

Understanding Pre-service EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practice in Reading Comprehension Instruction in China

Zhenglin Kuang

Sichuan Normal University, China

Abstract

Despite an increasing understanding of the importance of teacher beliefs and practices, which of pre-service EFL teachers in relation to reading comprehension instruction (RCI) still need to be investigated. Based on Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Activity System Analysis Methods, this study examines the cultural and historical foundation of Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs and practices on reading comprehension instruction. This study highlights the potential value of a comprehensive examination of other CHAT constructs, including the subject(s), tools, rules, community, and division of labor, for a context analysis for successful reform. To better prepare student teachers for adapting to their teaching contexts, it is advised that EFL training programs should provide them the chance to explore their own beliefs.

Keywords

Teacher Belief; Reading Comprehension Instruction; Pre-service EFL Teacher; Activity Theory.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been an explosion of research on teacher beliefs and practices in second language (L2) teaching [1, 2]. Although several studies have examined teacher beliefs and practices in reading, little research has focused on particular components of reading [3], for example, reading comprehension instruction. Due to limited research on EFL reading comprehension teachers, it remains unclear how and why L2 reading comprehension teachers' practices form, transform, fluctuate, and stabilize, especially in the early years of teaching [1]. Given the culturality and historicity of teachers' beliefs and practice [4, 5], the current study intends to explore the beliefs and practice of pre-service EFL reading comprehension teachers from an activity theory (AT) perspective. While early research has used AT to comprehend teachers' beliefs and the relationship between teachers' beliefs, practices, and contexts, pre-service teachers have received relatively little attention, whose beliefs and practices comprise unique features that call for further research. Informed by AT, the present study aims to increase understanding of the culturality and historicity of pre-service reading comprehension teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices in EFL context.

2. Understanding EFL Teachers' Beliefs About Reading Comprehension Instruction

2.1. Language Teachers' Beliefs and Theories

According to Pajares, beliefs can be conceptualized as an "individual's judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition" or "as a set of interrelated notions", or "as a set of conceptual representations which store general knowledge of objects, people and events, and their characteristic relationships" [6]. Despite the efforts have been made to define the term "beliefs" [7], there is no single, comprehensive definition of the term. For purposes of the study, we used

Negueruela-Azarola's definition of language teacher beliefs as a conceptualizing activity which takes place during concept formation in the language classroom [8].

Since the mid-1990s, the study of language teachers' beliefs and the relationships between teachers' beliefs and practice has grown quickly rapidly and steadily. Despite a large number of research on teacher beliefs and practices, few have focused on EFL reading comprehension teachers' beliefs and practices. Thus, this study is aimed at filling this gap and increase the understanding of EFL teachers, particularly pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs in reading comprehension instruction.

2.2. EFL Teachers' Beliefs in Reading Comprehension Instruction

The content of the beliefs and practices that this study investigates is L2 reading comprehension. Although there has been much research on the teacher beliefs concerning the teaching of reading, most of which is in L1 contexts [9], only a few studies have been conducted in the EFL setting. In the scant amount of research that has been done about beliefs and practice mainly focuses on experienced teachers and the consistency and inconsistency of their theoretical beliefs and practice.

Research discussed above mainly focus on experienced or in-service reading comprehension teachers' beliefs and practices, while minimal attention has received about pre-service teachers working in EFL circumstance. Unlike experienced teachers, novice reading comprehension teachers may be confronted with more significant challenges and difficulties, and their beliefs and practices are likely to interact bi-directionally with experience and context. Thus, the current study is targeted at exploring EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs and practices in RCI from AT perspective.

3. An AT Perspective on EFL Reading Comprehension Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

3.1. Activity Theory as a Tool for Understanding EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practice

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) was developed from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and furthered by his colleagues Leont'ev and Luria. Later scholars have developed iterations of CHAT [10], working on the activity system (AS) in which teaching and learning occurs. Within CHAT, culture is regarded as instrumentally central in understanding the human learning process [5]. Each activity system in the third generation of AT has six components. The teacher, in this study, is the subject, and the beliefs and practices of them are being examined. The object is the intended activity the teacher aims to achieve, which may be the objectives of teaching set by the teacher or imposed by others.

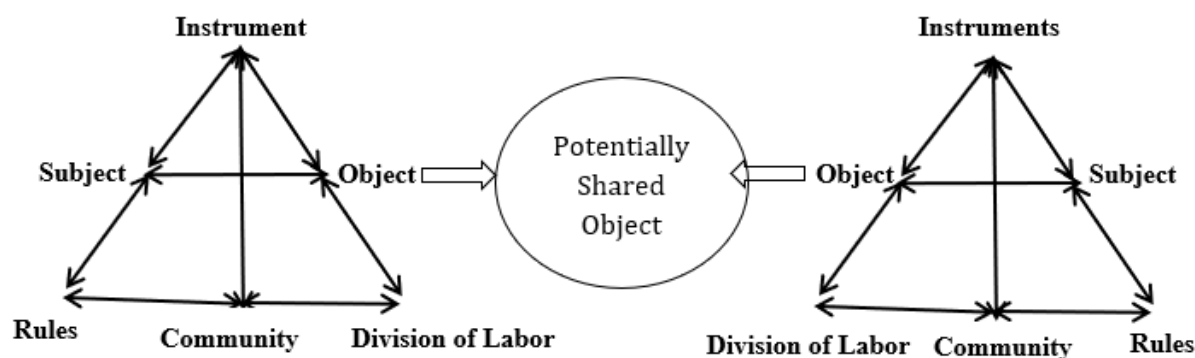


Figure 1. Model for Third-generation Activity Theory [11, 13]

In addition, the activity is conducted by using tools and signs, which can be either physical or symbolic artefacts the teacher uses to achieve his or her goals. As shown in Figure 1, the third generation of activity theory consists of no less than two interacting activity systems. Changes in teachers' beliefs are mediated by the context and key stakeholders in the classroom and the institute. If the contextual factors in a classroom, such as activities, topics, support and teaching methods, match the teacher's beliefs, this can generate affirmative thinking [12]. Therefore, this study makes use of this paradigm to analyze the characteristics of pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs and practices.

3.2. The Features of Pre-service EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practice from AT Perspective

3.2.1. The Mediated Action in Pre-service EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practice

According to Olsen [13], it is a mediated action that Vygotsky proposed as a unit of analysis in studying human psychological functions. Central to this mediated action is the concept of tools, including both physical tools and psychological tools. Pre-service teachers belong to a community that mediates pre-service teachers' learning and facilitate their professional development. Lectures, the practicum, the observation at school, the conversation with their teacher educators and teacher mentors about RCI, their beliefs and prior experience are some of the artefacts which pre-service teachers can utilize as mediating instruments to learn how to teach. A vital mediating tool for teaching L2 reading comprehension is the teaching experience or practicum. During the teaching practicum, pre-service teachers are faced with not just the actions they must do as future teachers but also with the actual work that goes into being a teacher in the teaching profession. By simultaneously paying attention to individuals and the situations in which they learn, activity theory is a useful tool for understanding teachers' learning and may help elucidating the changes in individual teachers' thinking and practice, even though they may differ from case to case.

3.2.2. The Interactive Dynamics between Pre-service Teachers' Beliefs and Practice

From AT perspective, cognition resides in practice [14]; cognition and practices are dialectically related, meaning that cognition and practices may or may not align. This model can offer a holistic view of an activity, and thus teachers' beliefs embedded within it. Teachers' beliefs that they express may have affected how they teach. Numerous research has shown the inconsistency between teachers' reported beliefs and practice [15]. That is, there may be some moments when teachers' professed beliefs do not align with what other studies reveal. When a teacher's practice contradicts his or her professed belief, beliefs underpinning such practice need to be unraveled [16]. Hence, it is crucial to attach importance to teachers' professed beliefs and their beliefs that underlie their practices when comparing the two relationships.

3.2.3. The Historicity and Culturality of EFL Pre-service Teachers' Beliefs

Activity theory embeds historicity, which means it is shaped and transformed over time. Therefore, teachers' beliefs can only be understood against teachers' historical contexts. Pre-service teachers will face more challenges when the environments did not match or conform, making it more difficult for them to adopt same tool and resources. Activity theory has been utilized in EFL situations to comprehend how pre-service teachers learn to teach in certain contexts. Although the shaping impacts of social circumstances, there is no common explanation for how pre-service teachers develop across the teacher education program. Because different program that prepares teachers has unique characteristics. Even if two pre-service teachers may be enrolled in the same program and employed at the same institution, their perceptions of the educational environment may differ according to their individual objectives, experiences, and activities in school settings.

To sum up, the social and cultural norms of the particular community are constrained by historical and cultural factors. Teachers' belief systems may alter internally as a result of the ongoing process of adaptation to contextual changes. Consequently, these interactions between beliefs and circumstances, a process known as "coadaptation" has been proposed. This "coadaptation" may promote the dynamic stability of the system.

3.2.4. The Contradictions of EFL Pre-service Teachers' Belief Systems

The idea that contradictions are an intrinsic component of all activities is the cornerstone of activity theory. According to activity theory, instabilities, conflict, and contradiction are viewed as the "motivating force of change and development" [11], and transitions and reorganizations within and between activity systems are viewed as a necessary part of evolution. Contradictions can appear at different activity system levels as well as within each component of the activity system [11]. Each element of an activity system comprises radical contradictions. As contradictions and conflicts within activity systems become apparent, some people may start to doubt the status quo and depart from expected norms. Sometimes, this can turn into a joint effort to alter the activity, a process known as "expansive transformation." This transformation takes place when 'the object and motive of the activity are reconceptualized to embrace a radically wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous mode of the activity' [11].

4. Conclusion and Implications

In this study, I have explored pre-service reading comprehension teachers' beliefs and practices by adopting an AT perspective. Before the implications of the study are presented, some limitations should be noted. While this study tries to understand pre-service teachers' beliefs and practice in RCI from AT perspective, there is a lack of empirical studies to test it out in practice. In the future, the case study can be conducted to collect data through a series of research methods, such as classroom observations, in-depth interviews and documents.

To enhance pre-service teachers' teaching effectiveness in practicum and future education, reflection should be carried out on their own teaching belief systems, including the sub-systems related to EFL RCI, and observe their actual instructional practices in practicum, discussing their practices with experienced L2 reading teachers, and conducting surveys among students. Furthermore, to help pre-service strengthen the awareness and understand the value of critically analyzing their own beliefs and practices, conferences, seminars, and other teacher education programs that might support their professional growth should be organized. By means of frequent dialogue with in-service teachers and outside stakeholders and learning from them, pre-service reading teachers could create more situated possibilities for more effective reading comprehension instruction in their later classroom teaching so as to enhance their belief and practice systems.

References

- [1] Borg, S. (2015). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. London: Bloomsbury.
- [2] Mao, S. S., & Crosthwaite, P. (2019). Investigating written corrective feedback: (Mis)alignment of teachers' beliefs and practice. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 45, 46–60.
- [3] Cross, R. (2010). Language teaching as sociocultural activity: Rethinking language teacher practice. *Modern Language Journal*, 94(3), 434–452.
- [4] Barahona, M. (2016). Challenges and accomplishments of ELT at primary level in Chile: Towards the aspiration of becoming a bilingual country. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 24(82), 82.
- [5] Ellis, R. (2010). Second language acquisition, teacher education and language pedagogy. *Language Teaching*, 43(2), 182–201.

- [6] Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, 62 (3), 307-32.
- [7] Murphy, C. K. (2000). Combining belief functions when evidence conflicts. *Decision support systems*, 29(1), 1-9.
- [8] Negueruela-Azarola, E. (2011). Beliefs as conceptualizing activity: A dialectical approach for the second language classroom. *System*, 39(3), 359-369.
- [9] Beach, S. A. (1994). Teacher's theories and classroom practice: Beliefs, knowledge, or context? *Reading Psychology*.
- [10] Engeström, Y. (2015). *Learning by expanding*. Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Peng, R. D. (2011). Reproducible research in computational science. *Science*, 334(6060), 1226-1227.
- [12] Olsen, B. (2008). How reasons for entry into the profession illuminate teacher identity development. *Teacher education quarterly*, 35(3), 23-40.
- [13] Lave, J. (1988). *Cognition in practice: Mind, mathematics and culture in everyday life*. Cambridge University Press.
- [14] Barcelos, A. M. F. (2003). Researching beliefs about SLA: A critical review. *Beliefs about SLA*, 7-33.
- [15] Flores, B. B. (2001). Bilingual education teachers' beliefs and their relation to self-reported practices. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25(3), 275-299.
- [16] Wertsch, J. V., del Río, P. E., & Alvarez, A. E. (1995). *Sociocultural studies of mind*. Cambridge University Press.