

Original article

A qualitative case study on Chinese secondary school EFL teachers' beliefs about intercultural foreign language teaching

Shiqin Wu¹✉*

¹Shanghai Pudong Institute of Education Development, Shanghai 200127, P. R. China

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Abstract:

This paper reports on a qualitative case study of four secondary school EFL teachers' beliefs about intercultural foreign language teaching (IFLT) in the Chinese context. Based on within-case analysis and cross-case analysis of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and teaching materials, the study discusses the four participants' common beliefs and personalized beliefs and identifies a gap between the teachers' folk understandings of IFLT and the guidelines proposed by academia. Drawing on the analyses, a dynamic system of the teachers' beliefs about IFLT is proposed, which is composed of beliefs about culture and language, beliefs about intercultural teaching in EFL, beliefs about EFL learners, and beliefs about teachers' themselves. Furthermore, the study proposes effective intervention strategies in teacher education and professional development to change teachers' beliefs and facilitate intercultural teaching practices in secondary EFL classrooms.

1. Introduction

In response to the rapid change of the world and the continuous development of globalization, intercultural education has emerged as a critical component of curriculum in formal education (UNESCO, 2006), which emphasizes developing intercultural competence (ICC) alongside academic skills to prepare students for global engagement in an interconnected and culturally-diverse world. Given the intrinsic connection between language and culture, foreign language education has become a pivotal platform for nurturing ICC, with its expected learning outcome shifting from the mere acquisition of linguistic competence to the development of ICC (Byram, 1997).

In China, the current national curriculum reform echoes the international trend. Developing students' ICC has been incorporated into the national curriculum standards as a major goal of education in English as a foreign language (EFL). At the secondary level, the General Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (MOE, 2017) and the Compulsory Education's English Curriculum Standards (MOE, 2022) have

explicitly stated that one of the general goal of English curriculum is to cultivate students' international vision and ICC, with "cultural awareness" being included as one of the key competencies of the English subject.

However, development of ICC doesn't just naturally occur in most people through foreign language study or living in another country; rather, it must be intentionally addressed through education (Liddicoat, 2008; Deardorff, 2009), which requires deliberate actions by language teachers who must first develop their own ICC as well as sufficient knowledge in intercultural teaching theories and pedagogy, especially the intercultural foreign language teaching (IFLT). The shift in the goal of language education internationally has placed the teaching of EFL at the forefront of educational innovation with language teachers playing a crucial role in this endeavor, because the effectiveness of intercultural teaching rely much on the beliefs of the language teachers themselves.

Previous studies indicate that even though the importance of IFLT is widely recognized among language teachers worldwide, they still struggle with strategies to effectively

foster their students' ICC (Sercu et al., 2005; Oranje & Smith, 2017). Despite the external factors such as limited time and lack of training (Sercu, 2007; Karabinar & Guler, 2013; Gu, 2016), teachers' beliefs serve as a major contributing factor, considering its crucial influence on teaching decisions and classroom practices (Pajares, 1992; Basturkmen, 2012). In China, studies on foreign language teachers about IFLT focus much more on the higher education level than the secondary level, thus, it remains an open question the extent to which secondary school EFL teachers in China embrace and implement IFLT. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literature by providing empirical insights into how secondary school EFL teachers in China conceptualize and approach IFLT, which consequently offers practical implications for teacher development.

2. Review of the literature

2.1 Intercultural Foreign Language Teaching (IFLT)

IFLT emerges on the foundation of various foreign language education philosophies throughout the history (Zhang, 2007), and is highly compatible with the current curriculum reform in China. The term is introduced with the aim of re-examining the conventional foreign language education from an intercultural perspective, which can be briefly defined as a foreign language teaching approach that targets the development of learners' ICC (Sun et al., 2020) and seeks to integrate language teaching with culture teaching, thereby fostering the holistic development of learners' language proficiency, multicultural knowledge, intercultural identity and communication skills (Zhang & Wu, 2022).

IFLT is in nature pedagogically postmodernist (Risager, 2007), which addresses culture and language as integrated rather than separated. Differing from the traditional approach focusing on declarative and factual knowledge, it emphasizes the lifelong development of learners' ICC including the three dimensions of knowledge, attitudes and skills, and prepares learners for using English as an International Language or English as a Lingua Franca. IFLT holds a non-essentialist view of culture, which means culture is not simplified to the static entity held by certain nation-state, but is presented as dynamic and heterogeneous (Sun et al., 2020). Therefore, the teaching content is multicultural in nature, not confined to the culture of the target language but encompassing the cultures of various groups worldwide, with an emphasis on the value of home culture and diverse levels of subcultures (Zhang, 2007; Marczak, 2010).

In terms of pedagogy, IFLT advocates a student-centered rather than teacher-centered approach, providing experiential learning process for learners based on authentic resources such as learners' real life experiences rather than merely textbooks, with teachers serving as facilitators or coordinators rather than transmitters of knowledge (Zhang, 2007; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Piątkowska, 2015).

2.2 Language teachers' beliefs about IFLT

Teachers' beliefs are teachers' attitudes toward education, teaching, learning and learners, subjects, self and teaching roles, and are considered to be the internal filters through which teachers interpret and act upon their educational environment (Pajares, 1992). Despite the absence of a unified terminology, with other terms close in meaning to beliefs such as attitudes, conceptions, understandings (Richardson, 1996), it has become a consensus that teachers' beliefs influence and guide teachers' decisions (Basturkmen, 2012). In the field of IFLT, language teachers' beliefs about culture and language teaching have been identified as a critical factor, and a significant body of empirical research has been carried out in variable contexts.

Research topics majorly include teachers' attitudes towards integrating culture into language teaching (Lessard-Clouston, 1996; Bayyurt, 2006; Shao & Chen, 2011); teachers' understanding and perception of ICC and its assessment (Larzén-Östermark, 2008; Han & Song, 2011; Han, 2014; Zhang, 2014; Brunsmeier, 2017); the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices in intercultural foreign language classrooms (Sercu et al., 2005; Young & Sachdev, 2011; Nguyen, Harvey & Grant, 2016; Oranje & Smith, 2017; Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020; Munandar & Newton, 2021; Qian, 2023; Wang, Xu & Zhong, 2024). Furthermore, some scholars have tried to explore factors influencing teachers' beliefs about IFLT (Estagi & Rahimi, 2018; Soodmand Afshar & Yousefi, 2019; Wang, Xu & Zhang, 2023).

Among these empirical studies, quantitative approach is most favored by scholars, who often use self-report questionnaires to collect data. In recent years, scholars are using qualitative data collected through interviews and classroom observations more often, and others are trying to adopt mixed research design to ensure triangulation among data.

Most of the research findings indicate that despite a common intention to integrate culture into language learning, the practical implementation often encounters numerous challenges, such as limited time and lack of instructional materials (Sercu, 2007; Zheng, 2019), leading to a discernible discrepancy between teachers' professed beliefs and their actual practices. Furthermore, the superficial understanding of culture and ICC among teachers can be attributed to the insufficiency of intercultural experiences and professional development opportunities. This shortfall also extends to a misunderstanding of the very tenets of IFLT, underscoring the need for pre-service teacher education programs and in-service teacher training.

2.3 Gaps in literature

As for population, Chinese scholars have predominantly focused on EFL teachers in higher education institutions, while attention to teachers in primary and secondary schools has been insufficient. In view of the fact that development of ICC is a lifelong endeavor which should begin from earlier stages before students entering higher education level, it is necessary and urgent to carry out research in secondary schools.

In terms of methodology, quantitative investigations into

Table 1. Information of Participants

Participants' Pseudonym	Gender	Teaching Experience	Educational Background	Grade
Li Mei	Female	0.5 years	Master's Degree	Year 6
Wu Lan	Female	10 years	Bachelor's Degree	Year 7
Sun Zhu	Male	1.5 years	Master's Degree	Year 10
Zhang Ju	Female	16 years	Bachelor's Degree	Year 11

beliefs are common among the literature. In fact, qualitative approaches are more apt than quantitative ones, given that beliefs are subjective and intangible constructs which cannot be directly observed or measured but must be inferred from what people say, intend, and do (Rokeach, 1968; Pajares, 1992).

When it comes to the setting, the majority of the studies are confined to the compulsory curricula, where many EFL teachers, constrained by tight class schedules, are unable to fully implement IFLT. This leaves teachers' beliefs about IFLT illy-discussed, because beliefs can be most effectively discussed after people have had at least some behavioral experience in attempting new practices (Fullan, 2007). Considering the fact that most teachers in China lack practical experience in IFLT, this study tries to figure out that when teachers are provided with the opportunity to carry out IFLT in elective courses, what might be their beliefs after engaging in such practices?

Therefore, this study explores EFL teachers' beliefs about IFLT through a qualitative approach with four teachers involved in an IFLT project at a secondary school in China to answer the following research questions:

What are Chinese secondary school EFL teachers' beliefs about IFLT after they have practical experience of it?

What are the common beliefs and personalized beliefs among these Chinese secondary school EFL teachers?

3. Analytical framework

Scholars in language education acknowledge the pivotal role of teachers' beliefs in pedagogical practices, and have proposed diversified theoretical frameworks. For example, Richards (1994) proposes a five-dimension framework consist of: (1) beliefs about English; (2) beliefs about learning; (3) beliefs about teaching; (4) beliefs about the program and the curriculum; (5) beliefs about language teaching as a profession. Williams & Burden (1997) categorize language teachers' beliefs into three domains: (1) beliefs about learner; (2) beliefs about learning; (3) beliefs about themselves. In China, Chen (2009) proposes a belief system for college English teachers with 8 sub-beliefs and Xu (2014), on the other hand, proposes an English teachers' belief system with 6 dimensions.

Based on these literature, it can be concluded that the language teachers' beliefs basically encompass four domains: (1) beliefs about the nature of the subject; (2) beliefs about the language teaching process; (3) beliefs about language learners; (4) beliefs about language teachers themselves. Considering the feature of IFLT in which culture plays a pivotal role, this research develops an analytical framework in which the

four domains are adapted into (1) beliefs about culture and language; (2) beliefs about intercultural teaching in EFL; (3) beliefs about EFL learners; (4) beliefs about EFL teachers themselves.

4. Methodology

4.1 Setting and participants

Qualitative case study was conducted within an IFLT project in 2019, which was collaboratively completed by the researcher's team and M School in Shanghai, China. M School was chosen because it features foreign language education and aims to cultivate students' intercultural understanding and global vision, echoing the philosophy of IFLT. In this project, EFL teachers at M school were provided with training in IFLT at the beginning of the semester and they developed elective intercultural EFL courses for one semester at Year 6,7, 10 and 11 under the help of the research team. The four participants in this study were members of the project, whose personal information is shown in Table 1.

4.2 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected for triangulation through 4 one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each participant at the end of the semester, as well as non-participatory classroom observations and teaching materials including lesson plans, PPTs and handouts throughout the semester. The research was conducted with institutional approval, and the participants were well-informed of the research purpose and they provided oral consent for the collection of data.

The 4 interviews with a total duration of 342 minutes constituted the core data, with the transcribed texts of which analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by Nvivo12 Plus. Data from observation and teaching materials served as supplements for the purpose of triangulation. Each participant was regarded as one case, and the four cases were analyzed through within-case analysis followed by cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2017).

The core data were firstly analyzed through top-down coding based on the analytical framework adapted from the four major domains of language teachers' beliefs according to the literature. Bottom-up coding was then conducted with 14 sub-themes emerging from the data as shown in Table 2.

5. Research findings

5.1 Beliefs about culture and language

Table 2. Coding table of teachers' beliefs about IFLT

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency of coding
Beliefs about culture and language	Beliefs about culture	43
	Beliefs about language	5
	Beliefs about culture-language connection	10
Beliefs about intercultural teaching in EFL	Beliefs about teaching objectives	44
	Beliefs about teaching contents	46
	Beliefs about teaching approaches	32
	Beliefs about teaching materials	22
Beliefs about EFL learners	Beliefs about evaluation	7
	Beliefs about learners' motivation	79
	Beliefs about learners' learning conditions	20
Beliefs about teachers' themselves	Beliefs about learners' ability	25
	Beliefs about teachers' roles	58
	Beliefs about teachers' self-efficacy	40
	Beliefs about teachers' development	45

5.1.1 Beliefs about culture

All the four participants considered “culture” as a “wide”, “broad”, “vague”, “abstract”, “elusive” concept that they were unable to clearly define. However, divergent perceptions were observed among the four teachers. For example, Sun conceptualized culture primarily within the nation-state framework, delineating it majorly to the “big C” culture of historical, geographical, literary, and artistic elements, which indicated more of an essentialist view of culture, with a monolithic understanding. In contrast, the other three teachers showed a tendency of non-essentialist perspective, believing that culture transcended geographical and national boundaries, and represented itself in diverse groups, as Li stated:

“(culture) is not only confined to regions and countries, but also embodied in different groups. Cultural differences exist even between you and your schoolmates in other classes, and any other people who are different from you.”

What's more, Wu and Zhang hold a more fluid and dynamic conceptualization of culture, arguing that “culture is fluid” and it was difficult for teachers to “appropriately capture the cultural development in a timely manner.”

5.1.2 Beliefs about language

The four teachers' beliefs about language primarily manifested a divergence in the dichotomy between the instrumental and the humanistic perspective. Sun and Zhang viewed language only as a tool for communication and believed that the ultimate goal of language learning was to “do things”. Li and Wu, on the other hand, emphasized the humanistic nature of language and the nurturing function of language education, stressing that IFLT “could help students develop a better understanding of themselves and form a better expression of their self-worth”. They also tried to integrate moral education

with language teaching.

5.1.3 Beliefs about culture-language connection

When discussing the relationship between culture and language, all the four teachers agreed that “there is no doubt that culture should be integrated into the EFL class”. Li and Zhang also pointed out the facilitating role of cultural learning in language learning, believing that IFLT could “improve students' cultural literacy and basic English skills, and understanding culture and interculturality is helpful (to language learning), which would in turn, improve English skills”. As Zhang stated:

“(English classes) should not be limited to the study of the language itself. What conveyed through language is equally important. Moreover, learning culture can facilitate the learning of the language... It kills two birds with one stone.”

5.2 Beliefs about intercultural teaching in EFL

5.2.1 Beliefs about teaching objectives

The four teachers reached a consensus on ICC being a major objective of foreign language learning, but they put different emphasis on the three dimensions of ICC. Li only mentioned attitudinal dimension, stated that “(ICC is) on the one hand, the respect for and tolerance of other cultures, and on the other hand, the confidence in one's own culture”, and she especially focused on conveying to her students the idea that “there is no right or wrong in terms of culture”, so that students “learn to accept” other cultures and respect “different people's choices” based on their understanding of cultural diversity. Wu focused particularly on “skills in intercultural conflict management”, because one of her students once had an intercultural conflict with the local host family on a study abroad trip, which led her to depict ICC as “the problem-

solving ability based on one's understanding of one's own country or group as well as that of the target culture being visited". With a state-nation view of culture, Sun believed that in the relatively "homogeneous" cultural context, secondary school students in China had no chance to get practical experiences to develop ICC. So he defined the objective of IFLT as "developing understanding of the behaviors of foreigners, especially those from English-speaking countries or Japan and Korea, who have more contact with China". Therefore, he provided "general knowledge" to his students as a "supplement", which aimed to expand students' cultural knowledge. Zhang thought it was enough for her students to develop a little bit intercultural awareness, which could be inferred from her lesson plans, where she used the phrase "realize/be aware of..." in five of the nine lesson plans to describe the teaching objectives.

5.2.2 Beliefs about teaching contents

All of the four teachers agreed that the teaching contents should be decided based on students' interests and life experiences, so they mostly chose topics such as customs and etiquette, which were closely related to students' daily life. What's more, according to their lesson plans, a multicultural orientation was discovered, as cultures of countries such as German, French, Japanese and Korean were included in addition to English-speaking countries. At the same time, Chinese culture was regarded as an important content because the teachers believed that home culture could create "resonance" with the students and the comparison between home culture and other cultures was an essential approach to develop students' cultural identity alongside the ability to tell Chinese stories. In addition, the four teachers organized teaching contents in diverse ways according to the topic of their lessons shown in Table 3. Obviously, Sun delivered his course through topics related to certain nation-states, which was in alignment with his essentialist view of culture, while the other three teachers tended to design topics related to "small c culture". A further investigation into these three teachers' lesson plans showed that multiple cultural groups were included other than nation-states, for example, the "Sports" session for Grade 6 explored the issue of gender equality among athletes, with the intention to help students reflect on gender stereotypes and prejudices. These findings verified the three teachers' non-essentialist view of culture.

5.2.3 Beliefs about teaching approaches

Two major differences in teachers' beliefs about teaching approaches emerged: knowledge-centered versus competence-centered, and teacher-centered versus student-centered. Sun believed that ICC "had to be developed in practice", but students "were not provided with opportunities. All they had was a blackboard and a homogeneous Chinese context", so he chose a knowledge-centered and teacher-centered approach of teaching. The other three teachers agreed on the importance of real-life experience and practice, but they believed that merely imparting knowledge was "only at a superficial level, which was ineffective in developing ICC because students were not deeply engaged", indicating a competence-centered

view. Therefore, Wu chose a student-centered approach by designing "interactive" and "task-based" learning activities, because she believed that:

"(these activities) create opportunities for students to talk, role play, and develop problem-solving skills through case analysis... (during the process) of sharing, questioning, and presenting different opinions."

Compared with the other three teachers, Li was in a much different story. Considering the students' low language proficiency at Grade 6, she believed that "the task had to be simple enough for them to be in the mood to engage attentively". In addition, the fact of being a novice teacher who lacked experience in classroom management often put her into a difficult situation where students frequently "created chaos" in class, which made her feel that "it was unmanageable if the students were given initiative to ask questions in class", thus she believed that teacher-centered lectures were "more efficient".

5.2.4 Beliefs about teaching materials

The teachers had a consensus that the textbook in use did not meet the need for developing students' ICC, but only Li had clearly articulated that "systematically-designed textbooks (for intercultural teaching) accompanied with learning activities for different ages were in an urgent need". Sun was relatively negative about textbooks, because he felt that "although textbooks for intercultural teaching is certainly theoretically possible... it is useless to have any textbook as long as ICC is not included in the tests." Wu and Zhang, on the other hand, worried that intercultural teaching would be "limited by the textbook", and they believed that teaching materials needed to be updated constantly because of the dynamic nature of culture. Therefore, they proposed that a "reference framework" with recommended themes and resources as well as sample learning activities could be provided to teachers instead of a set of textbooks, so that teachers could make flexible changes based on it.

5.2.5 Beliefs about evaluation

The teachers shared the same beliefs about evaluation, agreeing that there lacked a "standard" or "system (of indicators)" that can be used to test secondary school students' ICC, so it was difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning. What's more, they believed that the "ambiguous" and "unquantifiable" nature of ICC made it "difficult to design a scale (for measurement)", and it was not appropriate to use traditional paper-and-pencil tests, otherwise it went "against the original intention (of IFLT)".

5.3 Beliefs about EFL learners

5.3.1 Beliefs about learners' motivation

The four teachers all reported that students showed stronger learning motivation in the IFLT class than in the traditional ELF class, but there were differences among students of different grades. Those at junior high school enjoyed the course even more than Li had expected, and the class was even regarded as a "reward" by her students at Grade 6.

Table 3. Topics of the lessons delivered by the 4 participants

Session	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 10	Grade 11
1	Body language	What is Chinese culture?	Japanese Culture I	Culture
2	Christmas	Taoism	Japanese Culture II	Cheerleading
3	Family life	Chinese Guanxi	Japanese Culture III	Team Sports
4	Festival	Body Language	North Korean Culture I	Attending a Sports Event
5	School life	Western Festivals	North Korean Culture II	School Uniforms
6	Sports	Education Differences	German Culture	Fashion
7	Table manners	Etiquette Culture	French Culture	Cafe Society
8	The food we eat	Moving Customs	The Renaissance	Vietnam
9		Food and tableware		Gender

However, the two teachers from senior high school found the students to be relatively “utilitarian”, “passive” and “fussy”. These differences were also confirmed to some extent through classroom observations. In addition, the teachers all agreed that students’ motivation depended on their familiarity with the topic. When students had “something to say” about the topic, they behaved more actively. Otherwise, the teachers had to deliver the class “in an interesting enough way”. Therefore, “the approach to deliver the class” was crucial, especially for senior high school students, as Sun stated: “you have to make them feel relaxed rather than for the purpose of testing.”

5.3.2 Beliefs about learners’ learning conditions

As for learning conditions, the three teachers apart from Sun believed students had diversified and individualized access to cultural information and intercultural experiences, which went beyond the teachers’ knowledge, so it was “not easy to diagnose students’ learning”. For example, Zhang pointed out: “it is clear for teachers what grammar has been taught and what types of articles have been learned, but it is not clear what culture students has knowledge about.” Wu found out that students’ intercultural knowledge and experiences were often richer than teachers’, which imposed “a challenge” on her:

“In every session, I am worried that what I have prepared is less than what the students have already known. And I have to get prepared to respond flexibly when the students express ideas that are out of my reach.”

On the contrary, Sun believed his students “only know the most superficial things (of culture)”, because only those who from well-off families had the opportunity to go abroad to gain in-depth intercultural knowledge and experiences according to him.

5.3.3 Beliefs about learners’ ability

Teachers’ beliefs about learners’ ability vary greatly. As mentioned before, Li believed that her students’ language proficiency was insufficient, so she adopted a teacher-centered approach, and Sun even believed that cultural contents “cannot be taught in English, no matter the content is difficult or not” because his students “were not accustomed to communicating

with each other in English”, thus he used Chinese as the main language of instruction. However, the other two teachers believed that the students’ language proficiency was not a barrier. Zhang believed that compared to language proficiency, it was students’ lack of high order thinking skills that prevented them from probing into cultural phenomena and thus had no ideas to offer: “It was more often the case that students failed to express themselves because they really had nothing to say, rather than their language proficiency did not support their expression.” Wu had a different concern from Zhang, because she found that her students already had reached a certain level of intercultural awareness:

“They are actually aware that different countries have different cultures, and people have to show tolerance and acceptance. In fact they have already reached a relatively high level (of ICC)... and they know how to solve these problems.”

So she admitted that the course she had designed was not challenging enough, yet she had no idea how to go deeper.

5.4 Beliefs about teachers’ themselves

5.4.1 Beliefs about teachers’ roles

For three of the participants, teachers play an authoritative role as model and judge in EFL classrooms, except Wu, who believed that teachers serve as a collaborative learner and facilitator, and an IFLT class “was a learning process for both the teacher and the students”, as she stated:

“In traditional classrooms that focus on transmitting of knowledge, teachers certainly should act as a demonstrator, but it is not the case in an intercultural classroom, where communication of information to each other serves a more important purpose... (Teachers) tend not to judge students’ opinions as right or wrong... There’s no right or wrong in terms of intercultural issues... so it is indeed a student-centered class.”

For the other three teachers, although they all recognized the authority of teachers, they defined their roles differently. Li believed that her students at Grade 6 were easy to be affected on an attitudinal level, so she utilized the course as “a platform to convey values” and she believed that teachers should be wary that their own stereotypes and cultural biases

might “subconsciously affect students”. Therefore, her role as a moral educator was more pronounced, and she was “more critical in correcting” students’ deliberately inappropriate responses. Sun compared himself to a “stand-up comedian” who aimed to “warm up the class” and make the students “laugh”, but he was still playing the dominant role as the transmitter of knowledge and information, while his students were the audience and the receivers. As for Zhang, though she tried to teach in a student-centered approach, she felt that students were “always passive” and that “(the teacher) was just pushing the students around”, so it was the teacher who was taking initiative.

5.4.2 Beliefs about teachers’ self-efficacy

Due to the lack of professional knowledge about IFLT, the four teachers all showed low self-efficacy. They repeatedly emphasized that they were deterred by the teaching tasks which were “difficult at every step” and they believed that IFLT “required a very high level of teacher literacy”, because teachers needed subject knowledge and strong interest in culture, as well as the ability to collect information and design instruction in a systematic way. They also believed that their own ICC would affect the openness and inclusiveness of the classroom, but they were not confident in their own ICC. However, their low self-efficacy might be a result of modesty or high expectation, because most of their students gave highly positive feedback on the course.

5.4.3 Beliefs about teachers’ development

The four teachers had reached a consensus that teaching practice itself was an essential approach for professional development in IFLT, and “classroom observations and evaluation” would be most helpful. However, they perceived the function of training differently. Only Zhang felt that training was “very necessary” and the other three felt that it was “not helpful” or they had “no time” for training. During the project, Sun participated in only one training session and had no further communication with the research team, while the other three were in close contact with the team throughout the project, and they all particularly emphasized that the guidance of the team had “sharpened” their understanding of cultural issues and “opened their mind” in instructional design.

6. Discussion

This study reveals that secondary school EFL teachers in China are not well prepared for IFLT, which echoes the findings from previous research about EFL teachers at other educational levels in China (Qian, 2023; Wang, Xu & Zhang, 2023; Wang, Xu & Zhong, 2024). Firstly, teachers lack a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of language and culture, which is the fundamental reason that IFLT cannot be effectively practiced. A considerable amount of literature (Sercu et al., 2005; Zheng, 2019) support this finding and in this study it is specifically revealed that teachers’ essentialist view of culture and instrumental view of language often lead them to ignore the diversity within cultures as well as the value of foreign language education in whole person development.

Secondly, teachers’ failure to see the whole picture of ICC, with focus on certain dimensions of ICC as mentioned by Brunsmeyer (2017), makes it difficult to achieve a satisfactory learning outcome. Specifically, teachers untrained in IFLT in China like Sun in this study usually approach culture teaching as presenting factual information, which is supported by the research findings prompted by Zheng (2019) and Qian (2023). Thirdly, the fact that teachers sometimes underestimate their students is an interesting finding that has not been extensively discussed. For example, Sun believed that his students had limited cultural knowledge and were narrow-minded, but his students presented vast knowledge and depth of thinking in the interview at the end of the semester, which provides evidence for the teacher’s biased perceptions of students. Lastly, beliefs in teachers’ authority are deeply rooted, which is a typical phenomenon in China’s secondary educational context that has not been fully discussed in IFLT literature. In this study, though Wu pointed out that the teacher was no longer authoritative in an IFLT classroom, she still felt uneasy about her students’ knowledge surpassing her own. Behind her lack of confidence lies the entrenched belief in teachers’ authority, which prevents teachers from turning to a student-centered teaching approach and making full use of students’ own cultural resources. These beliefs may lead to a negative cycle of low self-efficacy and low motivation.

The lack of content related to IFLT in EFL teachers’ pre-service education and in-service development is a major cause of the above problems. Although all the four participants hold degrees in English major, they had never been exposed to IFLT concepts and theories in college. Zhang repeatedly emphasized that she was “still ignorant of the concept” and “did not understand it at all”, even after a semester of teaching. Wu also stated that her lack of professional knowledge made her “very confused and afraid of making mistakes”, therefore she dared not to try out innovative teaching strategies in order to “avoid any possibility of going wrong”. These struggles indicate an urgent need for interventions on IFLT in teacher education and professional development.

An in-depth understanding of the characteristics of teachers’ beliefs is fundamental to the development of effective interventions. The EFL teachers’ beliefs about IFLT, as well as teachers’ general beliefs, constitute a multilayered system with central and peripheral beliefs (Green, 1971), and this study further argues that the beliefs about culture and language lie in the center of the system, because they greatly influence the setting of teaching objectives and the selection of teaching contents, approaches, materials and evaluation, and they determine teachers’ judgments about students. Beliefs about intercultural teaching in EFL and beliefs about EFL learners influenced each other, while beliefs about teachers’ themselves are subject to and interacted with both.

What’s more, the belief system is dynamic and evolving. Though numerous studies have shown that teachers’ beliefs are difficult to change (Pajares, 1992), interventions in specific ways can be effective (Borg, 2011). As mentioned above, only Sun’s beliefs were not intervened in, because he did not engage with the research team, while the other three were intervened by the research team within the community of practice and it is

evident that their essentialist view of culture has been deconstructed, because all the three of them stated that they learned through their interactions with the research team that “culture can be related to different groups, not just to countries”. The reconstructed view of culture was gradually integrated into their belief system as it was reinforced and consolidated during the project, so they presented a non-essentialist view in the interview at the end of the semester. Sun, however, still believed that “intercultural” was equal to “international” and was not aware of the heterogeneous and dynamic nature of culture. In addition, after acquiring understanding of the humanistic nature of language, the knowledge-centered approach was also deconstructed, and the three teachers abandoned the “presentation-of-formation” approach to culture and focused more on the development of ICC, especially the attitudinal and behavioral dimensions, presenting a turn to the competence-centered approach. Given that the central beliefs are not easy to be changed, and that once the central beliefs are changed, the entire belief system is affected (Green, 1971; Rokeach, 1968), changing teachers’ beliefs about IFLT might begin with the central beliefs about culture and language by deconstructing the essentialist view of culture and the instrumental view of language at first. Moreover, in view of the fact that individual teachers’ beliefs are more likely to be changed when supported by others (Sercu, 2007), this study suggests that interventions that point to changes in teachers’ beliefs about IFLT should be rooted in teaching practice and conducted in forms such as communities of practice that focus on interactive collaboration.

7. Conclusion

This study investigates four Chinese secondary EFL teachers’ beliefs about IFLT and identifies a gap between teachers’ folk understanding and the guidelines proposed by academia. By proposing a dynamic system of beliefs, this study argues that certain interventions aiming to change the central beliefs about culture and language might be effective in changing EFL teachers’ beliefs and practices. However, the current research was confined to a secondary school with high socioeconomic background in China, which limits the generalizability of its findings to represent the EFL teachers’ beliefs in different geographical contexts. What’s more, teacher’ beliefs about IFLT may change over time due to various factors such as professional development, personal experiences, parental expectations, policy changes or broader societal attitudes, so the current research may not reflect their beliefs in the future. This limitation calls for longitudinal research about how teachers’ beliefs evolve over time and how these changes might impact their teaching practices.

To facilitate IFLT practices, further studies based on larger samples in various contexts are expected to gain deeper insight into teachers’ beliefs. Moreover, interventional studies are in an urgent need to explore effective ways to change teachers’ beliefs and enhance teachers’ intercultural teaching competences. Collaboration between teachers and researchers is necessary for empowering teachers with theoretical supports through communities of practice, which might help to enhance teachers’ self-efficacy by accumulating successful teaching

experiences in IFLT.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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