectations about knowledge and learning. These contextual and social forces were found to inhibit change to the direction of student-centered teaching, which the two teachers would like to encourage.

The study found that Renee appears to have suspended some of her beliefs because she felt she lacked the autonomy and power. Ina, by contrast, has refused to dislodge her belief about the potential of learner-centered teaching, despite obstacles. It seems that what Ina has that Renee lacks is the energy to experiment with her teaching principles; Renee does not have Ina's tenacity and sense of challenge. However, we cannot criticize Renee too severely: she simply needs encouragement to stick to her beliefs and above all she needs more time and experience. Six weeks of TP in the two-semester TP block were not enough to allow her to grow in confidence.

It appears that Ina has shown professional skills and adaptability that came from her two years of teaching and from understanding the relationship between her pedagogical choices and the context in which she works. She is able to project what will work and not work. She has learned how to negotiate with her students about the value of being taught in English and of certain new approaches that she brings to them. Committed to at least trying to implement the learner-centered mode of teaching, Ina

is “open to change, and ... able to react flexibly to the needs of her students and of the educational context within which she is working” (Tudor, 1996, p. 231).

Meanwhile, Renee was concerned with establishing control, classroom management, and fitting into the system that she wants to work *with* rather than against. With little chance of experimentation and no support from the students and the mentor, Renee fell easily back into the teaching approach she knew as a learner.

Arising from this research are important implications for language teacher education in Macau, the schools, and even the society itself whose attitudes make “good teaching” so difficult to practice in Macau. We merely isolate three major implications for teacher education, changes that we believe are manageable:

1. One implication for pre-service teacher education is clear: the importance of providing a longer teaching practicum period to enable novice teachers to express their beliefs and knowledge about effective teaching and learning and to develop professional skills and flexibility. Teacher education authorities should increase collaboration with Macau secondary schools to this end. Unfortunately, there are still many schools that do not offer teaching practice placement to student teachers, apparently not wanting to disturb their routine and delay the completion of the curriculum.
2. In the light of the experience of Renee and other novice teachers in the study, it is also recommended that more cooperation and rapport be fostered between mentors, who are usually senior teachers, and young student teachers before, during, and after the school experience. Teachers like Renee tend to feel alone and unsupported too much. We propose that more experienced teachers or mentors be invited to the Teacher Education Faculty to share their knowledge, beliefs, and experiences with pre-service teachers.
3. Renee’s and Ina’s perceptions of the teaching profession reveals an untapped knowledge base in language teacher education. Their stories and comments, as well as those of other participants in this research, should find a place in the language teacher education curriculum. Education students are aware of many of the realities they will have to face in the schools, but the program does not at present offer enough discussion of them, of the practical ways to navigate through them.

Conclusion

Renee and Ina have told us, with, we sense, remarkable candor, about their experiences as learners of EFL and of EFL teacher education, as well as about the challenges of teaching English in schools and classrooms and how their beliefs about teaching grew out of their diverse experiences.

Their narratives are in a sense a grand illustration of what Richards (1998) calls “the teacher-as-thinker metaphor” (p. 65), in his view an extremely important development in second language teacher education. Instead of taking the learning of teaching skills as simply “the mastery of general principles and theories that have been determined by others,” he states, “the acquisition of teaching expertise is seen to be a process that involves the teacher in actively constructing a personal and workable theory of teaching” (p. 65). Renee and Ina may be said to be struggling to construct such a theory in order to survive as confident professionals. But in their circumstances, the theory has to be necessarily compromised. Prominent among these circumstances are socio-cultural and educational constraints under which a huge number of language teachers in the world labor and about which so little has been written—constraints such as large classes, unmotivated learners, pressure to use L1, an examination-driven syllabus, a conservative school culture.

Although our study can have only limited external validity, it should appeal to those concerned for English language education elsewhere. In both developed and developing countries of the region, there is among language teachers a “conflict or mismatch between old and new perceptions and, more seriously, a threat to prevailing routines and to the sense of security dependent upon them” (Prahbu, 1987, p. 105, cited in Tudor, 1996, p. 232). The present research, we hope, urges teacher educators in Macau and similar educational environments to review the sense in which their programs prepare student teachers for the phenomenon that has often been referred to in this paper, “the realities.” Clearly we do not advocate advising teachers to surrender to them; we advocate acknowledging them as fully as possible, understanding them, making judicious compromises if necessary, and trying to change them. We hope too that this research offers language teachers and teacher-educators a vivid insight into the working lives of teachers who struggle hard to apply what they believe, giving them some courage to deal with the constraints that they face.

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