



Elementary School English Teachers' Beliefs and Classroom Practice Regarding Alternative Curricula

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes interviews, observations, and documents to explore eight Taiwanese elementary school English teachers' beliefs and classroom practices regarding the alternative curriculum, the school-based curriculum of alternative learning required courses under Taiwan's 12-Year Basic Education plan. A conceptual framework on curriculum innovation based on empirical studies is proposed and the study has the following conclusions. A lack of congruence between government intention and the delivery in classrooms in pilot schools occurs due to English teachers' beliefs. Four major problems are raised during the design and implementation of the alternative curriculum, including teachers' conflicting beliefs about subject matter content knowledge, curriculum knowledge, language for instruction, and assessments. Trainings and professional learning for fostering teachers' professional identity and competence are recommended for effective designs and implementations of the alternative curriculum.

KEYWORDS

Alternative curriculum; beliefs; classroom practice; competence; professional identity

Under the 12-Year Basic Education plan (Ministry of Education, 2014), English teachers and other subject teachers are encouraged to work collaboratively to design the theme-, project-, or issue-based curriculum for the so-called “alternative curriculum for the alternative learning required courses,” lessons and academic content taught for the same grade level (Ministry of Education, 2014). Such alternative curriculum is expected to be school-based and cross-curricular, so learners can learn content knowledge in English.

Language policy has directly affected teachers' beliefs and curriculum development (Chen, 2006; Judd, 1981; Ollerhead, 2010; Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007; Su, 2006; Tan, 2016). English and subject teachers with various educational backgrounds and pedagogical content competence may have different beliefs toward the influx of innovative instructional approaches mandated by Ministry of Education (2014). The tension between teachers' beliefs (agency) and classroom practice might result in tension and gaps in the contexts in which they teach the alternative curriculum.

Teachers' beliefs are a kind of personal implicit presumption about teaching practice (Kagan, 1992). Teachers' classroom practice can be influenced by various factors, such as their teaching objectives, classroom artifacts, beliefs and competence about instructional practice, classroom and institutional contexts, previous experience, and educational policy (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017; Molina, 2016). Teachers' beliefs also influence their acceptance and adoption of education reforms, approaches, techniques, or strategies (Donaghue, 2003; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017; Xu, 2012). However, some empirical studies reveal that inconsistencies exist between what teachers think and what they actually do in the classroom (e.g., Basturkmen et al., 2004).

In the fall of the 2018 academic year, a total of 53 elementary schools were subsidized by the Ministry of Education as model schools to design and develop the alternative curriculum for first graders. This study explores the following three questions: first, how were elementary school English teachers' beliefs

concerning the alternative curriculum different from the observed and demonstrated, the school-proposed and government-stipulated (official) alternative curriculum? Secondly, how different were English teachers' beliefs and perceptions of the alternative curriculum from their classroom practice? Thirdly, what challenges or problems did these elementary school English teachers face when they implemented and designed the alternative curriculum? Suggestions on fostering teachers' professional identity and competence in effective design and implementation of the alternative curriculum are provided.

Literature review

Scholars have different definitions of teachers' beliefs. Richardson (1996) defined "belief" as "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true." According to Pajares (1992), beliefs are defined as:

Attitudes, values, judgements, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, pre-conceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few that can be found in the literature. (p. 309)

Teachers' beliefs include beliefs about learners and learning, teaching, curriculum, learning to teach, and the self and the nature of teaching (Calderhead, 1996). Designs and implementations of lesson plans and curriculum mirror teachers' competence, experience and beliefs in teaching and learning (Liyanage & Bartlett, 2010).

Teachers' beliefs have many characteristics. First, teachers' beliefs shape their instructional behavior and their teaching practice (Castro et al., 2004; Deng & Lin, 2016; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017; Xu, 2012). Min (2013) used reflective journals and logs to explore one Taiwanese EFL writing teacher's beliefs and practice based on written feedback. The congruity between her beliefs and practice occurred at the beginning and end of the writing class. At the beginning, her comments and beliefs mainly focused on students' intentions and problem identifications, explanations, and specific suggestions. Later, the consultant's professional knowledge of relevant literature helped her shift her beliefs and practice on feedback from giving her comments to asking her students for peer reviews.

However, the inconsistency and tensions between teachers' beliefs and practice are not unexpected (Fang, 1996; Mak, 2011). Li (2013) used interviews, reflections, and classroom interactions to analyze one Chinese EFL teacher's beliefs about language teaching theories compared to his practices. The data analysis indicated that there was no one-to-one correspondence between teachers' beliefs and practice; however, the teaching context influenced his understanding of his beliefs, identifying theories on his practice, and making decisions about classroom practice. Hence, teacher educators are recommended to help teachers understand how to cope with the complexities of classroom life and how to apply theories within the constraints imposed by those realities (Fang, 1996).

Another characteristic of teachers' beliefs is multidimensionality (Zhang & Liu, 2014). Zhang and Liu (2014) surveyed 900 Chinese secondary school English teachers' beliefs about English teaching and learning and interviewed nine of them. The analysis indicated that their beliefs were multidimensional. These English teachers' beliefs were congruent with the constructivism-oriented curriculum reform and they favored student participation, interactive class, and learning strategy training. They also favored traditional instruction that focuses on grammar and language form, drill and practice, rote memorization, and teacher authority.

Thirdly, teachers' beliefs are shaped over time (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017; Min, 2013). Mak (2011) explored a Chinese EFL student teacher's beliefs about communicative language teaching from the first to the second practicum. The EFL student teacher first perceived her role as transmitting knowledge to her secondary students and providing a lot of teacher talk in English classes. However, her students' passive attitude toward learning English and her advisor's suggestion compelled her to evaluate the effectiveness of her teaching beliefs and methods. Her beliefs were changed, and she began to design more activities involving student-to-student interaction.

Many factors can have a strong influence on teachers' beliefs, such as their personality, past learning experience, teaching experience, educational approach, policies, learners, or context (Clarke et al., 2007; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017; Jones & Fong, 2007; Odo, 2017; Sang et al., 2009). Molina (2016) used a questionnaire to explore 72 English teachers' agency in educational reform in elementary, junior, and senior high schools. The results of the questionnaire and interviews of teachers concluded that external (e.g., institutional beliefs, expectations, students and parents' beliefs) and internal (e.g., their own English proficiency, beliefs about teaching and language learning) factors affected English teachers' teaching practice.

Moreover, Jamalzadeh and Shahsavari (2015) used a questionnaire and observations to compare and contrast fifteen adult and young EFL teachers in Iran. The data analysis led to the conclusion that teaching context did not affect these teachers' beliefs and classroom practice. However, contextual factors of the institution affected teachers' performance in the classroom.

Debreli (2012) used interviews and writing projects to explore the influence of training programs on three pre-service English teachers' beliefs about language education. The data analysis revealed that teacher training programs allowed pre-service teachers to put their teaching beliefs and theoretical knowledge into practice. In Robertson et al.'s (2018) study, 12 in-service Vietnamese EFL teachers received training on grammar instruction. The analysis of the assessment tasks and reflections indicated that their beliefs about grammar teaching were changed, and they developed a deeper understanding of pedagogical approaches to grammar. They showed their willingness to engage with alternative approaches. The above studies indicate that language teachers' learning experience affects their beliefs and practice (e.g., Debreli, 2012; Feryok, 2012; Mak, 2011; Odo, 2017; Richards et al., 2001; Sang et al., 2009).

Furthermore, governmental English educational policies affect English teachers' beliefs and classroom practice (Iskandar, 2015; Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996; Ollerhead, 2010; Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007; Su, 2006). Su (2006) used observations, interviews, and documents to explore the impact of the government policy on 10 elementary school English teachers' classroom practice. These teachers claimed that they had to help the fifth graders prepare for the proficiency tests due to the policy mandated by the local bureau. On the other hand, Rahman and Haslynda (2014) used mixed methods to explore the beliefs and practices of eight Malaysian elementary school EFL teachers. The analysis of observations, interviews, and documents indicated that English teachers did not fully understand the top-down English education policy, so the curriculum development and implementations were not effective. It resulted in incongruence between the curriculum policy and classroom practice.

Underwood (2012) used a questionnaire to explore Japanese secondary EFL teachers' beliefs and intentions regarding grammar instruction under the national curriculum reforms. These EFL teachers believed that integrating grammar into communicative language instruction could help learners to use grammar correctly in communication and arouse their learning interest; however, they did not incorporate this belief into their classroom practice due to lack of time, training, materials, and pedagogical knowledge on educational reforms. Hence, teachers' beliefs or teaching experience determine how they interpret educational policy and translate it into instructional practice (Ollerhead, 2010; Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007).

The current empirical studies of English teachers' beliefs mainly focus on different language foci or instructional strategies, such as writing (e.g., Khanalizadeh & Allami, 2012; Min, 2013), grammar (e.g., Deng & Lin, 2016; Underwood, 2012), reading or literacy (e.g., Odo, 2017; Yang, 2012), communicative language teaching (e.g., Mak, 2011; Peacock, 1998; Roothoof, 2017), or learner centeredness (e.g., Hatipoglu Kavanoz, 2006). Only a limited number of studies focus on English teachers' beliefs about educational reforms or curriculum development (e.g., Rahman & Haslynda, 2014; Su, 2006). This study aims to bridge this gap in the literature and explore elementary school English teachers' beliefs regarding implementations of new curricula on alternative curricula.

The existing empirical studies of English teachers' beliefs about English instruction mainly employ questionnaires or surveys (e.g., Deng & Lin, 2016; Jamalzadeh & Shahsavari, 2015; Molina, 2016; Richards et al., 2001; Sang et al., 2009). These methodological designs could not truly reveal English teachers' beliefs and specific classroom practices (Li, 2013; Mak, 2011).

Based on the literature reviewed above (e.g., Carless, 2001; Rahman & Haslynda, 2014; Yang, 2012) and Remillard and Heck (2014) curriculum framework, the conceptual framework is proposed as in Figure 1. The Ministry of Education-level alternative curriculum as formal curriculum is proposed based on the 12-Year Basic Education policy. The school-level alternative curriculum in each school is drafted followed, by the Ministry of Education-level curriculum, and affected by the school's curriculum development team, resources, time spent on the alternative curriculum, and school features. Based on the school-level alternative curriculum, English teachers take their learners' proficiency, resources, and time into consideration and modify the school-level alternative curriculum as their intended curriculum for classroom level English teachers put this curriculum into classroom practice as enacted curriculum, and its implementation is affected by learners' proficiency, resources, and time. The congruence or incongruence might exist between the Ministry of Education level and the school level, the school level and the classroom level, or the classroom level and the implementation.

The internal factors of English teachers' beliefs on the designs and implementations of alternative curriculum include their attributes or personality, learning experience, teaching experience, proficiency level, and pedagogical content knowledge. English teachers' beliefs are also influenced by the Ministry of Education's policy and the school-level alternative curriculum. Moreover, their beliefs affect the school-level and classroom level curricula and their implementations.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative case study, because case studies are particularistic and focus on a specific situation or phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Case studies are descriptive and provide a rich, "thick" description of a phenomenon under study. They are also inductive and develop theories grounded in

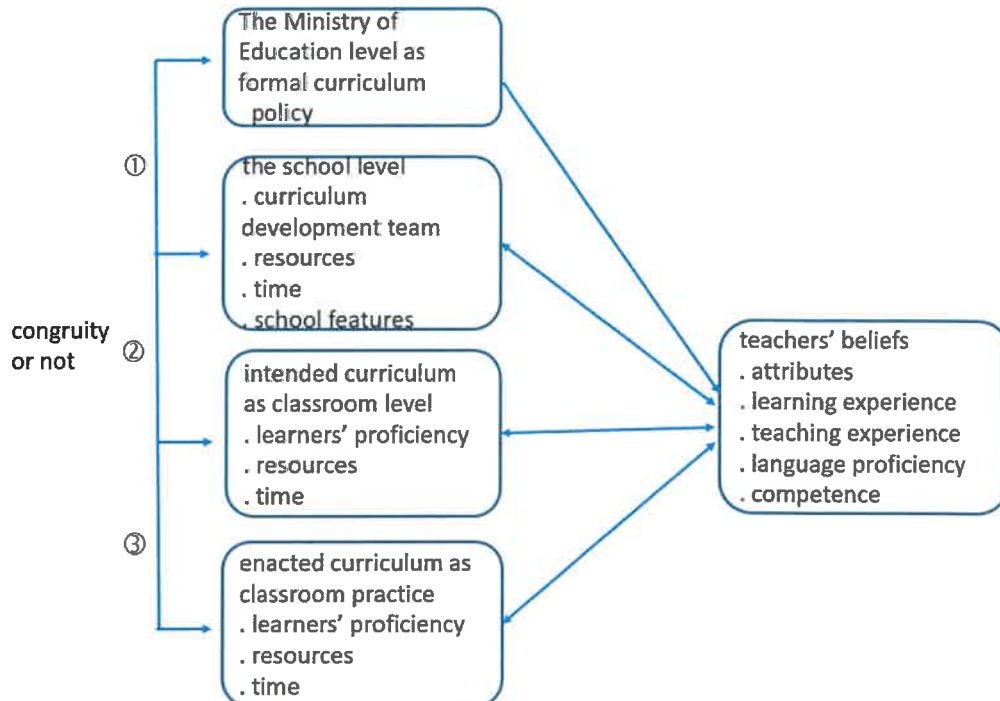


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

multiple data sources (Merriam, 2009). The triangulation of different data sources including interviews, observations, and documents in this study can compare and cross-check data to find a commonality and assure its validity regarding the elementary school English teachers' beliefs and classroom practices regarding the alternative curriculum.

Participants and setting

The researcher was invited to observe the implementations of the alternative curriculum for the 2019 spring semester. Convenience sampling was employed in this study because the data were collected from population members who were conveniently available to participate in this study (Merriam, 2009). Participants in this study included eight elementary school English teachers and Kevin was the only male teacher. Participants' demography was in Table 1, and all names are pseudonyms. They taught the first graders, so they were all involved in school-level curriculum designs on alternative curricula. In addition to first graders, six of them taught higher grades (fifth or sixth) and two taught lower grade (second). Mandy and Nancy were substitute teachers. Carol and Kevin were novice teachers, while Anita, Doris, Helen, and Jenny were experienced teachers with 12 to 18 years of teaching experience.

Data collection

Moving beyond the limitations of the questionnaire in exploring teachers' beliefs, this study uses triangulation, including interviews, documents, and observations, for the validity of findings to explore elementary school English teachers' beliefs on the alternative curriculum in spring 2019. The first data included document analysis of school-proposed alternative curriculum plans, lesson plans, worksheets, and teaching aids in order to investigate the participants' beliefs regarding the alternative curriculum.

The second type of data was observation fieldnotes. The researcher sat at the back of the classroom and occasionally moved around the class. A total of eight classroom observations were conducted, and each observation lasted for forty minutes. Field notes were taken to document participants' delivery of one lesson chosen from the alternative curriculum, such as their presentations on input or tasks designed for practice and production stages as learners' output.

A semi-structured interview protocol was employed and designed based on empirical studies (e.g., Molina, 2016; Rahman & Haslynda, 2014; Zhang & Liu, 2014). In order to explore participants' overarching beliefs about the alternative curriculum, sample questions were designed, such as "Is there any gap between your ideal alternative curriculum and your school's curriculum?" or "What are the differences between your beliefs and your classroom practice?" The interview was conducted at the end of the study, and each interview lasted for an hour.

Table 1. Participants' demography.

Teachers	Schools	Teaching experience	Grades they taught
Anita	Dunn	Full time teacher with 16 years experience	First, sixth
Carol	Matt	Full time teacher with 3 years experience	First, second
Doris	Kent	Full time teacher with 15 years experience	First, fifth
Helen	Kyle	Full time teacher with 12 years experience	First, fifth
Jenny	Otis	Full time teacher with 18 years experience	First, sixth
Kevin	Ryan	English teacher with 2 years experience	First, second
Mandy	Sean	Substitute teacher	First, fifth
Nancy	Todd	Substitute teacher	First, sixth

Table 2. Topics for alternative curriculum.

Schools	Topics	Cross-curriculum
Dunn	Go to school, my new friends, take care of myself, hula hoop	Life, health
Matt	Wax Apple Wally's Life: Wash your hands, snack time, do your homework, dinner time, Teddy Bear says Good night, Good night, Gorilla, Let's go to the zoo	Life, physical education and health, math
Kent	Food, clothes, colors and shapes, friendship and family, animals, sports and games	Life
Kyle	Flowers and plants in the campus, my own garden, sand painting and drawing	Life
Otis	Summer, <i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i> and <i>The Enormous Turnip</i>	Life, physical education and health
Ryan	Hello to school, colors, family, seasons, festival, animals	Life
Sean	My new friend, animals, my toys, animal sounds, rice, spring, family, day and night, water, bamboo shoot	Life
Todd	All about bees	School-based curriculum

Data analysis

The interviews and observations were first transcribed. The study followed an inductive approach. The researcher first read through the notes and gave the tentative codes (e.g., numbers, alphabet, Chinese, English). The researcher read through the codes and generated the tentative themes (e.g., topics, cross-curricular, regular, materials) and later into major themes (e.g., school-level, classroom level, beliefs, classroom practice) based on the research questions and conceptual framework. The coding, categorizing, and emerging concepts were cross-checked by the researcher's colleague for peer review and by three participants for member checking to ensure that reliability and consensus was achieved by discussing differences.

Results

Based on the data analysis of interviews, observations, and documents, major issues are discussed in terms of the congruence between the school-proposed and government-stipulated curriculum, English teachers' beliefs regarding alternative curricula, differences between English teachers' beliefs and observed classroom practice, and challenges they faced for designing and delivering alternative curricula.

Congruence between the school-proposed and government-stipulated curriculum

The alternative curriculum is expected by the Ministry of Education (2014) to be theme-, project-, or issue-based. As revealed in Table 2, these eight schools developed their own school-proposed alternative curricula for first graders, particularly based on the issues covered in life and physical education and health textbooks, such as school, friends, food, or family. Vocabulary such as *grapes*, *fruit*, *vegetables*, *chicken*, *sausage*, *potato*, and *eggs* were listed to be taught under the topic "Food" along with the Macmillan Children's Reader *Food*, *food*, *food* at Kent Elementary School.

Three teachers, Matt, Sean, and Todd, also integrated the local and school features into the alternative curriculum, such as wax apples, rice, bamboo shoots, and bees. Take Sean's school-proposed curriculum in Excerpt 1 as an example. Vocabulary, sentence patterns and classroom English related to rice and bamboo shoots were taught.

Excerpt 1. Sean’s school-proposed curriculum

Rice

- (1) Vocabulary: sushi, straw, mask
- (2) Sentence patterns: I like sushi. It’s yummy! Look! It’s my mask. Cool.
- (3) Classroom English: Yummy! Cool!

Bamboo shoots

- (1) Vocabulary: bamboo shoot, pork soup, leaf, leaves
- (2) Sentence patterns: I like bamboo shoot soup. It’s yummy! Look! It’s my work. Cool/beautiful.
- (3) Classroom English: Yummy! Cool! Beautiful!

The school-proposed curriculum brings out the school and local special characteristics, so every school has the opportunity to make itself stand out and construct its own special curriculum structure (Tan, 2016).

English teachers’ beliefs on alternative curriculum

These English teachers mainly had two types of beliefs about the alternative curriculum. Anita, Kevin, and Nancy thought that the alternative curriculum was just like the regular English classes. They relied on the textbooks. Kevin said, “I just teach the content covered in the textbook. I prefer using the CD and e-materials provided by the textbook publishers because they are convenient.” Nancy said, “Learners just need to memorize a lot of English vocabulary. So I design cloze exercises for them.” Anita said,

For me, the alternative curriculum is the same as the regular English classes. I just teach alphabet letters, ask my students to read and write alphabet letters and practice the corresponding vocabulary. I don’t have time for other materials. I just use the commercial textbook. I also ask my students to finish the workbook. I spend a lot of time in grading the workbooks. I do not have time to do lesson planning.

Teachers rely too much on commercial textbooks and are often resistant to innovation (Iskandar, 2015). English teachers’ beliefs about the use of textbooks seem to be deep-rooted and greatly influence their teaching and employment of instructional strategies. Such beliefs hinder their desire to explore other pedagogical options (Mak, 2011).

On the other hand, unlike the regular English classes, the other five teachers thought that the alternative curriculum should be cross-curricular, issue-based, school-based, and local. Carol said, “The school and local features should be integrated into the alternative curriculum, such as wax apples, green beans, religions, or history.” Mandy also said, “Integrations of learners’ daily lives into the alternative curriculum should be the best model, because learners will be motivated and interested in learning.” According to Fullan and Stiegelbauer, “educational change depends on what teachers do and think” (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991, p. 117). Hence, teachers are the key actors in the implementation of any curriculum reforms. Teachers should be consulted to have the right beliefs on alternative curriculum that is expected to be implemented (Hayes, 2010).

Table 3. Topics for the observed lessons.

Teachers	Observed Lessons	Alternative curriculum
Anita	Letters N and O	
Carol	Snack time	✓
Doris	Clothes we wear	
Helen	I Love You	
Jenny	Toys	
Kevin	Animals	
Mandy	Call the police/an ambulance	✓
Nancy	Make black forest cake	

Differences between English teachers' beliefs and observed classroom practice

Table 3 reveals the topics these participants designed and delivered for the teaching demonstration, such as food, clothes, or animals. Except for Anita's class, which focused on alphabet letters, the other seven lessons observed were topic-based. However, only Carol's and Mandy's lessons marked with a check in Table 3 were considered as classroom practice for the alternative curriculum, because the content was cross-curricular and designed for learners to use English to learn other content knowledge. The rest were taught and delivered in the traditional manner of English instruction.

In Excerpt 2, Kevin taught a lesson on animals. He delivered his lesson entirely in Chinese except for the target vocabulary, such as *dog*. He mainly taught words related to animals and their sounds without any cross-curriculum instruction.

Excerpt 2. Kevin's instruction on animals

Kevin: I am going to play the video. It's easy. Look at the picture. Say the word. (He plays the video and it shows a dog.)

Students: Dog.

Kevin: What sound does a dog make?

Students: Wang wang.

Kevin: That's a Taiwanese dog.

Kevin thought that the alternative curriculum was the same as the regular English classes, so he taught the class the same way as the regular English classes without focusing on cross-disciplines. Teachers' beliefs have a greater influence on their competence and knowledge on planning their lessons, decisions they make, and their classroom practice. Teachers tend to be culturally bound and formed early by the school where they teach or by teacher training programs. They tend to be resistant to change (Xu, 2012).

Excerpt 3 reveals Nancy's instructions for the cloze exercise. She asked students to read the sentences on the blackboard and fill in the blanks with the key words, such as *spoon*, *vanilla*, *mixture*, and *degree*. Her students did not know the answers, so she whispered the Chinese translation with the initial sound. One student copied down the word from the word list.

Excerpt 3. Nancy's cloze exercise

Nancy: Look at the sentences on the blackboard. Find your own team, come, and write down the words.

Students: (No responses)

Mandy: S1, you come and write the answer.

S1: (Looks at the blackboard)

Mandy: Which one is tang chi, s . . . ?

S1: (Copies down the word spoon).

Mandy: Excellent. Good.

The contextual factors of the institutions might affect English teachers' beliefs and their classroom practice (Jamalzadeh & Shahsavari, 2015). Nancy's principal endeavored on developing the school-proposed curriculum on bees; however, the school context did not affect Nancy's English teaching beliefs and classroom practice. English teachers' beliefs deeply influence their classroom principles and practice

(Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017). Nancy stuck to traditional teaching and regarded the importance of vocabulary for language learning, so she designed cloze exercises for her students.

Excerpt 4 demonstrates Carol's lesson on food. After reviewing different words, such as *corn*, *candy*, *cookie*, or *snack*, she introduced the concept of sugar quantities and health issues as "too much" or "healthy" (safe). Moving beyond the English instruction on vocabulary, Carol's instruction was cross-curricular in English, mathematics, and health.

Excerpt 4. Carol's instruction on healthy food

Carol: It's a candy. Let's read the food label. Let's count. How many sugars does a candy have?

Carol and students: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8,

Carol: 8?? Is it too much or safe?

Students: too much

Language teachers, like Carol in this study, have strong intentions toward curriculum innovation. Language teachers are encouraged to explore and examine their beliefs and the relationship those beliefs have to classroom practice and their professional knowledge base. Hence, they create space for their own growth in curriculum innovation and exert an imperceptible influence on active teaching methods in alternative curricula (Xu, 2012).

Excerpt 5 is Mandy's instruction on making phone calls. After reviewing numbers from 0 to 9, she introduced two important numbers to students: 119, "call an ambulance" and 110, "call the police." She showed the number 119 on the computer screen and students had to say "call an ambulance." Later, she showed the phone screen and called one student to dial the number, 119.

Excerpt 5. Mandy's instruction on making phone calls

Mandy: (Shows the picture of telephone number 119)

Students: Call an ambulance.

Mandy: Who wants to make a phone call?

Students: (Raise their hands.)

S1: Me.

Mandy: Come.

S1: (Clicks on the numbers 1-1-9 on the screen).

Mandy: Good.

Language teachers are active thinkers who have their own beliefs about language learning, such as Mandy's beliefs regarding integration of learners' daily life into the alternative curriculum. Their beliefs can exert an influence on their actual practice in the language classroom (Min, 2013).

Challenges or problems with the implementation and design of alternative curricula

Four major problems or challenges were raised when these participants designed and implemented the alternative curriculum. First, these English teachers regarded the alphabet and phonics as the fundamental skills and knowledge for the first graders; however, they were expected to teach across curricula for the alternative curriculum. Doris said in the interview, "English classes were not offered for the first graders.

Instead, the alternative curriculum would use another way of teaching English. Should we focus on the alphabet and phonics in the alternative curriculum?" Teachers' beliefs are not congruent with the curriculum reform and innovation, such as Doris, Kevin in Excerpt 2, and Nancy in Excerpt 3. Their beliefs are deeply resistant to change, because curriculum reform and innovation entails an encounter between conflicting English teaching values and goals (Zhang & Liu, 2014).

Secondly, the alternative curriculum was cross-curricular, issue-based, topic-based, and school-based. Hands-on activities or manipulations were integrated into the alternative curriculum. These activities might last or extend over multiple weeks. Carol said, "Each unit of the alternative curriculum with the integration of other content areas, such as mathematics or health, might last for weeks. It was impossible to finish teaching all the curriculum." The challenge that participants faced regarding the long schedule accords with Hayes's (2010) study, which shows a lack of congruence between what is required by official curricula and what is possible to implement in the teaching context (Hayes, 2010). The success of curriculum reforms should acknowledge the influence of context on real classroom practice.

Thirdly, these English teachers were puzzled about the assessment designs for the alternative curriculum. Jenny asked, "All four skills should be included in each lesson. Do we have to assess the first graders' writing skills?" Helen also said, "Paper-and-pencil tests were required in our school. How could I design tests for the alternative curriculum?" This study was in agreement with Zhang and Liu (2014) that teachers' beliefs on English instruction are related to the constraints of classroom practice, such as high-stakes knowledge-based testing. Teachers' struggle to enact curriculum reforms can result from conflicting beliefs about the local school context and the governmental education policy.

Fourthly, these English teachers wondered how much of their instruction should be in English only, because introducing the concepts in English might be too challenging for first graders with limited English proficiency. Kevin asked, "What percentage of the lesson should be in English? It is much easier to explain concepts in Chinese?" Nancy said, "It was difficult to explain the procedure of making cakes, honey, or honey lotions in English." English medium instruction was identified by the participants as a challenge in implementing the alternative curriculum. Hayes (2010) warns that educational policymakers need to devise ways to harness language teachers' capacity and competence for building up their confidence in teaching totally in English.

Discussion

The analysis of the document, interviews, and observations is based on the research questions and the conceptual framework in Figure 1. This study has the following conclusions. First, the relationship between government-stipulated, school-proposed alternative, and teachers' beliefs was incongruent. Secondly, there was a substantial gap between school-proposed alternative curricula and English teachers' classroom practice. The alternative curricula were expected to be theme-based and cross-curricular. Third, English teachers' beliefs regarding the alternative assessment and English teaching affected their classroom practice. Based on the above findings, the teacher training should be designed to equip English teachers with competence in designs and delivery of alternative curricula.

Relationship between government-stipulated, school-proposed alternative curricula and teachers' beliefs

According to Hargreaves, "what the teacher thinks, what the teacher believes, what the teacher assumes—all these things have powerful implications for the change process, for the ways in which curriculum policy is translated into curriculum practice" (Hargreaves, 1989, p. 54). The school-proposed alternative curriculum in these eight schools was designed as the government stipulated, whether cross-curricular, issue-based, topic-based, or school-based. However, Anita, Kevin, and Nancy thought that the alternative curriculum was the same as the regular English classes. Teachers' beliefs determine their behavior and attitude toward curriculum innovation. Awareness-raising of one's own beliefs is crucial if teachers are expected to change (Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996). These teachers' beliefs about the alternative curriculum were incongruent with the government-stipulated and school-proposed alternative curriculum.

The gap between school-proposed alternative curriculum and teachers' classroom practice

Educational reforms, such as national or government-stipulated curricula, are seldom implemented in the classroom as they were intended by curriculum developers and policy makers (Underwood, 2012). A substantial gap existed between school-based proposed alternative curricula and English teachers' classroom practice, particularly Todd's school-proposed curriculum entitled *All about Bees* in Table 2 and Nancy's cloze exercises in Excerpt 3.

Four of the English teachers in this study have been teaching English for years, and they have their own perceptions of English instruction and alternative curricula. Teachers' beliefs tend to persevere. Once they are formed, it is hard to change them (Castro et al., 2004). Only Carol's and Mandy's observed lessons were considered to be part of the government-stipulated alternative curriculum and based on the school-proposed alternative curriculum. Teachers like Carol and Mandy transform the written curriculum and create a more personalized curriculum as they teach. Their curriculum agency and ownership can be fostered so their participation in curriculum reforms and innovation becomes true (Banegas, 2011).

The relationship between English teachers' beliefs and classroom practice

English teachers' beliefs about the alternative curriculum and English teaching affected their classroom practice. While English teachers, such as Anita or Nancy, believed that the alternative curriculum was just the regular English classes, language issues such as alphabet or vocabulary became the foci of the observed classroom practice. Carol and Mandy regarded alternative curriculum as cross-disciplinary, so their classroom practice focused more on the disciplinary concepts. Banegas (2011) claimed,

By taking into account their teaching beliefs and classroom experiences, the gap between theory and practice could be narrowed and that the alignment between the official curriculum and the observed curriculum may be achieved as it was a participatory curriculum. (p. 10)

Language teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and understanding of alternative curricula play crucial roles in their classroom practice. Their beliefs influence the goals, teaching procedures, materials, instructional strategies, and interactions they design and deliver (Hassankiadeh et al., 2012).

Calls for teacher training on designs and delivery of alternative curricula

Participants highlighted four major issues regarding the designs and implementations of the alternative curriculum in terms of fundamental competence for the first graders, teaching hours, assessments, and instruction language. The result of this study reveals the disconnection between curriculum policy, teachers' beliefs, and classroom practice. This gap is referred to as "rhetoric and reality" (Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2008). The gap results from insufficient training, resources, and support from experts. For educational and innovation reforms, teachers should be involved in the curriculum development process and a teacher support network or learning community should be established (Karavas, 2014; Machida & Walsh, 2015; Wang & Cheng, 2005).

Conclusion

Based on the conceptual framework in Figure 1, this study analyzes the interviews, observations, and documents to explore eight Taiwanese elementary school English teachers' beliefs and classroom practices regarding the alternative curriculum. The lack of congruence between government intention and the delivery in classrooms in pilot schools results from English teachers' beliefs on alternative curriculum. Four major problems are raised during the design and implementation of the alternative curriculum, including teachers' conflicting beliefs about subject matter content knowledge, curriculum knowledge, language for instruction, and assessments. Teacher training is needed to equip English teachers with stronger knowledge and competence in the design and delivery of the alternative curriculum.

This study advances the current empirical studies on English teachers' beliefs that social context (policy, school, classroom) shapes English teachers' decision making, competence, and pedagogical content knowledge regarding curriculum development and implementation. Moving beyond interviews and questionnaires, this study also highlights the importance of investigating the relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom practice.

Although this study advanced the understanding of elementary school English teachers' beliefs on curriculum development and implementation from the social perspective, this present study was limited to a case study of eight elementary schools. This study focuses mainly on teachers' beliefs and classroom practice on alternative curricula. Taiwanese EFL elementary school learners' beliefs on alternative curricula were not collected and analyzed. Gaps in satisfaction with English classes, learners' linguistic progress, and class activity designs between teachers' and learners' beliefs exist (Peacock, 1998). A further study can compare and contrast between teachers' beliefs and learners' beliefs about alternative curricula.

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Notes on contributor

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