

**Teachers' understanding and implementation of a
whole language approach to literacy in Taiwan: A
study of early years' teachers' beliefs and
practices**

Ling-Ying, Huang

Submitted by Ling-Ying, Huang to the University of Exeter
as a thesis for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Education
In July 2012

This thesis is available for Library use on the understanding that it is
copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published
without proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been
identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved
for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Signature: Ling-Ying, Huang

Abstract

In recent years, state and national governments have introduced major programmes to reform literacy teaching, e.g. textbook programmes in the United States; the Literacy Block in Victoria, Australia (DEET, 1997, 1998); the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in England (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1998). These programmes are largely based on the growing body of evidence about what may constitute effective literacy teaching. Following the trend, Taiwan's government is also recognizing that in order to meet the challenges of globalization and the desire to improve students' PIRST in the literacy section year-on-year, Taiwanese should be well-equipped with new knowledge and literacy (Ministry of Education, Taiwan; 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005). One of the ways to make education and training more accessible is by providing better infrastructure, such as building new libraries and providing more books, as well as upgrading the teaching and learning practices through teacher training. There is also an urgent need to improve the declining standards in Chinese literacy (Ministry of Education, Taiwan; 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005). In 2000, the Taiwan Education Commission proposed a Reading Project in an attempt to deal with these challenges, which included the whole language approach (MOE, 2000). This approach was the key guideline for the implementation of the aims of early childhood education for the twenty-first millennium. Therefore, many nurseries and kindergartens claim that they have applied the whole language approach as part of their teaching policy, and have treated it as an important element of their curriculum design.

In order to explore the understanding of Taiwanese early year's teachers regarding whole language approach and its implementation, a total of 200 questionnaires were

delivered to teachers at nurseries and kindergartens. 169 were completed and analyzed. In addition, three Taiwanese nursery teachers participated in an in-depth qualitative study to investigate the implementation of the whole language approach and to explore their understanding of it. During the course of the investigation, their beliefs about literacy teaching and the extent to which those beliefs are reflected in their classroom practices were examined. Their framing of the whole language approach was tracked for more than four months by means of interviews and classroom observations. The wealth of data and information collected revealed that although the whole language approach may be positively mandated on a large scale, individual differences between teachers may make the implementation of any such approach or reform more variable in its impact than researchers and policy makers would expect.

The findings indicate that, while teachers sought to include the whole language approach into their literacy teaching, their thinking often shifted and their concept of the whole language approach and literacy learning and teaching fluctuated.

The findings also highlight the complexity of these views. The key influences on teachers' perceptions of literacy and literacy teaching form a continuum, ranging from a purely discrete skill-based curriculum, which reflects traditional Confucian beliefs, to social interaction, which supports the integration of the whole language approach. This range of beliefs is informed by a variety of different influences, including the experience of teachers; their personal background; their understanding of the needs of parents, as well as those of school requirements; government suggested guidelines, and, finally, cultural demands. Each of these influences represents a unique challenge to the beliefs of teachers. When drawn together, the combination of influences that emerge illustrates the complex ways in which teacher beliefs inform their pedagogical practice.

What the data reveals is that the pedagogical practices of teachers were pushed and pulled by these intervening forces, along a continuum between a whole language approach and a more traditional skill-based teaching. Therefore, it is not that they were slow to adopt the utopian whole language approach in practice, nor were they reluctant to change, but that their practice was in reality always constrained by these forces.

The findings also indicate that there are immense difficulties in understanding the concept of the whole language approach and a gap between the practitioners' espoused theories and practice. The study revealed the complex nature of learning and teaching and the core issue for implementing reform, namely, the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Based upon the findings of the study, implications for practice are also considered, namely, the need for government funding and subsidies to help nursery schools to mediate market forces; the restructuring of the bureaucratic and hierarchical management in nurseries; the empowerment of teachers through nurturing their pedagogical competence; support of professional career training; and the ongoing development and reformation of the philosophical underpinnings of teacher training.

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgements	4
Table of Contents.....	6
Chapter one: Introduction.....	13
1.1 Introduction	13
1.2 The origins of my interest.....	13
1.3 Research objectives	15
1.4 The research questions are:.....	20
1.5 An outline of the thesis	21
1.6 Summary.....	23
Chapter two: Background Information.....	24
2.1 Introduction	24
2.2 An introduction of Taiwan.....	24
2.3 Nursery Education in Taiwan	26
2.4 The nursery education system	27
2.5 Nursery curriculum.....	28
2.6 Teacher's qualifications and quality	30
2.7 The Teacher's Role	32
2.8 The Reading Project	34
2.9 The Chinese Language	37
2.9.1 Chinese literacy teaching in the nursery school	39
2.10 Summary.....	44
Chapter three: Theoretical framework and literature review.....	45
3.1 Introduction	45
3.2 Learning theories	46
3.2.1 Behaviourism.....	46
3.2.2 Constructivism.....	47
3.2.3 Socio-cultural theory of learning.....	50
3.2.4 Summary.....	56
3.2.5 Learning in Taiwanese Society.....	57
3.3 What is literacy?	63
3.3.1 Literacy as a set of individual skills	64
3.3.2 Literacy as a set of social practices	64
3.3.3 Whole language approach	67

3.3.4 The process of Chinese Literacy Learning	71
3.3.5 Summary.....	77
3.4 Teachers' beliefs.....	77
3.4.1 Teachers D/d discourse.....	82
3.4.2 Teachers' identities.....	83
3.4.3 Subjectivity.....	87
3.4.4 Teacher change and classroom practice	88
3.4.5 Teacher beliefs and practice in literacy	93
3.5 Summary of the Chapter.....	96
Chapter Four: Methodology	100
4.1 What I Believe	100
4.2 My Epistemological Position	101
4.3 My Philosophical Perspective	104
4.4 Qualitative methods approach	106
4.5 Exploring Teachers' Beliefs.....	108
4.6 Aim of the research.....	111
4.7 Research Design	112
4.7.1 Adopting a case study approach	112
4.7.2 Multi-Method designs of Data Collection	114
4.7.3 Information Collection	115
4.7.4 Questionnaires survey.....	119
4.7.5 Recruitment of Teachers for Interviews and Observations.....	125
4.7.6 Interviews with Teachers	129
4.7.7 Carrying Out the Observations	133
4.8 Ethical Considerations.....	136
4.9 Quality control: issue of trustworthiness and generalization.....	138
4.9.1 Trustworthiness of Data.....	139
4.9.2 Generalization.....	143
4.9.3 Researcher Positionality	145
4.9.4 Accounting for subjectivity and bias	145
4.10 Analysis and Interpretation.....	147
4.10.1 Questionnaire Data	147
4.10.2 Interview and Observation Data	147
4.11 Summary.....	150
Chapter Five: Questionnaire Findings	151
5.1 Introduction.....	151
5.2 Teacher reactions towards the whole language in the literacy classroom	153
5.2.1 How do teachers assess their own approach to teaching literacy?	154
5.2.2 Decision making in the literacy classroom.....	154

5.2.3	Perceptions of literacy	155
5.2.4	Availability of the resources in the school.....	156
5.2.5	Perceptions of teachers' reported practices in the literacy classroom	156
5.3	Analysis of the literacy beliefs profile	159
5.3.1	The relation between teachers' beliefs and their practices	165
5.4	Background profiles of the respondents	168
5.4.1	Analysis of the Beliefs profile in the light of teachers' background.....	170
5.4.2	Teachers' beliefs and teachers age range	170
5.4.3	Teachers' beliefs and Education.....	171
5.4.4	Teachers' beliefs and specialization.....	172
5.4.5	Teachers' beliefs and teaching experience	173
5.4.6	Teachers' beliefs and school size	174
5.4.7	Overall scores of the Beliefs profile with teachers' background variables	175
5.5	Summary.....	176
Chapter Six: Presentation of the interview and observation findings		177
6.1	Introduction	177
6.2	Data sorting and initial data analysis	180
6.3	Data coding.....	182
6.3.1	Rereading the coding, noting and coding prevalent categories	183
6.3.2	Theme Emergence	185
6.3.3	Summary.....	189
6.4	Interview and observation findings	189
6.4.1	The teacher in context.....	191
6.4.2	Views of Literacy.....	194
6.4.3	How the Teacher teaches	208
6.5	Summary.....	242
Chapter Seven: Discussion		243
7.1	Introduction	243
7.2	Relationship between Taiwanese nursery teachers' beliefs and the whole language approach..	245
7.2.1	Making sense of real use and immersion in environmental print.....	247
7.2.2	Making sense of play and social activity.....	249
7.2.3	Making sense of teachers' general position about literacy instruction	252
7.3	The domain of change and challenge	255
7.3.1	Yes, positive rhetoric, but practice?.....	257
7.4	The gap between espoused theory and practice.....	268
7.4.1	A transitional model of pedagogy.....	273
Chapter Eight: Conclusion		279
8.1	Introduction	279
8.2	The journey begins	279

8.2.1 Summary of teachers' complex beliefs and practices.....	280
8.3 Limitations of the study.....	287
8.4 Recommendations	289
8.4.1 For further research	289
8.4.2 Practical recommendations.....	290
8.4.2.2 Recommendations for nursery schools.....	291
8.4.2.3 Recommendations for teachers.....	292
Appendices	295
Appendix One: TBALQ Questionnaire for the study	295
Appendix Two: Seeking volunteer for taking interview and observation.....	321
Appendix Three: Pre-interview protocol.....	323
Appendix Four: Post-interview Schedules	325
Appendix Five: Observation field notes.....	328
Appendix Six: Observation checking list.....	333
Appendix Seven: Certificate of ethical research approval.....	339
 Bibliography	 342

List of Tables

Table	Content	Page
Table 2.1:	The number of Nurseries	27
Table 4.1:	The three phases of study	119
Table 4.2:	The information of the questionnaire participants.....	123
Table 4.3:	Background Information of the Three Teachers	125
Table 5.1:	Teachers access their approach to teaching literacy	154
Table 5.2:	Teachers decision making in the literacy classroom.....	154
Table 5.3:	Teachers perceptions of literacy	155
Table 5.4:	Descriptive Statistics for whole language approach activities	157
Table 5.5:	Descriptive Statistics for skills based activities.....	158
Table 5.6:	Descriptive Statistics for whole language approach, child-centered items	162
Table 5.7:	Descriptive Statistics for traditional approach.....	165
Table 5.8:	Relation between beliefs and practices.....	165
Table 5.9:	Relation between beliefs and practices.....	165
Table 5.10:	The information of the questionnaire participants.....	169
Table 5.11:	Teachers' beliefs and teachers age range.....	170
Table 5.12:	Teachers' beliefs and Educational background	171
Table 5.13:	Teachers' beliefs and specialization	172
Table 5.14:	Teachers' beliefs and teaching experience	173
Table 5.15:	Teachers' beliefs and nursery school size	174
Table 5.16:	Independent Test of TBALQ by degree; specialist; number of pupils	175
Table 6.1:	Checklist of classroom observation	179
Table 6.2:	The categories within the theme of teacher in context.	186
Table 6.3:	The categories within the view of literacy.....	187
Table 6.4:	The categories within the theme of how teachers teach literacy	188

Table 6.5: Miss Liu’s lesson photo	208
Table 6.6: Miss Lyn’s lesson photo.	209
Table 6.7: Miss Wang’s lesson photo.....	210
Table 6.8: Summary of classroom observation Data (Classroom Management)	213
Table 6.9: Summary of classroom observation Data (Literacy Environment)	214
Table 6.10: Themes in the curriculum of the three participating schools.....	215
Table 6.11: Themes in the curriculum of the three participating schools.....	216
Table 6.12: Observation period of current research in the kangaroo nursery.....	216
Table 6.13: Observation period of current research in the Lilly nursery.....	218
Table 6.14: Observation period of current research in the Lion nursery	220

List of Figures

Figure	Content	Page
Figure 2.1:	Taiwan's location	24
Figure 5.1:	Conception of whole language approach	153
Figure 6.1:	Detailed procedures of the data analysis process	177
Figure 6.2:	A sample of files managements	178
Figure 6.3:	A sample of manual sorting (Miss Lyn pre interview)	180
Figure 6.4:	An example of crash file	181
Figure 6.5:	A sample of using Max sorting	181
Figure 6.6:	A sample of rereading the coding, noting and coding prevalent categories	184
Figure 6.7:	Final coding catalogues	185
Figure 6.8:	View of literacy	190
Figure 6.9:	General view of literacy	194
Figure 6.10:	View of language skills and literacy	199
Figure 6.11:	Perception of literacy learning in the classroom	201
Figure 6.12:	Structuring literacy instructions.	232
Figure 7.1:	A continuum view	270
Figure 7.2:	A continuum within a transitional model of pedagogy	274
Figure 8.1:	The relationship relocated nursery system	291