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Bridging policy and practice: A study of EFL teacher talk in China

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Abstract

This study focuses on teacher talk in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in China. Framed against China's current focus on 'thinking, imagination and innovation' as stated in the National English Curriculum Standards (NECS), this paper reports the findings of a qualitative study aimed at understanding how the discursive practices of EFL teachers contribute to the learning outcomes and overall goals of the NECS. The study adopts the theoretical lens of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, which views dialogue as the principal means for meaning making and learning. It focuses on how teachers encourage dialogic interactions in the classroom through their questions and code switching practices. The data comprises 30 hours of audio-recordings of lessons taught by eight EFL teachers at the high school level in two Chinese cities. The analysis of this data suggests that EFL teaching is still very much entrenched in the traditional practice based on word recognition and pattern drills and, despite official policy pronouncements, maintains a predominantly monologic thrust. The implications of these findings are discussed in relation to how teacher talk can mediate EFL learning and, more broadly, bridge the gap between policy and classroom practice.

Keywords: teacher talk; dialogue; code switching; EFL policy; China

Introduction

In the last decade or so, China has taken large economic strides to become the world's second largest economy (The World Bank, 2016). During this period, China has also made concomitant efforts to reform its education to keep pace with the developed world (Zhang & Liu, 2014; Liu, 2011). In recognition of the status of English as an international language of commerce, technology and diplomacy, China has revised its English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum in order to nurture students who are not only proficient in English but who are also critical thinkers imbued with a global outlook. As teachers can be viewed as 'micro-politicians' who wield the power to enact the curriculum (Luke, 2001, p. 9), this study focuses on the role that EFL teachers play in translating curricular goals and policy pronouncements into classroom practice in China.

China's English Curriculum

First launched in 2001 and subsequently revised in 2011, the *National English Curriculum Standards* (NECS) for China's nine-year compulsory education and senior high school education is decidedly different from previous reform efforts (Zheng, 2012; Zhong, 2006). Signalling a departure from a traditional, teacher-centered approach, the NECS adopts a student-centric approach by focusing on students' learning and holistic development, as the following excerpts from the document illustrate:

> In accordance with the communicative needs and cognitive levels of the students at senior high school, English instruction should emphasize the development of students' abilities to use English appropriately in interpersonal communication, to use English to retrieve and process information, to use English to analyze and solve problems, and to think critically (NECS, 2011, p. 7, translated from original Chinese version[1]).

> Teachers should seek to foster students' critical thinking abilities and their spirit of creativity. The design of classroom activities should be in favor of the development of students' creativity and imagination. More open tasks and exploratory learning content should be utilized in class to offer students the opportunities to express their views and opinions. Teachers

should also encourage students to develop their abilities to cooperate and communicate with others (NECS, 2011, p. 26, translated from original Chinese version [2]).

These excerpts clearly signal an official commitment to the role of English as a means to develop students' communication and cognitive skills, and represent an explicit call for English teachers to nurture their students' critical and creative capacities through 'open' and 'exploratory learning' activities that encourage them to express their views.

These curricular and pedagogical reforms were intended to develop students into active, collaborative and reflective individuals by encouraging them to dialogue with themselves, the world and others (Sato, 2004; Zhong, 2006). EFL teachers are therefore expected to relinquish their authoritative position in class, co-construct knowledge with their students, and concentrate more on the teaching process rather than focus on preparing students to pass examinations (Cheng, 2011; MOE, 2001). The diagram below encapsulates the key areas of focus in the 2011 edition of the NECS.
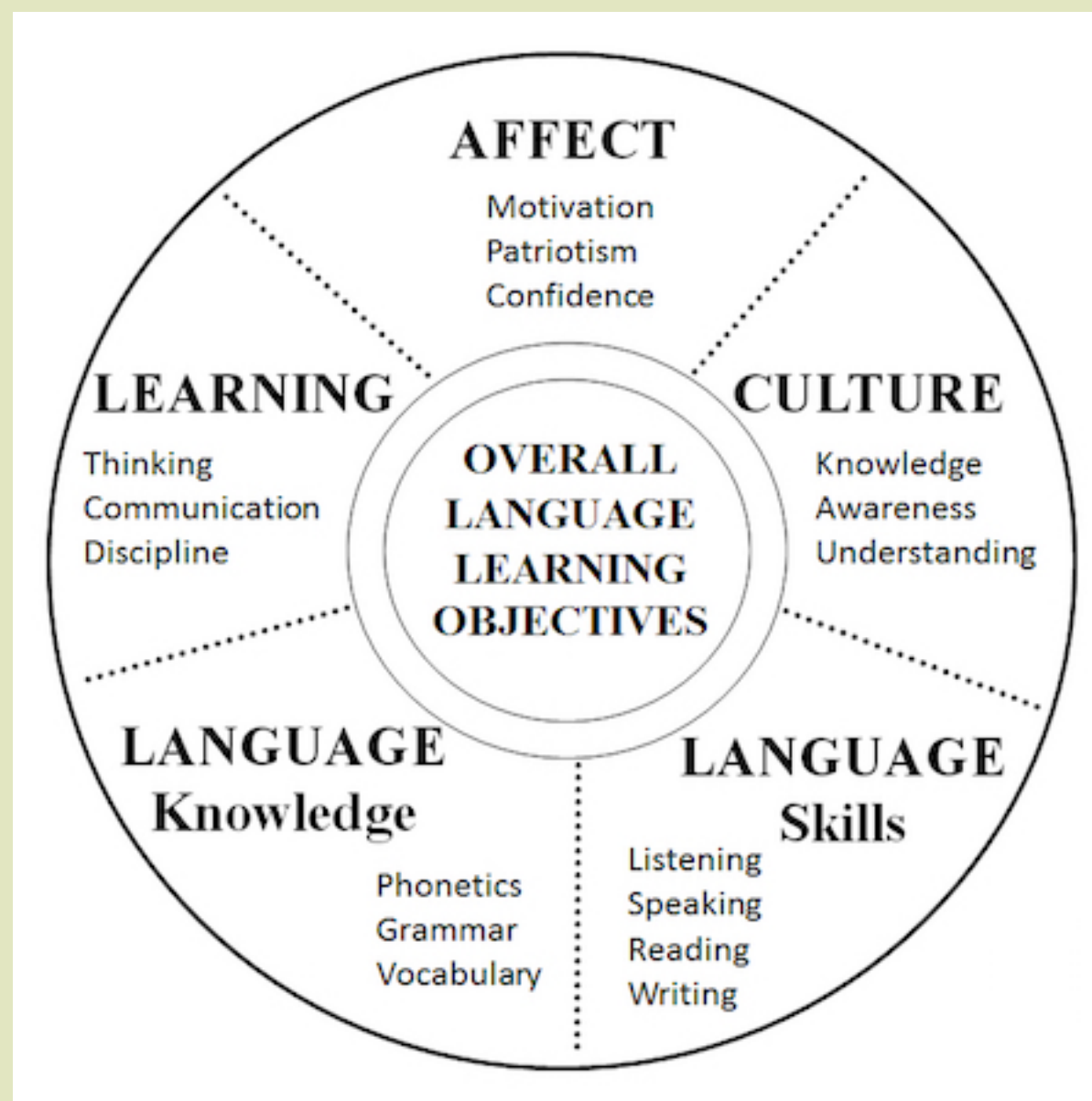

Figure 1. Key areas of focus in China's EFL learning (Source: NECS, 2011, p. 9)

As we can see, the focus of EFL education in China goes well beyond the equipping of students with basic linguistic knowledge and competencies like listening, speaking, reading and writing. It also aspires to inculcate in students broader dispositional attributes and qualities, such as confidence, patriotism, cultural awareness and understanding, as well as effective communication and thinking skills. According to China's Ministry of Education (MOE), EFL teachers are "to develop autonomous learning and cooperative spirit, … to foster students' abilities of observation, memorisation, thinking, imagination and innovation, to help students get to know the world and be aware of cultural differences between China and Western countries" (MOE, 2001, p. 1-2). The mandate issued to EFL teachers is therefore not only to equip students with language proficiency skills but also to cultivate the broader mindsets and competencies that will help them to navigate the 21st century global landscape, in which China aspires to play an increasingly influential role. What follows is a review of the research literature divided into two sections. The first focuses on the theoretical framework the study adopts, while the second reviews empirical studies investigating the role of teacher talk in language teaching.

Literature Review

Theoretical framework

According to Bakhtin's (1986) theory of dialogism, dialogue is the principal means for meaning making and learning. By demonstrating how the voices of other people get interwoven into what we say and write, Bakhtin argues that thinking and knowing occur in and through dialogic speech. The contrast between monologic and dialogic utterances within a classroom is that the former involve students' unquestioning acceptance of meanings expressed through 'authoritative' texts and talk, while the latter involve students' resistance to and interrogations of these meanings (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293-4). Put simply, the educative power of dialogic teaching lies in teaching students not what to think but *how* to think (Reznitskaya, Kuo, Clark, Miller, Jadallah, & Anderson, 2009, p. 35, my emphasis). In construing learning as something borne out of dialogic interactions, Bakhtin has provided an epistemological perspective that decenters learning from the cognitive processing that takes place in an individual learner to the social interaction in which learners participate (Koschmann, 1999).

In this study on EFL teaching in China, 'dialogism' is construed in terms of how teachers, through their classroom talk, foster dialogic

interactions that encourage students to think, question and thereby construct their own meanings and understandings (Alexander, 2005). This includes not only the linguistic knowledge and skills of the target language, but also the understanding of the socio-pragmatic and socio-cultural contexts within which language use is embedded. It is believed that such dialogic interactions would engender the broader and deeper critical awareness and cross-cultural understandings envisaged in the NECS.

In applying Bakhtin's theory to foreign language learning, this study moves away from a formalist view of language, which sees language as an essentially stable and normative structure which learners need to grasp. Instead, it construes language as a dynamic entity which is constantly evolving and responding to social, cultural and historical contexts. In this dynamic view of language as a "living tool – one that is simultaneously structured and emergent" (Hall, Vitanova & Marchenkova, 2005, p. 3), foreign language learning is no longer about learning the structural patterns of the target language but a process of bringing one's cultural world into contact and interaction with that of the target language. This study thus broadens the scope and nature of EFL learning beyond the acquisition of forms and meanings to emphasize the actual and active *use* of English to interact with other users in authentic contexts, not just to comprehend or interpret but to question and interrogate, thereby *constructing* instead of merely assimilating meanings. In this regard, it aligns with Pavlenko and Lantolf's view of second (and by extension foreign) language learning 'not as the acquisition of a new set of grammatical, lexical and phonological forms but as a struggle of concrete socially constituted and always situated beings to participate in the always symbolically mediated lifeworld' (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 155). The use of the word 'struggle' is significant in highlighting the inevitable and continual contestations and negotiations that characterize real-life communicative events. This moving away from acquisition of discrete forms to participation in situated meanings and functions in real life necessitates a re-imagining of the teacher's role to engage and encourage students to participate in meaning making and knowledge construction in real-world contexts. In particular, the role of teacher talk in facilitating and mediating students' learning experiences is pivotal.

Empirical studies on teacher talk

Teacher talk can be understood simply as the language employed by teachers to give directions, explain activities, check students' understanding, and give feedback on student learning (Sinclair & Brazil, 1985; Wallace, Sung & Williams, 2014). In the EFL context, an increasing number of researchers have undertaken studies on teacher talk using Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. These studies range from determining the amount of authoritative and persuasive discourse in EFL contexts to examining the type of questions asked by teachers (Ghasemi, Adel & Zareian, 2015; Xu, 2012). For instance, Xu (2012) examined the type of questions asked by teachers who taught an Intensive Reading (IR) course for EL students pursuing a Bachelor's Degree at the Harbin Institute of Technology, China. Three instructors participated in the study and a total of 564 questions were coded. From her analysis, it was found that IR classes were predominantly monologic in nature. The instructors frequently asked questions to elicit facts or recite information derived from texts. Students rarely asked questions and, if they did, they would ask content-oriented questions pertaining to texts that they had read rather than to propose (or counter-propose) ideas that might challenge the knowledge being presented in textbooks. Students therefore had "little ownership and voice in the meaning making process of reading the text" (Xu, 2012, p. 104). Xu explained this phenomenon on the basis of teachers' perception of their learners' low language proficiency and their preference for a unilateral transmission of knowledge due to institutional pressures like the need to complete a syllabus within a stipulated time frame.

Besides teacher questioning and its impact on student participation and cognitive engagement, another aspect of teacher talk that has engaged EFL researchers is code switching. This refers to teachers' use of their students' first language (L1) to facilitate learning and understanding of the target language (Cook, 2001; Hall & Cook, 2012). In a sense, code switching can be seen as a dialogic interaction between the L1 and the target language, wherein the use of one code illuminates and interanimates the other, thereby facilitating students' comparative understanding of the L1 and target language and the cultural contexts within which they are embedded. In this way, code switching in the Chinese EFL classroom could contribute significantly to the goals of the NECS. When teachers code switch, they could go beyond providing literal translations to help learners negotiate, wrestle and indeed 'struggle' (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 155) with the culturally situated meanings and connotative nuances between the two codes so as to let them experience and embrace 'language in its concrete living totality' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 181). In this sense, code switching goes beyond the alternation between two languages to the interaction and interanimation of two cultures within which language use is situated and comes alive.

Although there is currently no consensus on whether the use of L1 enhances or impedes student learning, researchers seem to agree on the functions of code switching in the EFL classroom (see Cheng, 2013; Cook, 2001; Duff & Polio, 1990; Grim, 2010; Levine, 2003; Myers-Scotton, 1993). These include explaining the more abstruse features of the target language, such as grammar, engaging in comparisons between the first and target languages and their accompanying cultures, checking for student comprehension, ensuring understanding of instructions, giving feedback to students, and establishing rapport (see Atkinson,1987; Auerbach,1993; Cook, 2001; Grim, 2010; Jiang, 2004; Lin, 2013; Liu, 2010; Macaro, 1997; 2001; Pennington, 1995; Tang, 2002; Wilkerson, 2008). For instance, Liu (2010) sought to identify the functions of the use of L1 in her mixed-methods study conducted in the EFL classroom of Chinese universities. She found that the L1 functions observed, such as 'translating vocabulary items, explaining grammar, managing class and building close relation with students' (Liu, 2010, p. 21), were generally consistent with what was found in previous studies such as Levine (2003) and Macaro (1997). Additionally, Liu (2010) found that students' English proficiency was the principal factor for teachers who decide to code-switch to the L1. In spite of studies conducted to identify the functions, motivations and factors pertaining to code switching in EFL teaching, there is scant research aimed at examining the extent to which and the ways in which such practices actually support student learning or not through close analysis of teacher talk.

Research Purpose

Besides studies like Xu's (2012), which only examined teacher questions, little has been done to investigate teacher talk in a more comprehensive manner from a Bakhtinian perspective. In particular, the examination of code switching practices as a form and means of facilitating dialogic interaction remains uncharted territory. This study therefore sought to analyze the classroom talk of Chinese EFL teachers from a Bakhtinian perspective by asking the following questions:

1. To what extent does teacher questioning encourage dialogic student talk?
2. To what extent does teacher code switching help students to form links, both linguistic and cultural, between their L1 and target language?

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach to analyse teacher talk in the EFL classroom in two cities in China: Beijing and Yinchuan. Eight Middle School teachers (five from Beijing and three from Yinchuan) were invited to participate in the study. All of them are native to China and have attended teacher training programmes, either a three-year diploma course or a four-year undergraduate course, in China. The teaching experience of the seven female teachers and one male teacher ranged from one to seven years. Participation in the study was voluntary and informed consent from the teachers and their students was obtained prior to data collection.

For each teacher, between one and three lessons were observed and audio-recorded. This yielded a total of fifteen lessons, with each lesson lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. The audio-recordings were subsequently transcribed [3] and coded in terms of (1) the type and function of teacher questions and (2) the perceived purpose when the teachers switched from English to Chinese during the lessons. Following Cazden (2001), the following coding scheme for teacher questions was used.

Table 1. Coding scheme for teacher questions

Type of question	Function
Display	Elicits specific and generally agreed-upon answers, such as facts or prior knowledge
Exploratory	Invites response with no predetermined answer, often opinions, suggestions, ideas and hypotheses
Rhetorical	Asserts a point or makes a claim by asking a question whose answer is obvious

The lesson transcripts were initially read to obtain a general sense of what transpired during the lessons before isolating the Initiation-Response-Follow-up (IRF) sequences (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975). Once these sequences have been isolated, two research assistants independently coded the type of questions used by teachers to initiate student talk using the above coding scheme. This coding process was accompanied by "memoing" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 254) to record the thoughts, hunches and reasons behind the interpretations. What follows is an analysis of teacher talk captured in the classroom data in terms of the type and function of teacher questioning and code switching.

Analysis

Questioning

The analysis of teacher questions across all eight teachers showed a pattern dominated by Display questions (58.3%), followed by Rhetorical questions (30%) and Exploratory questions (11.3%). The relative frequency of the three types of questions is presented in Figure 2 below. As Display and Rhetorical questions tend to produce predetermined and fixed answers from students, as opposed to Exploratory questions which encourage opinions, ideas or suggestions, their preponderance (88.3%) suggests a rather monologic thrust in the questions posed by the participating teachers.
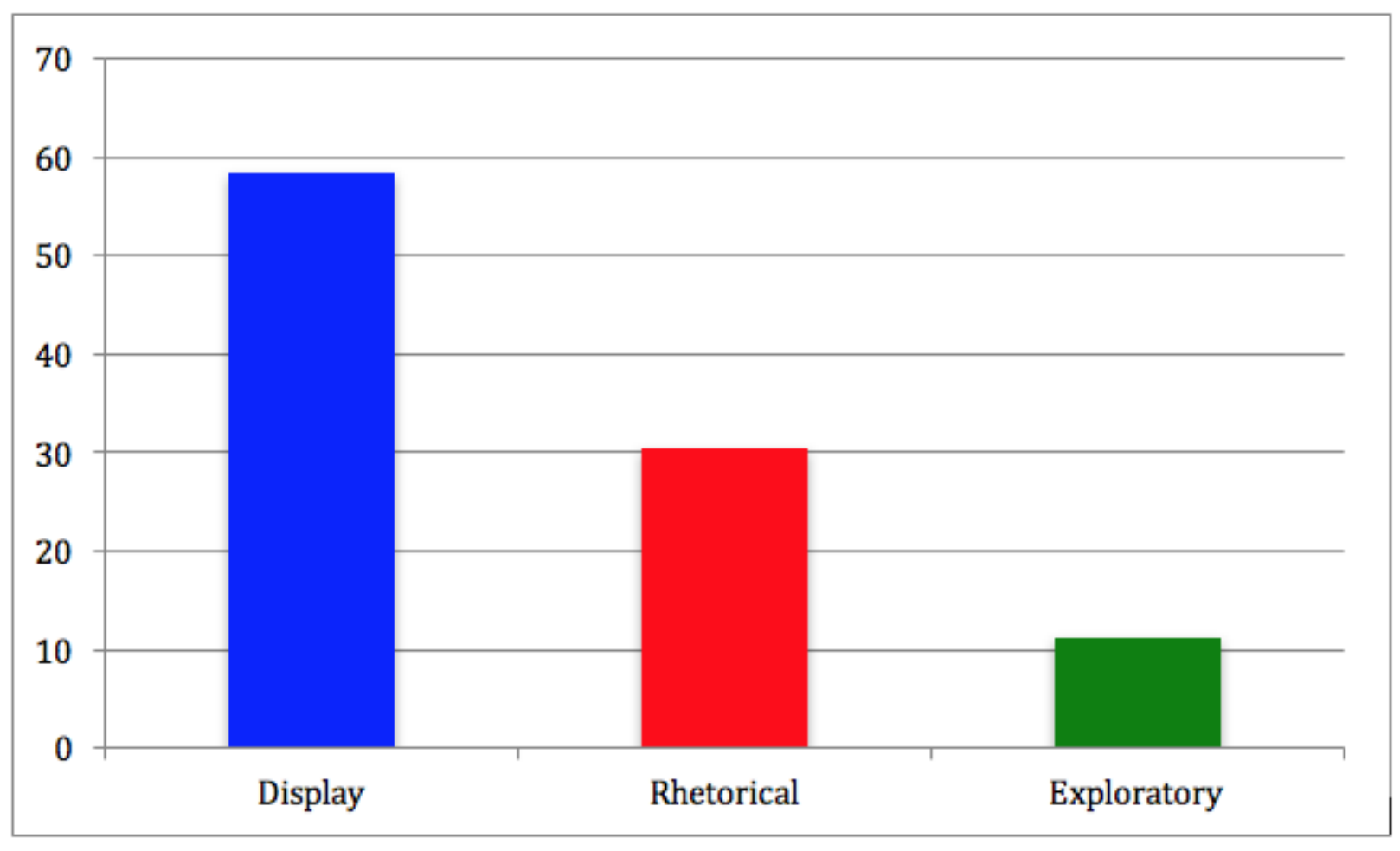
Figure 2. Relative frequency of teacher questions

A representative instance of the use of Display questions by the teachers is shown in Excerpt 1. Here the Yinchuan teacher is seen preparing her students for a writing exercise on tourist attractions. The excerpt begins just after a student has said that she had been to an amusement park many times. The words in brackets show the Chinese translation.

Excerpt 1

1	T:	How do you spell 'times'?
2	Ss:	T-I-M-E-S. [Ss are answering in chorus]
3	T:	Yes. Ok. Good. Sit down please. Now next one, how about Ruan Xiuxiang*, have you ever been to amusement park?
4	S:	No, I haven't.
5	T:	Yah. Also the other answer it is: no, I haven't. [T is writing the answer on the board]. Now do you remember how to spell 'haven't'?
6	Ss:	H-A-V-E-N撇 *(apostrophe)* T. [Ss are answering in chorus]
7	T:	Yah. No, I haven't. Also you can say? //I have never been to there.
8	Ss:	//I have never been to there.
9	T:	Yah. How do you spell 'never'?
10	Ss:	N-E-V-E-R. [Ss are answering in chorus]
		[Several turns later]

| 20 | T: | It's a-
Look at this picture. Look at this picture.
Now for example, what is the first picture? What is it?
Now, how about you, Yu Xiaotong? 那 *(so)* What can you see in the picture?
What can you see in the picture or you can say what other places can you see in the picture?
那 *(so)* <u>so</u> except amusement (park), what can you see in the picture? |
| 21 | S: | Zoo. |

22	T:	it's a?
23	Ss:	Zoo. [Ss are answering in chorus]
24	T:	Yes, no?
25	Ss:	Yes. [Ss are answering in chorus]
26	T:	Ok. Sit down please. Now anything- anything else? What is in the picture?
27	Ss:	Aquarium. Aquarium.
28	T:	It's 'an'?
29	Ss:	Aquarium. [Ss answering in chorus]
30	T:	Yah. It's 'a' or 'an'?
31	Ss	'an'.
32	T:	It's <u>an</u> //aquarium.
33	Ss	//aquarium.
34	T:	Now what's the meaning of aquarium? Do you know (…)?

*All names of students and teachers are pseudonyns.

The excerpt shows that the questions posed by the teacher in turns 1, 5, 9, 20, 26, 30 and 34 are all Display questions, intended for students to demonstrate their knowledge. Her questioning tends to constrict the range of possible responses from students, and hence narrow the dialogic space for them to produce alternative answers to what the teacher has in mind. This is evident in turns 1, 5, 9, where she asks for the spelling of words ('times', 'haven't' and 'never'), and also in turns 24, (Yes, no?), 28 (It's an?) and 30 (It's 'a' or 'an'?), where she is asking students to provide a one-word answer or complete her sentence. What we see therefore is a questioning style that goes no further than developing students' lexical or grammatical knowledge of the target language. It is therefore unsurprising that most of the students' responses are limited to brief or even monosyllabic choral responses, rather than elaborated individual opinions or ideas, which provide students with the opportunity to use the target language in a meaningful and authentic manner (Mercer & Dawes, 2010). Interestingly, when the teacher does ask an Exploratory question in turn 3 (have you ever been to an amusement park?), she seems more interested in the formulation of the student's response (No, I haven't) than its content. Instead of probing for possible reasons why she hasn't visited an amusement park or asking if she would like to visit one, she appears more concerned with the students' ability to spell the word, 'haven't'. With such a questioning stance, students are left with little opportunity to incorporate their lived experiences or personal interests or ideas into the class discussion, which then takes on a markedly monotonous and monologic tenor. Worse, they might come to doubt their teacher's sincerity when she asks about their experiences or opinions.

There are a few instances in the classroom data which afford a glimpse of the potential for dialogic interactions, although these are the exception rather than the norm. One case in point is shown in Excerpt 2 below:

Excerpt 2

1	T:	Thank you. Sit down, please. So this is my description about Thanks-giving Day. And now…em…do you see the different questions on your worksheet? Guiding questions. And here I should make something clear. The first one, what is the name of the festival and what kind of festival it is? And by this question I mean the name, we have already known that…in the first place you should mention the name of your festival. You invent a festival, for example, No-homework Day. If it is like this, you should mention No-homework Day is blah blah blah. OK? And in the second place, you should make clear that it is one of the festivals celebrated in what style or…it is …my Thanks-giving is traditional western festival but now you should not use the word "traditional," because it is

		newly-invented. Understand? . . . [turns omitted] And the last one is why do people celebrate this festival? So that's the meaning of your festivals. So are you all clear about that?
		[Students engage in group work before presenting.]
2	S:	Today we have new, we have a new festival. Its name is Students' Festival. It is a new kind of festival and it is very fashion. It is very fashion. And now it is very popular now. Eh... every year in September 27, from September 27 to September 30, people can have fun in these days. Eh...那个 *(that one)*...why people celebrate this festival because, because...first students eh...reduce their pressure. And secondly, they can relax themselves. And thirdly, they can improve their friendship.
3	T:	And I think these reasons are very...his...he has adequate reasons, and very interesting, right?

In this excerpt, the teacher begins her lesson with a description of Thanksgiving Day as an example of a festival celebrated by Americans. The students are then asked to invent their own festival and give reasons for why the festival should be celebrated. The nature of the task and the teacher's instructions encourages inventiveness from the students, and provides an opportunity for a student representative to offer elaborated responses and justifications for his group's choice of festival, rather than the monosyllabic choral responses witnessed in the previous excerpt. Moreover, the positive appraisal by the teacher in turn three serves to affirm the student's contributions and thereby encourages other students to contribute in a similar manner. The teacher refrains from correcting the student's language (most notably in the use of the word 'fashion'), and gives the student the freedom and discursive space to speak spontaneously. Although the teacher does not take the discussion further to exploit its potential to raise cross-cultural awareness and understanding by, for instance, getting students to think about the cultural values and beliefs that underpin festivals, the potential is certainly there for the teacher to do so.

Code switching

The analysis of the classroom data showed a wide variation among the eight teachers in their use of L1, ranging from one teacher who did not use L1 at all in one lesson to another whose classroom talk showed approximately 60% L1 usage. However, despite this wide variation, the code-switching practices of the teachers generally reflect and corroborate the findings of previous studies (e.g., Cook, 2001; Franklin, 1990; Grim, 2010; Liu, 2010). Similar to these studies, the most common functions of code-switching found in the study involve clarifying the meanings of unfamiliar words/phrases and giving instructions for student tasks (see Figure 3).
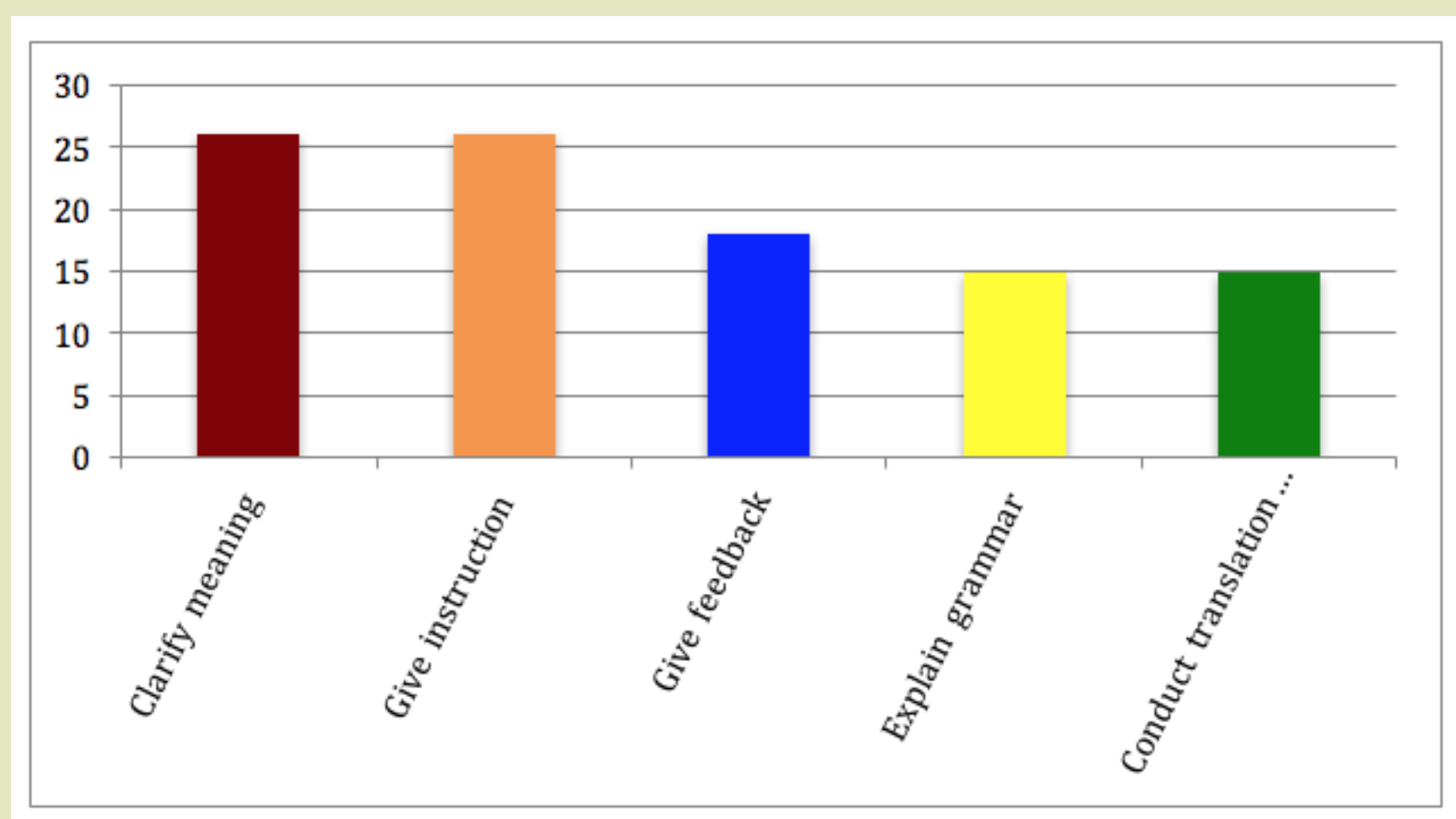

Figure 3. Relative frequency of code-switching functions

The teachers' use of L1 to clarify the meanings of words in the target language could be predicated on their belief that their students, being at the middle school level, would have a reasonably well-established lexical and conceptual L1 system which they could tap on to clarify meanings in the target language. This was what other researchers like Cook (2001) and Jiang (2004) had previously observed in their work. Excerpt 3 below illustrates how a Beijing teacher attempted to clarify the meaning of target words.

Excerpt 3

1	T:	This man is holding certificate.
		Do you know <u>certificate</u>?
		Certificate. 证书 *(certificate)*.
		This certificate reads "wining a scholarship fifty-five thousand."
		So…can you guess what does scholarship mean?
2	S:	奖学金 *(scholarship)*？
3	T:	Yes! Right! 奖学金 *(scholarship)*.
		So, wining a scholarship
		So read after me. Scholarship.

This excerpt illustrates the teacher's code switching to engage in comprehension checks (in this case of the words "certificate" and "scholarship"). Such instances provide students with opportunities to hone receptive skills, like reading skills which include word recognition and comprehension. This finding is consistent with Grim (2010), who has categorized such occurrences as instances of delayed translations. Another major function of code-switching as seen in the data relates to instruction giving, a phenomenon observed by other researchers as well (e.g., Atkinson, 1987; Cook, 2001; Grim, 2010). In this case, the code switching appears to be motivated by procedural purposes rather than pedagogical priorities. Excerpt 4 is a case in point.

Excerpt 4

1	T:	So take out your worksheet, and see Part One.
		In Part One there are five five eh…
		Yes, there are five words here, and I will play the tape and you listen to it.
		Then give me your answer.
		Which one is truth and which one is false.
		大家做一道判断正误的听力题 *(Let's complete a listening task which requires us to decide if it's true or false)*.

The use of L1 by the Beijing teacher could be motivated by her desire to convey instructions to the students in a clear and effective manner. This is supported by what some of the teachers revealed during the post-lesson conference, when they indicated that they perceived their students to be weak in English. This perception could have motivated them to tap the L1 (Chinese) as a resource to provide students with Chinese instructions that would aid the students' understanding of what is required or expected of them.

In the following excerpt taken from a lesson on a unit called *Celebrations*, we see a teacher from Beijing teaching her students different festivals celebrated in China and in the west.

Excerpt 5

1	T	So I again have some pictures. Can you see them? [T shows class some pictures] So these are some festivals in China , and can you recognize them? What's first? [referring to a picture depicting Spring Festival celebrations]
2	Ss	New year.
3	T	Yes. New year. In China, we also say?
4	Ss	Spring festival.

5	T	Good. The Spring Festival. Yes. And the second one?
6	Ss	粽子 (dumplings)
7	T	粽子 dumplings. how to say (…)? They are sailing a <u>boat</u>. Dragon. Yes. I heard someone say dragon. So this is Dragon Boat Festival. Read after me. //Dragon Boat Festival.
8	Ss	//Dragon Boat Festival.
9	T	The Dragon Boat Festival.
10	Ss	The Dragon Boat Festival.
11	T	Good. And the third one. The girl is holding a what?
12	Ss	元宵 (*Lantern Festival*).
13	T	元宵. And what is she holding? In her hand.
14	Ss	灯笼 (*lantern*).
15	T	How to say a 灯笼? In English.
16	Ss	(…)
17	T	Lantern. Lantern. So read after me. LANTERN.
18	Ss	Lantern.
19	T	Lantern.
20	Ss	Lantern.
21	T	The Lantern Festival.
22	Ss	The Lantern Festival.
23	T	OK. Good. So this is 元宵节 (*The Lantern Festival*) in China, in Chinese. And oh, sorry. What is the last one. You can see a round one. //A moon cake.
24	Ss	// A moon cake.
25	T	So this is ? What?
26	Ss	中秋 (*mid-Autumn*)
27	T	IN ENGLISH.
28	Ss	The Mid-autumn Festival.
29	T	Yes. The Mid-autumn Festival. And we eat dumplings in Spring Festival, right? //Chinese dumplings.
30	S	// Yes.
31	T	And // 粽子 (*dumplings*).
32	Ss	// 粽子.
33	T	And here //sweet dumplings. .
34	Ss	Sweet dumplings.
35	T	So read after me. Sweet dumplings
36	Ss	Sweet dumplings.
37	T	元宵或汤圆儿 (*Lantern Festival or sweet dumplings*)。And the last one. Actually?

38	Ss	Moon-cake.
39	T	Moon-cakes. Right. Moon-cakes. So:: these are festivals celebrating only in China and this is, all of them have long histories. So we call them? What kind of Chinese festivals?
40	Ss	traditional
41	T	Yes, traditional. GREAT. Traditional. So… What is the noun form of traditional. Noun form. This is actually adjective.
42	Ss	Tradition.
43	T	TRADITION. Right. Good. Tradition. [T is writing "tradition" on the board]. Put down this word on your word bank. Tradition and traditional. This is adjective and this is noun. [Ss are writing down the words]

Besides showing further evidence of code switching aimed at clarifying lexical meaning, this excerpt also highlights opportunities to develop cultural awareness in addition to vocabulary development. Embedded in the festivals celebrated in China or the west, beneath the layers of sedimented folklore and tales of yore, are rich and interesting narratives that make the festivals come alive in the minds of the students. However, instead of drawing on this treasure trove of cultural narrative to arouse the students' interest or deepen their understanding of how festivals have come into being, the teacher seems content to get her students to articulate and learn the English names of Chinese festivals and cultural artefacts, such as dumplings, lanterns or mooncakes, without attempting to get them to explain how or why these artefacts have come to be associated with their respective festivals. Beyond teaching them the English translation for '灯笼' as 'lantern' (turns 15-20) and clarifying the Chinese term for 'Lantern Festival' as '元宵节' (turn 23), for example, the teacher does not probe into their knowledge and understanding of the significance of carrying lanterns to mark the end of the Spring Festival. Neither does she clarify the difference between '粽子' and '汤圆儿', which are both confusingly coded as 'dumplings' in English. Perhaps, this is an instance where language is inadequate in codifying the richness of meaning, a topic which can potentially open up a wealth of discussion about the relationships between language, meaning and culture. To her credit, we do see the teacher early in the excerpt getting her students to go beyond the term, 'New Year,' to recall the more traditional, culture-specific term, 'Spring Festival' (turns 2-5). It is regrettable, however, that she does not get them to explain why the *Chinese* New Year, as opposed to the generic 'New Year,' is known more traditionally as 'Spring Festival.' It is also interesting to note the students' pre-emptive response of '元宵' (turn 12), referring to the name of the festival, when the teacher was merely asking them what the girl in the picture was holding. This is despite the rather narrowly phrased question – The girl is holding a what? – meant to elicit a fixed, one-word response: 'lantern.' This suggests that students can be quick to read teachers' intentions behind their questions, an ability that teachers would do well to exploit by aiming at the higher order thinking skills envisaged in the NECS.

The excerpt continues with the teacher moving to festivals celebrated in western countries.

Excerpt 6

44	T	And look at some western festivals. What is this?
45	Ss	Christmas.
46	T	CHRISTMAS. Good. And this one ? //Can you see the words?
47	Ss	Thanksgiving.
48	T	Yeah, thanksgiving. We can see a turkey on the table, right? And third one?
49	Ss	万圣节 (*Halloween*).
50	T	万圣节。I heard someone said Halloween. Right? Halloween. So. HALLOWEEN. Read after me.
51	Ss	Halloween.
52	T	OK. Good. An::d the last one.
53	S	What?
54	T	We can see 彩带 (*coloured ribbons*). Yes, it's

54	T	Easter. Easter. Read after me. Easter.
55	Ss	Easter.
56	T	Good. And do you know when are this festivals celebrated? Do you know?
57	Ss	(…)
58	T	Christmas? What's the date?
59	S	December 25th.
60	T	Good. December the 25th. Good. December the 25th. And second, thanksgiving. When? Do you know?
61	S	//三月二十七号…忘了 (*March 25th…I forget*)
62	T	Do you know it? It is the fourth Thursday of November. Remember on the day you can give your gratitude, you can show your gratitude to your mother, father, to your parents, to your teachers and friends. Don't forget to show, eh to express your gratitude to the person grateful. OK? (…) just October the 31st.
63	S	October 31st.
64	T	And Easter, do you know? Easter in China, in Chinese means 复活节 (*Easter*). 对 (*right*). And the date is… It's a little bit complicated. It's one day among March eh 22nd to April the 25th. It just one day during this period. Eh… Every year is different. OK?

Once again, we see missed opportunities for the teacher to deepen the students' knowledge and understanding of these 'western festivals' (turn 44). Instead of the dates of these festivals, which the teacher seems to get entangled with, there is considerable potential for her to explore, together with the students, the meanings and significance – traditional and contemporary – of festivals like Christmas, which seems to be celebrated with equal or even greater gusto in contemporary China as it is in the west.

Discussion of findings

The findings from this small study involving eight EFL teachers in two Chinese cities generally corroborate what earlier studies have found. They echo the predominantly monologic tenor of teacher talk, which other researchers like Xu (2012) have also observed in teacher questioning. As seen from the data, the teachers' questions tend to elicit 'correct' answers from students rather than draw upon their lived experiences or draw out personal opinions or ideas. In fact, the findings here reinforce what has also been found in studies situated in non-EFL contexts, which reported teachers' rigid and restrictive adherence to their teaching script (Teo, 2016; Cazden, 2001; Hardman, Smith, & Wall, 2003; Hiebert et al., 2003). They suggest a predominantly monologic and transmissive orientation in teacher talk, indicated by a preponderance of moves that elicit pre-established knowledge or lead students to preconceived conclusions, and do little to probe for opinions, perspectives, positions and their underlying thinking. Instead of opening the classroom discursive space to engender dialogic interactions, the teachers seem more intent on helping students fill in linguistic knowledge blanks. Such a discursive classroom culture, whilst possibly elevating students' lexical or grammatical knowledge pertaining to the target language, would ultimately debilitate the development of their conceptual knowledge and metacognitive abilities (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) as well as impoverish their communicative competence in the target language. If teachers continue to focus on the acquisition of linguistic knowledge or formal accuracy at the expense of functional competence, as seen in the excerpts above, they will not be able to elevate their teaching to the level aspired to and endorsed by the Chinese MOE.

The analysis of the code switching practices of the eight EFL teachers suggests primarily pragmatic and procedural motivations; at the same time, they reflect the pedagogic purpose of easing their students into the target language. However, this pedagogic purpose seems limited to reinforcing knowledge of linguistic form rather than in honing the pragmatics of the target language. Close analysis of the data has revealed that teachers tend to concentrate on practices like reciting the meaning of an unfamiliar word or repeating a particular structure in the target language. Such discursive practices position learners merely as code-breakers or meaning-makers, rather than learners who can use a newly acquired word or structure in specific contexts (meaning-users) or even question or challenge its usage in particular situations to serve particular purposes (meaning-analysts) (see Luke and Freebody, 1999). By providing students with literal translations of target words and engaging in comprehension checks, the teachers in the study were merely providing students with a means to engage in simple meaning-production rather than meaning *application* (Anderson & Freebody 1981; Zeegers, 2006). Moreover, it is evident from the data that students are typically asked to repeat the target language after the teacher in chorus ('so read after me'). Such choral responses might mask weaknesses

among students, who could just be miming the words or merely repeating the sounds made by the teacher without any understanding of what these sounds mean, let alone how to use them in different contexts. Even for the more able students, such practices would deprive them of opportunities to develop their skills by practising the use of the target language in new or authentic contexts. This would also enhance their understanding of the cultural or situational contexts within which language use is necessarily embedded (Rush, 2004). More broadly, these practices do little to develop students' 'thinking, imagination and innovation,' ideals which are enshrined in the NECS. Despite the Chinese MOE's initiation of a curriculum that proposes a paradigm shift from traditional, authoritative, knowledge-based transmission to a problem-solving, experiential and student-centered mode of teaching, there is manifestly a disjuncture between government policy and classroom practice. The findings of this study reveal a gap that needs to be filled if EFL teaching in China is to move beyond the deeply entrenched practice of 'Chinese traditional receptive learning' (Zheng, 2012, p.8) to the ideals envisioned in the NECS.

To achieve this, educators need to grapple with multiple issues surrounding the backwash effects of examinations, a possible clash of eastern and western educational ideologies, and inadequate professional support for teachers in China. In addition, the tendency among many EFL teachers to equate their students' low linguistic proficiency with their inability to engage in productive dialogic discourses is something that needs to be addressed, since a deep engagement in meaning is not necessarily dependent on or limited by one's linguistic proficiency as argued by Luke and Freebody (1999). Indeed, if EFL teachers continue to limit their students' opportunities to practise and use the language in code-breaking or literal meaning-making practices rather than challenging them with more engaging and eminently more meaningful language-using activities, such as what we saw in Excerpt 2, their belief that their students are weak will probably be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead, teachers should be equipped with the skills and strategies through a systematic and supportive professional development programme to nurture students to be active, collaborative and reflective individuals, so that they can have productive dialogues with themselves, the world and others (Sato, 2004; Zhong, 2006).

In addition, teachers should be encouraged to reflect on their own discursive practices and behaviors in the classroom. This could be facilitated through recordings (audio or video) of their own teacher talk to raise their awareness about what is taking place and unfolding in their lessons while they teach and the effects of their talk on students' uptake (Pehmer, Gröschner & Seidel, 2015; Schieble, Vetter and Meacham, 2015). While EFL teachers are generally encouraged to maximize target language input in the classroom, this does not preclude the use, albeit judiciously, of the L1 even in the new NECS curriculum (Zhang & Liu, 2014). Such use could be to encourage students to reflect on and thereby enhance their understanding of the situated use of target words and structures in particular contexts. This would not only encourage flexibility and even creativity in the use of the target language, but also enhance cross-cultural awareness which is also one of the express goals of the NECS. This will cultivate students who can appreciate the nuances of meaning not only of the target language but also invite them to appreciate those of their mother-tongue to arrive at a deep understanding that language is not just a pragmatic tool for communication but a social and cultural product.

Conclusion

Fundamentally, the proposals above would need to acknowledge that China, not unlike many EFL contexts in Asia, is historically an examination-oriented and authoritarian society and is heavily influenced by Confucianism (Cheng, Moses & Cheng, 2012). Influence from Confucianist values may result in teachers and students being less receptive towards lessons that are interactive, learner-centered and being less keen in embracing pedagogical approaches which 'de-emphasize the transmission and mastery of authoritative knowledge' (Hu, 2002, p. 37).

While the findings from this small-scale, qualitative study cannot be generalized across the vast EFL landscape in China, what we have seen from the excerpts illustrated here does raise some pertinent questions. What is clear from the data is how deeply entrenched practices and values that promote the 'repeat after me' mode of language teaching are resistant to change even after more than a decade of educational 'reform' catalyzed by the NECS. To borrow a metaphor used by Cuban (1993), the NECS is akin to the 'hurricane winds' sweeping across the sea 'tossing up twenty foot waves,' but while the 'surface turbulent waters swirl, on the ocean floor there is unruffled calm' (cited in Curdt-Christensen and Silver, 2013, p. 246). But if the discursive practices that EFL teachers traditionally favor can go beyond procedural or pragmatic imperatives to the kind of dialogic interactions that Bakhtin envisaged, then perhaps policies can finally penetrate beneath the 'unruffled calm' to effect deep-seated and enduring changes in classroom practices.

About the Author

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Footnotes

1 根据高中学生的交际需求和认知发展水平，高中英语教学应该着重培养学生以下几方面的能力：在人际交往中得体地使用英语的能力；用英语获取和处理信息的能力；用英语分析问题和解决问题的能力以及批性思维能力.

2 教师在教学中要注意发展学生的批判性思维能力和创新精神。课堂教学活动的设计应有利于发挥学生的创造力和想象力。在教学中应增加开放性的任务型活动和探究性的学习内容，使学生有机会表达自己的看法与观点。教师要鼓励学生学会合作，发展与人沟通的能力.

3 Transcription conventions used were adapted from Jefferson, G. (2004). Glossary of transcript symbols with an introduction. In G. H. Lerner (Ed). *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the First Generation* (pp: 13-31). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.