



An investigative study of EFL Teachers' cognitive development characteristic model in western rural areas

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Abstract

This study intends to conduct in-depth interviews with three teachers selected from the rural English teachers participating in the "national education plan" of G province in 2019, to explore the cognitive concerns of the three participants in the early, middle and stable stages of the foreign language curriculum reforms. Based on Pennington's teacher cognition transformation model (1998), the researcher optimized the model and structured a western rural English teacher's cognition development process model, exposing teachers' focus on external procedural regulation at the initial stage, interpersonal relationship regulation at the mid-stage and concept interpretation at the stable stage.

Keywords: EFL teacher, cognitive development, characteristic model, western rural areas

1. Introduction

Basic education teaching reform advocates holistic education, where students are educated as a whole, against the tool tendency, focused on the internal value display of education, giving full play to student's every aspect (including physical, intellectual, moral, social, creative, spirit, etc)^[2]. Its purpose is to "make people into people", to cultivate complete and all-round people with sound and balanced personalities. The guidelines of the ministry of education on comprehensively deepening curriculum reforms and implementing the fundamental task of cultivating morale (hereinafter referred to as the opinions) take comprehensively deepening curriculum reform, cultivating morale and promoting students' all-round development and healthy growth as the fundamental tasks of education in the new era. The English discipline should carry out the spirit of "opinions" and give play to its due value in raising people with morale, promoting students' all-round development and healthy growth. The core competencies of English discipline include the knowledge, ability, mentality and character, which are the key abilities and necessary competencies for individuals to adapt to the future society, to promote lifelong learning and to realize all-round development. English education not only needs to impart knowledge, develop skills, but also is a process of shaping personality, cultivating morale, developing rationality, expanding horizons and pursuing the meaning of life^[3]. Yafu Gong (2017)^[4] pointed out: "English education in primary and secondary schools should change the goal of focusing solely on language competence and design diversified goals. We should combine language learning with mentality cognition and personal competency training, and look at the category of learning motivation from the perspective of holistic development. Such a goal is more conducive to the development of students, which reflects the value of English education in promoting the development of human character and mentality". The national goal of strengthening students' core literacy has put forward higher requirements for English teachers. As English teachers, they must constantly learn and update their knowledge structure,

broaden their horizons, cultivate cultural awareness in analyzing, comparing and evaluating different cultures, learn and absorb multidisciplinary knowledge extensively, and strive to develop the quality of mentality. The improvement of teachers' own quality and ability is the key to developing students' core competency.

The reform of English teaching and education is the driving force and an important part of education reforms^[5]. In the process of implementing and promoting the reforms of English education and teaching, teachers are undeniably the key factor, because teachers are the most direct executor and implementer of the curriculum. What teachers know, think and do directly determines the direction and concrete practice of the curriculum reform. In other words, the reform of English education and teaching depends on the continuous improvement and development of English teachers' cognition, ability and professional competency. On the other hand, the teaching reform provides the necessary impetus for the professional development of teachers and the support and platform for the cognitive development of teachers. Therefore, the reforms of English education and teachers' cognitive development depend on each other and develop together.

This study takes the rural school teachers in G province in the west, who participated in the "national education program" as the research subjects, trying to explore the characteristics and models of the cognitive development of western rural teachers, which is of practical significance.

2 Research Methods and Process

This study adopts a qualitative research method, with in-depth interviews to deeply understand the cognitive development characteristics of western rural English teachers. This study intends to conduct in-depth interviews with three teachers selected from the rural English teachers participating in the "national education plan" of G province in 2019. In this study, a qualitative retrospective interview approach was used to explore the cognitive concerns of the three participants at the early, middle and stable stages of the foreign language curriculum reforms.

In the process of sample selection, the researcher asked the teachers to spontaneously select 10 qualified candidates, among whom the researcher preliminarily determined six teachers according to their gender, age, school level, working experience and job title screening. This study also took into account the possible impact of gatekeepers on the study. The so-called gatekeeper refers to the person who has authority over the subjects and has the right to decide whether the participant can participate in the study smoothly. In this study, the “gatekeeper” of the candidates specifically refers to the principal of the school where the teacher works and the teaching and research staff of the district where the teacher works. Finally, the researcher decided to seek the opinions of “gatekeepers”. Based on the score of “gatekeepers” on the six teachers (including personality, attitude towards teaching work, attitude towards self-development, etc.), the researcher decided to select three teachers as the final research participants. Studies show that if the opinions of “gatekeepers” are not followed, even with the consent of the participants themselves, the study may not be conducted smoothly and reliable results may not be obtained (Chen Xiangming, 2000; Cohen, *et al.*, 2007) [6, 7].

According to the research, in order to understand the teachers’ pursuit of teaching, self-cognition and self-development, the researcher made a basic grasp of the basic situation of teachers through the recommendation of teachers and the understanding with the “gatekeeper”, and understood the evaluation of the “gatekeeper” on potential research participants. The researcher had preliminary contact with the research candidates, and paid attention to the research participants’ personality, teaching attitude, self-cognition attitude and self-development opinions through deep interviews. All of the above approaches were to ensure that the selected subjects meet the sampling conditions.

Through sampling, this study identified three rural English teachers in northwest China as research participants: Ms Xie, Mr Li and Ms Yang. Ms. Xie was from a rural middle school in Weiyuan County, Gansu province, who graduated from the provincial teachers’ college. She had been working for 3 years. Mr. Li was from a rural junior high school in Tongwei County, Gansu province. He graduated from a normal university in China. Ms. Yang was from a rural middle school in Minxian County, Gansu province. Having graduated from a teachers’ college in the northwest, with 15 years of rich work experience and senior teaching title, she was an expert teacher.

All three selected teachers in the study were from the northwest countryside, two of them females and one male. The three teachers were born in the 80s and 90s of the 20th century, all in the golden age of development, with positive enterprising spirits, treating new things with curiosity and exploring spirit, with good learning ability and active learning desire, generous enthusiasm, willingness to share, to communicate, to make positive changes to themselves, and with determination and morale towards reforms.

In order to have a deep understanding of the inner world of the research subjects, the researcher needed to conduct at least three rounds of interviews with the research subjects (Seidman, 1991) [8]. The researcher needed to conduct three thematic interviews with the research subjects. The first interview was to understand the self-experience and pre-service education experience of the research subjects, and it was conducted in the narrative mode of the research

subjects. The second interview was about the cognitive impact of reform on the subjects. The third interview focused on the relevance of on-the-job training (mainly national training program) to the needs of research subjects and its cognitive impact on them. Since the whole interview was conducted during the 20-day national education program period, the interviews were conducted in the hotel room of the subjects, in the classroom after class, or in the researcher’s office.

3. Result Analysis

Based on the research findings, it can be found that these findings have testified the teacher’s cognition transformation model put forward by Pennington (1998) [1]. According to Pennington, teachers’ transformation cognition development mainly goes through three stages: the stage of paying attention to procedure, the stage of paying attention to interpersonal relationships and the stage of paying attention to concepts. At the first stage, teachers have just come into contact with the curriculum reform and are unfamiliar with the reform concept and curriculum content. They pay more attention to procedural issues such as teaching content, teaching materials and the use of resources to improve their sense of self-efficacy. “Procedural matters” become the focus of teachers’ attention at the initial stage, while “interpersonal” and “conceptual” levels will be relatively ignored. When teachers basically master the procedural issues, their focus will shift to the second stage---focus on interpersonal stage. Teachers’ focus is shifted to class activities, teaching effect, teacher-student interaction. When teachers’ exploration is achieved at this stage, or teachers can’t find a way out by themselves, they will focus on deeper conceptual issues, including how to improve their teaching ideologies, reform ideologies, their personal understanding and restructuring towards the reforms. At the same time, they gradually form their individual understandings towards the reforms and class teachings. Based on Pennington’s teacher cognition transformation model (1998) [1], the researcher optimized the model and structured western rural English teacher’s cognition development process model in Figure 1.

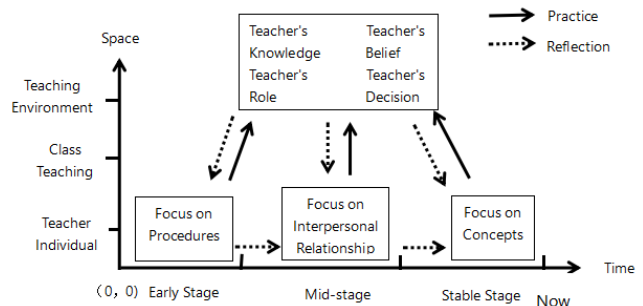


Fig 1: Western Rural English Teacher’s Cognition Development Process Model

As can be seen from Figure 1, western rural English teachers’ cognition go through the initial stage of reforms, focusing on teaching content, to the mid-stage of reforms, focusing on interpersonal relationship, to the stable stage of reforms, focusing on reform ideologies. The process goes through two transformations. The first transformation is from concrete content to abstract concepts, or from course resources to class teaching results and teacher-student

relationship practice. The second transformation concerns practice to theories, or from teaching practice such as teaching content and courseware to teachers' cognition ideologies such as the understanding and personal interpretations towards reforms.

4. Conclusion

The western rural English teachers' cognition development process model embodies the different issues teachers focus on at different stages of reforms, which upwardly explain the focuses of the three stages and summarize the teachers' cognition development process as a gradual changing one from practice to theory, from being concrete to being abstract and as a general regular development process of teachers' cognition development. Such cognition development process model for western rural English teachers is made up ultimately, putting the teachers in a horizontal time axis, which represents English curriculum reforms and a vertical space axis, which represents reform space, usually including teacher knowledge, class teaching, teaching environment. In this concrete time-space dimension, English teachers' cognition development is mainly represented by teacher's reforming beliefs, teacher's roles and teacher's decision and so on. Furthermore, teachers' cognition development is roughly divided into focus on procedures, focus on interpersonal relationship and focus on concepts, respectively parallel to the initial stage, the mid-stage and the stable-stage of reforms. Two main routes are immersed in the reforming time axis to realize English teachers' cognition development: practice and reflection, which are dynamic, continual and interactive elements, existing at any stage of curriculum reforms, propelling English teachers' cognition development ahead.

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