

China's Secondary School EFL Teachers' Situational Restraints in the Implementation of Mediation*

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Abstract—This paper is aimed at exploring China's secondary school EFL teachers' situational restraints in the implementation of mediation. In order to address the proposed question, a questionnaire survey was employed for the data collection regarding teachers' situational restraints in their classroom practices. The results indicate that most EFL teachers are unable to play mediators on account of situational restraints that they have encountered. Most of them refer to the shortage of suggestions and recommendations from related specialists or experts and the lack of cultivation training in terms of the execution of mediation as the most influential of all the restraints. The paper thus attempts to bring out reflective implications for language teacher practitioners by means of the provision of reference evidence for policy makers and curriculum developers.

Index Terms—EFL, mediation, implementation, situational restraint

I. THE PROBLEM

Current education reforms imply that it seems necessary for teachers to implement the teacher role as a mediator instead of disseminator in the language classroom since the value of adult mediation in children's learning can never be overstressed (Seng, Pou, & Tan, 2003). Given the facilitation of children's education quality, this paper seems to be great importance in that the majority of secondary school students in China fail to express themselves in proper oral and literal English (Y. Li, 2004; Liao, 2000; Ye, 2007). Conversely, they are exposed to finite language knowledge laying emphasis on grammatical forms of language (Ting, 1987). The most ideal foreign language instructional programs, however, ought to "involve the whole learner in the experience of language as a network of relations between people, things, and events" (Savignon, 1987, p. 236, cited in Chen, 2005, p. 3). Mediation offers young students more occasions for them to practise systematic English rendering the linguistic learning more effective since it views all language users start from birth to develop relationships with people around them (Feuerstein, 1990; Williams & Burden, 2000). Through constant interactions with others, learners attempt to apply language and make sense of the world (Vygotsky, 1978). As such, the teacher role as a mediator ought to take priority in the linguistic instructional program (Feuerstein, 1990).

The National Standards of English Curriculum for Basic Education of China (hereafter referred to as *Curriculum Standards*) was generated on the notion that "learners individually possess diverse learning styles and intelligences" (Ediger, 2000, p. 35) and social-constructivism which "provides various ways to access the students' multiple intelligences" (Teague, 2000, p. 9). Now, the execution of the *Curriculum Standards* is in process throughout China, whose implementation seems indispensable in that "the current situation of English education still does not meet needs of the economic and social development" (MOE, 2001, p. 2).

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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The study focuses on investigating why mediative classrooms are rare in China and what can be done to generate more mediative classrooms. To achieve this goal, one question that follows to be addressed is proposed:

What situational restraints prevent EFL teachers from implementing mediative functions?

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Feuerstein (1980) generates a program about teaching students learning strategies named Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) in which a special quality of interaction is elucidated between learners and the mediator via 12 parameters: significance, purpose beyond the here and now, shared intention, a sense of competence, control of own behavior, goal-setting, challenge, awareness of change, a belief in positive outcomes, sharing, individuality, and a sense of belonging (pp. 289-290). The program consists of 400 cognitive tasks constructed to instruct the skills as models in terms of issues on mental activities, problem solving, and learning strategies (Feuerstein, 1980; Feuerstein & Feuerstein, 1991).

Feuerstein (1980) believes that there are 12 various ways of mediation rooted in these 12 MLE criteria, which might provide adequate flexible space for the teacher in the language classroom to conduct mediation (Seng et al., 2003). The first “three criteria are also considered universal, in the sense that they can be present in all races, ethnic groups, cultural entities, and socioeconomic strata” (Seng et al., 2003, p. 36). Comparatively, “the remaining nine criteria are considered responsible for the process of diversification of humankind in terms of cognitive styles, need systems, types of skills mastered, and the structure of knowledge”, and “these nine criteria are also considered situational because they need not always be present in every MLE” (Seng et al., 2003, p. 36).

IV. INSTRUMENT

To secure data to address the question, a questionnaire survey was adopted relying on the question item that participants were requested to indicate to what extent each of the 20 factors influenced their teaching practices and allowed to add other restraints as well with reference to Williams and Burden’s *Mediation Questionnaire* (2000) testing teachers’ classroom practices respecting Feuerstein’s 12 MLE parameters on top of Liao’s *Communicative Language Teaching Questionnaire* (2003) (see Appendix).

V. RESEARCH SITES AND PARTICIPANTS

The target population of the current study consisting of all China’s secondary school EFL teachers to which the researcher really prefers to generalize is rarely achievable (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2007), which was thus carried out in Henan situated in eastern central China for the reachable population (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2007). Henan, whose capital is Zhengzhou, is the most populous province of China, having a gross population of 100 million in 2008 with 31% urban residents and 69% rural ones, and it is traditionally regarded as the cradle of Chinese civilization (National Bureau of Statistics of China [NBSC], 2008; New World, 2008). Since the majority of the province is south of the Yellow River (*huanghe* in Chinese), it was thus named Henan (River South), covering an area of 167,000 square kilometers (NBSC, 2008). With the growing, profoundly economic, and social innovations and development of China, Henan has gradually become the centre of Chinese cultures, transportation, education, and economy (New World, 2008).

Deng Xiaoping’s extensive and holistic educational reform policy, involving all levels of the education system, focused on narrowing the gap between China and other developing and developed countries, and so it was with Henan province (New World, 2008). Secondary education in Henan was rearranged and now is developing steadily on the basis that a more closely integrated educational system has already taken shape (New World, 2008). By the end of 2007, there were 7,492 secondary schools in Henan with 7,698,650 students enrolled and 454,540 teachers, involving 25,000 secondary school EFL teachers compared with a total of 572,000 in China (NBSC, 2008). The researcher used to work as a secondary school EFL teacher and is familiar with the situation of this career, so the investigation into secondary school EFL practitioners in China is an alternative of interest. Furthermore, China’s secondary school students have to sit for the national matriculation English test (NMET) before tertiary education, which is referred to as one of the most serious situational constraints to hinder teachers’ application of the mediative role (Liao, 2003; MOE, 2001).

A vital difficulty with the questionnaire survey is that a smaller percentage of pre-sampled participants tend to answer questionnaires (Liao, 2003). Out of the 350 distributed survey sheets, 152 valid copies (43.4%) were returned, but “power is not an issue” in that the sample size concerned is larger with over 100 participants (Stevens, 1996, p. 6, cited in Pallant, 2007, p. 205).

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey requested the participants to scale the 20 statements by circling the figure from 1 to 6 implying *not sure* to *quite a lot*. The mean for each item was 3.5, with the minimum scale total 20 and the maximum 120. The majority of the respondents ($n = 147$) made an answer involving 17 missing values, and five participating teachers ($n = 5$) left this item blank whose missing data did not threaten the wanted validity of the survey as the valid sample size exceeded 100 (Stevens, 1996, cited in Pallant, 2007). No other situational restraints were added while the respondents scaled the

survey item. The 20 statements fell into three segments associated with (a) China's current educational system (*a-d*), (b) the learners (*e-g*), and (c) the teacher participants themselves (*h-t*).

As per the statistical results, the mean of 75% of the restraint statements ($n = 15$) exceeded 3.5 ($M > 3.5$). The top five restraints tended to be "lack of advice from relating specialists" (1st), "lack of cultivation being a mediator" (2nd), "lack of financial support for teacher role training programmes" (3rd), "large-sized class instruction" (4th), "lack of mediation role effectiveness testing instruments" (5th). The remaining 25% of the restraints ($n = 5$) were perceived least influential ($M < 3.5$), which tended to be "lack of cultural knowledge" (16th), "mandatory textbooks" (17th), "mandatory syllabuses" (18th), "lack of oral proficiency in EFL" (19th), and "attitudes towards instructional work" (20th).

Among the situational restraints the respondents uttered in the questionnaire, those in relation to the teachers' cultivation as the role of mediation were assumed to be the most serious. The majority of the respondents attached great importance to the re-education concerned with the role of mediation, which showed that they had positive attitudes towards mediation and desired to be equipped for the mediation role with the assistance of related training programs and experienced specialists. Of the restraints related to the education system, large-sized classes and grammar-based exams seemed more serious than mandatory syllabuses and textbooks which were believed to provide adequate convenience for implementing the mediator role (MOE, 2001). The restraints linked to the students' low proficiency in EFL appeared to impact heavily on the teacher participants' classroom practices. The situational restraints respecting the teachers' "shortages" such as "low oral proficiency in EFL" and "lack of knowledge of mediation" were least serious likely due to social desirability (Liao, 2003).

VII. IMPLICATIONS

The current paper looks at investigating why there are so few meditative classrooms in China's secondary middle schools and what can be done to make EFL classrooms more mediative. The results displayed that the teachers' situational restraints hindered them from playing the mediator. The following implications suggest solutions to the situational restraints that the teacher participants came across in the case of (a) EFL teachers' re-education cultivation, (b) the current EFL educational system, and (c) the promotion of learners' proficiency in EFL.

A. Implications for EFL Teachers' Re-education

Based on the survey, it could be seen that the teacher participants argued that the lack of advice from relating specialists and of cultivation of the execution of the role as mediator was the most influential of all the restraints. This confirms Grosser and Waal's (2008) argument that mediation instrument cultivation or re-education programs are to "provide the necessary knowledge, skills, and moreover attitudes to pre-service teachers to become mediators of learning in order to ensure the development and growth of thinking skills" (para. 1). Meanwhile, numerous specialists on mediation claim that the implementation of mediation is pretty tough to educators (e.g., Bligh, 1971; Feuerstein, 1990; Higgins, 2003; Seng et al., 2003). As Seng et al. (2003) put it,

The roles of teachers will have to change dramatically if they are to remain relevant to a new generation of students. The challenge is indeed for educators to design new learning environments and curricula that really encourage motivation and independence to equip students with learning, thinking, and problem-solving skills through good mediation. (p. 17)

EFL teachers thus need to secure professional cultivation respecting mediation so as to act as true mediators. According to Wu (2001, cited in Liao, 2003), an ideal EFL teacher re-education program in China's current educational settings should promote teachers' subject knowledge, skills, and pedagogy. In view of the results of the current research, promoting teachers' proficiency in EFL and cognition of mediation appears to be greatly important.

B. Implications for the Current EFL Education System

In this study, the teacher participants reported that constraints such as large-sized class teaching and grammar-based examinations seriously hindered them from mediating the students' learning. First, in the present exam-oriented education system, they had to teach what would be examined, so they considered teaching the students more language points to be the most important of all (e.g., Teacher ID No. 23; Ting, 1987) rather than comprehensive linguistic skills due to the pressure from the schools and parental expectations (e.g., ID No. 85). Second, in a large class, advanced students could accomplish given tasks, but backward students failed (e.g., ID No. 145). Language interaction in a large class seemed a big challenge to the teacher, and the execution of activities made the entire classroom noisy and in a mess (e.g., ID No. 145). As such, implications are thus offered for the EFL education system respecting the reduction of the large-sized class and the innovation of grammar-based exams.

C. Implications for the Development of Students' Proficiency in EFL

In the current research, the students' low proficiency in EFL and the lack of motivation of learning EFL were more influential factors that inhibited the teacher participants' execution of mediation functions. Most of the teacher participants complained that their students were unable to apprehend their learning tasks given in EFL. They were to talk bilingually, and the students communicated with each other in the native language. Some of the students held negative attitudes towards EFL learning, for, on most occasions, the learners merely listened and took notes as the

teacher talked in the classroom. Therefore, the enhancement of students' proficiency and motivation to learn EFL should be put on the agenda.

China is a large agriculture-based nation with around 70% of the population residing in rural areas, "while members of the Standards writing group and textbook writers are all urban residents" (J. Li, 2004, p. 227). These writers are more familiar with urban learners and thus neglect the situations and requirements of rural students, and even "some teachers have suggested the MOE should provide alternative curricula to teachers of rural students" (J. Li, 2004, p. 227). Considering other unfavorable conditions in rural areas, the present curriculum contents require to be further facilitated to relieve the situational restraints of implementing mediation caused by learners' low proficiency in English.

The following innovations are expected to help raise rural students' proficiency in EFL: (a) providing salary and career incentives for EFL teachers who would like to work in rural schools and (b) investing in a large-scale system of distance education in which the Internet, cable, and satellite technology enable excellent teachers to "teach" in rural schools (Education in China, 2005).

Likewise, learner strategy training seems to facilitate the development of students' EFL levels since the facilitation of students' autonomous learning is among the most valuable targets of language training (Wenden, 1985), which is also one of the functions for the teacher to conduct while mediating students' learning. Students' intrinsic motivation of learning EFL facilitates their proficiency promotion in language, without which students manifest negative learning attitudes and resistance to classroom participation as reported in the current study (Brown, 2001).

VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to reveal why there are so few mediators in secondary school EFL classrooms in China and tried to bring out effective measures to render more mediative classrooms in the future. As such, the present research study is expected to be one of the initial attempts to investigate the mediation execution of China's secondary school EFL teachers. On the basis of the survey results, a conclusion is drawn that the majority of EFL teachers among secondary schools in China are unable to mediate the language cognition of their students in the classroom in the current educational settings. It is damn challenging for EFL teachers to implement the role as a mediator readily on account of situational restraints in relation to the current educational system, learners, and EFL teachers themselves as well. Particularly, the majority of the participating teachers refer to the shortage of suggestions and recommendations from related experts or specialists and the lack of training cultivation regarding the implementation of mediation as the most serious of all the situational restraints. It is therefore proposed that China's secondary school EFL teachers re-orient their own instructional roles from traditional knowledge-givers to mediators with the assistance of teachers' re-education of mediation-based knowledge so as to meet the need of the current social progress.

APPENDIX MEDIATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Listed below are 20 situational restraints. Kindly indicate how much each restraint factor affects your instructional role by scaling the figure from 1 to 6 representing *not sure* to *quite a lot*. If you have other factors that prevent you from implementing mediation, please list them and likewise scale the relating figure implying the extent to which each factor affects your part in the classroom.

1= Not sure; 2= Not at all; 3= Only a little; 4= Fairly; 5= A lot; 6= Quite a lot

Situational restraints	Not sure	Not at all	Only a little	Fairly	A lot	Quite a lot
1). The mandatory syllabus	1	2	3	4	5	6
2). The mandatory textbook	1	2	3	4	5	6
3). Grammar-based examinations	1	2	3	4	5	6
4). Large-sized class instruction	1	2	3	4	5	6
5). Learners' low proficiency in EFL	1	2	3	4	5	6
6). Learners' passive attitudes in learning	1	2	3	4	5	6
7). Learners' resistance to class participation	1	2	3	4	5	6
8). Your lack of oral proficiency in EFL	1	2	3	4	5	6
9). Your lack of mediation knowledge	1	2	3	4	5	6
10). Your lack of cultural knowledge	1	2	3	4	5	6
11). Your lack of support from your school	1	2	3	4	5	6
12). Your lack of mediation-based instructional materials	1	2	3	4	5	6
13). Your lack of mediator-related instructional aids	1	2	3	4	5	6
14). Your lack of mediation role effectiveness testing tools	1	2	3	4	5	6
15). Your lack of time to prepare mediation-based lessons	1	2	3	4	5	6
16). Your lack of cultivation being a mediator	1	2	3	4	5	6
17). Your lack of financial support for teacher role training programmes	1	2	3	4	5	6
18). Your lack of recommendations from relating specialists	1	2	3	4	5	6
19). Your lack of collaboration with colleagues	1	2	3	4	5	6
20). Your attitude towards instructional work	1	2	3	4	5	6

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