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**A Narrative Inquiry into EFL Teacher Change in  
Chinese Primary Schools**

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**Abstract**

Narrative inquiry has been used for teacher education and development. This paper presents a narrative approach to teacher change by using one EFL teacher's stories in a teaching English reading project in Chinese primary schools. This change is built on the teacher's teaching philosophy and attitude for what she teaches. The paper concludes that the possibilities for real teacher change depend not only on the teacher's beliefs and understanding of EFL teaching, but also on authority's support, observing other teachers' classes, reflecting on what she has read, heard and seen.

**Keywords:** teacher change; narrative inquiry; primary EFL teacher

## **Introduction**

Curriculum reform in China brings many challenges to teachers at the elementary stage. In order to overcome these challenges, both primary and middle school teachers are eager to get help from college experts with rich educational theoretic knowledge. Under this context, a project aiming to help ten primary schools become model primary schools of English as a foreign language (EFL) education appears. This project consists of three subprojects, classroom instruction, teaching reading, and using drama. The present study focuses on teaching reading, which lasted three years. Four primary schools with a total of 20 teachers took part in the reading project. Three EFL university English experts from a key teachers' university in Beijing, China, worked with the 20 primary school teachers in developing their skills in teaching English reading. In so doing, it was hoped that the 20 teachers would become model teachers in teaching English reading in primary schools.

From a narrative inquiry perspective, the present study aims to illuminate the process of teacher change by using one primary EFL teacher's stories in the teaching English reading project. This narrative inquiry, just like any other qualitative studies, is in search of meaning and the findings are significant since they can present the field with an insider's view of taking part in a teaching English reading project in Chinese primary schools. Meanwhile, the present study on teacher change contributes to foreign language teacher education and professional development in China.

## **Teacher Change**

Teacher change is one of the key factors of contributing to the success of curriculum reform. Whitworth & Chiu (2015) defined teacher change as change in teacher beliefs, understandings, and/or practices. In addition to these aspects, teacher change can also refer to various change happening in teachers' daily professional practice. Richardson & Placier (2001) once argued that teacher change is a term lacking clear definition and it is often mixed with other concepts such as teacher learning, teaching development, teacher growth, and teacher cognitive and affective change in the pedagogical field. This kind of mixture indicates that teacher change is a complex concept and covers a lot of facets. Fullan (1991) divided teacher change into three domains: curriculum materials, teaching practice, and teachers' beliefs and understandings on reform. Among them, the last two refer to teacher's external behavioral change and internal psychological change. Only changes are made within all the three domains, it can be called the real teacher change.

Whitworth & Chiu (2015) discussed factors influencing teacher change. Among them, teacher experience (i.e. years in the classroom) can be seen as a critical factor to consider in professional development and teacher change (Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon, & Rowe, 2003). Teachers' motivations for attending professional development can also influence their change. Smith et

al. (2003) put forward that teachers who exhibit a strong motivation to attend professional development are more likely to change following participation. Meanwhile, self-efficacy is an important contextual factor related to teacher change. Self-efficacy is defined as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (Bandura, 1995: 2). More experienced teachers tend to have more stable self-efficacy, while beginning teachers are still developing their self-efficacy (Ross, 1994). Teachers with stronger self-efficacy are more likely to change their practices as a result of attending professional development, regardless of experience (Guskey, 1988; Smylie, 1988). In addition, Whitworth & Chiu (2015) also mentioned school culture is related to teacher change. The more collaboration there is within a school, the more teachers are committed to teaching, which may result in teachers being more open to new practices and knowledge (Rosenholtz, 1986).

Some scholars talked about the ways of influencing the process of teacher change, for example, Penlington (2008) mentioned dialogue as a catalyst for teacher change. He attempted to help readers to understand how and why dialogue works as an effective tool for teacher change and he drew upon the philosophical theory of practical reason in order to show why and how teacher–teacher dialogue plays such a crucial role in the evolution of teacher practice. Besides, Tripp & Rich (2012) analyzed how video influences the process of teacher change. Teachers in three different teaching environments engaged in semester-long video-reflection groups. Through a descriptive analysis of these meetings, participants’ own video-analyses, and individual interviews, six over-arching themes emerged across the different environments that describe the change process. It is found that video encouraged teacher change because it helped teachers: (a) focus their analysis, (b) see their teaching from a new perspective, (c) trust the feedback they received, (d) feel accountable to change their practice, (e) remember to implement changes, and (f) see their progress.

Those studies mentioned above have consistently reported that teacher change is a very important issue in the field of teacher education and teacher development and it is worthwhile to make further study on it.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a way of thinking about life (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). “Learning how to think narratively is more important than learning definitions, steps and methods. The reason for this is that narrative inquiry is a conception of the phenomenal world in which experience is mediated by story...Narrative is the phenomenon of inquiry because everything, including teacher development, is a phenomenon narrated through stories.” (Xu & Connelly, 2009:221). “Narrative inquiry can be described as research in which narratives, or stories, play a significant role” (Benson, 2014:155). The meaning of narrative inquiry lies in whether changes and developments exist in people’s (including researchers’ and readers’) life stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Teachers' stories are a crucial way in narrative inquiry. Teachers' stories can clearly show whether teachers have made any changes in curriculum materials, teaching practice and teacher's belief and understanding. Therefore, teachers' stories can be a very suitable way to discover teacher change.

According to Polkinghorne's (1995) explanation on the distinction between analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. The present study belongs to an analysis of narratives which uses one primary EFL teacher's stories as data and thematic analysis as ways of analyzing data.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Questions*

In order to present the process of teacher change in the teaching English reading project in Chinese primary schools, the following questions are raised:

Is there any change to the primary English teacher during her taking part in the reading teaching project? If yes, how does the primary English teacher change? In which aspects does she change? If no, what are reasons for that?

### *Research Participant*

The present study followed the purposeful sampling procedure and chose one primary EFL teacher from the reading teaching subproject, Xenia (pseudonym) as the research participant. From the technical requirements of ethical considerations, Xenia had been given informed consent and she agreed to take part in the present study. Xenia has seven years of primary English teaching experience and holds a junior professional position. Xenia was teaching Grade four and five at the beginning of this study and she didn't take part in any reading projects like the one mentioned in the present study. Xenia was a very responsible English teacher with the exploration spirit.

Within three years, three EFL educational experts visited the classes of Xenia who took part in the reading teaching project each semester, discussed problems in her reading classes and gave her suggestions to improve her reading classes. Many reading modes were practiced with the development of the reading teaching project, such as SSR (Sustained Silent Reading), jigsaw reading, story map teaching, picture around teaching, and autonomous reading. Xenia learned and experienced much as she tried those reading techniques.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The data collected for this study consisted of the teacher's reflection papers in the form of narratives.

The narratives were coded and analyzed for themes and patterns related to the research questions (Bogden & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 2004). Findings from the narratives were integrated to form a whole picture of Xenia's change.

To triangulate the findings, researchers discussed the interpretations with the participant and also presented the findings to three critical friends for verification.

## **Findings**

### *Xenia's First Year's Change*

“I was one member of the reading project”

I came back school and became one member of the reading project after the maternity leave in September, 2013. I didn't take part in any trainings because of the maternity leave, therefore, I knew little about this reading project. The only thing I knew was that I was one member of the reading project and I had to take part in teaching shows and reseaches.

“I failed in my reading class”

I gave a reading class on December 11, 2013 and three experts from BNU reading project visited my class. The text was chosen from Unit 7 “We Love Nature” in Volume One, Grade Four of the Beijing version and I taught Lesson 23. I followed the traditional classroom teaching methods and spent a lot of time and energy to prepare this reading class. There were five stages in my readng class, and they are warming-up, presentation, practice, production, summary. On each stage, I designed some speicific activities, such as filling in the blanks on the practice stage and reading the similar text and answering questinons on the production stage. Classroom is the only place to evaluate teaching design's effectiveness and rationality. In my teaching, I had realized the weakness of this class from students' lacking interest, passion and enthusiasm. A class full of rich design and enough teaching activies in my eyes demotivated my students however and the whole class seemed very boring. After the class, three experts pointed out some shortcomings of this class and gave a lot of detailed suggestions. In fact, lack of real communication was the big problem in this class, but I didn't realize it at that time. After the class, I knew I failed in my reading class and there were many problems in my teaching and I felt very distressed. Although experts had given me a lot of good suggestions, I didn't fully understand them and therefore I can't use them very well in my own teaching.

“I failed again”

Although I failed in my first reading class, I didn't give up. With an indomitable attitude, I gave the second reading class in front of three experts on March 21, 2014. I chose Lesson 9 from Unit 3 “We Love Nature” in Volume Two, Grade Four of the Beijing version. With three experts' suggestions, I

carefully prepared the lesson and designed teaching activities. I added the Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) activity at the beginning of the class and then followed the three stages of presentation, practice, production to finish the teaching. After class, I myself felt I didn't do well in this class, then I felt I failed again from three experts' "serious" facial expressions. Xin, the expert in the reading project, pointed out that I focused too much on language learning in the reading process at the SSR session and didn't give students more autonomous space and didn't concern students' ideas and their critical thinking since I still controlled the whole class. Xin suggested that I should give more opportunities to students and ask them to do things in the class, meanwhile, enlighten and encourage them and make them have more meaningful expressions.

“I was trapped in the reading project”

I did my best in the second reading class, but I failed again. This failure bruised my feeling and made me feel very depressed. In addition, when I heard the improvement and change of other teachers from the reading project, I felt the strong pressure since I found myself back where I started. I was trapped in the reading project. Where was the problem? Why can't I find the breakthrough although I worked so hard? How should I go on the following days? Where was the way to my reading class? A series of questions took root and sprout in the cockles of my heart and made me suffer a lot. Because I can't find the breakthrough, my professional development entered into “the bottleneck period”.

“*The Power of Reading* is powerful”

Sheila, the expert in the reading project, once recommended the book named *The Power of Reading* to us after my second reading class. Our principle gave us a lot of support and decided to buy this book for all English teachers in my school. When I got this book, I made full use of commute time and free time in the school to read it. Therefore, I finished my reading thirstily within one week. The author used many examples and data to illustrate the importance of free voluntary reading (FVR) and I was deeply moved by those ideas in this book. Especially SSR as one way of FVR was introduced clearly in this book and that was just what I wanted. I myself liked reading and often bought a lot of books to read in my spare time. I knew my students liked reading too but the problem was that they had not enough reading time and good reading materials. Based on my own teaching, I decided to start everything from scratch and squeeze out five to ten minutes to my students' and my own reading in the class. I bought *Plan X* (Grade one to ten) and read them ahead of time by myself in order to know the main ideas of this series of books and then used five to ten minutes to read with my students together in the class. Sometimes I recommended one volume to my students to read and sometimes I also consulted the opinions of my students and made them read according to their own interest. In



a word, my students and I read books by our interest and without any purpose. *The Power of Reading* is powerful. We all enjoy the pleasure of reading.

“Suddenly an enlightening public reading class”

I attended a reading conference recommended by the reading project and observed a public reading class in this conference on April 12, 2014. I learned a lot from Ms. Xu who was the teacher of this public reading class, such as a series of questions used to cause students' deep thinking, ways to cultivate students' critical thinking, and ways to make students produce authentic and meaningful expressions. This was a suddenly enlightening public reading class to me and I immediately tried those ways in my own reading class.

“Playing a shadow puppet show” and “Flying a kite”

I gave my third reading class in front of three experts on April 18, 2014. The text was chosen from Unit 6 “It's Not Safe.” in Volume Two, Grade Four of the Beijing version and I taught Lesson 19. According to the content of this lesson, I creatively developed the teaching material and designed two lively figures named Miss Don't and Mr. Don't. Meanwhile I designed a lot of activities based on Miss Don't and Mr. Don't to stimulate students' learning enthusiasm, cultivate their interest in autonomous reading, and open their minds. Especially, I invited students to play as Miss Don't and Mr. Don't and tell partners what people can do and what people can't do. Since this activity was very interesting and students showed very high enthusiasm on participation and the whole class became very active. In this class, I felt better and better and more and more confident and the interaction between students and me became more and more natural and we all engaged in the pleasure of language learning.

After class, Sheila commented that this class had shown the authenticity of the classroom, focused on the students' language generation, stimulated students' reading interest and made significant breakthrough. After listening to Sheila's comments, I was very excited and finally realized that English classroom teaching shouldn't be “a shadow puppet show”, that means teachers themselves directed and played the shadow puppet show and students were only those puppets, instead, English classroom teaching should be a process of “flying a kite”, that means teachers should be the person who flew the kite and students should be the kites freely flying on the sky but the kite line was in the teachers' hands and teachers played the facilitating role.

“From a cocoon into a butterfly”

I finally tasted the happiness from my success in the third reading class, realized the sense of achievement and pleasure made by the happy learning between students and me, and I also saw the smiles appearing on three experts'

faces at last. This success was a good beginning of my reading teaching reform and I had found the direction and never felt confused and depressed any more.

I'd like to use "metamorphosis" to describe my growth within the one year. The more familiar in a model, the more difficult to change, but the more difficult and depressed, the more beautiful and surprising when it changed from a cocoon into a butterfly. I will firmly go forward and do better and better on the road of reading teaching reform.

### **Reflection**

Xenia's first year's change in her teaching practice is shown in the form of narrative inquiry above. "Narrative inquiry in language education research provides a means to grasp the complexities of learning and teaching, permitting the development of ideas for improvements in teaching practice" (Fang, 2006:128). This inquiry has assisted us to reflect on Xenia's change in her participation in the reading project.

From Xenia's stories, her change consists of change both in teaching philosophy and in her own attitude. "Playing a shadow puppet show" and "Flying a kite" shows her change in teaching philosophy. It is well known that Confucian values place a high emphasis on education and that teachers have a special place in Chinese thought (Xu, 2006). Traditionally teachers have the absolute authority and they control everything in the class. But Xenia has realized the importance of students' autonomous learning and clearly knew teachers should be facilitators in language teaching after one year of hard work in the reading project. Xenia told us the process of her controlling the whole class at the very beginning to giving students more opportunities to take part in classroom activities and her focusing on students' language generation at last. All those details can show her change in teaching philosophy. Meanwhile, in Xenia's stories, it can be seen that Xenia experienced the process of knowing little about the reading project, feeling distressed in the first failure of the reading class, being trapped and suffering a lot in the second failure of the reading class, suddenly enlightened, being confident, to tasting the happiness from the success in the third reading class. This process has shown her change of attitude in the reading project.

Xenia's change in teaching philosophy and in her own attitude are interactive. As a primary EFL teacher with seven years of teaching experience, it is very difficult for Xenia to change her original teaching philosophy. Therefore, Xenia experienced depression and suffering in the change of her teaching philosophy. But when she followed the new teaching philosophy and made success in her teaching, she gained the excitement, confidence, and happiness.

#### *Xenia's Second Year's Change*

"The biggest challenge: Lack of reading materials" and "Never give up"

After taking part in one year's reading project, I have gained some experience for my reading teaching methods and I was eager to try some new reading teaching methods. But when I planned to apply those good reading teaching methods further, I met one big challenge, that was the lack of reading materials. Although I was going to continue using SSR in my class, the lack of reading materials made me have to stop it. I felt very sad because I didn't want to give up and quit our reading class. Moreover, my students' interest on reading had just been cultivated. How can I discourage them? Never, I will never do that, I said to myself. I will try my best to carry on participating in this reading project and continue our reading class.

“Self-editing vs. authentic reading materials” and “ I was trapped in the reading project again”

In order to continue my reading class, I self-edited reading materials based on the topics of the textbook. Meanwhile I wanted to try jigsaw reading in my class. I remembered one topic's summer holiday and I self-edited those reading materials, planned to set a scene to my students, use the information gap, and ask students to finish the jigsaw reading. After finishing my teaching design, I was very happy because I thought it was a perfect connection between the textbook and the reading materials. However, the effect of the real teaching was out of my expectation. The whole class was a mess. My students didn't know what to do when they had got their tasks and the worse was that I had no enough time to give them specific instructions one by one.

After the class, those experts in the reading project pointed out that it was not available for teachers themselves to self-edit reading materials and students still need to read the authentic materials. Meanwhile I didn't deeply understand how to use jigsaw and still didn't know how to use it effectively in the reading teaching. When I heard experts' comments, I was very frustrated. I was trapped in the reading project again. My students and I were eager to get those authentic reading materials, but because of the change of our principle, this thing was delayed. Moreover, I myself need to learn how to use those reading teaching methods effectively. I met a lot of difficulties in this year's reading project. I am puzzled and I don't know where my reading teaching road will go.

## **Reflection**

Xenia's second year's change is mainly shown in the change of her own attitude. At the beginning, she was still very confident and active and she wanted to try something new. However, when she met the difficulty in lacking of reading materials, she felt very sad but she didn't give up. She decided to use her own way to solve this difficulty, that is using self-editing reading materials. But when experts in the reading project denied her way and the

worse was that she failed in trying jigsaw reading in her class, she was very frustrated and puzzled and this time she even felt a little bit desperated.

Through Xenia's narration, we can find one possible reason for her difficulty in lacking of reading materials is the change of her principle. From this point, we can see the importance of authority's support on teacher change.

### *Xenia's Third Year's Change*

“New beginning”

Under the effort of reading project group members, our school bought a large number of reading materials for students at last. Our difficulty in lacking of reading materials has finally been solved. Each group member of the reading project was very excited and encouraged, of course, including me. I can make full use of these reading materials to carry on those reading teaching methods and my students can thoroughly enjoy their reading again. I felt I regain the confidence and refind the direction on the reading teaching road.

“Trying jigsaw reading again” and “Finally realizing reading to learn”

Last year, I once tried jigsaw reading in my class and the result was that I failed at that time. There were many reasons for my failure, such as lacking of authentic reading materials, unfamiliar ways of using jigsaw reading, unclear classroom instructions, etc. This year, I wanted to try jigsaw reading again since we have got enough authentic reading materials. My two colleagues tried jigsaw reading first and experts in the reading projects gave them very helpful suggestions and I had learned a lot from those suggestions.

Through experts' comments, I found the big problem of our jigsaw reading was that we emphasized more on the form of jigsaw reading rather than the internalization of the language and knowledge through jigsaw reading. Therefore when I tried jigsaw reading again in my class, I thought continuously how to solve this problem and link the form of jigsaw reading with the internalization of the language and knowledge. With such a kind of reflection, I began to design my jigsaw reading class. The reading material that I chose was *Bug Hunt*. I tried to make my jigsaw reading class better through emphasizing those details.

When I started my jigsaw reading, I told students the evaluation form first and made them clearly know the four different dimensions which include silent reading, listening, expressing, and language and two different assessing ways which are teacher assessment and students' peer assessment. Such clear assessing contents are very helpful for my improving classroom effectiveness. Then I used pictures from *Bob Bug and the Insect Club* that they have learned before to help students review the knowledge about the bug so as to stimulate their schema on the topic of this reading materials.

After students' jigsaw reading, I guided students to observe, compare, and generalize the knowledge of the bug and helped them know more about some

scientific knowledge. Students were still very excited in the class. After class, experts in the reading project spoke highly of my performance and I was very happy. I got the success at last.

I think the reading project makes me realize the ultimate goal of reading teaching is not to help students understand the meaning of the material or learning some new words and phrases, but to facilitate them know more knowledge through reading, such as interdisciplinary knowledge. From this point of view, reading is not just for language learning, but for learning from the perspective of the generalized macro, for improving students' comprehensive abilities.

## **Reflection**

Xenia's third year's change is both about the change of her teaching philosophy and her own attitude. Since Xenia's school has bought reading materials for their students at last, Xenia solved a big problem and she was no longer desperated, on the contrary she was very encouraged and full of passion on trying jigsaw reading again. From this point of view, Xenia has experienced her attitude change again, that is from being desperated to being passionate.

Through observing her colleagues' jigsaw reading class and getting experts' suggestions, Xenia gradually found the big problem of their jigsaw reading class and she tried to solve this problem in her own teaching. When she succeeded at last, she realized the ultimate goal of reading and understood the key points of reading teaching. During trying jigsaw reading, Xenia gradually realized her change on teaching philosophy.

## **Conclusion**

Through taking part in three years' reading project, Xenia has changed both in her teaching philosophy and her attitude toward her career. "Playing a shadow puppet show", "Flying a kite", and "Finally realizing reading to learn" show her change in teaching philosophy. Meanwhile, "From a cocoon into a butterfly", "I was trapped in the reading project again", and "New beginning" show her change in the attitude.

Those critical incidents in Xenia's stories, such as reading a theory book *The Power of Reading*, getting the principle's support, observing a public reading class, caring about experts' comments and attitudes, lack of reading materials and regaining reading materials, the first failure in jigsaw reading class and finally the success of jigsaw reading class, all contributed to her change in the reading teaching project. Xenia has gained many ideas about FVR and SSR from *The Power of Reading* and those ideas helped her a lot in carrying out SSR in her own class. Xenia's principle bought the book *The Power of Reading* to them and this was the visible help and invisible encouragement to Xenia. Xenia was lucky to observe that public reading class

and this was suddenly an enlightening experience to her. Especially, she said above that she tried those ways in her own reading class, therefore, this public reading class helped her strengthen her new teaching philosophy. Xenia mentioned three experts' comments and attitudes many times in her stories. From the words like "serious facial expressions" and "smiles appearing on three experts' faces", we can see Xenia paid a lot of attention to experts' attitudes and their attitudes influenced Xenia a lot in the reading projects. Meanwhile, from those detailed comments mentioned in her stories, it can be seen that Xenia cared about experts' comments very much. Lack of reading materials and regaining reading materials made Xenia cherish those reading materials very much and pushed her into grasping the opportunity to try some new reading teaching methods. The first failure in jigsaw reading class and the success of jigsaw reading class at last made Xenia realize the ultimate goal of reading. Those critical incidents played a very important role in Xenia's change, helped her develop the new teaching philosophy, and provided her encouragement, enlightenment, and direction to go forward.

Narrative inquiry helps us better understand Xenia's change in her teaching philosophy and in her own attitude. "Narrative studies often paint a complex picture of the issue infocus, rather than provide clear-cut results or findings" (Benson, 2014: 164). This paper has shown a complex picture of a primary EFL teacher's change in the teaching English reading project. In addition, through Xenia's creatively developing the teaching material and designing Miss Don't and Mr. Don't, cultivating students' interest in autonomous reading, and her own understanding on the reading teaching project which is a process from a cocoon into a butterfly, we can see Xenia's change covers the three domains divided by Fullan (1991) which are the change in curriculum materials, teaching practice, and teachers' beliefs and understandings on reform and therefore this primary EFL teacher change is the real teacher change.

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