A Study of University Teachers' Enactment of Curriculum Reform in China

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Abstract

This article documents an ongoing study of educational policy enactment in a Chinese university. Drawing upon data collected through document analysis, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, this paper argues that the enactment of China's systemic College English curriculum reform is not a matter of simple implementation but the result of a more complex process which may change the original reform intention. It suggests that the enactment of centralised reform is mediated through an interplay of forces and challenges and that the major impetus for how teachers make sense of and enact reform relates more to the strength of their current values and practices and students' feedback, rather than the power of external initiatives. Without localised management, curriculum reform itself is, therefore, insufficient to ensure change in practice.

Keywords: policy enactment, curriculum reform, teacher change, Chinese context

1. Introduction

The status of English has been reinforced as 'the dominant language for international communication' in China (Smith et al., 2000, p.2), since its opening up to the outside world. It has been recognised that China needs qualified graduates who can communicate effectively in English. Hence, the last two decades have witnessed a dramatic change in the teaching of English at tertiary level in China. However, the results of English language learning in Chinese higher education have been disappointing, since most students continue to graduate with 'deaf and dumb English' (Liu & Dai, 2003, p. 8).

Nevertheless, College English (CE), that is, English teaching for non-English majors, has witnessed noticeable development, and three reforms have been launched. Numerous research studies have been conducted concerning these three CE reforms (Cai, 2003; Wang, 2011; Ruan & Jacob, 2009), but few scholars have explored whether and in what ways the classroom practices of teachers at tertiary level have been affected by external policy initiatives. Although several research studies have attempted to explore the implementation phase and the factors mediating the adoption of the reform (e.g. Hu & McGrath, 2012; Chen, May, Klenowski, & Kettle, 2014), their research mainly focused on the analyses of factors contributing to the changes / non- change or examination of the implementation of a particular strand of College English reform, such as listening or assessment. Thus, the present research is one of the first (in the context of Chinese tertiary level) that attempts to investigate how the frontline teachers perceive and enact the top-down external initiative at classroom level. Whilst tentative, the research findings provide a contribution to the understandings of policy enactment in China. This study, thus, attempts to address the following research questions:

(1) How do teachers perceive the changes required by CECR 2007?

(2) To what extent are changes designed at the centre enacted at classroom level?

(3) What are the factors mediating the process of curriculum enactment?

For the purpose of this paper, we draw on understandings of policy enactment provided by Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012), which is taken to mean a process by teachers of interpretation, re-interpretation and re-contextualization of policy so that they may be applied by them to the specific contexts in which they work. Thus, policy change at central level may, but does not necessarily, result in its intended change at classroom level.

2. Review of literature

Up to now, three relevant guideline documents have been formulated concerning CE teaching and learning, namely, the National College English Teaching Syllabus (NCETS1985/1986), the National College English Teaching Syllabus (NCETS1999) and the College English Curriculum Reform (CECR2007).

In 1985, the first National College English Teaching Syllabus was issued for the Science and Technology students, and then in 1986 for the Liberal Arts students. In the two Syllabus, vocabulary and grammar was strengthened. To reinforce the effective implementation of the Syllabus, the CET-4/6 testing system was adopted, which aimed to secure an objective, scientific and fair measure of whether the undergraduates met the requirements prescribed in the syllabus or not (Yang & Weir, 2001), and also to motivate English teaching and learning in higher education sectors. The then CET-4/6 format was composed of paper-and-pencil tests only, and most items were multiple choice questions in terms of grammar, sentence structure and reading. The CET was regarded as the exclusive assessment instrument of CE education during this period, and much effort and investment was given to it, particularly when CET-4 pass rate became a criterion to evaluate and rank higher education institutions (Gu, 2005). In turn, these institutions awarded and promoted teachers based on the CET-4 pass rate and pegged the CET-4 score to students' academic degree and certificate (Wang, 2006). These high stakes of CET-4 reinforced the motivation as well as the pressure to learn English, but, on the other hand, it guided the attention of the institutions, teachers and students to the test, and backwashed negatively on CE teaching and learning (Tang, 2005).

In 1998, a survey among employers of college graduates about their English proficiency was conducted, and the findings demonstrated that the employers were dissatisfied with the students' general ability to use English (Liu & Dai, 2003). To modify the unsatisfactory, a modified version of NCETS for all non-English major undergraduates was issued in 1999.The issuing of NCETS 1999 intended to strengthen the use of communicative language teaching (CLT) at classroom to enhance students' communicative capability and better meet the needs of China's economic reform (Gao, 2013). To ensure the effective implementation of CLT, an oral session called CET-SET was added to CET. CET-SET was designed to assess directly the test-takers' communicative and interactional competence. However, it was only accessible for students who had graded 80 in CET-4 or 75 in CET-6, which was considered impossible for most students in most universities (Wang, 2006). Therefore, CET-SET failed to stimulate teachers' and students' motivation and interest to develop communicative competence. However, the impact of CET on society was increasingly severe, and the certificate of CET-4/6 was utilized as gate-keeping device to higher degree education, general employment and even residential certification in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong. Thus, CE curriculum gave way to coach materials of CET, and CE learning was narrowed to doing mock tests and developing test-wise skills rather than promoting communicative proficiency.

The rapidly developing national economy has set forth higher and more urgent requirements for CE teaching, particularly for students' ability to actually use the language. A new document, which might provide a guide for current CE teaching, was needed to move along with the times. The CECR (for trial implementation) was then introduced in 2004. After two rounds of trial implementation (from 2004 to 2006) in 180 universities, the official report concerning the policy and the implementation experience and students learning outcomes were formulated, based on which, the final version of the CECR was issued in 2007. The objective statement in CECR 2007 signals a significant change—from an emphasis on reading in the previous syllabi to the current emphasis on listening and speaking. In addition, the new curriculum takes full consideration of the varieties of conditions in China; therefore, it requires the teaching to follow the principle of providing different guidance for different groups of students and instructing them in accordance with their aptitude so as to meet the specific needs of individualised teaching.

CECR 2007 sets out new teaching goals 'promoting students' communicative competencies', and to ensure the goals to be realized, new teaching approaches (CLT with integration of technology) is encouraged. Correspondingly, the textbooks were revised and the content and format of testing and assessment was adjusted. Teachers were not only required to change their teaching approaches, but also to alter their teaching philosophies and beliefs. In addition, CECR 2007 tends to decentralize some authorities to individual universities for designing a scientific, systemic and individualized College English syllabus to guide their own College English teaching in accordance with the Requirement and in the light of their specific circumstances. Therefore, how the frontline teachers perceive and enact the top-down external initiative at classroom level need to be explored, which is the main focus of the present of study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Justification of Case Study

Case study is 'an in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon' (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 545). Furthermore, case study tends to use multiple sources of evidence to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Thus, case studies provide unique examples of real people in real situations, and make ideas more clearly than simply presenting abstract theories or principles (Gerring, 2007). The features of case studies indicate that it tends to match the current study, for the methodology employed in a research has to meet several practical needs to explicitly answer the research questions.

3.2 Participants

Specifically, four CE teachers from University L were identified as the cases in this study, that is, collectively through the four teachers to understand how a top-down curriculum reform was perceived and enacted in their classroom teachings. The four teachers were interviewed and observed teaching. They were

- T1, with less than 5 years of teaching,

- T2, with between 5 and 10 years of teaching,

- T3, between 10 and 15 years of teaching

- T4, more than 15 years of teaching.

The rationale behind the selection of the teachers was that CE had witnessed three reforms since it began. The teachers of more than 15 years teaching have experienced all these changes, the teachers of 10-15 years three times, the teachers of 5-10 years twice, and teachers of less than 5 years teaching only once. Through examining their perception and implementation of CECR 2007, specific changes, challenges and impacts of the national CER can be traced, furthermore cross comparison can be drawn on to understand more explicitly about the overall teachers' enactment of curriculum changes regardless of their ages and teaching experiences, particularly in a specific Chinese university. In addition, two middle level administrators and four groups of students were interviewed, that is, one group from each teacher's classes, with six students each group (n=24). The majors of the 24 students covered both Arts and Sciences. They were recommended by their English teachers with the major criterion that they should be willing to talk, and simultaneously from different classes or majors, that is, to ensure that the student participants could provide diversities and varieties of opinions concerning CE teaching and learning.

3.3 Collection and Analysis of Data

The overall data collection process constituted six major steps, namely, documentary review, interviews of administrators, general interviews of the teachers, pre-observation interviews, classroom observations, and collect data from post-observation interviews. Two main stages of data analysis were involved in this study, namely, in-the-field analysis and intensive data analysis. In-the-filed data analysis was the initial transcription and analysis of the gathered data during the period of fieldwork. The main purpose was to summarize the main themes of the data and generated subsequent interview questions for the following interviews, and to clarify subconsciously presumed information between the researcher and the participants. After the field work was done, the data was analysed systemically to identify the essential features and the systemic interrelationships among the gathered data. Some specific analysis methods were employed with regard to the data collecting procedure in the study, specifically, documentary analysis, interview data analysis, and classroom observation data analysis. The procedures of data analysis were interwoven and overlapped, rather than separated and sequential. New data were collected to validate and modify the emerged issues in the previous data analysis, and then newly analysed data might involve and guide more and further data collection. Thus, the process of data analysis was continuous and cumulative rather than linear to ensure that the actual happenings in the classrooms were possibly reflected.

4. Findings

Generally speaking, the teachers held positive attitudes towards the objectives and requirements outlined in the national curriculum to improve students' communicative English proficiency. They acknowledged that the guideline of the intended changes served as direction for their CE teaching and learning. The relevant changes in the revised textbook and CET enhanced, to some extent, the prescribed changes in the national policy. However, the policy process is not simply developing texts for individuals or organizations to follow (Singh, Harris, & Thomas, 2013), but also the policy process involves multidimensional and value-laden state activities existing in context (Fitz, Davies, & Evans, 2006). Data revealed multi-level tensions involved in the process of

reinterpretation and re-contextualization of the abstract policy initiative in the local contexts, and influenced the actual delivery and realization of the intended changes in the grassroots level.

4.1 Teachers' Skepticism of the Implementation of the Intended Changes

Many empirical research studies have focused on teachers' perceptions of communicative curriculum and its impact on teaching practices (e.g. Sato, 2002; Hiramatsu, 2005; Careless, 2006; Narari, 2007), and the various studies reach an agreement that EFL teachers' negative perception is one of the major constraints that prohibit the adoption of CLT in EFL context, which resonates with Nunan's (2003) proposition that top-down educational reforms may not achieve the intended results if teachers' beliefs are inconsistent with the rationales underpinning the innovations. Similar findings were revealed in this study.

Teachers in this study expressed doubts about the compatibility of the communication-oriented and student-centered curriculum with the current educational context. In their view, the present Chinese philosophy of teaching and learning is still dominated by the Confucian educational tradition, that is, teacher-dominated and knowledge transmitting. Due to the doubt of the incompatibility of the mandated changes with the current educational context, the participants lacked in trust in the practicability of the national curriculum in the situated institutional context, which was also exacerbated by the micro politics and culture and relevant policies and regulations at institutional and departmental level concerning the enactment of the national reform. Moreover, the changes in the textbooks and testing were far sufficient to enhance the realization of the prescribed changes in the curriculum. In the teachers' perspective, the content and format of textbook was against the requirements in the national policy and CET. Thus, textbooks and CET, which were prescribed to supplement the national curriculum turned out to be barriers at actual classroom teaching and learning. In the process of enacting the prescribed changes, administrators demonstrated lack of trust in teachers and students, while teachers were also lack of confidence in leaders and students. As one teacher said in the interview, 'students in my class are not confident or capable of communicating in English. I'd like to encourage them to speak more, but little response and reaction washed away my enthusiasm' (T1, Ref. p. 20). The lack of trust among different levels of policy actors led to insufficient corporation and collaboration in executing the intended changes.

4.2 Teachers' Limited Enactment of the Intended Changes at Classroom Level

The results demonstrated that teachers had done some changes in their teaching, but the changes were superficial and incremental, such as engaging more classroom activities or focusing more on the listening, rather than substantial changes in their teaching practices and beliefs demanded by the systemic reform. Though teachers admitted the importance of the national curriculum policy, their classroom instructions indicated that they failed to enact the imposed changes purposely and efficiently.

The teaching goals of the teachers (particularly, T1, T3 and T4) were mainly to finish the teaching content and the previous set goals in terms of explaining new words, analyzing the language points and doing after-text exercises to meet the demand of examinations. Their teaching contents and focus were prominently dominated by examinations, rather than adjusting to the responses of students. To them, achieving the set goals meant the classes were conducted successfully, and the assessment practices were mainly involved in memorization of new words and language points, reading and writings skills, which were designed to evaluate the learning products rather than enhancing the learning process. Comparatively, T2's teaching goals were seen much to promote students' communicative competence and stimulate students' interaction and participations. T2 provided supportive and timely feedback to strengthen students' learning interest, and emphasizing fluency rather than accuracy. To T2, student's participations and interactions at classroom weighed more than memorizing the words usage and language points. Thus, concerning the teaching goals, teaching focus and assessment practice, T2's classes closely matched the requirements of CECR 2007. However, it was worth noting that T2 did much of the prescribed changes because of her beliefs about language teaching and learning happened to resonate with the underlying principles of the CE reform rather than the power of the external policy. Therefore, generally speaking, the application of the national external imitative was limited and insufficient in most of the teachers' classroom instructions, and the top-down policy failed to stimulate teachers' change in practice and beliefs.

4.3 Factors Mediating Teachers' Enactment of the Intended Changes

Based on the fieldwork findings, the main factors mediated teachers' changes could be categorized into different layers, specifically, at university-level: lack of support and resources and mismatch between the national policy and university-level regulations, at department-level: lack of collaboration and rigid promotion of the teaching model, and at classroom level: large class-size and limited teaching time.

4.3.1 University-Level: Lack of Support and Resources and Mismatch between the National Policy and University-Level Regulations

To enact the national policy, some measures and actions were taken at institutional and departmental level in University L. However, teachers lamented that the limited support and training concerning the new changes in the national policy made it difficult for teachers to actually execute the reform in their teaching. Though, they knew that students could benefit from the new curriculum, and they themselves also would like to attempt the changes, sometimes they could not implement these intended changes due to the limited support from the institutional leaders, together with the limited trainings inside and outside the university. Some teachers also stated that the limited resources became another factor that inhibited the application of the new reform. To ensure the smooth application of the new curriculum, specific universities were required to provide necessary resources and equipment for teachers, such as multi-media classrooms, language labs, available Internet access etc. However, it could be easily identified from the data that the resources in University L were limited for sufficient classroom teaching, not mention for students' autonomous learning after classes.

Data indicated that CET impacted the application of CLT at classroom level. However, concerning the effect of CET on the teaching methods, teachers could not reach an agreement, such as T1 and T2 mentioned that CET might influence the teaching content and classroom focus, but not the teaching method. That is, teachers could apply student-centred classroom teaching without the impact of CET. While T3 even mentioned that CET could stimulate the implementation of the new curriculum, since students' leaning interest improved due to more student-centred classroom atmosphere and more classroom activities. While T4 mentioned that CET was a major difficulty for her to execute the new curriculum at classroom teaching. However, CET became one major concern in University L. From leaders to teachers and students, they all attached great attention to CET. Due to the mismatches between CET and the new curriculum requirement, the university adopted the intended changes partially, that is, listening which occupied 35% of the total score in CET was strengthened, and consequently, '171' teaching model was regulated at department-level. In addition, the passing rate of CET became one major criterion to evaluate teachers' teaching and students' learning of CE. Thus, CET became too much in the agenda of the university and department, which turned out to be a great burden for teachers.

4.3.2 Department-Level: Lack of Professional Learning Community and Rigidity of the Promoted Teaching Model

Though the atmosphere in the workplaces was harmonious, and teachers were friendly to each other, they complained that no professional community in the department or the university, where teachers could regularly discussed issues concerning teaching and learning together, and learned current educational theories and pedagogies. Thus, for most of time, teachers were isolated or interacted with each other occasionally through mundane talks, which provided limited help for their professional development.

To promote the teaching focus on listening and speaking, the department leader proposed the application of '171' teaching model, that is, 90 minutes classroom teaching was divided into three parts, that is, 10- minute listening exercises, and 70-minute to teach new content, and 10-minute to consolidate the teaching by using discussion or group work. The new teaching model had some 'positive effect on improving students' listening comprehension' (T1, Ref. p. 23). However, teachers stated that '171' model was too rigid in actual application, such as the listening materials were pre-set based on CET, and students showed 'little interest in the dull and boring listening exercises' (T4, Ref. p. 74), thus the 10-minute listening turned out to one part of 'classroom routine' (T2, Ref, p. 45), rather than a strategy to improve students' listening abilities. With regard to the last 10-minute, which was prescribed to stimulate students' speaking, the teachers admitted that they seldom organized discussion or group work, and the reasons mainly attributed to the fact that they could not finish the teaching content by using only 70 minute. Thus, the rigid promotion of '171' teaching model inhibited teachers' implementation of the intended changes, rather than promoted the teaching focus on speaking and listening.

4.3.3 Classroom Realities: Large Class-Size and Limited Teaching Time

Another major barrier for teachers to execute the intended changes was the classroom realities, particularly, large class-size and limited teaching time. Teachers complained in the interview that the large class-size class made it impossible to apply CLT and organize more classroom activities. Limited teaching time and tight teaching schedule also enhanced the difficulties for teachers to employ student-centered CLT at classroom. As T3 stated in the interview, 'I know the ideal way to improve students' communicative proficiency is student-centred class, and more classroom activities, but my class is teacher-centred. The main reason behind this is that I have to follow the teaching syllabus, finishing the teaching content within the certain period, otherwise it would be considered as teaching errors, which would lead to serious consequence '(T3, Ref, p. 56).

5. Discussion of the Findings

Institutions as parts of the educational system, along with individual teachers as main change implementers, need to shoulder their responsibilities in the concerted efforts of systemic change. The effectiveness of leadership is one of the key factors to ensure the successful implementation of educational changes (Elmore, 2004), which was confirmed by the research findings. To ensure the large-scale reform to be enacted at classroom level, the institutional leaders, just as the frontline teachers, must have the will and capacities to carry out the policy (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). However, the findings in the present study revealed that the administrators, on the one hand, lacked in the motivation and capacities to respond to the intended curriculum meaningfully and productively. On the other hand, they failed to provide the grassroots teachers' sufficient support and equip them with the will and capacity demanded by the reform.

5.1 Ineffective in Adopting the Intended Curriculum

Since institutions in different contexts might have different capacities, potentials and limits, how the policies are interpreted and enacted might be mediated by institutional factors (Ball et al., 2012). Enactment also, in some degree, relies on the extent to which the new policy initiative matches the existing ethos and culture of the institutions, and correspondingly, how much changes that might cause.

University L in the current study demonstrated little enthusiasm to the actual application of CECR 2007. The institutional regulations indicated that the leaders had no interest in enhancing some driving forces within the context to adopt the reform effectively, but attempted to interpret the reform to fit the cultures already established in the universities, which echoed other research studies (i.e. Hargreaves, 1998; Patterson, 2002). What the university attempted was to do what could be done concerning the national policy within the situated contextual constraints and cultures, rather than what should be done to ensure the smooth and successful adoption of CECR 2007.Therefore, CECR 2007 was not adopted as intended at the university level, instead, what the leaders cared about was only the desired outcome—good scores on CET. Although the national policy emphasizes CET is voluntary for local universities and students, all students in University L were required to take CET 4. In the perceptions of university level administrators, the result of CET was important not only for college students because of its pragmatic use for job-hunting after graduation but also for the reputation and evaluation of the university. Thus, CET was given more attention in University L, and became one important criterion to evaluate teachers and their teaching effectiveness. The university authority even set higher and higher CET passing rate for the department, and then the department leaders relayed the pressure to individual teachers. If authoritative interpretations were misguided (Ball et al., 2012, p. 49), the policy enactment consequences / outcomes could be quite different. The major change in CECR 2007 is the shift of teaching content from reading and writing to listening and speaking. While, the university-level administrator chose to focus on listening which occupied a large portion in CET (35%), and speaking was purposely neglected, for no relevant evaluative tests on speaking were appropriate nationwide.

The ambiguous policies can result in multiple interpretations and thus create much confusion within the organization, thus policy messages might also be distorted as they filter down through layers of policy actors (Lefstein, 2008). In the present study, the institutional administrators interpreted the national policy in the situated contexts on the basis of the institutional priorities and their personal interests. Thus, the intended changes were distorted and narrowed down through relevant institutional level regulations with regard to what to teach, how to teach and how to assess. Consequently, reforms may look very different in different institutions and achieve different ends that may have little to do with their original intent (Gordon & Patterson, 2008), as the findings in this study the national curriculum reform was changed into scores on CET, rather than the improvement of students' communicative proficiency. This phenomenon informed of the importance of collaboration and cooperation between policymakers and implementers during both policy development and policy implementation. The perception of the institutional administrators indicated their peripheral position in the upper level policymaking, and their powerless in negotiating the situated constraints and challenges in enacting CECR 2007 with the policy makers. University L, a non-experimental university of the national reform, received limited support and help from the top-level except for several conferences urging the adoption of the national reform. Thus, the university, on one hand, had to take some actions to adopt the top-down imitative, but on the other hand, had no motivation and interest to initiate some significant changes. As the national CET was the only tangible means to evaluate the CE teaching and learning nationwide at ternary level, not surprisingly, CET became the paramount priority in the institutional agenda.

5.2 Insufficient in Providing Teachers Support

To ensure the successful enactment of educational reform at the institutional level, teachers need continuous

professional development, particularly when the reform engaging new skills and knowledge (Fullan, 1999), as CECR 2007 in the current study. However, the research findings revealed that the professional development programs for English teachers were far from sufficient, which resonated with other researchers' claim (e. g. Hu, 2005; Wang, 2006; Zheng & Borg, 2014). University L offered teachers limited training opportunities due to some practical difficulties, such as teachers' heavy workload. In the limited training programs, teachers were transmitted some theoretical knowledge rather than the pedagogical support, such as how to teach communicatively and how to conduct formative assessment, which were demanded by the national reform.

The national reform explicitly requires the specific universities to establish a system of teacher and teaching management, and to ensure the appropriate ratio of teachers and students, and a qualified staff team. University L seemed to have failed to conduct the requirements. With expansion of the enrollment of students, few English teachers were recruited, thus the ratio between English teacher and students was reached 1:320 in 2011, and on average every teacher was in charge of 5 classes with around 60-70 students in each. The heavy workload and large class size prohibited teachers from professional improvement continuously. University L provided limited and insufficient resource and material support to teachers, such as language labs and multimedia classrooms were far from sufficient to ensure teachers conduct information and technology-based classroom instructions. For most of time, teachers had to conduct chalk-and- talk traditional classroom teaching, which prevented them from nurturing autonomous and individualized learning. There was no institutional professional learning community in university L, teachers were isolated and separated in their attempts to improve professionally. In addition, there were no evaluation and superintendent mechanisms to supervise and evaluate teachers' enactment of CECR 2007, which led to teachers' low motivation in enacting the consensus national policy, or even the institutional regulations.

The leaders need to create school-wide (university-wide in the present study) participation and consensus in alignment with the overarching external changes. To do so, it necessitates the needs analysis of teachers and provides relevant timely support concerning their difficulties and demands in their professional development to fulfil the national policy. While, it was obvious that no bottom-up attempts to stimulate teachers' participation and motivation launched in the university, instead, levels of hierarchical rules were regulated to pressure the lower level to carry them out. As for the teachers, changes imposed outside can threaten their values, beliefs and norms (Fullan, 2001). Therefore, it is of paramount importance for the leaders to develop a shared vision of reform university wide, with teachers' concerted efforts to design a curriculum under the umbrella of the intended changes, and to incorporate concrete pedagogy better meeting teachers' needs. To ensure the sufficient enactment of educational reforms, it is also necessary to develop the culture of collegiality and collaboration among teachers to encourage wider participation and to prevent the individualistic orientation. Therefore, to ensure the realization of the curriculum reform in the university, the university leaders need not only to take relevant actions required by the national policy, but also to initiate and develop the kind of collaborative cultures and promote a professional learning community among teachers. However, the findings indicated that what University L attempted was only to regulate some top-down rules to ensure the passing rate of CET, without taking teachers' needs into account or putting students' learning into the agenda.

5.3 Hierarchical Way to Disseminate the Top-Down Policy

Pal (2006) argues that policy implementation is not exclusive, and as long as the direction goes in right with the intended policy, any form of implementation is acceptable. Due to unique circumstances and culture, it is impractical or even impossible for specific universities to translate the external policy into practice without mutual adaptation. CECR 2007 granted some flexibility and autonomy to individual universities for designing a scientific, systemic and individualized College English syllabus to guide their own College English teaching in accordance with the Requirement and in the light of their specific circumstances. Thus, policymakers of CECR 2007 left some freedom and flexibility for individual universities to enact the national reform under local circumstances as well as for local needs, rather than expect them to demonstrate complete fidelity in implementing the proposed curriculum. However, University L seemed to have failed in performing the autonomy and flexibility and adapting effectively the national policy to their situated context.

The university leaders were seen to utilize the top-down model to disseminate the national policy within the institution, and made relevant regulations for the department and teachers to carry out. Teachers, the actual policy implementers, were given little attention, and the teaching realities were purposely ignored. The national policy was difficult to stimulate teachers' motivation and interests, and as well constrained by the situated local contexts. Thus, two-way communication channel should open within the organization (Hu & McGrath, 2012). The university level leaders need to work with the department leaders and teachers to build the shared vision and to design teaching and learning appropriate to the specific local context with the guidance of the national

curriculum, to engage teachers' in their professional development, and meanwhile to ensure that students' needs and teachers' worries can be fed back timely and be resolved efficiently.

6. Conclusion

Data from the fieldwork revealed that the process of enacting a top-down external initiative was full of multifaceted challenges and tensions, which were inherently complex and incontrollable from the top. The large-scale systemic reform was eventually filtered down through layers of interpretations and localized re-contextualization. When confronted with the reversed and diverted intended changes, the frontline teachers were not passive victims of the multi-level tensions. They tended to adhere to the changes consistent with their beliefs, and achieved some changes due to students' feedback and their own reflections, regardless of the national or university level policies. The departmental regulations might influence their classroom organizations, but their teaching content and teaching methods were decided mainly by their conceptions. Thus, the enacted curriculum turned out to be quite different from the intended changes of the national policy. Therefore, the top-down centralized model of change was proved to ineffective, even within the centralized hierarchical educational system, such as China. Without localised management, curriculum reform itself was, therefore, insufficient to ensure changes in practice.

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