Classroom Activities in Chinese Secondary EFL Classes: Teachers' Uptake of the Learner-centred Curriculum Reform

Mingkun Lou
University of South Australia, Australia

Abstract
China's 2001 curriculum reform aimed to shift the exam-oriented teacher-dominated instructional model to quality-oriented learner-centred education. Accordingly, China's National English Curriculum Standards focus on students' all-round development to prepare students for future learning and development. The standards aim to facilitate the development of students' English linguistic and communicative competence, learning and thinking ability, and intercultural awareness and understanding. However, the implementation of the curriculum has been challenging for teachers who are used to traditional teaching styles, and who have large classes with students of varying English learning backgrounds and many other constraints. To date, limited evidence is available regarding how teachers engage with the new curriculum to facilitate learning in the classroom. To illustrate how the curriculum reform has been taken up in terms of teacher practices, this paper reports on classroom activities used in the teaching of vocabulary, grammar and speaking by seven teachers in two secondary schools, drawing on the observation data generated for a larger project investigating teachers' practices and beliefs. While most teachers mainly used activities in line with traditional practices, some teachers used a range of activities in ways designed to facilitate students' active learning and practice of English, as well as learning strategies and higher order thinking development. The findings are informative for second or foreign language teachers, teacher educators and policymakers in China and countries of similar contexts.

1 Introduction

The world has witnessed large-scale educational reforms over the last two decades, many of which were guided by a learner-centred philosophy. This is due to an increased awareness of the importance of liberalizing education to cultivate young people with independent minds and creativity (Doddington & Hilton, 2007; Lou & Greg, 2020; Schweisfurth, 2015; Yin, 2013). China also launched a radical curriculum reform in 2001 to revitalize the nation and cultivate high quality talents with international

Address: UniSA Education Futures, University of South Australia, Magill SA 5072, Australia
Email: mingkun.lou@mymail.unisa.edu.au

vision, an innovative and creative spirit, and practical ability (Zhou & Zhou, 2019). The reform aimed to shift the exam-oriented teacher-dominated knowledge-transmission instructional model to quality-oriented learner-centred education (MOE, 2001; Zhou & Zhou, 2019). Accordingly, China's National English Curriculum Standards emphasize paying attention to students' affective factors, respecting and catering for students' individual differences, and facilitating students' all-round development to prepare them for future learning and development (MOE, 2001; 2011; Lou & Restall, 2020). The standards aim to facilitate the development of students' English linguistic and communicative competence, learning and thinking ability, and intercultural awareness and understanding (MOE, 2001; 2011; Lou & Restall, 2020; Yan & He, 2012). Methodologically, these standards endorse participatory, interactive, inquiry-based and collaborative learning, emphasizing the learning process and the creation of authentic and real-life contexts and opportunities for students to learn, experience and practice the language (MOE, 2001; 2011; Yan & He, 2012; Zhang & Liu, 2014; Zheng & Borg, 2014).

The implementation of the curriculum, however, has been challenging for teachers, especially secondary teachers. To begin with, the learner-centred philosophy underpinning the reform clashes with the traditional pedagogical practices and norms as shaped by the entrenched exam-oriented educational system (Dello-Iacovo, 2009; Fang & Warschauer, 2004; Hu, 2005; Li & Baldauf, 2011; Liu & Wu, 2006). Next, primary schools in different regions have long been permitted to vary the starting age depending on available teachers and resources (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hu, 2005; Wang & Gao, 2008). Nevertheless, whatever variations exist, all secondary schools offer English classes starting from Year 7, with textbooks presuming students with a three-year English learning background. This poses immense challenges to secondary teachers, especially junior secondary teachers, who have classes with a large group of students (50–70), some of whom may have studied English for three years while others may have never learned any English at all (Hu, 2007). In addition, teachers' practices are shaped by their past experience of language learning – teacher-dominated, favoring knowledge-transmission and rote-learning, and learning about the language rather than learning to use it (Hu, 2005; Zeegers & Zhang, 2016). It is therefore challenging for them to teach in ways that facilitate students' active participation and development of communicative competence (Zeegers & Zhang, 2016). This is especially so in large classes with students of varying English learning backgrounds.

Taken together, all these contextual factors clearly challenge effective implementation of quality-oriented learner-centred education, raising a question as to how English teachers engage with the curriculum standards. This study therefore provides detailed evidence about teachers' uptake of the learner-centred curriculum, as reflected in their practices regarding classroom activities used in the teaching of vocabulary, grammar and speaking by seven teachers in two secondary schools. Drawing on classroom observation data from a larger project investigating Chinese secondary EFL teachers' beliefs and practices, this study focuses on the two research questions:

1. What activities are used in these secondary EFL classrooms in teaching vocabulary, grammar and speaking?
2. How do these Chinese secondary EFL teachers' classroom practices align with the curriculum standards guidelines?

This study identifies a range of examples of learner-centred practices, giving insight into how learning can be organized and facilitated in similar contexts to make learning and teaching more effective. It also identifies several issues to be addressed to support teachers to better implement the curriculum.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Research about China's English curriculum reform

Since the launch of China's 2001 curriculum reform, researchers have investigated various aspects of its

implementation. On the one hand, some positive findings have been reported, for example, by national investigation studies Ma (2009) and Liu & Kang (2011). These include improved student motivation and academic quality, changes in teachers' perceptions about learning and teaching, the shift from a traditional teaching mode towards a quality-oriented one, and better-facilitated teacher professional development. On the other hand, and as a matter of concern, more reported findings are about the challenges and pressure that practitioners face. For example, investigating the policy implementation in four public primary schools located in one of the most economically developed prefectures in China, Hu (2008) reveals a severe shortage of available teachers as well as a lack of appropriate and adequate professional preparation and training for teachers. Interviewing 73 English teachers from Chinese public primary and secondary schools, Li and Baldauf (2011) identify five major factors impeding the implementation of the curriculum. These are: (1) textbook congruence with the testing system and rapidly changing and challenging content; (2) insufficient qualified teachers; (3) lack of sufficient and effective teacher professional development; (4) perceived student resistance; and (5) the backwash effect of the examination-oriented education system. Consequently, most teachers choose to stick to the old spoon-feeding or "duck-feeding" procedures, consistent with "rote learning and drilling" (ibid., p. 802). Similarly, Li's study (2010) shows that, being critical of the curriculum objectives and requirements, teachers teach to the test rather than following the curriculum instructions and recommendations. Therefore, Li (2010) argues that the curriculum has failed to function in the classroom as intended.

Other studies report a mismatch between teachers' beliefs and/or practices regarding the curriculum. For example, Yan's study (2012) shows that, despite teachers' high level of endorsement of the new curriculum, changes to their practices were limited, which mainly focused on covering the grammar and vocabulary contents of the textbooks, with listening and speaking elements mostly omitted. Li (2013) shows that while upholding a belief in promoting communicative competence, in practice the teacher focuses on knowledge transmission, using authoritative teacher-led discourse patterns, assuming the role of knowledge provider and restricting student contributions. Zheng's (2013) study notes the misalignment of teachers' practice with their beliefs and teachers' adoption of an eclectic approach in their practice to cater for different teaching aims. It also suggests that teachers vary in their understanding of the curriculum standards and that teachers lack support in establishing "theoretically supported notions' as well as "first-hand experience of the effectiveness of these notions in promoting immediate learning outcomes" (p. 192).

The above research has provided valuable insights regarding the curriculum reform. However, despite the central role of classroom teaching and learning in the curriculum implementation process, limited research has investigated the teaching and learning processes that actually take place behind the classroom door. Those studies which have occurred have disproportionately focused on economically advanced cities and elite learners in tertiary institutions (e.g., Fang & Garland, 2014; Gao et al., 2007; Gu, 2008; Hu, 2007; Hu, 2008; Reinders, Nunan & Zou, 2017; Woodrow, 2011; Zhang, 2013; Zheng & Borg, 2014). Consequently, little is known as to how far the new curriculum has been taken up at the classroom level in secondary schools in socially and economically less-advanced cities. Given that clear regional disparities exist in EFL teaching due to economic and socio-cultural differences across different regions, such restricted representations of individual learners and classroom practices could "project stereotypes" and "compromise the development of appropriate pedagogy" and policies (Wang & Gao, 2008, p. 390; see also Hu, 2005; Sargent et al., 2011). Therefore, there is a call for more research in schools and classrooms in different parts of the country, especially in some under-represented settings, such as in junior secondary schools and in economically less advanced locations (Sargent et al., 2011; Wang, 2007). Such evidence would be valuable in informing future policy making and professional development programs. This study, therefore, reports on the practices of seven teachers in two non-elite secondary schools in an urban city in the Southwest of China. It adopts the view of classroom teaching as "any activity that learners engage in to further the process of learning a language" (Williams & Burdon, 1997, p. 168), and focuses on teachers' practices with respect to vocabulary, grammar and speaking activities.

2.2 Learner-centred education

Learner-centred education dates back to the child-centred education movement of more than 250 years ago. This developed from extreme dissatisfaction with the traditional subject-centered, teacher-directed approach to education, featuring imparting skills, emphasizing factual information, "gritty application and memory work" (Darling, 1994, p. 2). As a reaction against such traditional practices, progressive educators stressed the importance of appreciating children as individuals with a unique personal history, ability, aptitude, interest, experience and cultural capital (Entwistle, 1970). As one of the most influential educational reformers at this time, Dewey maintained that learning takes place through group community-based activities, linking up with real life activities, problems, and students' interests, with the purpose being to enable the learner to see the usefulness, meaning and connection of learning to the real world (Darling, 1994). Dewey saw the traditional school as a place where "the centre of gravity is outside the child. It is in the teacher, the textbook, anywhere and everywhere … except in the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself" (Dewey, 1990, p. 34). He therefore called for the "shifting of the centre of gravity" so that the child becomes the centre of educational design and practice (Dewey, 1990, p. 34). Dewey also emphasized the importance of social interaction in a co-operative, encouraging and mutually helpful environment for human development (Darling, 1994).

2.3 Learner-centredness and L2 pedagogy

The L2 teaching community started to "espouse the learner-centred teaching principles" in the mid-1970s due to the desire to make teaching more responsive to learner needs, allowing learners to "play a fuller, more active and participatory role" in learning (Tudor, 1996, p. 1). So far, learner-centred teaching has been widely embraced in the language teaching community (e.g., Bao, 2013; Hanifehzadeh & Ebrahimi, 2015; Lee & Chen, 2010; Nosratinia, Gourabsari & Sarabchian, 2014). It tailors all aspects of language teaching according to learner needs and characteristics, seeking to empower learners by enabling them to assume an informed and self-directive role in pursuing their language-related life goals (Nunan, 1999; Tudor, 1996). The dual focus of learner-centred education is how learning and learners' overall development are best facilitated. Learner-centred pedagogical practices include:

> *curriculum choices such as sharing power and decision making with learners, being partners with learners in the learning process, engaging learners in active learning, thinking and participation, making learning relevant, interesting, challenging and meaningful to learners, maximizing and enabling the dual functions of the resources and materials, and using assessment to facilitate learning* (Lou & Greg, 2020, p. 115).

In terms of methodology, rather than aligning with any specific way of teaching, learner-centred teaching implies openness to a variety of methods, approaches, and insights. As Nunan (1991) pointed out over two decades ago:

> *there never was and probably never will be a method for all, and the focus in recent years has been on the development of classroom tasks and activities which are consonant with what we know about second language acquisition, and which are also in keeping with the dynamics of the classroom itself* (p. 228).

To better respond to learner needs in context teachers should seek to learn from different methods or approaches, as well as from the insights derived from their everyday teaching experience (Tudor, 1996). Nunan's and Tudor's perspectives are consistent with the concept of principled eclecticism (Brown, 2014) and the post-method condition, which rejects the contention that there is only one right way to teach or learn (Kumaravadivelu, 1994; 2006). Such a perspective frees teachers from the bonds of any specific method, empowering them to "construct classroom-oriented theories of practice" and enabling them to "generate location-specific, classroom-oriented innovative practices" (Kumaravadivelu 1994,

p. 29). Therefore, learner-centred teachers use a variety of activities and tasks of appropriate challenge, relevance, and interest to learners. In this way they engage the whole learner in active meaning-making, interaction, and thus significant learning. This theoretic understanding underpins the analysis of the data in this study and the discussion of the findings.

3 Method

This study forms part of a larger study investigating secondary English teachers' overall practices and beliefs involving seven teachers in two non-elite secondary schools in an urban city in the Southwest of China. A purposive sampling procedure was used to select research sites (non-elite secondary school) and a "maximal variation principle" was used within the selected research sites to sample teachers who differ in some characteristics such as age and teaching experience (Bryman, 2012, pp. 418-419; Creswell, 2013). The seven participants are all females, aged from late 20s to early 50s. Fang and Guiyun (pseudonyms), are from School One, while the other five, Anli, Bailin, Chen, Dongmei and Enya (pseudonyms) are from School Two. Six participants hold a bachelor's degree relevant to English literature or English education while one has a bachelor's degree in Tourism Management. They have a teaching history ranging from 7 to 33 years. The classes observed are typical Chinese EFL classes with class sizes ranging from 37 to 58 students. The basic information about the seven participants and the classes observed is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Basic Information about the Participants and Classes

Participant	Age Group	Highest Degree	Year level	Class size
Anli	35-40	BA in TESOL	Y8	56
Bailin	30-35	BA in TESOL	Y7	58
Chen	30-35	BA in Tourism Management	Y7	48
Dongmei	35-40	BA in English Literature	Y9	53
Enya	25-30	BA in TESOL	Y7	56
Guiyun	50-55	BA in English Literature	Y9	37
Fang	45-50	BA in English Literature	Y8	45

Data that this study draws on were generated from five classroom observations of each participant (45/40 minutes/class). Each participant's class was observed across the span of one week to capture the key procedures of teaching a unit of work. The observed classes were audio-recorded and an observational protocol (see Appendix A) was used to safeguard impartiality. A passive, non-intrusive role was adopted by sitting in a corner at the back of the classroom, fully immersed in note taking. A reflective research diary was kept on the same days as the observations.

The incoming data were organized into a computer software NVivo 10. The audio recordings were scrutinized repeatedly together with the observation notes, and further notes made on the same day or the next day while classroom processes were still fresh in the mind. The audio recordings were all transcribed except for sections when students were listening to the tape, having a dictation, or reading in chorus. The abbreviations and symbols used in the transcripts are as follows:

T	the teacher
STs	the whole class or many students
1ST	a random student

ST1, ST2 …   the individual students called upon to answer questions
Bb   the blackboard/whiteboard
PPT   projected PowerPoint slide
[]   [Chinese version, translated into English]
()   (explanation)

Thematic analysis was conducted on the class observation data, with comments and notes made in the NVivo document along with the transcripts, supported by the observation notes and reflective diaries.

4 Findings

This section first presents the activities teachers used in the teaching of vocabulary, grammar and speaking. There follows a meta-analysis of the alignment of teachers' practices with the curriculum standards.

4.1 Vocabulary teaching activities

Five types of activities were used to teach new words, namely: teacher telling and explaining; the "little teacher" activity; translation; authentic use of the words; and reading in chorus. The most frequently used activity was the traditional form of teacher telling and explaining, during which the teachers mostly dominated while the students listened passively, taking notes and responding occasionally. For example, in Fang's class, the students were receiving a great amount of information that was passed onto them without scaffolding or interaction to facilitate the internalization of the words. After introducing the words, a common practice was to ask students to read the words in chorus.

In contrast to this traditional practice was the "little teacher" activity, which was used by Anli exclusively and by Bailin sometimes. Excerpt 1 is an example of Anli's class, when the "little teachers" led the class by reading and explaining the new words, sharing information including how they had come to remember the spelling of the words, and what relevant information or important points to emphasize or expand on.

Excerpt 1 Anli Y8 L1

T: OK, ST4, how do you spell outgoing?

ST4:   o-u-t-g-o-i-n-g

T: Very good! [How do you remember this word?]

ST4:   [By separating it in to two words] out [and] going.

T: [OK, are there any combinations of letters in this word?]

ST4:   'ou'

T: 'ou' /au/ [right?] outgoing?

T: OK, very good! [Class], how to spell outgoing?

STs: o-u-t-g-o-i-n-g

T: OK, very good, and ST4, [What do you want to emphasize about this word? For example, its synonyms or antonyms, you need to tell others]

ST4:   [When we interpret it as friendly, its synonym is] friendly

T: [Good!]

ST4:   [When it is interpreted as sociable, its antonym is] shy

T: [The antonym is] shy, [What else?]

    T& STs: Quiet

    …

Nearly one third of the students had a turn to be the little teacher while the others listened carefully, taking notes, and responding to the teacher's questions. The little teachers explained most of the important or relevant points concerning the new words, so Anli acted as a facilitator, engaging the class, reinforcing what the little teachers had said, making explanations or additions when necessary. This activity required students to have self-studied the words at home by using learning strategies such as using audio devices, listening, and imitating, practicing reading aloud, referring to resources such as a dictionary, grammar books or the internet. Gradually the students had become capable of self-studying and explaining words to the class. When they acted as little teachers, they were also sharing learning strategies and their own thinking. Therefore, this activity facilitated the development of students' cognitive and metacognitive strategies, learning ability and good habits. As the students had done so well in self-studying and previewing the words and grammar focus, Anli could allocate more time for students to do other activities, which maximized the efficiency of the 45-minute class time. This activity effectively engaged students in actively thinking, telling, and learning, demonstrating great student involvement and contribution, and extending learning beyond the classroom.

    To reinforce the newly learned vocabulary, Anli engaged students in translation activities, which challenged students to translate the words shown on the screen one-by-one or group-by-group, while the class watched and later evaluated how well other groups had done. Bailin used an activity for authentic use of the newly learned words, as in Excerpt 2 where the words were 'zero' to 'nine'.

    Excerpt 2 Bailin Y7 L4

    T: Now, look at the screen! Let's go on. Let's do some exercises. How many birds are there in the picture? [What's the Chinese meaning of this question, do you know?]

    …

    T: Now, work out the math problems: [We will answer some maths questions.] What's 0 and 4?

    STs: Four.

    T: OK, very good! Four. [0 and 4 is] (Screen showing 0 + 4 = 4)

    STs: Four.

    …

    T: [Next,] bike number. [Bike number, right? Many of you come to school by bike. When we say it, we say the word 'bike' first.] bike,

    …

    T: [Next, I drive a car, right?] What's my car number?

    …

In this example, Bailin made the learning more meaningful and relevant, and the use of English authentic. Compared with the common practice of exclusively asking students to read in chorus, Anli's and Bailin's practices helped students better internalize the words.

4.2 Grammar teaching activities

Two approaches to teaching grammar rules were identified: a deductive approach used by six teachers and an inductive approach used only by Anli. Taking a deductive approach, four teachers used a teacher-telling activity to directly introduce the rules and then reinforced the rules with a grammar-translation activity, while two (Bailin and Chen) also used activities to facilitate authentic use and practice of the

rules, making learning more meaningful and relevant. Taking an inductive approach, Anli used activities to foreground the grammar concepts, to facilitate noticing of the rules, and to engage students in thinking discussing, practicing, and applying the rules in meaningful and authentic ways. The activities used by Anli, Bailin, and Chen are described here in detail.

4.2.1 Activity to foreground grammar concepts

To foreground the concept of comparative degree, Anli created a real situation to reinforce the newly learned vocabulary. The students were sitting in four big groups in rows. She read the English words on the screen aloud for Group 1 to translate and asked other students to judge Group 1's performance and then she wrote 'well' on the blackboard, which meant Group 1 did well. Group 2 followed suit and achieved a 'better'. Groups 3 and 4 had to translate within three seconds, one by one, row by row, achieving 'good' and 'better' respectively. Anli then guided the students to compare the groups (see Excerpt 3):

> *Excerpt 3 Anli Y8 L2*
>
> T: [We should say that when we compare Group 3 and 4, we discover] Group 3 did well. Group 4 did better.
>
> T: [OK, if we compare all of the groups, we will discover] Group 3 did
>
> T& STs: as well as Group 1
>
> T: [How do they compare?]
>
> T& STs: [as well as]
>
> T: and Group 2 and Group 4, [How do they compare?]
>
> T& STs: Group 4 did as well as Group 2.
>
> T: [Ah, this is something we are going to learn tomorrow. Today we only need to know about it.]

Anli embedded a valuable opportunity into the vocabulary reinforcing activity, creating a situation where English is used for authentic purposes and the grammar concept is introduced in a natural way.

4.2.2 Activity to facilitate noticing of the rules

The next day, to facilitate noticing of the rules, Anli showed many pictures on the screen, each containing two people with strikingly contrasting characteristics, such as height, weight, and age. She asked students to work in pairs to observe, notice, and practice saying plenty of sentences to compare the two people in each picture. The screen showed the words and sentences simultaneously, highlighting the differences in the adjectives and their respective comparative degree. This process enabled students to look, observe, notice, listen, think, discuss, and speak at the same time, also enabling them to discover or infer the grammar rules. Anli continued this activity the following day with pictures which were more interesting, vivid, and relevant to students' lives, such as popular figures in TV or cartoons and famous actors or sports players. With their striking comparisons, these pictures amused the students, who, with Anli's facilitation and scaffolding, gradually became able to independently produce complete sentences, grasping the grammar rules while using them in an authentic way.

     To reinforce grammar rules, three teachers (Anli, Bailin, Chen) used activities besides the common practice of grammar-translation activities. For example, to continue practicing the comparative degree, Anli invited two students to come to the front and asked the whole class to compare these two students using what they had just learned. She first guided the students to compare from different aspects (see Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4 Anli Y8 L3

T: OK, try, [how can we compare them two, from what aspects, think about it] (T raising hand)

STs: [tall]

T: [tall]

STs: [short]

T: [Short], OK, [tall and short, what else?]

STs: Funny

T: Funny, [what else?]

…

T: [OK, ST1, say a sentence]

ST1:   En, A is taller than B

T: OK, very good, [what about the other way round? ST2]

ST2:   B is shorter than A

T: Very good, [what else, what else? ST3]

ST3:   A is funnier than B

…

ST5:   A's hair

T: A's hair is

ST5:   is longer than B's (T is doing action, pointing to A's hair, and showing the difference)

T: than B's hair

T: Very good, (T and the class applauded) [we can also say that B has longer hair than A, how to say?]

STs: B has longer hair than A (T is like a conductor to an orchestra)

…

The class seemed happy, and the atmosphere was conducive to learning. Rather than purely focusing on pattern drilling and repetition, this activity made the application and learning of the language authentic and meaningful.

Likewise, Chen used real objects to facilitate the teaching and reinforcing of possessive pronouns (see Excerpt 5).

Excerpt 5 Chen Y7 L3

…

T: What's this? (Taking a student's book)]

STs: It's a book.

T: OK, it's an English book. OK, whose book is it?

STs: ST1's

T: [What to add to ST1?]

STs: 's

T: (T pointing to a desk) … Whose desk is it? [Whose desk?]

STs: It's ST2 and ST3's

T: [OK, two students sharing this desk.] It's

STs: ST2 and ST3's

…

In this way, the learning of the possessive pronouns was made meaningful, relevant, authentic, and accessible to students, rather than being abstract.

4.3 Speaking activities

Four types of speaking activities were identified: authentic questioning, oral presentation, whole class speaking activity and pair/group speaking activities. Authentic questioning is an activity frequently used by Anli, Bailin and Dongmei, occasionally used by other teachers, but never used by Guiyun. For example, Anli asked the students questions about their frequency of doing things (see Excerpt 6).

> *Excerpt 6 Anli Y8 L2*
>
> T: ST2, how often do you go to the movies?
>
> ST2:   I go to the movies once a month.
>
> T: OK, how often does ST2 go to the movies?
>
> STs: He goes to the movies once a month.
>
> T: Once a?
>
> STs: Month
>
> T: OK! Very good!
>
> T: ST3 how often do you play computer games?
>
> ST3:   I never play computer games.
>
> T: OK, how often does ST3 play computer games?
>
> STs: She never plays computer games.
>
> T: Plays, [pay attention to the third person singular form of verbs!]

Anli then used the students' answers as input, based on which she further engaged students in meaningful and contextualized communication about themselves, their peers, or pictures. To give another example, to lead into a reading passage, Dongmei asked questions that were relevant to the topic of the passage (see Excerpt 7).

> *Excerpt 7 Dongmei Y9 L2*
>
> T: If you like travelling, please hands up! …
>
> …
>
> T: ST4, what's your favourite country?
>
> ST4:   Er, Germany.
>
> …
>
> T: Germany, if you have a chance to go to Germany, what would you like to buy?
>
> ST4:   I will buy some (inaudible). If I could I will buy a soccer ball.
>
> …
>
> T: OK, now, as we know that there are so many things made in China, Switzerland, France, and what about in America and other countries in the world? …

Dongmei engaged students in meaningful discussion, thinking, and authentic use of English, making learning relevant to students' lives so as to lead into the reading text.

A student oral presentation activity was used routinely by Anli and Dongmei, but the way they used it differed. In Anli's class, every day at the beginning of the class, one student or one group of students would go to the front to give an oral presentation, trying to apply in the presentation what they had learned recently. Each day the presentation was in a different form. Some gave a speech about a topic,

some introduced their friends, some had a role play as interviewer and interviewees, and some simply acted out a scenario to address a topic related to good manners. The students supported their presentation with PPT slides, pictures and/or stage props. For example, on day four students gave a presentation as a group, two acting as reporters and two as student interviewees. Before the class began, they had already written 'Chinese Teenagers' with some drawings and a picture of the national flag of China stuck to the blackboard. During their presentation, they used pictures of fruit and real objects such as cups and bottles as stage props. After the presentations, Anli used peer assessment, guiding the class to give feedback, evaluate and give a score for the presenter(s), which would contribute to their overall oral exam scores for that school term. Anli also used it as formative assessment on students' English-speaking ability, which allowed student control and choice of topic, how to present and with whom and when they would like to do the presentation (by volunteering or negotiating with her). Throughout the whole process, she paid particular attention to the students' processes of learning and thinking. This activity not only brought out students' potential but also facilitated the development of their creativity and their ability to make judgements and evaluations.

Dongmei evidently had a different perspective on managing oral presentations. For example, a student stood at the front of the classroom saying something in a voice too low to hear, seemingly intimidated, not standing properly nor looking at the class. Dongmei was standing beside the student rather than leaving the stage to him. This activity ended with no comment or encouragement from the teacher or students and Dongmei quickly moved on to the next activity. Thus, the oral presentation activity existed as a form only, not seemingly useful for the majority of the students as it lacked feedback, meaningful discussion and engagement, nor were comments given regarding expectations of the presentation.

Whole class game-like activities were occasionally used by Anli, Bailin, Chen, and Enya to facilitate practice of the language. For example, Chen asked students to practice asking and answering names at the beginning of a lesson after the greeting. Starting with the first row, students asked the second row their names, who in turn, asked the next row. Thus, at any given moment, 12 people were given the opportunity to speak, asking and answering names, while the teacher could keep an eye on what was going on. Chen then engaged the whole class in authentic questioning on the names of those students who might have made a mistake.

Pair work/group work activities that facilitate speaking and communication were frequently used by Anli, Bailin, and occasionally used by other teachers. For example, Anli asked students to work in pairs to ask questions about each other's parents, compare figures on PPT or compare two classmates, ask about frequencies of doing things, and in groups to introduce their own parents to their group members. Bailin asked students to work in pairs/groups to create a dialogue asking each other's names, asking other students' names, asking telephone numbers. Other teachers only occasionally used pair/group work. For example, Chen asked students to work in fours to ask one another's names, Enya asked students to introduce figures in pictures and to act out a dialogue in pairs. Fang asked students to discuss what people usually do on vacation in groups, and Guiyun asked students to discuss and introduce Halloween in groups.

4.4 Alignment of teachers' practices with the curriculum standards

The seven teachers' practices regarding classroom activities sit variously on a continuum of curriculum implementation. Towards one end of the continuum are four teachers (Fang, Guiyun, Chen, Enya), whose practices align more with the traditional teacher-dominated knowledge transmission approach to teaching, featuring teacher telling, reading in chorus and grammar-translation activities, with occasional pair/group activities and limited authentic questioning. Most of the time their voice dominated while the students were like 'empty jugs' waiting passively to be filled with the teacher's knowledge, taking notes, and responding occasionally. The students were observed to be disengaged passive recipients of

knowledge. To facilitate the internalization of the new words these teachers only asked students to read in chorus and mainly used grammar-translation activities or exercises to reinforce newly learned grammar points, not providing opportunities for students to discuss, negotiate and deepen their understanding. Chen and Enya used relatively more activities than Fang and Guiyun to facilitate practicing speaking English, but these activities only accounted for a small proportion of the five lessons observed.

Compared to the above four teachers, Dongmei's practices were more aligned to the curriculum standards guidelines. She used more activities to facilitate students' speaking ability development by asking authentic questions and having meaningful discussions on topics relevant to students or based on the topics of the reading and listening passages. She also used the daily class sharing activity for students to give oral presentations in the front, but without feedback or discussion about the speaker's presentation. More productively, she facilitated students' thinking and discussion by asking them to reflect, recall and report about what they had learned previously. Bailin's practices aligned even more to the curriculum standards guidelines. First, she kept a balanced focus on the development of linguistic and communicative competence, using a variety of activities to effectively engage students in active processing of knowledge and information, making learning relevant and interesting to students. Second, she frequently engaged students in meaningful practice and authentic use of English with frequent questioning, pair/group, or occasional whole class work, thereby providing a range of opportunities for students to develop their English speaking and communication ability. Third, rather than being the centre of the class doing the learning and telling, Bailin let students 'do' the practicing, telling, learning, and thinking. Her use of the little teacher activity not only gave students talking time, but also allowed the classroom sharing of knowledge the students had gained through self-study at home. It effectively engaged students in actively thinking, telling, and learning, while the teacher only acted as a facilitator scaffolding the learning process. This process also facilitated active and deep learning and the development of learning strategies and ability.

Lying much further along the continuum is Anli. Beyond the above three aspects discussed in Bailin's case, Anli's practice enabled grammar learning in a natural and authentic way, providing abundant opportunity for noticing, thinking, discussing, and practicing the rules. Her use of the classroom presentation activity offered freedom of choice, facilitating the development of students' creativeness. In addition, by involving students in peer feedback and assessment, Anli facilitated the development of critical thinking in the students and motivated them to prepare well.

5 Discussion

This study identifies a wide variety of activities being used in the implementation of the new curriculum, ranging from mechanistic drilling, and reading in chorus, through grammar-translation activities, knowledge-transmission activity, to students' reflection and report, pair/group work discussion and practice, and the "little teacher" activity. The findings show that China's learner-centred curriculum reform was taken up only minimally by some of the seven teachers and to varying degrees by the others. The concept of learner-centred education is a relative concept and can function as a continuum, as remarked by Schweisfurth (2013). Therefore, the aims of learner-centred curriculum reform should be to gradually change the whole education system for the better and to be more responsive to both learner and teacher needs, "building on the existing pedagogical practices", taking into consideration the local contextual reality (Schweisfurth, 2013, p. 6). From this perspective, four points will be discussed.

First, teachers' practices need to be understood in context. For example, given the fact that English is studied as a foreign language in China where students do not use English to communicate in everyday life, the commonly used activity of reading aloud in chorus is an activity for students to become familiar with accurate sounds, associating the sounds with forms and meaning. It is a moment when everyone in a

large class would have the courage to read aloud. This practice, which has a deep-rooted history, is well-justified in China, where the learning of the Chinese characters follows two principles:

- Using the Five Organs: the eyes to see the shape, the ears to hear the sound, the hand to write the shape, the mouth to speak the sound, the mind to think about the meaning.
- Contextualized learning: each character as it is learned is formed with another into a word and each word is formed into a sentence (Biggs, 1998, pp. 726-727).

This kind of reading aloud and repetition must be distinguished from rote learning, as it involves all the senses for meaning making. Therefore, I argue that learner-centred practices include not only activities of meaningful interaction, but also some of the traditional Chinese chorus-type activities which have shown great value in building student confidence and memory. The inclusion of such activities in the implementation of the curriculum reform should be encouraged, given that they are in fact contextually learner-centred.

The second point relates to some teachers' unbalanced use of certain activities, resulting in questionable effectiveness of classroom teaching, a point that is also observed by Ma (2009). Each activity identified in this study has its pedagogical functions and purposes, and thus needs to be selectively use in a balanced way to facilitate effective teaching and learning, as evidenced in Anli's and Bailin's practices. Excessive use of a certain type of activity, for example reading aloud in chorus or grammar translation activity, deprives students of the opportunity to develop their other abilities, such as oral communication and thinking abilities. This practice suggests teachers' superficial understanding of the curriculum standards and of effective teaching and learning, which resonates with Yu's (2003) finding. The precious class time should be used for more meaningful learning and interaction as the classroom is usually the only place for most students to speak English. A lack of activity for students to practice, interact, discuss, reflect, and report, as was the case with the majority of teachers in this study, also limits the opportunity for the teacher to gauge students' learning states, what students find important, interesting or difficult and what they still remember from the previous lesson. Only with such information can teachers design or tailor their teaching to be more responsive to students' perceptions, understandings, and prior learning, and thereby diminish mismatches of understanding, interpretation, and perceptions (Nunan, 1995).

The third point is that just using an activity described as learner-centred does not guarantee its effectiveness. What counts more is the value that the teacher attaches to it and how the activity is organized, as this will influence the perceived meaningfulness of the activity to the student and therefore the effectiveness of it in facilitating learning. The effectiveness of some teachers' use of certain activities in this study is questionable, suggesting an insufficient understanding of the functions and purposes of the activities, a finding also reported by other studies (e.g., Fang & Garland, 2014; Yu, 2003; Zheng & Borg, 2014). For example, the class oral presentation activity worked differently in Anli's and Dongmei's classes. In Anli's class, the students were allowed freedom to make decisions on the 'what', 'how', 'with whom' and 'when' to present. Students' creativity was encouraged and each day the presentations took on a different form. Importantly, all the other students were expected to listen carefully as they were responsible for giving feedback and grading the presenter(s). Therefore, Anli's daily use of this activity optimized students' learning by encouraging creative thinking, decision making and freedom of choice while engaging the whole class in reflection, discussion, and evaluation of the presentations. By contrast, Dongmei's use of this activity seemed merely a formal requirement and meaningless for the students who were not presenting. The whole process just passed quickly and was not used as an opportunity for real learning and discussion.

The fourth and last point arising from this study is that some teachers' effectiveness in facilitating transferable learning is of concern. The ultimate goal of learner-centred education can be interpreted as developing self-directed or autonomous life-long learners (MOE 2001; 2011). To achieve this goal, of vital importance is the development of learners' higher-order thinking and learning strategies that can be

transferred to future learning. The more higher-order thinking is promoted, the more knowledge transfer would probably be facilitated (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Nevertheless, most teachers in this study mainly facilitated grammar-translation knowledge and rarely engaged students in deep thinking and discussion. Nor did they incorporate learning strategy training and use in their teaching. Therefore, they did not help students to develop autonomous learning, lending support to Yu and Wang's (2009) finding. By contrast, Anli facilitated higher-order thinking for evaluating and critiquing (i.e., peer feedback, evaluation, grading) and creative thinking. Regarding leaning strategies, Anli's and Bailin's use of the "little teacher" activity enhanced self-study ability and promoted sharing of thinking and strategies, expanding learning beyond the classroom (Wong & Nunan, 2011). It also promoted awareness of seeking a variety of resources and references to support their learning, empowering them to function as effective and self-directed learners (Cohen, 1998; Nunan, 1999; Wenden, 2002).

6 Conclusion

This study has presented seven Chinese secondary EFL teachers' classroom practices related to activities used in the teaching of new words, grammar and speaking, giving insight into the status of Chinese secondary EFL teachers' classroom practices and their uptake of the curriculum standards. Although it is nearly 20 years since the launch of the reform, the data indicate that there is still a long way to go before the reform is fully implemented and achieves "institutionalization" (Fullan, 2007). This study has identified several issues to be addressed to support teachers to better implement the curriculum.

First, given that the findings suggest superficial understanding of learner-centred pedagogies, teacher professional development programs need to facilitate teachers' understanding of the theories underpinning the reform and the functions and pedagogical purposes of different activities. Teacher "capacity" needs to be developed with tailor-made professional development programs to ensure the full implementation of the reform (Fullan, 2007, p. 58).

Next, this study has identified great variation in teachers' practices despite working in similar contexts, which suggests that a "culture of collegiality and collaboration" is yet to be developed for teachers to share and reflect on their teaching together, and to learn from and support each other (Ng, 2009, p. 187). The study has provided detailed examples of practices which make learning relevant, interesting, and meaningful to learners, facilitating active thinking, learning, participation, practice, and the development of learners' communicative competence and creative- and critical-thinking abilities. Therefore, once shared and reflected on, these practices can give insight into how learning can be organized and facilitated. They can be easily adapted and applied in similar contexts to make learning and teaching more effective. Efficient facilitation of such a culture of cooperation and sharing could be based on an action plan with guided discussion and reflection. This would alleviate teachers' feelings of powerlessness and being marginalized, due to limited and unequal accessibility of professional development opportunities (Bantwini, 2010; Troudi & Alwan, 2010; Zheng & Borg, 2014). In this way, teachers can be involved in curriculum change and development processes, their potential fully unlocked to ensure more effective implementation of the curriculum reform.

Because this study is of small scale and localized, involving seven teachers in two secondary schools in one city in the Southwest of China, the findings should be interpreted with reference to the contextual information provided. The data were generated through co-construction by the researcher and the participants and only represent the seven teachers' practices, at the moment the data were gathered, and therefore could hardly represent the mass of Chinese secondary EFL teachers. Nevertheless, this study offers a foundation for further research dialogue around topics related to learner-centred education, curriculum implementation, L2 teacher beliefs, classroom practices and teacher professional development. To understand teachers better and explore the challenges that teachers face in the

implementation of the curriculum, further research is needed which gives voice to teachers to theorize their practice, providing insights into what concerns teachers and how they enact their teaching beliefs.

Appendix A Observation Protocol

<table>
<tr><td colspan="6" align="center">Observation Protocol</td></tr>
<tr><td>Time:_____</td><td colspan="2">Class:_____</td><td>Teacher_____</td><td colspan="2">Number of students: ____girls, ____boys</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Environment (decoration, posters.)</td><td colspan="2">Seat arrangement (how and why)</td><td colspan="2">____line ____row</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6" align="center">Teaching procedure</td></tr>
<tr><td>Time</td><td>Activity</td><td>What T does</td><td>What Sts do</td><td>Interaction pattern</td><td>Other observation and comments</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
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<tr><td colspan="2">Classroom atmosphere</td><td colspan="4">competitive —cooperative   relaxing— stressful
safe   enjoyable   sharing   caring</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Power relationship</td><td colspan="4">T dominated   democratic   negotiation
shared decision-making</td></tr>
</table>

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Mingkun Lou has worked as an English language teacher in China for over 15 years and now works as an academic researcher at the University of South Australia. Her research interests include learner-centred pedagogy, curriculum reform, classroom interaction, and teacher professional development. Her PhD focused on Chinese secondary EFL teachers' language-teaching-related beliefs, classroom practices, and factors that influence teachers' practices and change.