Commonalities and Discrepancies in L2 Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices about Vocabulary Pedagogy: A Small Culture Perspective

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Abstract

In the past two decades, research has increasingly focused on the relationship between second language (L2) teachers’ beliefs and their pedagogical practices. Relatively few studies, however, have examined teachers’ beliefs and practices about vocabulary instruction, in spite of the central role that vocabulary acquisition plays in L2 learning, and the importance of instruction in fostering learners’ vocabulary development. This paper seeks to redress that balance by reporting on a case study of four Chinese English teachers in the People’s Republic of China, focusing on their beliefs about vocabulary teaching and their pedagogical practices. Semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and stimulated recall were employed to elicit the teachers’ beliefs and to help understand their practices. The teachers expressed similar beliefs relating to such aspects of vocabulary pedagogy as explicit vocabulary instruction, vocabulary instruction and communication, word meaning guessing, and use of Chinese. However, their pedagogical practices in the observed lessons showed both commonalities and differences. Also, some of their expressed beliefs were congruent with their practices, while there was little or no manifestation of others. The findings are discussed in light of the small cultures that potentially mediate the teachers’ beliefs and practices.

Keywords: EFL teaching and learning, vocabulary instruction, teacher beliefs, teacher pedagogical practices, small cultures

Introduction

In the past two decades, second language (L2) research has increasingly focused on teacher cognition, particularly the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and their pedagogical practices (Andrews, 2003; S. Borg, 2001; Borg, 2003, 2006; Fang, 1996; Johnson, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Theriot & Tice, 2009). However, relatively few studies have examined L2 teachers’ beliefs and practices about vocabulary instruction (Borg, 2006) despite the central role that vocabulary acquisition plays in L2 learning (Schmitt, 2008) and the importance of instruction in fostering learners’ vocabulary
development (Graves, 1987; Laufer, 2005; Schmitt, 2008). This paper seeks to redress that balance by reporting on a case study of four English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in the People’s Republic of China, focusing on their beliefs about vocabulary teaching and their pedagogical practices.

Teacher Beliefs and Pedagogical Practices

By drawing on previous definitions (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; M. Borg, 2001; Borg, 2003; Pajares, 1992), teacher beliefs in this study are defined as teachers’ thoughts about what should be done with teaching, and include both core and peripheral beliefs. Core beliefs, being “experientially ingrained” (Phipps & Borg, 2009: 388), “are stable and exert a more powerful influence on behaviour than peripheral beliefs” (Phipps & Borg, 2009: 381), whereas peripheral beliefs, being “theoretically embraced” (Phipps & Borg, 2009: 388), may not be reflected in pedagogical practices due to the influence of contextual factors. For instance, in Phipps and Borg (2009) the participant teachers theoretically believed in the value of group work for students, but their practical knowledge told them that teacher-class interactions were easier to manage and could benefit students more, so they used teacher-class interactions instead of group work in grammar teaching. Therefore, their theoretical belief about the value of group work constitutes peripheral belief whereas their practical knowledge about teacher-class interactions formulates core belief.

Teacher beliefs have been found to mutually interact with teachers’ pedagogical practices (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Thompson, 1992). That is, teacher beliefs can motivate, shape, or guide teachers’ pedagogical practices while teachers’ classroom practices can impact upon their beliefs. Teacher beliefs and pedagogical practices have also been observed to be consistent sometimes (Johnson, 1992) but inconsistent at other times (Fang, 1996), and consistencies and inconsistencies can coexist (Basturkmen et al., 2004).

The tensions between teacher beliefs and practices are attributable to the influence of such contextual factors as curriculum, learners’ language proficiency, time constraints, and examinations (Borg, 2003). Recently researchers have argued that such inconsistencies result from the competition between teachers’ core beliefs and peripheral beliefs and are linked with the mediation of contextual factors: specifically, when contextual factors allow teachers’ practices to be guided by their core and peripheral beliefs, few inconsistencies will be observed; otherwise, the pedagogical practices guided by core beliefs will take priority, and inconsistencies between practices and peripheral beliefs will occur (Phipps & Borg, 2009).

These contextual factors can actually be viewed as different levels of small culture. The default notion of culture denotes the large culture, that is, the ethnic, national and international entities (Holliday, 1999). Different from the default notion, small culture refers to “the composite of cohesive behaviour within any social grouping” (Holliday, 1999: 247). A small culture forms when a social grouping has a discernable set of cohesive behaviours and understandings relating to group cohesion (Holliday, 1999). In education, it may refer to school, classroom, teacher and other educational cultures, running between and within large ethnic, national and international cultures. For example, in an international classroom, the members’ educational, classroom, collegial and peer experience can converge, building up a new small culture. Thus, small culture is a dynamic
process and can be used as a heuristic means for interpreting emergent group behaviours (Holliday, 1999).

In light of the above explication, vocabulary instruction in a foreign language context should relate to at least three levels of small culture. The first level is the EFL learning culture, the major features of which are the essentialness of classroom instruction and limited opportunities for real language use (Oxford, 2003). The second level is institutional culture, which may require teachers to use a set course book, adopt a fixed teaching approach, follow a similar teaching pace, and even cover similar focal points, as practiced in China. The third level is classroom culture, which may be constituted by the teachers’ style, students’ English proficiency, vocabulary size and knowledge of word learning strategies, class discipline and so on. The present study adopts this small culture perspective.

The small culture perspective is a further development of the existing cross-cultural studies in cognition research, especially the research relating to learners’ epistemological beliefs, that is, beliefs about knowing and knowledge. In recent years, Schommer’s (1990) well-known five-dimensional scheme of personal epistemology (consisting of the structure, certainty and source of knowledge, and the control and speed of knowledge acquisition) has been applied or adapted to examine relevant issues in Asian cultures (Hofer, 2010). While Hofer (2008, 2010) welcomes such cross-cultural studies, she calls for research moving “beyond cross-cultural explanations towards deeper within-country explanations of how individuals come to believe about what they do about knowledge and knowing” (Hofer, 2008, p. 17). For Hofer, “cross-cultural explanations” refer to the expansion of research from the United States and Europe to Asian contexts, that is, across national and international cultures, whereas “within-country explanations” should mean the small culture perspective as defined in the current study. Thus, as the small culture perspective serves as a response to Hofer’s call, it constitutes a novelty of the present study. However, in contrast with the studies on learners’ epistemological beliefs as reviewed in Hofer (2010), the present study focuses on teachers’ beliefs about a domain-specific issue: vocabulary instruction.

Current Trends in Vocabulary Instruction and Relevant Studies

It is generally recognized that L2 vocabulary instruction should incorporate both implicit and explicit teaching (Coady, 1997; Sokmen, 1997). Implicit instruction, often taking the form of inferring word meanings from context, can lead to incidental word learning, but it is inadequate for L2 learners’ vocabulary acquisition because word meaning guessing is a time-consuming and error-prone process, which may not bring about long-term retention (e.g. Laufer, 2005). Besides, L2 learners, especially learners of a foreign language rather than a second language, who are learning language in the time-constrained instructional context, cannot afford to rely only on implicit word learning (Oxford, 2003). In short, implicit instruction cannot provide learners with sufficient word-learning opportunities to engage in adequate word processing (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008). Hence, explicit teaching is indispensable for L2 word learning. Moreover, in both first language (L1) and L2 teaching, vocabulary instruction entails teaching words and teaching word learning strategies (Graves, 1987; Nation, 2005) because vocabulary instruction cannot cover all the words that learners need for communication, while strategy teaching can help learners develop autonomous word learning competence (Graves, 1987).
As for actual pedagogical practices, empirical studies have revealed the range of classroom vocabulary instruction activities and techniques. Swain and Carroll (1987) and Wright (1993) both found that word instruction in immersion classrooms was associated primarily with reading input, and mainly focused on meaning, with word form and word use being mostly overlooked. Yet a case study of a science content-based class manifested that lexis-related instruction went beyond word meaning, ranging over linguistic, sociolinguistic and discoursal aspects of a word (Lapkin & Swain, 1996). The findings of the above studies indicate that even classes of a similar nature may show discrepancies in vocabulary instruction. This is also exemplified by Tang and Nesi (2003), who found that lexical richness in teacher output was greater in Hong Kong communicative English classes, while more words were explicitly taught in corresponding classes in Guangzhou.

Studies have also revealed the positive effects of specific vocabulary instruction techniques and classroom activities. In particular, researchers found that code-mixing in story-telling (Celik, 2003), semantic mapping (Morin & Goebel, 2001), such techniques as rich instruction, high frequency of encounters with taught words and extending word learning beyond classrooms (Beck, McKeown, & Omanson, 1987), varying classroom configurations including teacher- or student-directed discussions and independent reading (Harmon, 1998), and both overt classroom interactions and covert participation (Dobinson, 2001) all helped lexical learning, although Lightbown, Meare and Halter (1998) noted that communicative classroom interactions mainly provided repeated exposure to high-frequency English words as they contained few new words.

Only one study up to now has examined teachers’ beliefs and practices about vocabulary instruction. The study (Konopak & Williams, 1994), employing written forced-choice instruments, categorized English L1 elementary teachers’ vocabulary instruction according to three hypotheses about vocabulary and reading comprehension: a knowledge hypothesis (i.e. knowing a word means knowing word-related ideas), an instrumental hypothesis (i.e. knowledge of individual words is sufficient for comprehension) and an access hypothesis (i.e. knowing a word implies quickly retrieving and using its definition). The results revealed that the teachers overwhelmingly held knowledge orientations, mostly consistent with their lesson descriptions. However, the study constrained teachers’ choices, provided no observational data, and hence could not reflect the authentic picture of teachers’ beliefs and practices about vocabulary pedagogy; that is, it lacked ecological validity (Borg, 2006). Also, the findings of the study may not reflect the situation in tertiary-level EFL teaching. Therefore, more studies are warranted.

The Present Study

Research Questions

The present study examined Chinese EFL teachers’ beliefs and practices about vocabulary instruction in classrooms from a small culture perspective. Three research questions (RQs) guided the study:
1. What are L2 teachers’ beliefs about vocabulary teaching?
2. How do L2 teachers practice vocabulary instruction in classrooms?
3. To what extent are L2 teachers’ beliefs about vocabulary teaching consistent with their pedagogical practices?
Research Context

The study is situated in the context of tertiary EFL teaching in Mainland China, where the learners of English are differentiated between English majors and non-English majors. Non-English majors learn English as a compulsory course in the first two years of their university study to get a Bachelor Degree in a subject other than English. They are usually taught in large classes, where they follow one set of course books and experience a teacher-centered, textbook-bound and language-focused approach. English majors study English and English-related courses for four years to get a Bachelor Degree in English language and literature. They are usually taught in small classes, which provides favorable conditions for communicative language teaching (CLT), although what Chinese EFL teachers do, even in spoken classes, is a weak version of CLT at most (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Wu & Fang, 2002). English majors often have much higher English proficiency than non-English majors since they can have more contact with English. This study is grounded in the English major instructional context.

Method

Participants

The four female participants, Rose, Karen, Jane and Betty (all pseudonyms), came from a key university in South China. As shown in Table 1, Rose and Karen were teaching Year-Two English majors, but Rose’s class was the best in Grade Two, whereas Karen’s class was average. Jane and Betty were teaching two average Year-One English major classes. Despite teaching students of different grades, the four teachers were assigned to use the same series of course books entitled Communicative English for Chinese Learners (CECL). The theme-based CECL series, co-written by a well-known English teaching expert and a number of teachers in this university, aims to cultivate learners’ communicative competence through completing a series of intertwined listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks and activities. Each teacher was allocated seven CECL teaching periods with the same class per week, which were conducted as two double-periods and one triple-period, with each period lasting for 40 minutes. The four teachers had varying experiences with CECL, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Profiles of the Four Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Years of teaching</th>
<th>Years of teaching CECL</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Grade taught</th>
<th>Other information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>One of the CECL authors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>MA in lexicography</td>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>Experience of CECL as a university student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>MA in translation</td>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>No learner experience of CECL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>MA in translation</td>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>Experience of CECL as a university student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

Three methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and stimulated recall (Basturkmen et al., 2004; Gass & Mackey, 2000) were utilized to elicit teachers’ beliefs, understand their pedagogical practices, triangulate the observational data, and infer teachers’ unexpressed beliefs (Kagan, 1990). The data were collected by the first-named author, referred to hereafter as “the researcher”.

First, interviews were conducted using a guide to focus teachers’ attention directly on the issue under study (Bernard, 1988). The interview guide consisted of such open-ended questions as “Do you think vocabulary should be taught in EFL teaching? How do you think vocabulary should be taught and why?” The interview, conducted in Chinese and tape-recorded, lasted for about 30 minutes for each teacher.

Then, the researcher observed the four teachers’ double-lessons with their permission on different days. As the researcher took notes, an invited cameraman helped video-tape the lessons. The lessons of Rose and Karen lasted 55 minutes, with the remaining 20 minutes or so being spent on students’ morning English report, a routine activity for Year-Two students; those of Jane and Betty both lasted 77 minutes. The lessons represented the teachers’ usual instruction, as the teachers and their students confirmed.

About one week after the lesson observation, the stimulated recall was performed. While reading her own lesson transcript, each teacher recalled whether the identified lexical instruction instances were planned or emergent and why those lexical items were focused on. Although the accuracy of the recall might have been adversely affected because of the time lapse between the event and the recall (Ericsson & Simon, 1993), the lesson transcripts helped to offset this and increase the accuracy, according to the teachers. The stimulated recall, conducted in Chinese and tape-recorded, lasted about 30 minutes for each teacher.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data were analyzed as follows. First, all the themes relating to teachers’ beliefs were singled out from the semi-structured interviews and the stimulated recall through reading the transcript and listening to the tape repeatedly. Then, each teacher’s overall performance of vocabulary instruction was identified in the observed lesson. This was then broken down into vocabulary instruction episodes (VIEs), which were coded. In the study, lexis refers to either single words or multiple-word phrases (Schmitt, 2000). A VIE was defined as the classroom discourse from the point where the attention to vocabulary starts to the point where it ends due to a change in topic (Basturkmen et al., 2004; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001). Based on the above literature, the identified VIEs were coded from six aspects, as outlined in Table 2.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of coding</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word initiation</td>
<td>When a VIE was initiated</td>
<td>Reactive (correction by teacher); teacher-initiated instruction; student-initiated query or response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word type</td>
<td>Complexity of a word</td>
<td>Single word; multiple-word phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word knowledge focus</td>
<td>What aspects of word knowledge are discussed</td>
<td>Word form (spelling, pronunciation); word meaning; word use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction contingency</td>
<td>The possibility of word instruction being done</td>
<td>Planned instruction; emergent instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction purpose</td>
<td>Why a word was taught</td>
<td>Message transfer / meaning understanding; lexical learning; unclear purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction strategy</td>
<td>Methods used for vocabulary teaching</td>
<td>Explicit instruction; association; putting into use; rephrasing; elaboration; form-meaning mapping; use of L1 **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** The six types of instruction strategy are defined as follows:
- **Explicit instruction**: teacher performing direct teaching by using different methods, for example, explaining word form, word meaning or word use, paraphrasing, or English-Chinese translation;
- **Association**: word teaching by referring to derivational forms, synonyms or antonyms, or by inference;
- **Putting into use**: using a word in a sentence or collocation;
- **Rephrasing**: using different words to express the same meaning;
- **Elaboration**: conveying word meaning by describing a related situation;
- **Form-meaning mapping**: provided with word meaning, students were pushed to retrieve the appropriate word form.
- **Use of L1**: conveying word meaning by switching to Chinese.

In order to enhance the validity and reliability of the data analysis, the VIEs were coded by the researcher repeatedly until unanimity was reached on the last two times’ coding, the quoted interview data and the coded VIEs were validated by the teachers, and the stimulated recall data were referred to for triangulation. On completion of data coding, the teachers’ VIEs were quantified so as to obtain an overall picture of their vocabulary pedagogy. Finally, the teachers’ beliefs and their pedagogical practices were connected.

**Findings**

**Teachers’ Beliefs about Vocabulary Teaching**

Overall, eight themes emerged from the teachers’ interviews and stimulated recall relating to their beliefs. At least three teachers expressed views in relation to each theme. The teachers expressed both shared beliefs (on five themes) and discrepant beliefs (on three themes), which are presented below respectively.
1. Teachers’ Shared Beliefs

1) The Importance of Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

All four teachers believed that explicit vocabulary instruction was necessary in EFL teaching. In Rose’s words, “It is not about whether vocabulary should be taught or not. The point is how to teach. It is an issue of approach.” Rose specifically advocated that useful words and expressions should be pointed out to students so as to arouse their noticing, and only in this way could students possibly use those words and expressions in their production. Karen stated that if students could not guess word meanings, she preferred telling them about the meanings directly or giving them one or two sample sentences for a better understanding, but Karen would not extend her teaching to other aspects of word knowledge because of the limited class time. Karen’s self-reporting of her word teaching practices indicates her belief in the necessity of explicit word instruction because beliefs are usually manifested in what people do (Pajares, 1992). Jane said that when she taught CECL for the first time, she did not attach much attention to vocabulary teaching because, as a novice teacher, she did not realize its importance and felt unable to attend to vocabulary teaching in class while focusing on training students’ communicative competence. However, later on she realized the importance of word teaching. Jane suggested that students should ideally have a separate lexicology course, so that they could have real contact with vocabulary and feel the fun of learning word meanings and usage, in ways that the communicative approach prevented her from doing. Betty held that words that are potentially new to students should be explained in classroom teaching. For example, when conducting a listening comprehension task, she would do pre-listening or post-listening word teaching. These teachers’ belief about the importance of vocabulary instruction is consistent with the views of researchers about the role of explicit instruction in lexical learning (e.g. Laufer, 2005; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008).

2) Vocabulary Instruction and Communication

The teachers all believed that vocabulary instruction should be conducted through communication or completing communicative tasks including language-focused activities. Rose thought that learning language through use does not exclude singling out language items for attention as they arise in communication. Karen stated that vocabulary teaching should be conducted through doing all kinds of exercises, taking advantage of the large number of exercises / activities contained in the course book. Jane said that vocabulary teaching should be incorporated in the process of teaching when the right moment arose, while Betty reported that potentially new words that occurred in her teaching would be explained. The teachers’ belief about teaching vocabulary in communication or while students are performing activities is close to the proposal of using meaning-focused input and output to learn lexical items (Nation & Gu, 2007).

3) Word Meaning Guessing

All four teachers believed that students should be requested to guess word meanings. Rose stated that students should be trained to guess word meanings from listening because this is how people communicate in reality. She said, “If one student goes to work in an IT
company and he or she has memorized all the necessary words, there are still many uncertainties. How can the teacher predict? Thus, students should be led to learn language by themselves through doing tasks and be trained to take risks in language learning. Then, if they are in real life situations, they will not be panic-stricken.” Karen reported that after students had finished the exercises in the course book, she would usually pick out several difficult words or phrases and request students to guess their meanings. Although students might guess wrongly, Karen insisted that the effort was worthwhile. Jane stated that although word meaning guessing was insufficient for word learning, students should be encouraged to develop that practice. Betty insisted that teachers should encourage students to guess word meanings from reading. The teachers’ belief about word meaning guessing substantiates the idea that word meaning guessing is one of the most preferred and frequently-used word learning strategies (Schmitt, 2008). Their views about vocabulary instruction, teaching words in communication, and word meaning guessing in combination suggest that the teachers advocated that both implicit and explicit word teaching were necessary for EFL vocabulary acquisition, as researchers have argued (e.g. Sokmen, 1997).

4) The Use of L1

The teachers all believed that although using Chinese was not a must in vocabulary instruction, Chinese could be employed to help both students’ understanding and teachers’ exact meaning transfer. Rose insisted that Chinese should be utilized when the English meaning could not be conveyed to students easily. She cited lake as an example, saying that if the teacher provided students with its English meaning: “a large area of water surrounded by land”, students might still have difficulty in making out its meaning, while if its Chinese meaning was provided, students would immediately get it. Rose’s view agreed with Karen’s idea that Chinese meaning could be provided as a help if students could not catch the English meaning. Jane thought that Chinese should be used when the teacher found it hard to express in English something exclusively Chinese, or was explaining key concepts and notions, or felt students would be unable to understand the English explanation. In Jane’s words, the purpose was to help students’ understanding, increase vividness and have students feel the correspondence between English and Chinese. Betty said that ideally Chinese should not be used because otherwise students might develop the habit of doing translation in class, which is not good for learning a foreign language; however, Chinese could be used to save further confusion when students failed to catch the English meaning of a word by other means. In short, all four teachers held that Chinese could be used as a “scaffolding tool” in teaching words (Brooks-Lewis, 2009, pp. 219-220). Their stated belief about L1 use is also consistent with the views of researchers (e.g. Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Celik, 2003).

5) Word Self-study

Three of the teachers, when interviewed, explicitly mentioned that students should be required to do word self-study after class. Rose felt that students need to learn vocabulary through extensive reading, for example, reading newspapers, and that it would be a pity if students only focused on course books for two years. Karen said that her own university teacher used to provide a wordlist for students’ self-study. She reasoned, “University students already have the ability. If the teacher does too much instruction in class, students
will lose interest and think that the teacher is spoon-feeding them. If students feel a word interesting and useful, they will check the dictionary and pick out sample sentences for mastering the word.” Meanwhile, Betty believed that students should be provided with extra words to study after class depending on the topic concerned. She said that when teaching the units: “Home and House” and “Character and Personality”, she distributed related wordlists to her students.

2. Teachers’ Discrepant Beliefs

1) The Kind of Word Knowledge Taught

The teachers expressed disparate beliefs about the kind of word knowledge taught. Rose stated that useful words and expressions should be pointed out for students, fine shades of word meaning should be taught, and world knowledge including cultural knowledge should be incorporated into vocabulary teaching so that students could avoid literal translation in expressing ideas. Karen insisted that students should be mainly taught word meanings, either by guessing, direct instruction or sentence illustration, and she would not extend her teaching to other aspects of word knowledge due to the limited class time. Unlike Rose and Karen, Jane and Betty emphasized teaching basic and common words. Jane stated that basic vocabulary must be memorized, and the more words students memorized, the better it would be because this was the foundation of English learning. Betty also stated that teachers should require students to memorize common and productive words rather than receptive words because it was both impossible and unnecessary for students to memorize all the words that they encountered, and words were easy to forget without frequent opportunities to use them.

2) The Role of Learner Factors

Three of the teachers stated that their vocabulary instruction also depended on learner factors, but they pinpointed different factors. Rose and Jane insisted that students’ English proficiency should be considered, but they gave different interpretations. Teaching an advanced class, Rose tended to teach word meanings directly. She said that if she taught an average class, it would be enough to arouse students’ noticing because words and expressions within one unit would appear repeatedly and students should be encouraged to understand word meanings gradually. Unlike Rose, Jane insisted that it was enough to simply guide good students to complete communicative activities without paying special attention to vocabulary, but average or low-proficiency students had to be explicitly taught vocabulary. In Jane’s recent teaching she had increased vocabulary instruction because of the poor English proficiency of her students. Not mentioning students’ English proficiency, Betty said that she relied on students’ response in class to make decisions on vocabulary teaching, especially for the words she used in her lecture. If she perceived from students’ facial expressions that a word might be new, she would do word teaching.

3) Dictionary Checking

All four teachers agreed with the usefulness of dictionary checking for students’ word learning, but they held different beliefs about dictionary checking in class. Rose insisted
that students should be encouraged to check unknown words in the dictionary, especially after class because of the limited class time, but she allowed students to check dictionaries for word meanings, spellings or pronunciations in class in order to train them to work out problems by themselves. For Rose, the important thing was to give students guidance, not to study for them. In her words, “A student who does not study is like a person who cannot swim but falls in the water. The first time you pull him out, but he will fall into the water again and finally will be drowned.” Betty said that if students’ word meaning guessing was far from accurate, she would sometimes ask students to check the dictionary immediately in class. However, Karen held that dictionary checking in class should not be allowed because students should get rid of the habit of checking the dictionary as soon as they come across a new word, especially when the unknown word would not affect message transfer. Also, students might not be able to find the right meaning quickly in class as a word usually has several meaning entries in the dictionary. Thus, checking dictionaries might prevent students from keeping up with class instruction.

**Teachers’ Pedagogical Practices**

Classroom observations revealed that the four teachers’ lessons were mainly teacher-fronted, involving different activities but similar frequencies of VIEs. As outlined in Table 3, Rose’s and Jane’s lessons involved higher frequencies of VIEs: 0.29 VIEs and 0.3 VIEs per minute respectively, whereas Betty’s class had the lowest frequency: 0.19 VIEs per minute.

The teachers all incorporated vocabulary instruction in completing activities, though in different ways. Rose included word teaching in her communication with students. Karen mainly explained or elaborated potentially problematic words. Jane guided students to elicit word meanings or appropriate words. Betty singled out potentially unknown words or phrases from the input material and questioned students about their meanings, and then explained them or extended her instruction to other related words.

As summarized in Table 4, the teachers’ VIEs, in terms of frequency, showed the following overall trend. They were more teacher-initiated than student-initiated and reactive, focusing more on single words than on multiple-word phrases, more on word meanings than on word forms and word use, more emergent than planned, more for message transfer than for lexical learning, and involving explicit instruction more than such instruction strategies as association, putting into use, elaboration, rephrasing, form-meaning mapping and the use of L1. These features are generally consistent with those of previous studies (Lapkin & Swain, 1996; Punch & Robinson, 1992; Swain & Carroll, 1987; Tang & Nesi, 2003; Wright, 1993) despite their different research contexts.
Table 3

*Activities Performed in the Observed Lessons and the Frequencies of VIEs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Activities performed in observed lesson</th>
<th>Length of observed lesson (mins.)</th>
<th>Number of VIEs</th>
<th>Frequency of VIEs (per min.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Student presentation of an ad; discussing brand name translation; listening to a dialogue and answering post-listening questions; reading and discussing two ads</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Pre-reading discussion; a post-reading word exercise; listening to a conversation and post-listening discussion</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>A cloze; reading 8 post cards; listening to 8 short and 2 long dialogues</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>Discussing cultural differences in apology; listening to 3 dialogues and answering post-listening questions</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, individually the teachers showed variations against the overall trend. Particularly, Jane taught more word forms than word meanings, and hence did form-meaning mapping most instead of explicit instruction in her lesson. Karen and Betty did more planned than emergent word teaching and taught words more for lexical learning than for message transfer. The variations are understandable because the teachers taught students of different English proficiency and covered different activities in their lessons as shown in Table 3.
Table 4
Features of the Teachers’ VIEs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Rose</th>
<th>Karen</th>
<th>Jane</th>
<th>Betty</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word Initiation</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (0.95%)</td>
<td>1 (6.67%)</td>
<td>7 (10.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>10 (62.5%)</td>
<td>13 (100%)</td>
<td>11 (47.83%)</td>
<td>14 (93.33%)</td>
<td>48 (71.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>2 (12.5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10 (43.48%)</td>
<td>0 (17.9%)</td>
<td>12 (19.5%)</td>
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<td>Total (100%)</td>
<td>16 (93.75%)</td>
<td>13 (69.23%)</td>
<td>23 (53.33%)</td>
<td>15 (64.2%)</td>
<td>67 (71.6%)</td>
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<td>9 (69.23%)</td>
<td>11 (53.33%)</td>
<td>8 (64.2%)</td>
<td>43 (64.2%)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple</td>
<td>1 (6.25%)</td>
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<td>12 (46.67%)</td>
<td>7 (35.8%)</td>
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<td>Word knowledge focus</td>
<td>Form</td>
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<td>3 (18.75%)</td>
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<td>10 (43.3%)</td>
<td>8 (56.7%)</td>
<td>29 (43.3%)</td>
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<td>7 (43.3%)</td>
<td>38 (56.7%)</td>
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<td>13 (100%)</td>
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<td>6 (40%)</td>
<td>38 (56.7%)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Lexical learning</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
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<td>9 (60.87%)</td>
<td>11 (76.6%)</td>
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<td>Explicit instruction</td>
<td>17 (63%)</td>
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<td>10 (76.6%)</td>
<td>47 (71.6%)</td>
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<td>5 (18.5%)</td>
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<td>1 (3%)</td>
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<td>Form-meaning mapping</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13 (39.4%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>14 (21.2%)</td>
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<td>Use of L1</td>
<td>4 (14.8%)</td>
<td>5 (19.2%)</td>
<td>4 (12.1%)</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>15 (14.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total (100%)</td>
<td>27 (40%)</td>
<td>26 (39%)</td>
<td>33 (20%)</td>
<td>20 (28%)</td>
<td>106 (39.4%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note: The total number of VIEs for the first five features was 67, while the total number of instruction strategy uses was 106 because more than one strategy was used in some VIEs.
The Relationship between Teachers’ Beliefs and Pedagogical Practices

Overall the four teachers’ beliefs were found to be congruent with their pedagogical practices in three respects. That is, in line with their expressed beliefs, the teachers involved vocabulary instruction in their pedagogical practices, conducted vocabulary instruction through communication or performing activities and tasks, and occasionally switched to Chinese in teaching vocabulary. Individually the four teachers’ beliefs and practices also showed consistencies. Particularly, Rose’s beliefs about using explicit instruction with good students, training students to check dictionaries in class, and involving cultural knowledge in vocabulary instruction were observed in her teaching of the most proficient class in Grade Two. Karen employed explicit instruction most in her lesson and mainly focused on teaching word meanings, which conformed to her stated beliefs. Jane’s belief about the importance of vocabulary instruction in EFL teaching was manifested in her trying to elicit from students more appropriate words and expressions when they were doing activities, in many cases through form-meaning mapping, and doing more emergent than planned teaching. Betty’s belief about memorizing basic vocabulary was reflected in her trying to extend her explanation of new words to the revision of related known words. However, inconsistencies were also noted because word meaning guessing, dictionary checking and word self-study were either not observed or observed only rarely in the teachers’ pedagogical instruction although they expressed their belief in the importance of such strategies in vocabulary teaching.

Discussion

The study investigated four Chinese EFL teachers’ beliefs and practices about vocabulary instruction. The results reveal that the teachers expressed shared beliefs relating to such aspects of vocabulary pedagogy as explicit vocabulary instruction, vocabulary instruction and communication, word meaning guessing, use of L1, and word self-study, but they held discrepant beliefs concerning the kinds of word knowledge taught, the role of learner factors, and dictionary checking; the teachers’ pedagogical practices were observed to have shown both commonalities and differences; some of the teachers’ expressed beliefs were congruent with their practices, whereas there was little or no manifestation of other beliefs. The findings of the study not only enrich our understanding of the issue under study but also contribute to the literature since few previous studies have examined teachers’ beliefs and practices about vocabulary instruction.

The findings of the study will be interpreted from a perspective of small cultures, including China’s EFL teaching and learning culture, institutional culture, and classroom culture. The small culture perspective constitutes another contribution of the study to the literature because such a perspective has seldom been utilized in examining teacher cognition. The discussion is organized in four parts.

1. Teachers’ Shared Beliefs

The cultivation of the teachers’ shared beliefs can probably be attributed to the mediation of small cultures (Holliday, 1999): the Chinese EFL learning culture and the institutional culture that the teachers shared. Despite their different English learning
The teachers all learned English in China, sharing an EFL culture, which features the essentialness of classroom instruction and limited access to real language use. Thus, there is no wonder that the teachers all emphasized incorporating explicit vocabulary instruction in classroom input and communication, and stressed resorting to Chinese when necessary, since they shared the same L1 as their students. Besides, the teachers, working in the same Faculty, had to observe the Faculty tradition, which required them to use fixed course books, follow the same teaching approach (i.e., CLT), adopt a similar teaching pace, and even share the teaching of key points by holding collective lesson preparations. All these constituted the institutional teaching culture, which should have shaped the teachers’ cognitions about vocabulary instruction (Borg, 2003, 2006).

The institutional teaching culture was even able to convert teachers’ incompatible beliefs. One example is Jane’s change from her original belief in detailed systematic vocabulary instruction, formed under her own university teachers’ influence, to her current belief in teaching vocabulary through communication, formulated in the institutional teaching culture. Jane’s case manifests how institutional culture may impact upon teachers’ pedagogical practices and beliefs. Meanwhile, Jane’s belief in the value of detailed vocabulary teaching suggests that the cultural context that the teachers experienced previously, specifically their own language learning experiences, also played a role in cultivating their beliefs about vocabulary teaching (Holt Reynolds, 1992). This is also reflected in the case of Rose. Rose in the interview recalled that her church school English teacher would write Chinese meanings on the blackboard if the students could not guess word meanings correctly from the reading input. Such learning experiences, Rose explicitly declared, had influenced her own use of Chinese in vocabulary teaching. The difference between Rose and Jane is that Rose carried her previous belief into the current cultural context since they were compatible. The teachers’ shared beliefs formulated from a small culture perspective also substantiate the effect of educational background (Schommer, 1990) and school culture (Qian & Pan, 2002) on learners’ as well as teachers’ cultivation of epistemological beliefs.

2. Teachers’ Discrepant Beliefs

The teachers also expressed subtly different beliefs. Particularly, regarding the type of word knowledge taught, Rose and Karen emphasized teaching word meanings, whereas Jane and Betty stressed teaching basic and productive words and more varieties of expressions. This difference should be ascribed to students’ different English proficiency, one factor of the lower level small culture: the classroom culture. Rose and Karen were teaching Year-Two students while Jane and Betty were teaching Year-One students. It is unsurprising that they believed in imparting different word knowledge, as advanced learners possess larger vocabulary sizes, better word knowledge, and greater word self-study abilities than lower-proficiency learners. This difference of belief was actually observed in the teachers’ lessons. Students’ English proficiency also gave rise to the teachers’ discrepant beliefs about how learner factors would affect their approach to word teaching. Rose, teaching one of the most proficient Year-Two classes, insisted that learners with higher English proficiency should be taught word meanings directly and explicitly, whereas Jane, teaching an average Year-One class, maintained that learners with lower English proficiency should be offered more explicit lexical teaching. Yet, the teachers’ stated beliefs about giving different word instruction to learners of different English proficiency could not be
observed in the study because they each taught only one class, the students of which were considered to possess similar English proficiency and were therefore taught identically. In short, somewhat in line with researchers’ views (e.g. Beck et al., 1987), learners’ English proficiency mediated teachers’ decisions about what word knowledge to teach and how.

3. **Consistencies between Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices**

   The shared small cultures are also likely to have contributed to the consistencies of the teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding the importance of vocabulary instruction in EFL teaching, teaching vocabulary in communication, and the use of L1. In particular, the consistencies should be associated with the fact that the institutional culture required the teachers to follow a CLT approach and utilize the same series of theme-based and activity-centered course books. On the one hand, the CLT approach pushed the teachers to focus on communication; meanwhile, to promote better communication, teachers needed to help students learn to cope with unknown words, since teaching language form(s) is an important component of a communicative curriculum (Savignon, 2004). On the other hand, to finish the course book, as they were expected, the teachers had to focus on completing the activities. As a result, they incorporated vocabulary instruction in communication or performing activities. This is actually consistent with the finding in immersion education that vocabulary instruction is associated with reading input (Swain & Carroll, 1987; Wright, 1993). In short, the institutional culture might have mediated the teachers’ pedagogical practices and hence their beliefs about vocabulary instruction, creating the consistencies between them.

4. **Inconsistencies between Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices**

   All four teachers acknowledged the usefulness of dictionary checking for word learning, which is reasonable in consideration of the EFL learning culture in China. However, they held different ideas about using dictionaries in class, and cases of dictionary use were either not observed or observed only rarely even with teachers who claimed to allow dictionary use in class (i.e. Betty and Rose). The teachers’ different beliefs about dictionary checking and the inconsistencies between their beliefs and practices denote the possible contradiction between dictionary use in class and efficient classroom teaching, or between teachers’ peripheral beliefs and their core beliefs (Phipps & Borg, 2009), for teachers’ beliefs about knowing, as the core belief, influence how they teach (Chai, Deng, Wong, & Qian, 2010). That is, Rose and Betty considered that dictionary checking in class was compatible with efficient classroom teaching because they, especially Rose, tended to teach students the method of word learning, whereas Karen thought the opposite because she feared that using dictionaries would interrupt learners’ “flow of concentration” (Summers, 1988: 113). Their contradictory ideas are simply different responses to the essentialness and time constraint of classroom instruction associated with China’s EFL learning culture. Besides, the inconsistency between teachers’ beliefs and practices about dictionary checking can also be attributed to China’s classroom culture, in which teachers are often considered as more knowledgeable and powerful than students and responsible for teaching well while students are regarded as responsible for listening to the teacher (Zhang, 2010). Thus, dictionary checking, a form of learner autonomy, was rarely observed in the study in spite of teachers’ belief about its benefit for students.
Additionally, despite the teachers’ unanimous expressed beliefs about word meaning guessing, no relevant examples were observed in their teaching. The teachers’ limited use of word guessing seems to support the view that despite the importance of word meaning guessing as a lexical learning strategy, it is neither effective nor efficient for word learning due to its demand for rich contextual information and its time-consuming nature (e.g., Laufer, 2005). This, again, illustrates the contradiction between the teachers’ peripheral beliefs and their core beliefs, that is, their belief about word meaning guessing and their belief about efficient instruction, as argued in Phipps and Borg (2009). Also it can be attributed to China’s classroom culture, as stated with dictionary checking in the above.

Finally, the teachers’ shared belief about word self-study highlights the importance they placed on learners’ independent word learning, since classroom vocabulary instruction could only cover a limited number of words (Beck et al., 1987). The absence of word self-study from the observed lessons can be ascribed to the fact that word self-study was an after-class activity for students.

To conclude, the above discussion indicates that in the study the teachers’ shared beliefs, similar practices, and consistencies between their beliefs and practices might be attributed to the mediation of the Chinese EFL learning culture and the institutional culture that they shared. At the same time, the teachers’ discrepant beliefs, different practices, and inconsistencies between their beliefs and practices seem to have been formulated under the influence of the classroom culture that each teacher confronted as well as the balance between teachers’ core beliefs and peripheral beliefs. In light of the interpretation from the small culture perspective, the dynamic relationship of beliefs, practices, and small cultures can be further described as follows: on the one hand, teachers’ beliefs guide their practices with the mediation of small cultures, resulting in both consistencies and inconsistencies between their beliefs and practices; on the other hand, teachers’ practices, under the influence of small cultures, contribute to the formulation of both shared and discrepant beliefs.

Inevitably, a small-scale study of this nature has limitations. In particular, a more extended period of observation of each teacher’s vocabulary instruction practices might have enhanced the reliability and validity of the analysis of those practices. Nevertheless, the study has contributed to the literature in several important ways. First, it examined a rarely-researched issue and contributed to an enriched understanding of EFL teachers’ cognition and practices about vocabulary pedagogy. Second, the study reported a number of interesting findings, for example, the teachers’ report of the importance of word meaning guessing in lexical learning and their rare use of the strategy in instruction. Third, the study adopted a small culture perspective, which previous studies have seldom utilized in examining teacher cognition. More importantly, the small culture perspective is a further development of the cross-cultural research relating to epistemological beliefs, and it helps explain individual teachers’ different beliefs and practices within one large culture (Hofer, 2008). Further, the findings of the study have important implications for EFL teacher education. In particular, EFL teacher education, either in general or relating to vocabulary instruction, needs to take into account the beliefs of participants in pre-service and in-service programmes, their pedagogical practices, and the small cultures that they work in or that they experienced as learners so that the objectives of teacher education can be well attained.
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