

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' BELIEFS
TOWARDS TEACHER-CENTERED AND LEARNER-CENTERED
APPROACHES IN GRADE 12 ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE
CLASS AT ONE GOVERNMENTAL SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL IN
SHAAN'XI PROVINCE, CHINA**

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to determine what were Grade 12 EFL teachers', and Grade 12 intermediate- and advanced-level students' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach, in order to determine whether there was a significant difference between them. This study was conducted at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China. The study focused on 23 Grade 12 EFL teachers, 48 Grade 12 EFL intermediate-level students and 87 Grade 12 EFL advanced-level students of the second semester of academic year 2016-2017 from the target school. The researchers used descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the data. Among other things, the research findings presented here showed that teachers hold positive beliefs towards both teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach; both intermediate-level students and advanced-level students hold neutral beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach, and positive beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach. The results of the study also showed that there was a significant difference between Grade 12 teachers' beliefs and Grade 12 intermediate- and advanced-level students' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach in EFL class at the target school, whereas there was no significant difference between Grade 12 EFL intermediate-level and advanced-level students' beliefs towards both teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach in EFL. Based on these findings, the researchers gave some suggestions to students, teachers, administrators and future researchers.

Keywords: beliefs, teacher-centered approach, learner-centered approach, English as a foreign language, secondary school.

Introduction

In the educational field, beliefs have an important influence on teachers' teaching and students' learning (Li, 2004), because people make choices based on their beliefs of what they are capable of successfully performing (Pajares, 2005). Teachers' beliefs play an important role in understanding how children learn, which also could influence teachers' actions in class, the way they treat their students, and teaching and learning activities (Pajares, 1992). Students' beliefs also were the important tool in obtaining and acquisition of knowledge.

Since the late 1970s, English as a foreign language education in China has gone through many top-down reformations. The New High School Curriculum Reform Program (NHSCR) was put forward in 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2001a) and was piloted in some major provinces (Shandong Province, Guangdong Province, Hainan Province and Ningxia Autonomous Region) in 2004, and implemented nationwide in 2010. The main characteristics of this reform were the "New Curriculum, New Concept, New University Entrance Examination". This reform was applied into all subjects in senior secondary school. In terms of the pedagogical approaches to teaching, it also tried to shift from a teacher-centered approach to a learner-centered one.

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The NHSCR in English as a foreign language class in senior secondary schools represented a shift from the traditional behaviorism-orientated approach in foreign language education. It placed very high demands on English class teachers, who were expected to master many new theoretical and practical concepts, such as task-based language teaching, cooperative learning, inquiry-based teaching, and formative assessment, and learn to incorporate these constructivist ideas into their daily teaching practice. This presented an unexpected challenge to senior secondary English class teachers, many of whom have been deeply influenced by the traditional teacher-centered, passive model of instruction. It is also challenging for students to adjust their beliefs towards the new learning approach. Thus, it is very important to understand teachers' and students' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach under this scenario. In this article, a study of examination of Grade 12 EFL teachers and students' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China, are being reported.

Objectives

The following research objectives were developed for this study.

1. To determine Grade 12 teachers' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach in EFL class at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China.
2. To determine Grade 12 students' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach in EFL class at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China.
 - 2.1 To determine Grade 12 intermediate-level students' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach in EFL class at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China.
 - 2.2 To determine Grade 12 advanced-level students' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach in EFL class at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China.
3. To determine Grade 12 students' beliefs towards learner-centered approach in EFL class at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China.
4. To determine Grade 12 students' beliefs towards learner-centered approach in EFL class at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China.
 - 4.1 To determine Grade 12 intermediate-level students' beliefs towards learner-centered approach in EFL class at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China.
 - 4.2 To determine Grade 12 advanced-level students' beliefs towards learner-centered approach in EFL class at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China.
5. To determine whether there is a significant difference between Grade 12 teachers' and Grade 12 intermediate- and advanced-level students' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach in EFL class at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China.

Hypotheses

The following research hypothesis was developed for this study.

There is a significant difference between Grade 12 teachers' beliefs and Grade 12 intermediate- and advanced-level students' beliefs towards teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches in EFL class at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China, at a significance level of .05.

Conceptual Framework

The researchers distributed the study's questionnaire to both Grade 12 EFL teachers and Grade 12 intermediate- and advanced-level students at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China, during the academic year 2016-2017. Then, the researchers used inferential statistics to examine if there was a significant difference between Grade 12 teachers' beliefs and Grade 12 intermediate- and advanced-level students' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach at one governmental senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China, as depicted in Figure 1.

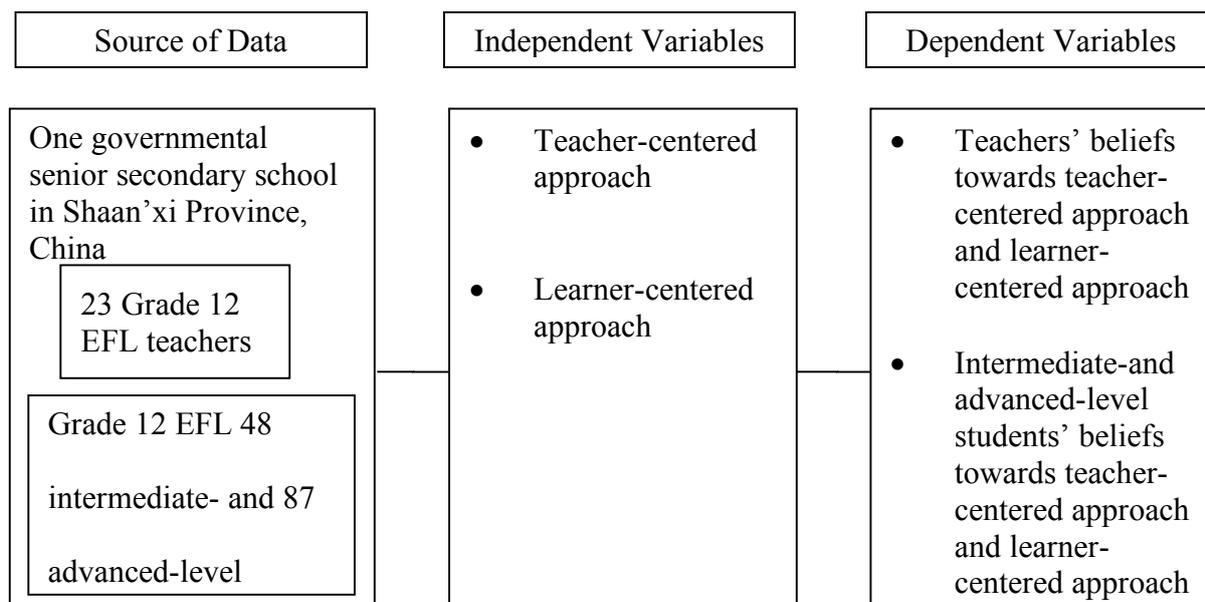


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for present study.

Literature Review

Skinner's Behaviorist Learning Theory

Skinner thought that learning takes place under contingencies of reinforcement, which were composed of three variables: an occasion for the behavior to occur, the behavior itself, and the consequences of the behavior (Li, 2004). Therefore, in Skinner's opinion, teaching is the arrangement of reinforcement contingencies which elicit learning. Second language teaching is strongly influenced in middle of the century by Skinner's view of learning theory, and also second language teaching heavily relies on the classroom environment. Second language teachers use the controlled practice of the verbal operant under carefully-designed schedules of reinforcement (Brown, 2014). With this well-designed reinforcement schedule, a structured, deductive, and sequenced instruction, is strongly welcomed in acquisition of basic concepts, skills, and factual information rapidly through practices such as drill-and-practice, programmed instruction or programmed learning under the behavioral principle (Schunk, 1996). With the guidance of the behavioral principle, teacher-centered approach has been widely applied into the second language teaching.

Vygotsky's Constructivist Learning Theory

Schunk (2012) stated that, according to Vygotsky's beliefs, there was a distance between a person's actual developmental level and the potential developmental level, and one could get the potential developmental level from the actual developmental level by the assistance of adults or interaction with peers. Many constructivists tend to support instruction not only because there is a match between instruction and students' actual cognitive development, but also because it could do the contribution of acceleration on students' cognitive development. Students could not finish the task because the difficulty of the task beyond the students' cognitive level, thus with the teachers' or peers' help, students could get the acceleration of cognitive development. Teacher, in the learner-centered approach, would give plans and guide on social interaction, and also will provide students a social context in which students could build and construct knowledge. Thus, teachers and students also play the active role in learning process.

Communicative Language Teaching Theory

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been widely recognized as a language teaching approach. According to Hymes (1972), the goal of language teaching is to improve the communicative competence of learners. In Hymes's (1972) opinion, communicative competence refers to the knowledge, the ability of using language in a social context and the ability of observing sociolinguistic

norms of appropriateness. For him, the goal of language teaching is to improve learners' communicative competence. Based on the constructivist learning theory and communicative language teaching theory, task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach has attracted more attention in the field of second language acquisition. TBLT regarded language as a communicative tool. The goal of TBLT is to provide opportunities to learners in mastering language both speaking and writing, according to some learning activities, which are designed to involve learners in a natural, practical and meaningful context (Lin, 2009).

Beliefs in Education

According to Pajares (1992), for teachers, teachers' beliefs are important tools in expressing themselves in the interaction and communication between school and home. Attitudes and dispositions describe the expression of teachers' and/or students' beliefs in their classroom interactions (Wesely, 2012). Teachers' beliefs play the important role in understanding how children learn which also could influence teachers' actions in class, the way they treat their students, and teaching and learning activities (Pajares, 1992).

New High School Curriculum Reform Program

The New High School Curriculum Reform Program in Chinese in senior secondary schools was a shift from the traditional behaviorism-orientated approach to foreign language education, implemented nationwide from 2010. In terms of teaching pedagogy, this reform aimed to transform teacher-centered approach to learner-centered approach.

Background of Target Governmental Senior Secondary School

The governmental senior secondary school targeted in this study was founded in 2007 in Shaan'xi Province, China. There were 46 classes and more than 150 staff during the academic year 2016-2017. There were 12 classes in Grade 12 and 25 Grade 12 English teachers. All the students in these 12 classes were locals. All of the teachers in this study came from other local high schools.

Methodology/Procedure

The purpose of this research was to determine what were Grade 12 EFL teachers', and Grade 12 intermediate- and advanced-level students' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach, in order to determine whether there was a significant difference between them. This quantitative study adopted questionnaire to collect data among 23 Grade 12 EFL teachers and 158 Grade 12 EFL students of academic year 2016-2017 at one governmental senior secondary school. Data from the respondents were analyzed by using descriptive and inferential statistics, in order to examine the research hypothesis.

Research Instrument

The research instrument used in this study was a questionnaire comprised of two parts. The first part was the cover letter in which participation was requested and the purpose of this research is explained. The second part was comprised of 20 items on beliefs towards two subscales: teacher-centered approach (11 items) and learner-centered approach (9 items). The original questionnaire, Secondary School English Teachers' Beliefs, was developed by Zhang and Liu (2014). This questionnaire was developed to assess teachers' beliefs about English teaching and learning regarding the values and principles which were put forward by English Curriculum Standards (ECS) under the NHSCR in China. The original questionnaire consisted of 35 items that measured teachers' beliefs about curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, resources, and the roles of teachers and students. The researchers used items in the first two subscales (*constructivist teaching* and *traditional teaching*), which were related to learner-centered approach and teacher-centered approach. These 20 items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

Validity and Reliability

The original developers of the questionnaire assessed the content validity of all the items by ensuring that the instrument content was based on the English Curriculum Standard (ECS) in China. In terms of construct validity, they verified it from two ways. One way was from 900 questionnaires, and one way

was from the interviews. There were nine teachers who took part in semi-structured interviews. Quantitative and qualitative data were integrated together to provide a more complete understanding of the teachers' beliefs. The original developers of questionnaire computed Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each subscale. Cronbach's alpha value for the constructivist teaching subscale was .71, and for the traditional teaching subscale was .74. For this study, the researchers also computed Cronbach's alpha values for each subscale. They got .76 in terms of constructivist teaching subscale, and .82 in terms of traditional teaching subscale.

Findings

Findings of this study showed that Grade 12 EFL teachers hold positive belief towards both teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach. Both Grade 12 EFL intermediate-level students and advanced-level students hold neutral beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and positive beliefs towards learner-centered approach. The findings of the study are shown in the tables below.

Table 1: Summary of the Findings of This Study

Group categories	<i>Beliefs</i>	
	Teacher-centered approach	Learner-centered approach
Grade 12 teachers	Positive	Positive
Grade 12 students	Neutral	Positive
Grade 12 intermediate-level students	Neutral	Positive
Grade 12 advanced-level students	Neutral	Positive

Table 2: Summary of the Main Findings of This Study Regarding the Inferential Statistics Used for Data Analysis

Teaching approaches	Group categories		Sig.	Interpretation
Teacher-centered approach	Teacher	Intermediate-level students	< .001	There is a significant difference
		Advanced-level students	< .001	There is a significant difference
	Intermediate-level students	Teacher	< .001	There is a significant difference
		Advanced-level students	.27	There is no significant difference
	Advanced-level students	Teacher	< .001	There is a significant difference
		Intermediate-level students	.27	There is no significant difference
Learner-centered approach	Teacher	Intermediate-level students	< .001	There is a significant difference
		Advanced-level students	< .001	There is a significant difference
	Intermediate-level students	Teacher	< .001	There is a significant difference
		Advanced-level students	.97	There is no significant difference
	Advanced-level students	Teacher	< .001	There is a significant difference
		Intermediate-level students	.97	There is no significant difference

Note. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Discussion

In this section, a discussion of the findings and conclusions from this study is presented.

For teachers' beliefs towards teaching approaches, as what the researchers has found, Grade 12 EFL teachers hold positive beliefs towards both teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach. It also could be said that teachers hold positive beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach in teaching practice. This is supported by Zhang and Liu's (2014) study, in which they found that teachers' beliefs were more inclined towards the learner-centered approach than teacher-centered one. Also Nunan (1986) mentioned that if teachers' and students' beliefs are not in accordance with the underpinning reforms, such reforms may not achieve the intended results, so teachers' beliefs may have been influenced and changed on this regard. Teachers hold positive beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach, which indicated that teachers might use the combination of the teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach in teaching practice. This phenomenon also is supported by the study in Singapore (Goh, Zhang, & Goh, 2005). Teachers in this study showed that teacher hold more than one perspective of teaching approach during teaching.

Although teachers' beliefs are more inclined towards learner-centered approach, from the teachers' responses of questionnaire, EFL teachers still hold some reservations to the learner-centered approach because they do not accept some reform ideas. For example, teachers think that students could not learn more from peers. Based on the actual reality of Chinese classroom, there are 50 students and one teacher in every classroom on average. It is very difficult for teacher to organize the whole class in groups and it is also hard for students to learn from peers in the loud atmosphere. Another big challenge for teachers is to assist weak students under this reform, because of the limited time and large group classrooms. According to a previous study in Thailand (Olivier, 2005), teachers should be well prepared, thus students could get the successful collaborate learning results. Also, teachers could able to challenge the Thai traditional education system if they are very confident. From the findings of this study, teachers hold positive beliefs towards teacher-centered approach, but the item of the lowest mean score of their beliefs towards teacher-centered approach was that teachers do not think the test are the main way to assess student learning. It indicated that teacher also have some reservations towards teacher-centered approach. With the consideration of China education reality, tests are the main tool to assess students' learning. It called upon teachers to challenge this education system step by step. Teachers also need to be given the big encouragement on changing and integrating various forms of assessment to evaluate students' learning comprehensively from the administration.

In terms of why a shift towards learner-centered approach was found, as Zhang and Liu (2014) stated, it is easier for teachers to change their beliefs if schools provide a supportive environment, such as a supportive administration, well-trained colleagues, high-achieved students and rich resources. These supportive conditions would have the key influence on teachers' beliefs. The administration of the target school called for this curriculum reform at the start of its implementation, and also organized teachers to get the professional development in some other provinces which have achieved success in the new curriculum reform.

The most important point needed to be mentioned here is that there are fewer resources which could be devoted into teaching in this senior secondary school in Shaan'xi Province, China, based on the true reality of the shortage of the economic support. For example, the classroom cannot provide computer for students to learn online and for teachers to teach using ICT. The shortage of equipment and resources in classroom also places an important influence on teachers' beliefs shift, that why the research also got the result that teachers also hold positive beliefs towards teacher-centered approach.

For students' beliefs towards teaching approach, this study also shows that the students hold neutral beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and positive beliefs towards learner-centered-approach. Regardless the students' level, (intermediate-level students or advanced-level students), they hold positive beliefs towards learner-centered approach. Adams and Sargent (2012) showed that the teaching practice has changed significantly by influence of the new curriculum between 2000 and 2007 in the primary school. This shift also showed that the idea of the new curriculum was more active and student-centered. The previous research about EFL students' beliefs towards teaching approach in China is very few. In this study, the results indicate that students' beliefs towards teaching approaches have changed, assuming they held positive beliefs about the teacher-centered approach, the common teaching approach in China, before the implementation of the NHSCR reform.

From what the research findings show, however, there was a mismatch between teachers' beliefs and students' beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach. Teachers hold positive beliefs towards both teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach. Students hold neutral beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and positive beliefs towards learner-centered approach.

This result was opposite to a study by Nunan (1986). In his study, students hold traditional perspective, and teachers' perspective was more influenced by the current communicative language teaching. Razmjoo and Riazi (2000) stated that only students could be convinced by the value of CLT principles, thus the practice of CLT principles is tangible. In this study, learners hold positive beliefs towards learner-centered approach. This may indicate that learners are convinced by the value of CLT principles which was put forward by the China Ministry of Education on curriculum reform.

Therefore, teachers could integrate the learner-centered approach into teaching practice because students also hold positive beliefs towards learner-centered approach. Thus, the practice of CLT principles in this governmental senior secondary school seems to be tangible, with the curriculum under the NHSCRП getting the intended results.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are presented.

For Students

Based on the findings of the study, the students hold neutral beliefs towards teacher-centered approach and positive beliefs towards learner-centered approach. The students are recommended to develop more methods to learn by utilization of the new learning tools in order to cultivate the learning ability and academic achievement. Especially Grade 12 students, who embrace the pressure of China university entrance examination should use more diverse learning styles to learn. The important point is that the more strong beliefs they hold, the more learning results they could get.

For Teachers

In this study, teachers hold positive beliefs towards both teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach. Teachers are recommended to try to accept more new concepts and to foster more professional development related to the NHSCRП reform so that their beliefs could be congruent with the new reform. Then the teachers could use the congruent beliefs into the teaching practice. An ideal situation is teachers integrating Western constructivist learning theory and behaviorist learning theory, as well as the Chinese traditional teaching approach together into the teaching practice, thus the more effective teaching results could be taken out. Teachers are also welcomed to ask support from school administration. The more support from outside, the more successes the teacher could get.

For Administrators

For administrators, it is recommended to support and provide teachers to apply the task-based language teaching and learning into teaching practice. The findings of this study showed that teacher hold positive beliefs towards both teacher-centered approach and learner-centered approach. However, the previous research showed that teacher only be well-prepared and self confident in the challenge of the traditional education and adapting the current communicative language teaching methods, thus the reform could get the successful results. So as the administrators, there is a need to provide teachers with the professional development. By providing teachers with the theory and pedagogical knowledge, teachers could provide more practical, real situation or activities to students' learning.

For Future Researchers

For future researchers, it is recommended to implement this research on larger samples, on other schools and on other locations, thus the results would be more representative. Future researchers also could put more focus on students' beliefs on teaching approaches, because student' beliefs also play an important role in teaching and learning, but there are very few studies on students' beliefs towards teaching approaches. Additionally, the administration's beliefs and parents' beliefs towards the curriculum renovation also play the important role in teachers' teaching and students' learning. Therefore, it is recommended to extend this research to administrators and parents.

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