

Reflection, Change, and Reconstruction
in the Context of Educational Reform
and Innovation in China

Reflection, Change, and Reconstruction
in the Context of Educational Reform
and Innovation in China:
Towards an Integrated Framework Centred
On Reflective Teaching Practice for EFL
Teachers' Professional Development

By

Yuhong Jiang

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Reflection, Change, and Reconstruction in the Context of Educational Reform and Innovation in China:
Towards an Integrated Framework Centred on Reflective Teaching Practice for EFL Teachers'
Professional Development,
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To my parents, husband, and daughter

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS/GLOSSARY OF TERMS

CPD	Continuing Professional Development
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
ESL	English as a Second Language
FL	Foreign Language
INSERT	In-service Education and Training
KEEP	Keele Effective Educators Project
L2	Second Language
LTE	Language Teacher Education
SLTE	Second Language Teacher Education
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
TEM	Test for English Majors
TKT	Teaching Knowledge Test

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PART I:
INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the question of the impact of reflection on teaching, focusing on whether and how reflection can be used as a tool for supporting university in-service English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) teacher professional development and change in pedagogical beliefs and practice in the context of English language teaching (henceforth ELT) reform and teacher education reform within the wider educational change in China. The empirical basis of this study is that of university teachers of EFL in China who are enrolled on a teacher preparation programme which introduces them to the principles and practice of reflective teaching. The context of national, government-sponsored reform of English language teaching and of teacher education provides the policy background to this study. Adopting a qualitatively dominant mixed-methods approach, the present study analyses the participant teachers' responses to questionnaires, answers to interviews, retrospective reports and writings about their experiences of involvement in reflective practice, with a focus on development and enhancement of their education philosophy, teacher beliefs, and practice of teaching over the duration of the programme.

This chapter starts by outlining the rationale for the present study. The aims and purpose of the study are then presented, followed by an outline of the organisation and structure of the book as a whole.

1.1 A brief research background

1.1.1 The current state of teacher education reform in China

Entering the 21st century, teacher education in China faces a number of challenges. With the rapid economic, social and political change, scientific and technological upswing, the spread of economic globalisation, and increasingly fierce international competition, human resources have displayed a more and more important role in boosting the overall national strength of the country. To meet the demands of a globalised world, foreign language education is seen as an important part of civic education in countries around the world. Many countries have made developing

high-quality education their fundamental state policy and have prioritised teacher education and teacher development in educational planning. In the era of political, economic and social transformation and in the circumstances of gradually increasing educational reform in China, the status and role of English, English education and English teachers are becoming more prominent:

The 21st century is a globally new era of knowledge information. The challenges we meet decide the teaching objectives and standards for educating English majors in higher institutions in our country. (Ministry of Education of China, 2000)

The 21st century is a globally new era of high technology and of a transition from the industrial society to the information society. The rapid development of scientific technology, emergence of new interdisciplinary subjects, mutual penetration and fusion of humanism culture and scientism culture, the society informatisation and the quick changes in the communication technology of knowledge and information strengthen the exchange, impact and integration between different cultures in the world. At the turn of the new century, we must realise clearly the opportunities and challenges which are brought about to the foreign language education in our country by the new century. [...]. The foreign language teachers are the principal agents in foreign language teaching and reform in our country. The reform of education of foreign language majors in the 21st century will also depend on them. (Ministry of Education, 1998)

Education is the foundation of everything. The progress of education depends on the teachers. Enhancing the quality of teacher education is a crucial mission in implementing the tactics to rejuvenate China through science and technology. (Ministry of Education, 2002)

Some Chinese sayings, such as “It takes ten years to nurture trees but a hundred years to rear people”, “The revitalisation of a nation depends on education”, “The foundation of developing the country through science and education lies in education”, “Teachers hold the key to education reform”, and “The quality of the teacher determines the quality of education” aptly illustrate the growing importance of education and teacher quality for both individuals and the nation. Therefore there is a growing sense of urgency about developing effective teachers. It has been argued that educational philosophy, theoretical attainment, pedagogical skills and techniques, and language competence are all essential factors restricting or facilitating language teachers’ professional development (Dai & Ren, 2006; Liu & Dai, 2003; Shu, 2004; Wu, 2005; Wu, 2008; Wang et al. 2008; Xia, 2002). However, the traditional teacher training model in China merely emphasises inculcating theories, instructional skills and methods to teachers but fails to show them how theory can be used to

support practice. Moreover, these skills and techniques are isolated from the reality of teachers' classroom practice and thus lead to difficulty in actually employing them effectively. In China, the term "teacher professional development" is understood by researchers as something which encourages teachers to reflect on their own teaching, to observe and evaluate teaching behaviour, teaching processes and the intrinsic teacher cognitions that cause this behaviour, thereby integrating classroom practice and educational approach (Dai & Ren, 2006; Liu, 2008; Wu, 2005; Zhang, 2004).

In China, in-service teacher education is regarded as the main channel for teachers either to obtain professional knowledge and skills and to promote personal growth, or to adapt themselves to the different requirements of the changing society in the context of the current educational reform, and thus has become a dominant trend in preparing teachers (Zhang et al., 2008). What I mean by in-service foreign language teacher education in this study is the continuing professional development of university teachers of English as a foreign language in China. Since the introduction of a series of new national curricula by the Ministry of Education of China for teaching English as a foreign language (henceforth TEFL) in universities since 2000, the professional development of university EFL teachers has been given much importance because of the perceived role that the English language and EFL teachers can play in the modernisation programme and drive for educational reform in China. The rationale for prioritising English language teaching has stemmed from the view that English language plays a pivotal role in supporting scientific and technological advances, enhancing national competitiveness, dealing with the unprecedented challenges of globalisation, and meeting the needs of China's social, economic and political development and international exchanges (Liu, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2004, 2007). Given the fundamental role of English in the modernisation endeavour in China, EFL teacher preparation or education has come to acquire a vital importance (Li, 1999; Lo, 1984; Paine, 1991, 1995). Consequently, EFL teacher preparation has received a great deal of attention and support ever since the 1990s. For example, several new policies concerning teacher education in general and language teacher education in particular have been enacted, the most important ones being: *Suggestions for Undergraduate Education Reform of Foreign Language Majors towards the 21st Century* (Ministry of Education, 1998), *The National Education Programme for Key EFL Teachers in Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ministry of Education, 2000), *Opinions about the Reform and Development of Teacher Education during the Tenth Five-Year Plan* (Ministry of Education, 2002). More recently, two new national curricula for English language teaching in

universities and colleges were enacted in 2000 and 2007 respectively: *The National English Syllabus for English Majors in Institutions of Higher Education* (Ministry of Education, 2000), *The College English Curriculum Requirements* (Ministry of Education, 2007), and an array of government guidelines have emerged, such as *The Project of Tuition-Free Education for Normal University and College Students* (Ministry of Education, 2007), *The Project Plan of Constructing Platforms for Teacher Education Innovation* (Ministry of Education, 2009), and *The National Teacher Training Programme for Elementary and Secondary School Teachers* (Ministry of Education & Ministry of Finance, 2010), *The Guidelines for the National Programme for Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development in 2010-2020* (Ministry of Education & State Council, 2010). The guidelines state that the Chinese government insists on giving priority to the development of education and the innovation of the teacher education model, emphasising the link between pre- and in-service teacher education, reinforcing practice of classroom teaching, and promoting teacher lifelong learning and professional development. Moreover, they focus on improving teachers' attitudes, beliefs and philosophy as well as improving the overall quality of teachers. In order to develop a high-quality teaching staff, it is important to raise the level of teachers' professional understanding and expertise, and to strengthen the teacher education system. Specifically, the two new national curricula explicitly identify the teaching objectives of English in the 21st century as the cultivation of all-round talent in students who are expected to have good language skills, a wide range of knowledge, open-mindedness, an innovative spirit, and practical ability. In fulfilling these requirements, EFL teachers encounter new challenges that require them to enhance their own qualities and teaching capability. In addition, some efforts have been made to reform the course design, objectives, teaching materials, teaching requirements, instructional principles, teaching methods, and assessment procedures for pre- and in-service teacher education programmes (Adamson, 1995; Li, 2000). All these efforts show that policy-makers and teacher educators are well aware of the necessity to bring about innovation in the current teacher education system to prepare teachers for their professional renewal. Nonetheless, the present situation in China is that, generally speaking, there is a separation between government policies and practical situations and it is difficult to achieve an integration of these two aspects. Furthermore, the research in the area of English language teacher education is lacking in China due to its relatively recent emergence as a research topic. Consequently, more in-depth empirical research is needed to obtain a better understanding of the complex process of teacher growth

in order to inform the practice of bringing about innovation in teacher preparation in the current context of educational change.

In the light of the current state outlined above, I consider it worthwhile to investigate the construction and evolution of teachers' thinking about, and practice in, English language teaching in China. Following Posner's (1989) famous formula: "practice + reflection = teachers' professional growth", my personal experience of teaching English as a foreign language in a university in China and as a teacher trainer for more than 17 years has led me to seek effective strategies and ways to develop EFL teachers' thinking and practice in their profession from the perspective of reflective practice. By "construction and evolution of teachers' thinking and practice" I refer to the dynamic and on-going process by which teachers improve their thinking and practice through consideration of various aspects of their teaching and situate their thinking and practice within the wider relationship to the social, economic and educational reform contexts in China. By "the perspective of reflective practice" I mean the approach to English language teaching and teacher education which is oriented towards reflective practice. The issue in China at the moment is that the bulk of research on EFL teaching has focused on effective teaching behaviours, teaching methods, teaching models, and positive learner outcomes that are believed to enhance language learning (Chaudron, 1988). The importance of exploring the cognitive dimensions of how EFL teachers' thoughts, judgments, and decisions might influence the nature of language instruction (Freeman, 1989; Johnson, 1992a, 1992b; Richards & Nunan, 1990) has been neglected by teacher educators and teachers themselves though recent studies have marked a welcome beginning (Liu, 2008; Wu, 2005; Zhang, 2004). This sparked my interest in discovering teachers' views about their teaching, the frequency and nature of their reflection, and to go deeper, in finding out whether their critical reflection on teaching might lead to development of their thinking and practice and, in turn, might contribute to their professional growth. Such explorations are necessary because they help to generate insight into the unique filter through which EFL teachers make instructional decisions, choose instructional materials, and select certain instructional practices over others. Moreover, such explorations are essential if we want to determine how teachers conceptualise their teaching experiences, interpret new information about EFL teaching, and translate this information into classroom practices (Johnson, 1994). It is assumed that teachers who are better informed as to the nature of their teaching are able to evaluate their stage of professional growth and what aspects of their teaching they need to change. In addition, when critical reflection is seen as an ongoing

process and a routine part of teaching, it enables teachers to feel more confident in trying out different options and assessing their effects on teaching (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). As Kullman (1998) points out, reflection will lead to a greater awareness among student teachers of what constitutes appropriate pedagogic practice and will lay the foundations for development. Reflection thus might encourage teachers to be more inclined to change their beliefs, if necessary, in relation to classroom teaching. The more teachers engage in reflective activities, the more likely that they would be ready to change their beliefs in the light of their experience of teaching. In fact, Pennington (1996) examines the relationship between reflectivity and change in eight Hong Kong secondary teachers and has found that reflective training is useful in changing some of the teachers' attitudes toward process-writing. In the light of these assumptions and prior findings, an in-depth multiple-case study of teacher professional development centred on critical reflection of classroom practice is justified. This PhD study sought to ascertain whether a reflective approach to teaching might facilitate teachers' professional growth, and if so, how, and to what extent.

1.1.2 The developmental perspective of teacher growth in the study

In-service teachers of English as a foreign language by definition have already had a certain amount of teaching experience before they joined the intervention programme. Such prior experience has considerable impact not only on teachers' beliefs about teaching English but also on their classroom practice. That is to say, teachers' understanding of, and practice in, English teaching can be assumed to be shaped both by their previous history and by their present English teaching circumstances. Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding of the evolution of teachers' thinking and practice, it is crucial to take a developmental view and to examine teachers' experiences from a developmental perspective, seeking to understand how teacher beliefs and practices may have shifted from the beginning to the end of the intervention programme. As it is difficult to transform teacher beliefs and thinking once they have become established, investigation into teacher growth should focus on its evolutionary process and nature. Nevertheless, very little research has been conducted on how EFL teachers' engagement in reflective teaching practice has an impact on their thinking and practice from such a viewpoint (Franke et al., 1998; Freeman, 1996; Lee, 2004). Teaching has been described as consisting of more than behaviour (Kagan, 1988; Shulman, 1986), and as "thoughtful

work” (Freeman, 1990). Recently, a growing body of research and policy-making has taken as its point of departure the idea that teachers construct their understandings of classroom practice through various forms of experience (Kennedy, 1992; NCRTE, 1988, as cited in Freeman & Richards, 1996: 221). However, Freeman (1996: 221) has argued that “the specific mechanisms by which teachers construct new understandings of classroom practice through the experience of teacher education have not been closely studied”. He (*ibid.*: 222) goes on:

If one looks at the behavioural side, teacher education seems to have minimal impact on classroom teaching. If, however, one examines the participants’ perceptions of what they are learning in such programmes, a more complex view begins to emerge. To do so entails a shift in research perspective from examining actions to examining the perceptions on which those actions are based.

Thus analysis of the dynamics of teacher change and identifying patterns of change from a developmental perspective is essential to better understand teacher growth. However,

Teacher education models and modes of organisation should be diversified. The way of participatory training is advocated and school-based teacher education should be brought into full play in order to really enhance the pertinence and pragmatism of teacher education. (Ministry of Education, 2002)

Thus participatory training and school-based teacher education are emphasised in the whole process of my teacher preparation programme. Furthermore, the mode of experiential teaching and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Fry, 1975; Kolb & Kolb, 2001) is employed because they are more conducive to nurturing teachers’ reflective ability than the traditional teaching mode of lecture-style indoctrination (Weaver & Cohen, 1997). In addition, the research strategy of a qualitatively dominant mixed-methods approach, highlighting case study, is adopted to investigate teacher change. Interaction, group discussion and research, collaborative study, inquiry and self-exploration teaching are intertwined in the process of the programme. The advantage of these approaches is that they have a unique developmental perspective in probing into the evolution and reconstruction of teacher thinking and practice in the course of engagement in reflective practice. In fact, the main research stance of my study is to develop an interrelated and developmental understanding of teacher growth from the perspective of reflective practice. These characteristics are different from the previous studies and are unique to my study.

1.2 The purpose and aims of the study

The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of how engagement in reflective practice has an impact on university in-service EFL teachers' thinking about teaching and on their classroom practice, and how the teachers' beliefs about English teaching and their practice in the classroom are transformed and developed over the course of the preparation programme. In the context of the new requirements of educational reform and the standards of the new national English curriculum in China, the study investigates whether the approach towards using reflection as a tool for change can be shown to be appropriate and effective for EFL teachers' professional development. The primary reason for conducting this unique study is that there is little work that has been done from a developmental perspective, employing a mixed-method approach in the Chinese context. The mixed-methods research design is adopted in order to obtain quantitative data in the form of questionnaire responses which were probed in greater depth through analysis of a range of qualitative data. In the quantitative data collection phase, the participants' views about a range of issues connected with reflective teaching were elicited. The views of three groups of teachers were investigated and compared in relation to the development of their thinking and teaching during the course of the teacher preparation programme. The qualitative data collection phase explored the processes and patterns of development and the growth of reflectivity over the year of the programme from the perspectives of the participant teachers and their students. In identifying the shifts in the teachers' thinking and teaching over this time and across individual contexts, the study constructs a picture of the nature of teacher reflection and examines how the teacher preparation programme serves to engage teachers in reflective practice and to enhance their willingness and ability in self-directed professional development through reflective activities. Thus I hope to shed new light on the research into teacher growth through engagement with reflective practice in the Chinese context of both reform of EFL pedagogy and teacher education.

1.3 Organisation of the book

The book consists of five parts which are divided into eleven chapters.

Part I provides a general introduction to the context and research background of the study. Chapter 1 briefly outlines the rationale for the study. The aims and purpose of the research are explained. Chapter 2

presents the research contexts: firstly, the wider educational reform and ELT reform context in China; secondly, teacher preparation and professional development through reflective practice in the university context in China.

Part II reviews the literature relating to the theories and empirical studies in language teacher education and reflective teaching practice. Chapter 3 locates the theoretical framework in the research and discusses the theoretical and methodological approaches underpinning the research. This chapter critically reviews the conceptual framework of reflective teaching practice, focusing mainly upon major reflective teaching models. Chapter 4 presents an overview of the studies in the literature on reflective teaching practice conducted in different contexts, in particular, prior studies relating to the Chinese context.

Part III outlines the research design of the study, including the research methodology and methods. The epistemological paradigms of interpretivism and constructivism and the theoretical perspective of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action informing the research are presented in Chapter 5. The chapter examines the research strategy of case study and action research, discusses the research questions of the study and proposes a qualitatively dominant mixed-methods approach to the study. The major methods employed in data collection and reduction, data management and analysis procedures are justified and discussed in detail. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the issues of validity, reliability, transferability, confirmability and ethics in dealing with the data. Chapter 6 presents the principles of the teacher preparation programme, inducting the participants into the pedagogical aims of reflective teaching. The programme's guidelines, key pedagogical principles, objectives, course content, key activities and tasks, and course assessment are described.

Part IV contains four chapters and reports separately on the findings, analyses and discussions of the quantitative and qualitative data. In Chapter 7, the quantitative data analysis of questionnaires is presented, exploring the differences in responses to beliefs about reflective teaching between, as well as within, the three groups of teachers before and after the preparation programme. Chapters 8, 9, and 10 provide qualitative analyses of the data collected from interviews, reflective writings and classroom observations, examining the development of the teachers' thinking and practice. Chapter 8 analyses evidence of change in the teachers' beliefs about approaches to teaching and aims of teaching, about EFL pedagogy, about how students learn EFL, and about the role of the teacher and the image of the teacher. Chapter 9 examines evidence of change in the teachers' classroom practice as a result of adopting the reflective approach. Chapter 10 focuses on the students' views of the

impact of reflective teaching on their teachers' classroom practice.

Part V concludes the book. Chapter 11 summarises the implications and theoretical, methodological and pedagogical contributions of the research based on the findings. Finally the questions arising from the investigation and limitations of the study are considered, leading to suggestions for future research in this field.

CHAPTER TWO

EFL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF ELT REFORM AND TEACHER EDUCATION REFORM IN CHINA

2.1 Introduction

The current reform of English language pedagogy and teacher education in higher education in China has given great priority to EFL teacher development, on the one hand, and to the wider social and economic change in the country, on the other hand. This chapter provides an account of the contextual background to my study, drawing on several sources of information. Section 2.2 gives an overview of the origin, development, and reform of foreign language teacher education in higher education in China. Section 2.3 presents the current state of policy shifts and how the policy contexts frame the focus of the study. Within this background, Section 2.4 reviews and discusses the research literature on EFL teachers' professional development in the current context of the reform of ELT and language teacher education in higher education in China. Finally, Section 2.5 summarises the whole context of educational change in which the present study is located.

2.2 The historical development of foreign language teacher education and its reform in higher education in China

In China, the training of teachers started in 1681 when the first Normal School was set up by the early Christian missionaries. But the concept of professionalism in relation to teaching was not put forward until the 1980s. In a review of the history of foreign language teacher education in China, we know that the first curriculum was *The Four-year Teaching Plans for English Majors in Normal Universities and Colleges (for Trial Application)* (Ministry of Education, 1979). However the impact it has had on