

# Investigation into and Analysis on Middle School English Teachers' Competencies<sup>\*</sup>

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**Abstract**—For teachers' competence, there is no uniform standard in domestic and foreign academic circles. Foreign scholars think that the personality of the teacher can do the performance of competence while domestic scholars believe that the professional values of the teachers, that is, personal qualities, professional ethics can be competent. The domestic and foreign scholars all agree that: the definition of teachers' competence should include the professional knowledge and professional skills related to the implementation of the successful teaching. Through questionnaire survey and interview, this paper makes a research on English teachers' conception and language skills---the core competency of middle school English teachers in Shaanxi Province. It is found that there are some disparities of English teachers' conception and language skills from the requirements of the new curriculum standards. Based on the reason analysis of disparities, the following suggestions are put forward: study the new curriculum standards seriously, strengthen the studies on education and teaching theories, strengthen the guidance on teaching practice and encourage the teachers to reflect on their teaching methods.

**Index Terms**—teachers' conception, language skills, competence, English teachers, middle school

## I. INTRODUCTION

Shaanxi province began its new curriculum reform in autumn of 2003 in Xi'an City and then further expended to Xianyang, Weinan, Baoji and other urban areas. In the practice of reform, the pilot schools are facing many problems, among which faculties are being the most prominent one. And the competence of English teachers has been an important impediment in the proceeding of new curriculum reform. Therefore, to build a qualified and professional English teachers team with advanced teaching ideas is the key to carry out the teaching of English in middle school. Through a comprehensive study on the documents, it is found that the competence of English teachers in our country is still a new topic. This paper is to investigate and analyze English teachers' conception and language skills, which are the core of middle school English teachers' competency, which not only help us understand the reality of competency of middle school English teachers systematically, but also provide an empirical basis for the research of professional development and the establishment of competency assessment system.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Teachers' competency" refers to a professional knowledge, professional skill and professional value which are possessed by the teacher himself/herself and are related to implement the successful teaching (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Scholars at home and abroad have carried out studies on this issue from different approaches and perspectives.

### A. Research Status Abroad

Foreign teachers' competency research began in early days. Development has presented a very deep and refined situation. The research results can be divided into three categories broadly: the content, model and characteristics of teacher competency research, evaluation research. **(a) Research content.** From the competency based on teacher education, human oriented teacher education to the standard based teacher education, this process shew the changes of the content of teacher's competency from 1960s to 1980: it had gone through the transition from the technical skills to the deep level of the professional knowledge and skills, creativity, professional spirit, self-reflection, and so on. Truog, A. L. surveyed principals from 255 primary and secondary school about their hiring new teachers and perspectives on teachers' competency: in addition to professional knowledge, there should be much higher qualities. R.J. Sternberg and others (2002) found that expert teachers have the following common characteristics: knowledge of expert level; efficient; creative; insight. **(b) Model and characteristic system.** The competency concept of American psychologist McClelland

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(1973) and the iceberg model and onion model studied by Spencer (1993) effectively promoted the study of teachers' competence. Danielson (2007), one of the representatives of Empirical modeling, put forward the teacher's four-dimensional competency model. The two-factor model of Bisschoff & Grobler (1998) and the multi-factor model of independent Australian schools association also provided the reference for us. **(c) Evaluation studies.** Many scholars believe that the purposes of teacher evaluation can be divided into two categories: summative evaluation and the formative assessment (Iwanicki, 1990; etc.). American scholars (Odden, 2000; etc.) pay mutual attention to the eight standards of teacher evaluation. The new teacher evaluation system has established the new concept of developmental teacher evaluation: Students' academic performance is an important index for evaluation of teachers. People should pay attention to the differences between individual teachers and dominant position of outstanding teachers in the evaluation.

#### *B. Research Status at Home*

In contrast, domestic research on teachers' competency started relatively late, but realizing the importance of this topic in time, scholars have been catching up. Nowadays, domestic research also presented the flourishing scene, which can be divided into the following four aspects: (a) Review the domestic and foreign research results (Liu, 2007; Luo, 2007; Xu, 2012.), promote the development of domestic teachers' competency research. Cai Yonghong (1999, 2003) and Ceng Xiaodong (2004) cited from foreign information to point out that competency evaluation is an important category of teacher evaluation. They, from the theoretical point of view, discussed the content, the evaluation, the theoretical basis, the purpose and evaluation of the teacher's competence. (b) Make an evaluation. Having a careful study on the reality of competency evaluation is helpful to improve the competency evaluation of teachers and students in our country. Cai (2001, 2003, 2005; etc.) cited foreign information to discuss teachers' competence evaluation theoretically. Xing (2003), Liu (2009), Huang (2013) studied the teacher competency evaluation in colleges and universities in China, and Li (2006), Zhai (2010) has carried on the empirical research on middle school teacher evaluation system, which makes the evaluation content transform from a single dimension to multiple dimension. (c) The contribution of a quality structure of teachers competency and construct of building a competency model. Zhang Dajun (2005), He Xinfeng and others (2006) from different angles and contents discussed the quality structure of teachers at different levels, and proposed that teachers' quality structure is an inalienable organic unity. Xu Jianping (2004) carried out a series of empirical studies on the competency model and evaluation on teachers in primary and middle schools. The research objects have primary and secondary school teachers (Xu, 2004; Luo, 2010; Li, 2011, etc), university teachers (Niu, 2009; Lin, 2010; etc.), higher vocational colleges teachers (Li, 2010; etc.); private college teachers (Xie, Zhou 2010); special education teachers (Shi, 2015). The research on English teacher competence is mainly concentrated in the university teachers, such as Li (2006), Tong (2012), etc, and there are a few the research literatures about the competence of secondary school English teachers, currently only 2: Zhao (2010), Feng (2013).

#### *C. Viewpoints of Teachers' Competency*

According to the literature research, there is no uniform standard for teachers' competence in the domestic and international academic circles. Here are three representative views: E.H. Dineke (2004) proposed that teachers' competence refers to the teacher's personality characteristics, comprehensive knowledge and teaching skills and teaching attitude under different teaching backgrounds. Xing and Meng (2003) proposed that teachers' competence refers to a kind of professional knowledge, professional skills and professional values related to the successful teaching of teachers. Ceng (2004) considered that the competence of teachers is the concrete content refers to know (knowledge), ability to do (skills), faith (values), which directly affects the teaching performances, but it does not refer to the effect of these factors. The domestic and foreign scholars agree that the point is: the definition of teacher competence should include the professional knowledge and professional skills related to the implementation of successful teaching. However, there are some disputes on competency: foreign scholars think that the performance of teachers' personality traits can appear competence; Domestic scholars argue that teachers' professional values, namely the individual characters, professional ethics can shows their competency (Liu, Ge, Liu, 2007).

#### *D. Research Trends*

From above, domestic and foreign scholars have made a lot of theoretical and empirical researches on teachers' competency. The quality of teachers has become an important breakthrough in the research of teachers' competence and the significance is widely accepted. Generally speaking, domestic research mostly focuses on the empirical research on teachers' competence based on the referencing, combing and analysis of the foreign related theories, which has a certain positive role in the development of teachers' competence in China. However, it cannot be denied that the research has a more import idea which can be seen from the competency theory, practice and research methods; the object of study is more general, lack of subject classification; the research field more concentrated in the higher education while the research on basic education has little. There is little research done on the competency of English teachers in middle schools.

This paper investigates and analyzes the present situation of middle school English teachers' competence from the "quality based" teachers' competency. From the previous researches it is known to us that the definition of the connotation of the teachers' quality mainly focuses on two aspects: Teachers' conception and teachers' professional ability, which are the core of middle school English teachers' competence. Learning from the results above, this project will also carry out

an empirical research on middle school English teachers' competency in Shaanxi under new curriculum reform from two aspects: teachers' conception and the core content of teachers' professional competency, which are their language capabilities.

### III. RESEARCH METHODS

Datas from questionnaire and interviews on teachers' conception and their language ability are adopted. The selected 180 English teachers were from Xi'an, Xianyang, Baoji and Weinan.

#### A. *Measuring Tools*

Two sets of questionnaire were chosen for research tools.

The first questionnaire is for teachers' teaching conception research. The questionnaire was designed with reference to Horwitz (1987) and Liu Runqing's (2003) test and further combined with Xu Jianping's (2004) *Tests for Teachers' Competency* and Tong Chengshou's *Quality Model of Adept English Teachers at Primary and Secondary Levels*. It consists of two parts: one is teachers' teaching conception, a total 25 questions, including the understanding of the concept of language, teaching, teaching strategies and methods; The other is students and learning views, a total of 20 questions, including learning views, students views, the relationship between teachers and students, learning abilities and teachers' awareness of learning strategies and methods.

The second one is for teachers' language abilities. It is selected from Y.G. Butler's (2004) "*Foreign Language Assessment Scale*". Teacher are required to evaluate their listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation abilities and each one of them has six statements to choose from, scoring 6-1.

#### B. *Test Methods*

In order to ensure the validity of the questionnaire, a pre-test was implemented on the English teachers of a certain high school, who have the similar education ground as the real targets. Interviews are applied to these teachers afterwards for a proper adjustments on the questionnaire. At the same time, the questionnaire of language ability test is done with different groups of teachers and inspections is fulfilled through the calculation of correlation. By testing, it is believed that these two sets of questionnaire as research tools on teachers' conception and language ability are of high efficiency. Then, English teachers from 12 middle schools (rural township schools, city's key schools and average ones) were interviewed and tested.

### IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

#### A. *Statistical Results of English Teachers' Teaching Conception and Language Abilities*

On English teachers' teaching conception, it is clear that apart from two contents of teachers' relations with the students and learning abilities that stand upon the average value of 3.00, other seven contents stay below the bar without exceptions. On language abilities, it is obviously noticed that four contents of the results, including listening, reading, writing and pronunciation in the language ability tests are above or equal to the average mean, which is 3.00, and the other three, spoken ability, vocabulary and grammar below that line.

#### B. *Analysis*

From the results of the research on the conception and language ability of middle school English teachers, it is found that there exists obvious disparity between the targeted middle school English teachers and the teaching requirements of the new curriculum. Of the two aspects carried out in the research, teachers' conception greatly lagged behind, which is characterized as follows:

1. Adhere to the traditional teaching concept and believe that language is merely a structural system, ignoring the social and functional languages.

In the teaching concept of questionnaire, nearly half of all respondents would agree that "I think the purpose of English teaching is to promote students to master knowledge, making his/her a knowledgeable person." and "I think the middle school English teaching is to cultivate students' interest in learning English and a good method of learning." There are the following three reasons. Firstly, the original middle school English curriculum objective is single, neglecting the important role in the development of students' thinking ability and the cultivation of emotional attitude values, etc in the foreign language curriculum. Therefore, the original curriculum cannot meet the needs of society and students' own development. Secondly, the original middle school English education idea is backward; the teaching content is too old and single to stimulate students' learning enthusiasm; Course designs are lack of diversity and selectivity, which cannot meet the demand of different students' learning. Thirdly, the original English teaching mode of middle school overemphasizes language knowledge teaching, and the integrity and systematicness of knowledge, while ignoring the cultivation of the actual language using ability.

New Compulsory Education *English Curriculum Standard* (2011 edition) points out that "The overall goal of English course in the compulsory education stage is to make students form the preliminary comprehensive language using ability, to promote the development of the mind and improve the comprehensive cultural literacy by English learning. The formation of comprehensive language using ability is based on the overall development of language skills, language

knowledge, emotional attitude, learning strategies and cultural awareness” It reflects that the student is the main body of classroom teaching, meanwhile paying attention to the all-round development of students, which reflect not only on the knowledge and skills, but also in the process and method, emotional attitude and values, cultural awareness and learning strategies in some specific training aspects.

2. Understand traditionally learning process and methods of students; lack consciousness of imparting students’ learning strategies and cultivating their autonomous learning ability.

In the “learning view” and “teachers’ awareness of learning strategies and methods” parts of the teachers’ concept questionnaire, it is found that more than half of respondents used learning method of acceptance too much in English teaching: the teacher lectures in the most class time, while students only listen; the teacher told students the knowledge directly, while students mechanically memorize knowledge and do the same thing uniformly according to the requirements of the teacher. Of course, this is bad for students to optimize learning style. Meanwhile it is unfavorable for students to form the ability of autonomous learning. The new English curriculum advocates interaction process between teachers and students as well as between students and students; Teachers lead students to find their target learning knowledge; Students use what they have learned to do some concrete things and achieve their learning goals according to the needs and way of their own learning. In other words, students are under the guidance of teachers in the process of English learning to construct knowledge, develop skills, active thinking, show individuality and expand horizons. If the result of the teaching is emphasized, it will focus on language knowledge which should be mastered and the development of language skills eventually. While if the teaching process is emphasized, it will pay attention to students’ learning and teachers’ teaching process itself.

*English Curriculum Standard* (2011 edition) lists the different stages of the target language knowledge, language skills and the non-language purpose, so it focuses on learning outcomes. Meanwhile *English Curriculum Standard* (2011 edition) advocates teaching approach of the language learning process, for example, the task-based language teaching, and set up some procedural targets such as analysis, reflection, discussion, decision-making, explanation, cooperation, etc., which also emphasizes the learning process.

3. Think that the education reform is only the change of method level, unaware of the profound philosophy, psychology and linguistics behind the change.

From the questionnaire “education reform” part of the teachers’ concept, it is found that the understanding of the new curriculum reform of some respondents is hazy, thinking its just the change of method level without realizing the philosophy, education and so on behind the new curriculum reform. The theoretical bases of the new curriculum reform are thick and timely with global perspective and the diversity, including constructivism, postmodernism, pragmatism and Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, etc. Constructivism thinks that the knowledge is not absorbed passively, but constructed actively by the cognitive subject; Post-modernism emphasizes interaction between teachers and students, and common development; Dewey advocates learning knowledge in one’s life; Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligence is an important theoretical basis for the implementation of quality education; Man’s all-round development theory of Marx is the policy of education which is always adhered to for a long time. These good research results all reflected the people-oriented and reasonable core, which has been and will continue to give an important influence to the new curriculum reform in our country.

4. Understand students and define the relationship between teachers and students in a traditional way.

In the “viewpoint about students” and the “relationship between teachers and students” parts of the teachers’ concept questionnaire, it is not hard to find that some respondents understand the relationship between teachers and students in a traditional way. The “viewpoint about students” refers to the educators’ basic views to students, which dominates the educator’ education behavior and decides their working attitude and working way. In the current education and teaching practice, however, there are still many teachers who have a lot of understanding that is one-sided even mistaken, which blocks the progress of education reform and the development of students. With the continuous advancement of new curriculum reform, teachers should change ideas and set up scientific viewpoint about students, making students survey self, know self and develop self correctly and objectively.

There is an old saying in China that is “If students are close to teachers, they can believe teachers and accept teachers’ instruction”, which means that only if students accept and respect teachers, they can listen to teachers’ edification and imitate teachers’ words and deeds. For a long time, English teaching in China overemphasizes cognition, ignoring the impact of affective factors on English learning. The teaching goal is only limited in the mastery and use of knowledge, combined with the pressure and competition of tests and the entrance examination, teachers only pay attention to the activities of students’ cognitive system, while ignoring the teaching emotion transfer in the teaching process. If the teachers only focus on its own professional skill and teaching content, and rarely observe the students’ emotional experience, there appeared to be an invisible wall between teachers and students stopping their emotion communication. Therefore it is hard to get the essence of the teaching effect. The new curriculum standard emphasizes that the emotional attitudes of students learning should be focused on in the teaching process, and teachers should cultivate and develop students’ positive emotional attitude of learning English and implement common participation involved in teachers and students and harmonious development in teaching.” The current new curriculum reform advocates people-oriented teaching atmosphere that teachers only “approach” students is not enough, but should be “into” students’ emotional world and the depths of the soul.

From the process and results of this research, it is known that these phenomena are mainly caused by the following: teachers don't realize that today's education is "social interactions" aimed at "cultivating and constructing people's spiritual world and enhancing a comprehensive individual growth as well as an overall development". (Zhang, 2005) In reality, teachers' conception on education is utilitarian. Education was regarded as a tool made for social needs, for which knowledge masters, rather than knowledge creators are made out of education. Due to a lack of perception and practice on the teaching theory, teachers do not have the ability to change fundamentally in the minds, therefore giving birth to a feeble and helpless teaching practice.

## V. CONCLUSION

The research above tells the disparity between middle school English teachers' competency in terms of teaching conception and language abilities with the requirements of the new curriculum. Hence, we must enhance the reform of middle school teachers' teaching methods; promote the professional development of English teachers; increase the competency of middle school English teachers. Through the analysis and discussion of the features of the phenomena and the inward reasons, suggestions are proposed as follows:

Study compulsory education *English Curriculum Standards* (2011 edition) seriously, for it is a guiding document of our country's elementary education. It is the basis of textbook writing, teaching, assessment and examination proposition, as well as the foundation of the national management and evaluation course, which reflects the basic requirements of our country to students of the different stages in knowledge and skills, process and method, emotional attitude and values, which rules the nature, objectives, content framework of English course, and put forward the proposals of teaching and evaluation. It not only presents the basic principles of teaching material compilation and proper suggestions for proper handling of teaching material, but also manifests the teaching and learning theory of subject curriculum. Therefore, the new curriculum standards provide an important guidance for teaching activities from the views of methodology and epistemology.

Strengthen the studies on education and teaching theories. The formation of the new curriculum standards is the guidance result of constructivism theory, which is a sort of critical reflection of the traditional education and teaching theories. Therefore, middle school English teachers should firstly study the basic knowledge about teaching and learning theories, and understand the source of philosophy, pedagogy and psychology of the new curriculum standards.

Strengthen the guidance on teaching practice and encourage the teachers to reflect on their teaching methods. The reflection process can help teachers to realize the pros and cons of the theories when utilizing in a real teaching environment and thus making adjustments to creating teaching skills, enhancing class' practical ability and innovation ability in accordance with the ideas of the new curriculum. Only in this way could teaching theories be possibly changed into teachers' teaching conceptions and a conscious action in the future.

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