

A PROPOSAL OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH DESIGN ON HOW TO ANALYZE THE EFFECT OF TEACHERS' AGENCY ON HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CURRICULUM REFORM

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ABSTRACT

The formal release and full implementation of the General High School English Curriculum Standard (2017 Edition) has propelled China's high school English curriculum reform into a new stage. As teachers are the key participants and practitioners of high school English curriculum reform, figuring out the relationship between high school English curriculum reform and teachers' agency and whether teachers can improve their agency to better realize the anticipated achievements of high school English curriculum reform has become an inevitable topic. In order to fulfill the above purposes, this paper proposes the conceptual framework and research design on how to analyze the effect of teachers' agency on high school English curriculum reform. In the proposed conceptual framework, the independent variable is the high school English curriculum reform while the dependent variable is English teachers' agency which is moderated by moderator variables such as teachers' profile and the ecosystem of teachers. In the proposed research design, the methodology is mix-mode research combined with quantitative and qualitative research which can dig out the in-depth relationship between teachers' agency and high school English curriculum reform and thus point out the methods to help teachers improve their agency and fulfill the tasks bestowed to the by the high school English curriculum reform.

Keywords: *high school English teachers, high school English curriculum, reform teacher's agency*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Teacher's Agency

Teacher agency is the capacity teachers have to make decisions, take action, and perform changes as they advocate for their professional and moral beliefs and responsibilities (Guerrero & Camargo, 2023). Although research on agency has yielded fruitful theoretical results, teachers' agency, particularly teachers' agency in teaching, has not received the attention it deserves from researchers (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). In the early 21st century, as scholars in the field of language policy and planning noted the countervailing effects of individual teachers on policy, and the rise of the topic of teacher professionalism in teacher education, theories related to teachers' agency have been enriched. Theories related to teachers' agency have been gradually enriched with the rise of the topic of agency in the field of teacher education. Initially, the issue of teachers' agency did not receive sufficient attention from teacher education researchers, and discussions of it were mainly attached to research focusing on teacher identity and teacher ethnics (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004).

It is only in the last five years that teachers' agency has become one of the most important factors influencing teachers' professional development, as the pace of global educational change accelerates and teacher education places greater demands on teacher professionalism. "Teacher's Professional Agency in Contradictory Times", a series of ten papers reporting on international empirical studies of teacher agency in diverse social contexts. This is a milestone in the development of teachers' agency research, covering key topics such as the concept, structural features, current performance, facilitators and constraints of teachers' agency in the context of educational policy change. Emirbayer & Mische (1998) first proposed that teachers' agency is a multi-layered complex that develops through the intertwined interaction of three dimensions: routines, goals and judgments. In this context, routines embody the experiences and skills that teachers rely on to sustain their daily teaching; goals point to the direction in which teachers strive to teach; and evaluation refers to the process by which teachers make decisions in reality.

While this doctrine identifies the past, future and reality as three important perspectives for interpreting teachers' agency, it lacks an in-depth account of the pathways of influence. Influenced by socio-cultural theory, most researchers are more interested in defining teachers' agency in a social context; Lasky (2005) states that teachers' agency is a teacher's willingness and ability to take initiative based on professional values, beliefs, goals and knowledge, both inside and outside the classroom, or in other work settings. Hilferty (2008) argues that teachers' agency should also encompass group organisation and is the ability of an individual teacher or group of teachers to break through structural constraints by actively and purposefully managing work and life. individual's ability to actively make choices, adopt behaviour and adapt strategies purposefully. It is easy to see that these definitions demonstrate the individual, group and forward-looking nature of teachers' agency. Teachers' agency manifests itself differently in different social contexts

(Huang & Benson, 2013). Researchers are keen to analyze teachers' agency in a variety of social contexts, seeing the dynamic complexity of the interaction between teachers' agency and the context in which it is embedded. Two of the key sub-concepts are teacher change agency and teacher professional agency, which point to different research interests, research questions and research content. Change agency can be seen as focusing on the means of agency, while professional agency focuses more on the goals of agency. As early as the 1970s, Taba (1962), a leading expert in curriculum theory, proposed that the teacher is the agent of change in curriculum development activities, arguing that the teacher is the main subject of classroom activities in curriculum reform. Fullan (1993, a) uses the term 'agent of change/change agent' to describe teachers' agency in educational change.

Lukacs (2009) suggests that from a group perspective, teachers' change agency is also reflected in their proactive collaboration with colleagues in their teaching practice. They are passionate and inspire learners. Overall, teachers' agency for change suggests that teachers take the initiative to change their teaching objectives, methods and content to improve teaching and learning outcomes. Meanwhile, Pyhältö, Pietarinen and Soini (2012) use the term teacher professional agency to express the ability of individual teachers or groups of teachers to engage in purposeful learning for professional development. From the outset, teacher professional agency focuses on the process of actively constructing and transforming teachers' identities in their professional development, emphasising teachers' lifelong learning goals (Eteläpelto et al. 2013).

It is clear that a teacher with a high agency is also an active learner. Since its inception, the concept of professional agency has significantly distinguished the teaching profession from other professions, and Vähäsantanen (2015) argues that professional agency refers to the ability of teachers to make choices and decisions in the workplace related to teaching and to take action to influence themselves and their environment. It is expressed in three ways: individual teachers taking control of their own professional development, making decisions related to educational change, and negotiating and transforming professional identities. In summary, teacher learning and teacher professional identity are two core elements in the definition of teacher professional agency.

1.2 High School English Curriculum Reform in China

Under the trend of the development of the world's economic globalization, political multipolarity, cultural diversification and social informatization, English, as one of the most widely used languages in the world, has become increasingly important. The English curriculum reform in high school bears the mission of national language strategy development and the hope of national foreign language competence building. As the English Curriculum Standards for General High Schools (2017 Edition) outlines the general goal of the English curriculum for nurturing people, which is "to cultivate students with national sentiment, international vision and cross-cultural communication skills".

Since the reform and opening up of China in 1978, the high school English curriculum reform has gone through three stages of development. The first stage was from

1978 to the early 1990s, which was a period of calm reflection and deployment in response to the chaotic order of foreign language teaching during the Cultural Revolution, the lack of resources for foreign language education, and the poor teaching conditions. The Ministry of Education of China organized efforts to draft and revise the English syllabus for secondary schools, and compiled English textbooks for junior high and senior high schools, which were instrumental in returning the teaching and learning of foreign languages to their original level, emphasizing basic English knowledge and skills training, and improving the quality of English teaching.

The second stage of curriculum reform emerged from the 1990s to 2000, when English education tended to serve the national strategic development needs of foreign affairs such as international trade, cultural exchange and political dialogue, so the reform clearly shifted English teaching to cultivating students' ability to use English for communication. The revised high school English syllabus emphasizes comprehensive training in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and teachers should change the teaching mode of "teachers dominate everything" to students oriented and fully mobilize the initiative and enthusiasm of English learning. In June 2001, the "Outline of Curriculum Reform for Basic Teachers (for Trial Implementation)" set out the ultimate goal of curriculum reform, which meant that a new round of curriculum reform for basic education was officially launched, and the English curriculum reform for high school officially entered the third stage.

Subsequently, the General High School English Curriculum Standards (Experimental Draft), which was promulgated in 2003, reflected deeply on the previous teaching reform and stated that the overall goal of the English curriculum was to cultivate students' "comprehensive language skills", including language knowledge, language skills, learning strategies, and emotional attitudes. The reform introduced a series of new teaching concepts. The reform introduced a series of new teaching concepts, such as highlighting students' independent, inquiry-based and cooperative learning, carrying out "task-based" classroom teaching activities, formative assessment, etc., and clarifying the teaching value orientation of integrating the instrumental and humanistic aspects of the English curriculum.

2.0 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Curriculum reform is an inevitable segment of education reform in the contemporary world, and it is also the focus of basic education reform in China. Since the 1980s, with the vigorous development of English education in China, the reform of the English curriculum in senior high schools has also been progressing steadily. In January 2018, the Ministry of Education of China promulgated the "General High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition)", which is a milestone in the reform of English curriculum in high school. The reform of the English curriculum in high school means not only the adjustment and updating of curriculum content and teaching materials, but also

the reconstruction of curriculum objectives, teaching concepts, curriculum structure and evaluation system, which requires teachers to embrace new education ideas and renew their teaching methods.

Fullan (1993, b), an authoritative expert in the field of education reform, pointed out that the effectiveness of education reform largely depends on teachers' decisions and actions. Curriculum reform carried out by administrative power tends to ignore the complexity of bringing educational policies into practice. Wang Qiang and Li Liang (2019) believe that teachers play a key role in shaping the personality of students. Therefore, to steer the direction of curriculum reform, attention must be focused on the practitioners and subjects of the reform, that is, the teachers. Teachers' agency highlights the identity of English teachers as subjects in the English curriculum reform, which has significance in successfully implementing the English curriculum reform and the professional development of teachers themselves.

So, the key issues that need to be addressed in this study are: As the practitioners of English curriculum reform, what kind of agency do teachers show under the circumstance of China's further senior high school curriculum reform and how can teachers improve their agency and achieve their professional development in the curriculum reform, thus contribute to the promotion of foreign language education in China.

2.1 Research Objectives

- i. To analyze the status of teachers' agency in curriculum reform by constructing the structural elements of high school English teachers' agency in curriculum reform.
- ii. To investigate high school English teachers of different ages and backgrounds to see the status and differences of their agency under the circumstance of curriculum reform, thus putting forward the main factors that affect teachers' agency.
- iii. To find out the ways to improve teachers' agency in detail under the circumstance of curriculum reform, thus contribute to the promotion of foreign language education in China.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 The Need for High School Curriculum Reform

The education system of China is a critical foundation progress and development of the, to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century requires a good high school curriculum. Globalization and technological advancements also require a curriculum that cultivates skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy to thrive in a

globalized and technologically-driven society (Zhao, 2018). Moreover, China's rapidly changing economy and industry demands a more diversified and specialized workforce, emphasizing vocational education and industry-specific skills training (Zhang, 2019). Holistic education and soft skills development are also crucial, with an emphasis on character, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and leadership (Chen et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the reform should address educational inequality by promoting equitable access to quality education for all students (Li, 2018). Additionally, to preserve cultural heritage, the curriculum must incorporate values education to instill ethical awareness and cultural identity (Wu, 2019). In the face of environmental challenges, integrating sustainability principles is crucial for environmental consciousness (Li & Hu, 2021). Equipping students with future-ready skills, including digital literacy and technology integration, is also imperative to prepare them for the rapidly evolving job market (Liu & Li, 2020).

By embracing these insights and integrating diverse perspectives on global competitiveness, education equity, cultural preservation, sustainability, and technological literacy, the reformed high school curriculum can successfully prepare students for a complex and rapidly evolving world. Through collaborative efforts, the curriculum reform can lay the groundwork for a generation of well-rounded, innovative, and socially responsible individuals, empowering China's continued progress and leadership in the global landscape.

3.2 English Teacher Agency in Curriculum Reform

Firstly, English teachers' agency is a 'double-edged sword', as teachers' attitudes towards change can either facilitate or inhibit the process and effectiveness of language policy implementation. Teachers receive increasing attention as change agents within education reform policy discourses positioning their professionalism, identity, and agency as critical to implementation of reforms (Liyana & Walker, 2023). Ollerhead (2010), in a long-term follow-up study of Australian adult English teachers implementing the Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme (LLNP), found that high agency foreign language (English) teachers excelled in innovative teaching resources and were willing to update their teaching ideas and methods, while low agency teachers struggled to integrate teaching resources and were more likely to lack classroom control and a sense of achievement to fall into negative affect, showing resistance to change. The low agency teachers are more likely to lack control and achievement in the classroom and fall into negative affect, showing resistance to change. Thus, English teachers' agency in curriculum reform is not only manifested in accepting the reform or continuously adapting their role until they adapt to the metamorphosis of the reform, but may also be manifested in resisting the reform (Robinson, 2012; Ali & Hamid, 2018).

Secondly, English teachers' agency is a multi-layered complex that reflects a combination of teachers' attitudes, thinking, perceptions and the environment in which they live. Most existing research on English teachers' agency has focused on teachers

whose second language is English, and non-native language learning adds to the difficulty and complexity of teachers' and students' successful adaptation to a new environment of change, making English teachers' agency research more context-dependent than general teachers' agency research. Choi (2014) argues that the effectiveness of national language programmes is closely linked to the personal beliefs of English teachers, and that only when new pedagogical ideas are aligned with teachers' own pedagogical goals, they can have a positive impact on curriculum reform. For example, the development of English in the globalisation of English has had an impact on traditional English teaching and learning, with multiple variants of English being produced in the process of localisation, and TESOL teachers are generally faced with the challenge of evaluating the science of traditional 'standard English' and 'non-standard English'.

Research has shown that teachers' attitudes towards world English and agency teaching decisions are closely related to positive changes in their beliefs and ideas, with different attitudes of conservatism or openness (Hamid, 2014). In addition, Tao and Gao (2017) used sociocultural theory to conduct retrospective in-depth interviews with eight English teachers at a Chinese university to unpack how English teachers exerted their agency to make choices and take actions related to their teaching and research in the context of curriculum reform.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

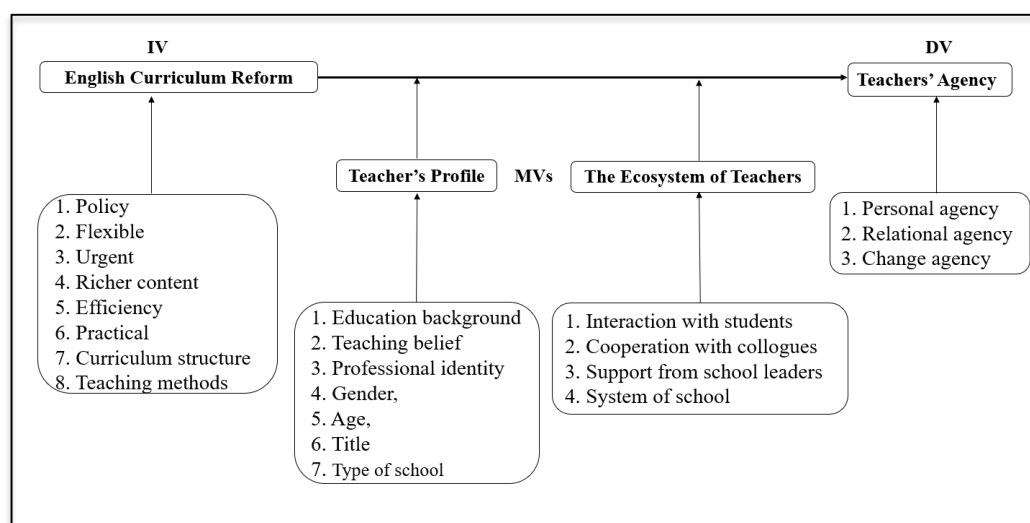


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework of English curriculum reform and teachers' agency

4.0 METHODOLOGY

This study proposes explanatory research, adopting a mixed mode research method, with quantitative data collected first and qualitative data second (Johnson & Christensen, 2011). The quantitative data will be obtained through the use of questionnaires, which will be

distributed and collected through a questionnaire called Teachers' Agency Questionnaire in High School English Curriculum Reform. The participants are all high school English teachers. The data for the qualitative study will be obtained from four high school English teachers who participated in the curriculum reform, through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and teaching journal analysis.

4.1 Research Design

This study proposes the adaptation of 'embedded research design', and the results of qualitative research will play a leading role in answering the research questions (Creswell & Clark, 2007, see in Figure 2). At the same time, this study will also refer to 'sequential-explanatory research design' when designing the research process. In 'embedded research design', one research design is in dominating position while the other is in a subordinate or auxiliary position, the data of the latter is mainly used to support and supplement the former. In 'sequential-explanatory research design' means sequentially, the researcher adopts a quantitative research design to collect data at first, and then designs the method and content of the qualitative research based on the results obtained from quantitative research.

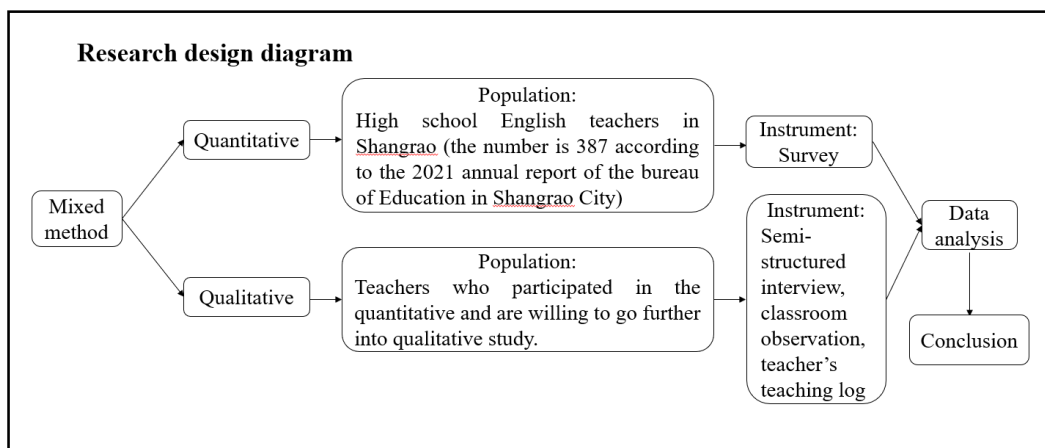


Fig. 2: Research design diagram of English curriculum reform and teachers' agency

4.3 Research Instruments

For quantitative data, this study proposes a questionnaire named Teachers' Agency Questionnaire in High School English Curriculum Reform (see in Appendix), which is consisted of five parts:

- a. Basic information
- b. Scale of teacher's agency in curriculum reform
- c. Scale of environment support for teacher's development

- d. Teacher's professional identity survey
- e. Teacher's teaching belief survey

For qualitative data, this study proposes three different instruments to collect data:

- a. Semi-structured Interviews: Collecting teachers' opinion on curriculum reform, how they exercise their agency, etc.
- b. Class observations: Observing teachers' class content, teaching practice, interaction with students, etc.
- c. Teaching logs: Collecting learning objectives, teaching methods, teaching process, teaching feedback, suggestion, etc. of the class.

Sampling method:

For quantitative data: this study proposes simple random sample

For qualitative data: this study proposes purposive sampling

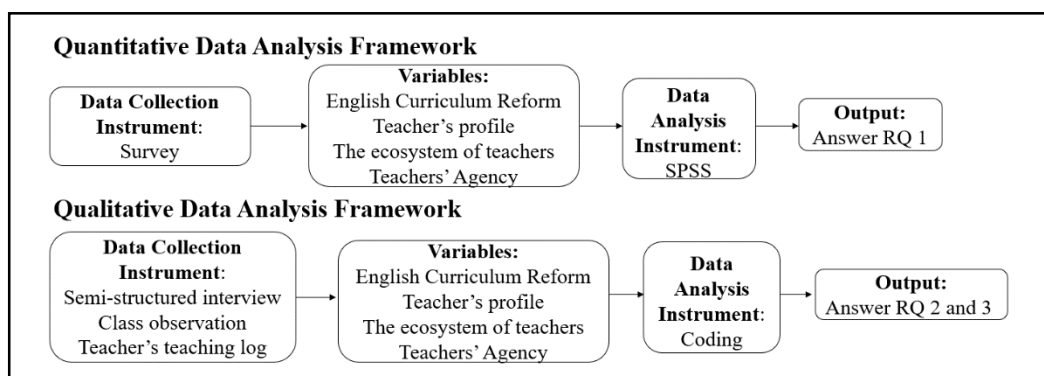


Fig. 3: Data analysis framework of English curriculum reform and teachers' agency

5.0 CONCLUSION

This paper proposes the conceptual framework and research design for how to conduct explanatory research to analyse the effect of teachers' agency on the reform of English curriculum in high schools, based on the conceptual framework and research design, the authors will continue with pilot study to check the validity of the questionnaire and start a formal questionnaire survey to collect quantitative data, then based on the analysis of the quantitative data, the authors will go on to collect the qualitative to further check the relationship between teachers' agency and high school English curriculum reform, and finally, propose suggestions on how to improve teachers' agency under the circumference of high school English curriculum reform.

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