

# The Impact of Teacher Education on In-service English Teachers' Beliefs about Self

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**Abstract**—This was a qualitative study carried out in the context of 2013 National Teacher Training Program for Junior High School English Teachers in Chongqing China, intending to reveal the impact of the program on four in-service English teachers' beliefs about self (*i. e.*, about English teachers). Rich data were collected throughout the process of training which lasted for 100 days, including semi-structured interviews, teachers' class analysis reports, professional development plans, periodic summaries and so on. The findings were interpreted with the help of the classification framework of teacher belief change proposed by Cabaroglu and Roberts, which showed that the impact of the program on these four in-service English teachers' beliefs about English teachers' roles, excellent English teachers and English teachers' professional development was considerable, however, the degree, the nature and the sources of the impact varied across individual teachers.

**Index Terms**—qualitative, in-service English teacher education, impact, beliefs about English teachers

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, teacher education programs have been prevalent around the world. In China, National Teacher Training Program has aroused public attention for its large scale, wide coverage, long duration, sufficient funds and professional trainers. However, how much it has actually improved teachers' practice still remains an unstudied question. Borg (2011, p. 370) points out that "teacher education is more likely to impact on what teachers do if it also impacts on their beliefs". Unluckily, research on the extent to which teacher education has actually changed the beliefs of language teachers has also been unexpectedly scarce, especially in in-service contexts.

This study was conducted in the context of 2013 National Teacher Training Program for Junior High School English Teachers in Chongqing China, intending to reveal the impact of the program on four in-service English teachers' beliefs about self (*i. e.*, about English teachers).

As this study is not aimed at exploring the nature of teacher beliefs, the working definition of beliefs proposed by Borg (2001, p. 370-371) in a similar study is adopted, which is "beliefs are propositions individuals consider to be true and which are often tacit, have a strong evaluative and affective component, provide a basis for action and are resistant to change".

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though the number of studies on the impact of teacher education on language teachers' beliefs is quite limited (Borg, 2011), the findings of them are still found to be inconsistent.

Foreign researches can be classified into the following three categories according to research contexts and results: those which identified few or limited changes of beliefs (pre-service: Borg, 2005; Peacock, 2001; Pennington & Urmston, 1998; in-service: Lamb, 1995), those showing positive evidence of considerable impact (pre-service: Debreli, 2012; Yuan & Lee, 2014; Busch, 2010; Mattheoudakis, 2007; in-service: Lamie, 2004; MacDonald, Badger & White, 2001; Cabaroglu & Roberts, 2000), and those which found that belief changes took place in various ways across individuals and areas of belief (pre-service: Läfström & Poom-Valickis, 2013; Özmen, 2012; Liu & Fisher 2006; Richards *et al.*, 1996; Urmston, 2003).

Compared with foreign researches, domestic researches on the impact of language teacher education on teachers' beliefs have been scarcer, most of which focused on the changes of pre-service English teachers' beliefs during the practicum, such as Zhang (2013), Zhai (2011), Kan (2012), Chen (2011) and Pan (2013). Different from these researches, Yang (2006) and Huang (2012) focused on the impact of language learning courses required for prospective English teachers on their beliefs and identified belief changes in some areas as well as belief stability in other areas.

The inconsistency among the findings of these researches (both foreign and domestic) can be attributed to the variations in the following four factors.

1) The nature of the language teacher education programs

The quality of trainers, the length and structure (for example, the ratio of theoretical courses to practical courses, the contents and schedule) of the particular program, would all certainly affect the extent to which the program would impact on teachers' beliefs.

2) The research approaches and instruments adopted

The differences in the nature of the research (qualitative, quantitative or mixed), and the rich and diverse instruments adopted in these foreign researches would naturally result in greater inconsistency in the results.

### 3) The areas of belief under investigation

Rokeach (1980) claimed that there was a belief system, shaped like a concentric circle, in which beliefs are positioned from the periphery to the core according to its importance, and assumed that the core beliefs would be more resistant to change, but the change of which would also influence other beliefs more greatly. Thus, the variability of certain beliefs varies according to their positions in the belief system and naturally leads to different research results.

### 4) The working definition of “impact”

Whether the “impact” was defined to be deep and radical changes or just something that promotes belief development would lead to different interpretations of the results and thus inconsistent findings.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study attempted to fill in the gap in the literature by adopting a qualitative approach to reveal the changes of individual in-service teacher’ beliefs throughout the National Teacher Training Program. As the training contents covered in this program were quite comprehensive, this study only focused on teachers’ beliefs about self and chose the following three sub-dimensions as the main research contents based on literature review, which included beliefs about English teachers’ roles, beliefs about excellent English teachers and beliefs about English teachers’ professional development. It should also be noted that in this study, “impact” was defined to be something promoting belief development, and the classification framework of teacher belief development proposed by Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) were referred to when analyzing the specific nature of the belief impact.

The research questions are: To what extent did the program impact these four in-service English teachers’ beliefs about self? What was the nature of the specific impact? What factors could be attributed to the impact?

### A. Context and Participants

This intensive 100-day training program was divided into five main stages as follows.

#### 1) 1st concentrated learning (32 days)

Trainees attended to lots of lectures delivered by professionals, discussed over various topics with peers, observed and analyzed real classroom cases under the guidance of experts.

#### 2) Shadowing learning (30 days)

This stage was called shadowing learning because the trainees followed the practical instructors every day, just like shadows of them. Specifically speaking, in this one-month shadowing learning stage, each trainee stayed at a first-grade middle school in Chongqing and followed the assigned practical instructor (an excellent teacher in this middle school) to observe his or her daily work to identify the connection between theory and practice.

#### 3) 2nd concentrated learning (18 days)

This stage was similar to the 1st concentrated learning, in terms of the training forms. However, the main aim of this stage was to help the trainees solve the problems they had encountered in the shadowing learning stage.

#### 4) Back-to-work practice and research (16 days)

Trainees went back to their original schools to try to put what they had acquired in the previous stages into practice in real teaching situations.

#### 5) Demonstration and reflection (4 days)

At the end of the program, trainees were able to demonstrate their achievements through the training program, by means of presenting a lesson plan, delivering a lesson, evaluating a lesson as well as having paper oral defense.

Throughout the training, practical courses accounted for 50% of the total courses. Besides, reflection was required throughout the process of training. At the end of each day, trainees were asked to discuss and reflect on what they had learned that day in groups and report the results to the whole class.

In the first and second concentrated learning stages, topics that involved English teachers themselves included: *Pronunciation Training for Junior High School English Teachers*, *Classroom Language Training for Junior High School English Teachers*, *Plan for and Discussion over Junior High School English Teachers’ Professional Development*, *Scientific Research and Academic Writing of Middle School English Teachers*, *Action Research of Junior High School English Teachers*, *Pursuit of Excellent Teacher Qualities*. Besides, the shadowing learning stage was also important for the development of teachers’ beliefs about self as they had observed those excellent teachers as role models.

There were 50 trainees in total, coming from various regions of Chongqing, mainly rural areas. They were all junior high school English teachers and were backbone teachers of their schools, or even their regions. The principle of “purposeful sampling” (Patton, 1990), which refers to selecting information-rich cases “from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1990, p. 169) was followed when selecting the participants. More specifically, among the 16 types of “purposeful sampling” identified by Patton (1990), the strategy of “maximum variation sampling” was adopted, which involves picking a wide range of variation on dimensions of interest. The criteria used in the process of “maximum variation sampling” included: professional titles and years of teaching, school levels or school types, educational backgrounds, and training experiences. In addition, as

Wen (2004) suggested, the attitudes of research objects should also be taken into consideration while sampling. Therefore, after selecting a few qualified candidates by using “maximum variation sampling” strategy, the researcher explicitly explained the contents and requirements of the study to the candidates to consult whether they were willing to take part in the study. Finally, four teachers responded quite positively and became the participants of the study. Table 1. presents the profile of the participants.

TABLE 1.  
THE PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Teacher	Gender	Age	Title	Years of teaching	School	Educational backgrounds	Training experiences
A	female	33	Level 2	12	key school of the city	Normal English	rich
B	female	31	Level 2	9	key school directly under the city	Non-normal English	lacking
C	female	34	Level 2	14	ordinary school	Normal English	lacking
D	female	41	Level 3	19	foreign language school	Normal English	rich

**B. Data Collection and Analysis**

Sources of data in this qualitative study included two main types.

1) Semi-structured interviews

Each participant was interviewed for three times (each time lasted for about half an hour), respectively, at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the training program. The process was recorded and further transcribed.

2) Written and visual materials

Participants’ course work during the program was all collected and analyzed carefully, including learning plans, professional development plans, lesson plans, course wares, classroom observation records, class analysis reports, teaching reflection reports, periodic summaries and final papers.

Among them, interviews were the major sources, while those written and visual materials were mainly for the purpose of “triangulation” (Patton, 1990), which refers to “the process of collecting data from several different sources or in different ways in order to provide a fuller understanding of a phenomenon” (Richards, Schmidt, Kendrick & Kim, 2005, p. 725-726).

Data collection and data analysis alternated with each other, forming a cyclical process, and thus were closely related with each other. To be specific, the researcher made the outline for the first interview based on literature review, in which the questions were centered around English teachers’ roles, excellent English teachers and English teachers’ professional development. Then, the questions for the second and third interviews were proposed after a process of “progressive focusing” (Woods, 1985) according to the results of the analysis of previous data. This is the first level of data analysis — “cyclical analysis” (Borg, 2011; Xu, 2003). The second level is “summative analysis” (Borg, 2011; Xu, 2003), consisting of within-case analysis and cross-case analysis, which refers to the process of first analyzing the belief development of each participant throughout the training program and then comparing the belief development across four participants.

Besides, the belief change categories proposed by Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) were referred to in the process of analyzing the nature of the impact, which included: awareness/realisation, consolidation/confirmation, elaboration/polishing, addition, re-ordering, re-labelling, linking up, disagreement, reversal, pseudo change and no change.

**IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results are presented in the following with discussion. Data cited here carry the following codes: I1, I2, I3 = the first, second, third interview respectively; PDP = professional development plan; CAR = class analysis report; S1, S2, S3, etc. = summary of the first, second, third stage respectively, etc.; FS = final summary; FP = final paper. Information in [ ] is added by the researcher as explanation.

**A. Teacher A**

“A teacher’s job is to motivate and inspire students to learn” (I1), Teacher A generalized so when talking about English teachers’ roles. After shadowing learning, she came to realize that English teachers should also play another two roles. One is emotional educator: “She [the practical instructor] really integrated emotional education into her daily teaching. Honestly speaking, I had usually ignored this aspect” (I2). The other one is cultivator of students’ habits: “There’s one thing that I admired her [the practical instructor] very much, that is, in pair work or group work, when one student was reporting, all the other students were listening carefully, no one was talking at that time. It seemed to be a pattern or habit, and this was really really rare to see in others’ classrooms. That’s when I began to realize that it’s necessary to cultivate students’ habit of listening to others” (I2). Besides, she deepened her understanding of English teacher as a facilitator: “Most of the time she [the practical instructor] was guiding students to learn. She provided them with lots of opportunities to speak in class. Her practice reflected the new curriculum concept [student-centred teaching] well” (I2).

It can be seen that Teacher A views English teachers more as “educator” who focuses on the cultivation of students’ interests, potential, habits, emotions, etc., rather than “subject instructor” who focuses on the teaching of the contents of a certain subject (Beijaard *et al.*, 2000). After training, Teacher A has expanded her beliefs about English teachers’ roles. On the one hand, she added two new roles — emotional educator and cultivator of students’ habits, both of which are teachers’ explicit roles, different from those implicit roles she mentioned in the first interview (motivator and inspirer). On the other hand, it can be seen that even though before training Teacher A had approved teacher’s role as a facilitator, after shadowing learning during which she observed the instructor’s teaching practice, she further consolidated and affirmed the new curriculum idea, that is, return time to your students to make your class student-centered.

As for excellent English teachers, compared with the four measurement criteria put forward by Teacher A in the first interview: “great language competence”, “advanced teaching methodology”, “ability to motivate, facilitate and instruct students” and “care about students like a mother after class” (I1), she added two new standards later. One is “classroom management ability” (I2): “A teacher should have strong abilities to manage the classroom when organizing teaching. In fact, the same class delivered by different teachers will produce completely different results” (I3); “She [the practical instructor] showed very strong classroom management abilities” (CAR); “She could always aroused students’ enthusiasm. The classroom atmosphere was quite good and the effects of interaction turned out to be great” (I2). The other one is “personal charm” (I2): “Her [the practical instructor’s] great personality attracted the students a lot. She brought the students positive energy. I have realized that maybe for a teacher, it’s important to transmit knowledge, but the most important thing is to influence your students with your personal charm” (I2).

Among the four participants, Teacher A seems to have been affected by the practical instructor in the shadowing learning stage most significantly, claiming that “She has interpreted what an excellent English teacher and head teacher should be like and shown me how to become such an excellent teacher” (FP). Thus, the two new standards added were both put forward in reference to her practical instructor. First of all, she noticed the positive impact on teaching effect exerted by the instructor’s great classroom management abilities. Then, different from the other three teachers, Teacher A not only observed the instructor’s class but also extended her visions towards the instructor’s practice outside the classroom because she believed that the positive influence after class could also be transferred to the classroom learning.

As regards professional development, Teacher A explicitly pointed out that she did not think too much about this aspect, even during the program, thus she did not talk much on this topic. However, the researcher thought that the practical instructor’s great influence during the shadowing learning stage would certainly enlighten her on her own professional development in the future.

#### B. Teacher B

When asked about teachers’ roles, Teacher B stated that “An English teacher should first be a guide. His main duty is to open the door of English for children and then stimulate their interests in English. Secondly, he should be a companion, that is, once he has led children to the main road of English learning he then becomes a companion and witnesses their progress. Later, children may find it harder to follow the teacher, at this time, the teacher should provide mental guidance to encourage them and ask them not to give up” (I1).

Teacher B then went to a foreign language school for shadowing learning, where class hours for the subject of English were more than those in ordinary schools and different teaching materials were also adopted. Due to the differences, Teacher B came to realize that a teacher should play another role as “lubricant” (I2), which referred to that a teacher should consciously re-arouse and maintain students’ interests when they were found to become bored of English learning: “The lesson types in this school were comparatively unitary while the time for English learning every day was quite long. I had expected that students would easily get bored, but it didn’t happen. Students were still enthusiastic. I found that the instructor would seize every opportunity to re-motivate students. I was deeply impressed by this. Then I realized that a teacher should also play the role as lubricant or condiment when students were tired of studying English” (I2).

It can be seen that Teacher B’s understanding of teachers’ roles was characterized by being staged, which was different from the other three teachers. More specifically, she believed that a teacher should play different roles in different stages of students’ development, at the mean time, he should stimulate and maintain students’ interests throughout. This understanding reflected that Teacher B considered it important to change roles according to students’ conditions.

In contrast, Teacher B’s view about excellent English teachers showed no differences before and after training. She consistently believed that if a teacher could motivate students to learn and produce certain teaching effects, he could be considered as an excellent teacher.

What’s worth mentioning is that Teacher B’s understanding of professional development was reversed. She mentioned that “I was really puzzled about my professional development before” (I3), however, after training, she described her change as “being brainwashed” (I3), that is, she began to have the desire to do scientific research. Such a significant change might be attributed to her non-normal education background and her puzzles about English teaching in all these years.

To be specific, though Teacher B worked in one of the best middle schools in Chongqing and had quite excellent qualities in herself, she thought she lacked theories related with English teaching and learning due to her non-normal

educational background. Besides, her teaching results turned to be great, thus she did not think about doing research and considered herself “unable to do this” (I2): “Because of the lack of theoretical knowledge, I always thought that scientific research was quite far from me” (FS), “However, after training, I found that maybe I could try to do something, such as the action research introduced by Dr. Zhang. I never dared to think about this before” (I2), “Thanks to the training, I have gained more profound understanding of my profession and have started to make plans for my future professional development” (PDP). In the final summary Teacher B re-emphasized that “Because of the training program, I have finally believed that front-line teachers can also do research and have known about how to do research. This idea is very meaningful and helpful to my future teaching and research” (FS). It can be concluded that Teacher B has figured out new directions for her professional development due to this training program.

### C. *Teacher C*

Teacher C’s beliefs regarding teachers’ roles remained almost the same during the process of training. She consistently considered teachers as guides, providers of learning methods and strategies and cultural disseminators.

While regarding excellent English teachers, Teacher C listed the following standards at the very beginning: “precise professional knowledge and systematic theories”, “well-prepared English lessons which can attract students and make students persistently like him or her” and “good morality” (I1). After comparing teachers in her own school with those in the shadowing school which is a key school, she found that “What amazed me was that these teachers [teachers in the shadowing school] showed a greater degree of dedication to work than our teachers working in normal schools, even though their students were so excellent. They did not get slack at their teaching, research and self-learning. I found that their teaching benefited both students and themselves” (I2). It can be seen that after shadowing learning, Teacher C came to realize that excellent teachers were those who kept pursuing sustainable development, instead of staying on the same level on the fixed standards. Besides, in a class analysis report of one lesson delivered by the practical instructor, Teacher C summarized that what impressed her deeply was that an excellent English teacher must possess “good spoken English”, “careful thinking which can be reflected in his or her ways of dealing with the teaching materials” and “harmonious teacher-student relationship”. Thus it can be seen that the standards adopted by Teacher C to judge whether an English teacher is excellent or not have become more diversified due to the observation of the practical instructor’s classes. For Teacher C, the instructor was considered as a “mirror” of excellent teachers.

What’s more, the training helped Teacher C to elaborate the connotations of English teachers’ professional development. That is, she realized that the professional development of an English teacher not only included improving teaching skills but should also cover these two aspects: research-oriented learning and promoting language competence.

In terms of research-oriented learning, Teacher C stated that such an impact on her belief about professional development could be attributed to her own self-learning during the training program: “I have realized that there is a need to research on something for a long time. I think this is the biggest change I have experienced in this stage. Maybe I used to be slack on study previously, thinking that it was not necessary to do research. But after this stage, I have started to think that the more you learn, the more shortcomings you will realize. Therefore, extensive and in-depth research-oriented learning and reading are essential” (I3).

As far as promoting language competence, Teacher C was obviously impacted by other trainees: “Talking about professional development, I have realized that as an English teacher I used to have neglected some basic things such as English pronunciation and thinking in English before. In this training, I came to know teachers from foreign language schools. They seem to pay more attention to the English language competence while I didn’t train myself in this aspect. This is what has impressed me most about professional development” (I3). This also demonstrates that the impact of the training program not also came from experts’ lectures, practical instructor’s demonstration, but could also come from other aspects such as interaction with other trainees.

### D. *Teacher D*

At the beginning of the training, Teacher D mentioned that the primary roles of a teacher should be “guide, facilitator and organizer” (I1), while after the shadowing learning stage, she added another one — “checker”: “in the end, the practical instructor had a test. I think he played the role as a checker. He played a teacher’s roles in a very good way” (I2).

Then, Teacher D proposed three standards to judge whether an English teacher is excellent or not and ranked them according to its importance, including: “responsibility and love”, “advanced teaching philosophy”, “solid language qualities” (I1). Even after the training, the standards didn’t change much.

As regards teachers’ professional development, Teacher D claimed that through this training “I now have a more explicit idea about the ways to promote the professional development as a foreign language teacher, improve my own professional skills in the future and facilitate teaching by doing research. I have learned about ‘action research’ which I believe will benefit my teaching and research a lot” (S1).

During the three interviews, Teacher D repeatedly used words such as “I always believe that ...” and “I consistently think that ...” which could reflect her firm beliefs. For those training contents which might be new to the other three teachers, she usually said “I have known about this before this training”. This could be attributed to her 19 years’ teaching experience as a senior teacher. As the rich teaching experience had already helped her to form comparatively

firm beliefs before training, even though she received the same external stimulus as the other three teachers during the training program, the impact was comparatively small.

Table 2 presents the research results, i.e., the changes of the four teachers' beliefs. The belief change classification framework proposed by Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) has been referred to when analyzing the nature of the specific belief change. The number of the mark "\*" demonstrates the degree of the belief change (that is, "\*" refers to a small change while "\*\*\*\*\*" refers to a radical change). In the table, the factors contributing to the belief change are also given. Thus, the three research questions mentioned earlier are all answered explicitly.

TABLE 2.  
THE BELIEF CHANGES OF THE FOUR PARTICIPANTS

Dimension		English teachers' roles	Excellent English teachers	English teachers' professional development
A	Nature of change	addition; consolidation	addition	no change
	Degree of change	*****	*****	
	Facilitating factors	the practical instructor	the practical instructor	
B	Nature of change	addition	addition	reversal
	Degree of change	***		*****
	Facilitating factors	the practical instructor; the shadowing school itself		experts' lectures
C	Nature of change	no change	addition	elaboration
	Degree of change		***	*****
	Facilitating factors		the practical instructor; the shadowing school itself	self-learning; interaction with other trainees
D	Nature of change	addition	no change	elaboration
	Degree of change	**		**
	Facilitating factors	the practical instructor		experts' lectures

The results reveal that the impact of this particular training program on the four teachers' beliefs about self varied across individuals. More specifically, addition was the most common type of belief change, which could possibly be due to the belief dimensions being investigated. As beliefs about English teachers' roles and about excellent English teachers could be reflected in the standards listed by the teachers, teachers' addition of new standards could reveal the addition of new beliefs. In terms of the degree of change, only Teacher D experienced comparatively small changes, while the other three teachers all underwent considerable belief development. As far as the facilitating factors, there were explicit factors including: the practical instructor, the shadowing school itself (the teachers naturally compared the shadowing school with their own schools), experts' lectures, self-learning and interaction with other trainees which were all explicitly mentioned by the teachers in the interviews or course work. However, there were also some inexplicit factors such as teachers' pre-existing beliefs before training (Borg, 2005), teachers' individual characteristics (Lamie, 2004) and so on, which might not have been perceived by the teachers themselves.

## V. CONCLUSION

The research results show that teacher education programs can influence teachers' beliefs. Despite that the degree, nature and way of the impact varied across individuals, the impact in general was considerable.

Nevertheless, a further question can be proposed, that is, how can teacher education programs facilitate the development of teachers' beliefs in a greater way? Based on the results of this research and extensive literature reading, the following suggestions are provided.

- 1) Conduct a detailed analysis of teachers' pre-existing beliefs before training so as to target those beliefs which need to be developed through the training program in advance and improve the effectiveness of the training.
- 2) Raise teachers' belief awareness at the beginning to enable them to reflect on their own beliefs throughout the program.
- 3) Increase belief development opportunities by assigning reflective course work such as weekly journals and summaries, delivering lectures on teachers' beliefs, organizing teachers to discuss about beliefs explicitly, requiring teachers to read literature extensively and observe excellent classes to confirm or elaborate old beliefs and add new beliefs.

What's more, with reflection on this particular research and extensive reading about other relevant researches, the following issues are considered as worth carrying out further investigation.

- 1) Research on implicit factors influencing teachers' belief development such as teachers' pre-existing beliefs, training experiences in the past, motivation to participate in the training and attitude towards it, teachers' personality characteristics and abilities and so on.
- 2) Research on the sustainability of the impact, that is, how long the impact will last for or how much of the impact will be sustained after the trainees get back to work in real teaching contexts.
- 3) Research on the impact of a particular course (such as a course on professional development) or stage (such as the shadowing learning stage) to get more in-depth findings.

4) Research on the impact on more specific beliefs (such as beliefs about English teachers as facilitators) or on other dimensions of belief (such as beliefs about English teaching).

All in all, teacher belief is a topic worth investigating into, because teacher cognition is the core of teacher development and teacher belief is the core of teacher cognition, which plays a significant role both in teachers' cognition and behavior.

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