

# An Investigation into the Relationship between English Teachers' Beliefs and Practices on Autonomous Study among English Majors

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**Abstract:** Teachers' beliefs pertain to the perspectives and convictions that teachers maintain and regard as true concerning their teaching work, their roles as educators, the curriculum, students, the learning process, and various other relevant aspects within the context of teaching situations and the teaching process. However, in the process of teaching, there may be discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and teaching practices. This paper conducted a qualitative study to explore the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices on autonomous study among English majors. Class observation and interview were used as the main research instruments in this study. The results indicated disparities between teachers' beliefs and instructional practices owing to various reasons, such as reduced teaching time, fixed teaching tasks, and so on.

**Keywords:** Teachers' Beliefs, Teaching Behavior, Autonomous Learning

## 1. Introduction

As the most widely utilized global language, English plays a significant role in international communication. As the pace of global integration accelerates, China's interactions with other countries around the world in fields such as politics, economics, culture, and education have become increasingly frequent. Consequently, the demand for English language proficiency is on the rise. Besides, the "Belt and Road" initiative also highlights the need to enhance the cultivation of language talents. Against this backdrop, the training goal of English majors is transformed from a focus primarily on professional education to a broader emphasis on quality education.

In March 2014, the Ministry of Education issued *The Opinions on Fully Deepening Curriculum Reform to Implement the Fundamental Task of Cultivating Virtuous Citizens*, proposing the concept of "core literacy" and requiring "the development of a core competency framework for students at all educational levels." Core literacy stresses on cultivating "all-round development of people" and consists of three elements: cultural foundation, independent development, and social participation. Independent development, as an integral part of core literacy, has attracted much attention from both society and the education sector, and is closely connected with students' autonomous learning.

Furthermore, in the new information age, the availability of abundant multimedia resources such as MOOC, Micro-lesson, and various educational Apps enable students to learn at any time and from anywhere. This shift from traditional teaching models to an integration with the internet demands that students need possess strong self-learning abilities to acquire new knowledge continuously.

Last but not least, the concept of "lifelong education" highlighted by Chinese government also requires university students to have a strong capacity for independent and autonomous learning. Therefore, cultivating students' autonomous learning abilities should be attached great importance to during the teaching process.

One of the ultimate goals of university English education is to develop students' awareness and ability for autonomous learning. Most university English teachers endorse the pedagogical concept of fostering students' self-directed learning. However, in actual teaching practice, do teachers' instructional behaviors align with their teaching beliefs?

As a college English teacher, I found that sometimes disparities exist between my teaching beliefs and teaching practice during the teaching process. Autonomous learning is highlighted nowadays for

college students. In my class, I want to leave more time for my students to learn by themselves. However, in reality, the fixed teaching tasks for a whole semester and the limited class time hinder me from giving my students enough time for autonomous learning in the class, which troubles me greatly. I don't know if other teachers meet the same puzzles as me in their teaching practice. Therefore, this research aims to find out whether there is inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices regarding the concept of autonomous study among English majors and to explore the reasons for this divergence.

## 2. Literature Review

Teachers' beliefs refer to the views that teachers hold and consider true regarding their teaching work, teacher roles, curriculum, students, learning, and other related factors in the context of teaching situations and teaching process. These beliefs encompass teachers' teaching practice and life experiences, which form an interconnected system that guides teachers' thinking and actions (Pajares, 1992). Other scholars also indicated that teachers' beliefs are composed of various complex factors, such as teachers' learning and life experiences, teaching practice, professional education experiences, levels of pedagogical knowledge, and interactions with colleagues that lead to self-reflection (Woods, 1996; Freeman, 2002). In addition, Fives et al. (2019) highlighted that teachers' beliefs refer to those propositions relating to teaching practices.

Based on Williams & Burden (1997), teachers' beliefs can be divided into three aspects: beliefs about students, beliefs about learning, and beliefs about themselves. Besides, they suggested that teachers' beliefs play an extremely important role in the process of language learning. For one aspect, teachers' beliefs represent teachers' underlying views on language and language learning. For another, teachers' beliefs are highly significant in determining teaching objectives and selecting teaching methods, and have a substantial impact on teachers' teaching behaviors. Therefore, research on the basis of teachers' beliefs can effectively enhance teaching activities.

In recent years, research on the relationship between teachers' beliefs and teaching behaviors has become a hot topic. Despite the considerable research on teachers' beliefs and teaching practice abroad, researchers often find it challenging to reach a consensus on this issue.

Burns (1992) supported the claim that teachers' beliefs are consistent with their teaching practice, as well as guide teachers' thoughts and actions. However, Richards (1996) put forth a different viewpoint. He believed that various objective conditions in classroom teaching restrict teachers' choices of teaching methods, resulting in the inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and teaching behaviors. Breen (2001) also found that 18 Australian primary school teachers' teaching beliefs were inconsistent with their teaching practice. Mak (2011) conducted a case study on the interaction between a pre-service EFL teacher's beliefs about Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and her teaching practice, and the result found discrepancies exist. De Hei et al.'s (2015) study indicated that teachers often experience a gap between their beliefs about cooperative learning and their actual teaching practices. Therefore, this study suggested to help teachers in curriculum design in order to facilitate the translation of their teaching belief into practical teaching strategies. Mulyah& Aminatun's (2020) qualitative study also showed that teacher's beliefs are not always realized in their classroom practices owing to a variety of potential reasons, such as time constrains, class density, incompatibility of the assigned text-books, huge workload, and so on. To sum up, it can be seen that most researchers believe there is inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and their teaching behavior.

In China, research on the relationship between teachers' beliefs and teaching practice is relatively limited. Zheng's (2004; 2006) study demonstrated the viewpoint of inconsistency between teachers' teaching beliefs and their actual teaching behaviors. Factors contributing to this disparity include contradictions between teachers' beliefs and the actual situation of students, contradictions between teachers' beliefs and the complexity of classroom teaching practices, contradictions between teachers' beliefs and students' beliefs. However, Li's (2002) study found that teachers' beliefs are closely linked to their classroom teaching behaviors but are not always perfectly consistent. The factors influencing teachers' beliefs include the life and teaching experiences of the teachers, as well as the students. Wei (2015) conducted a study on the relationship between teachers' beliefs and teaching practices on student-centeredness. The results found that both consistency and inconsistency exist between college English teachers' beliefs on student-centeredness and their teaching practices. Huang Min and Francis Bond (2018) conducted research from the perspective of teachers to explore how teachers perceive autonomous learning and the specific situations and challenges they encounter in practice. The study

pointed out that, on one hand, teachers played a significant role in nurturing students' self-directed learning abilities. On the other hand, there existed inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and their behaviors, which can have an impact on students' learning.

Dou (2015) pointed out the empirical studies that specifically investigate the differences in foreign language teachers' beliefs and teaching behaviors were limited. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of discussions that approach the relationship between teachers' beliefs and teaching practices from the perspective of autonomous learning. Additionally, the majority of research on teachers' beliefs and teaching behaviors of university teachers primarily focuses on English teachers who teach non-English majors, and there is a significant gap in research specifically addressing the teaching beliefs and teaching behaviors among English major teachers.

This study aims to explore any disconnect between teachers' teaching philosophies and their instructional behaviors on autonomous learning, analyze the reasons behind this disconnect, and ultimately provide guidance for improving teachers' actual teaching. This, in turn, will help ensure that English language instruction remains up-to-date, enhances students' self-directed learning abilities, and establishes a solid foundation for students to become well-rounded, high-quality individuals.

### 3. Research Methods

#### 3.1. Research subjects and research instruments

This research is a qualitative study conducted through observation and interview, and the research participants are six university English major teachers from China West Normal University. Among them, there are four female teachers and two male teachers. One of the teachers is associate professor, while the others are all lecturers. Besides, the oldest among them has 27 years of teaching experience, and the youngest teacher also has 7 years of teaching experience. In this study, all of the six teachers' English classes were observed, and their basic information was presented in the following table 1.

Table 1: Basic information of the research participants

Name	Gender	Title	Years of Teaching Experience	Teaching Courses
ZXJ	Female	Lecturer	20 years	Reading class
YSH	Female	Associate Professor	18 years	Reading class
WY	Female	Lecturer	24 years	Reading class
CYL	Female	Lecturer	7 years	Writing class
LB	Male	Lecturer	27 years	Writing class
HXD	Male	Lecturer	18 years	Writing class

Observation is one of the key tools for collecting data in qualitative research and is defined as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" (Marshall et al., 1989). In this study, teachers' teaching behaviors, teaching activities and teaching methods in the class were observed and recorded to understand whether inconsistency existed between English major teachers' beliefs and their teaching practice. Besides, students' classroom behaviors and activities were also observed and recorded. The field notes will include the individual time the teacher instructs the students in the class and the teaching contents; the time spent on the interactions between students and teacher, students and students respectively; and the time the students take part in the interactive activities independently. These recordings can reflect students' autonomous learning to a large degree. If the majority of class time is devoted to teachers giving instructions, there may not be sufficient time left for students to study independently. Consequently, there could be a misalignment between teachers' beliefs and their actual teaching practices.

For better understanding of teachers' beliefs on autonomous learning, their opinions on the feasibility of autonomous study, and the concrete problems they meet in the practical teaching process, one-on-one interview was also conducted in this study. "Interviews afford researchers opportunities to explore, in an in-depth manner, matters that are unique to the experiences of the interviewees, allowing insights into how different phenomena of interest are experienced and perceived" (McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2019). Among the six English teachers under observation, two of them were purposefully selected based on the courses they taught. The two teachers conducting the interviews were the reading course teacher YSH and the writing course teacher HXD. Additionally, five open-ended questions designed by the author herself around autonomous study were put forward during the interview.

### 3.2. Research procedure

This study was conducted from September to December in 2021. Two different English major courses, reading and writing, taught by six teachers were observed. In addition, each teacher was observed for two class periods.

At the beginning of September, the author first checked the class schedule of this semester, identified the courses need to be observed and the course time. Then, the author phoned the teacher in charge of the course to obtain their permissions to gain access to the classroom. During the process of observation, the author regarded herself as the outsider and nonparticipant of the class, watching and taking field notes from far in the classroom. In other words, the author just recorded the data without direct involvement in the class activities, the teacher and the students. Furthermore, the author designed an observational protocol to record notes in the classroom, including the physical environment, the participants, the activities and interactions that occur in the setting, as well as the duration and frequency of those activities / interactions and other subtle factors. Besides, reflective notes were also included as part of the observational protocol. After each observation, the author would promptly compile comprehensive notes and give detailed, rich narrative descriptions of the teacher, the students, and the class activities.

In addition, the one-on-one interview with the two teachers was conducted in the classroom after the observation of their classes was over. Each interview lasted about half an hour, and the whole interview process was recorded by voice recorder which would be analyzed later.

## 4. Research Results

### 4.1. The results of observation

According to the observation, among the six teachers observed, all of them took up most of their class time to instruct the students, but little time was given for the students to learn autonomously. The results were shown in the following table 2.

Table 2: The time for teacher's activity and students' activity respectively in the class

Course Name	Teacher's Name	Length of the class	Length of teacher engagement	Percentage	Length of student engagement	Percentage
Reanding	ZXJ	80 mins	60.5 mins	75.6%	19.5 mins	24.4%
Reanding	YSH	80 mins	58 mins	72.5%	22 mins	27.5%
Reanding	WY	80 mins	75 mins	93.75%	5 mins	6.25%
Writing	CYL	80 mins	44.5 mins	55.6%	35.5 mins	44.4%
Writing	LB	80 mins	60.5 mins	75.6%	19.5 mins	24.4%
Writing	HXD	80 mins	56 mins	70%	24 mins	30%

From this table, it can be concluded that all the teachers were dominant in their class. For the overwhelming majority of them, they spent more than 70% of the time instructing the students, but left students with less than 30% of the time to learn autonomously. Mrs. Chen, the teacher who provided students with the most time for independent study, dedicated almost half of the class time to students' self-learning. She incorporated various class activities, such as group discussion and role play, in her writing class to enhance student engagement in English. While for Mrs. Wang, the teacher who taught reading course, she allocated nearly all of her class time to teaching the students. In her class, she consistently dominated the classroom, but rarely offered opportunities or designed interesting activities for students to participate in. Therefore, autonomous study in her class seemed nearly impossible.

Besides, it was easy to draw the conclusion that the teachers who taught writing courses spent more time on students' autonomous study than the teachers who taught reading courses. It may imply that the output course pays more attention to autonomous learning than input course.

According to the observation, the author also noticed that the teaching methods most teachers used in the class hadn't kept up with the times, and the activities they designed couldn't capture students' attention, potentially reducing students' interest in class and resulting in passive participation in class activities. However, one of Mr. Hao's writing tasks grabbed my interest. First, Mr. Hao divided the students into different task groups, and then took out the pre-prepared writing task cards. Next, he let students to draw the cards randomly to get their own group task, and gave them ten minutes to discuss

and prepare for their own writing task based on the requirements on the card. Lastly, each group must select one representative to go on stage and make a presentation. In fact, the students in Mr. Hao's class were especially silent and inactive, but this activity effectively boosted their learning interest and motivation. In addition, group collaboration and discussions effectively promoted students' independent thinking and learning. As a result, during the group presentation, all of the students did a very good job. In short, new teaching methods and original teaching activities may stimulate students actively to take part in the class activities and are beneficial for their independent learning.

After observation, the author had brief exchanges with these teachers. They all expressed that they supported autonomous study. Nevertheless, from the data of observation, it can be summarized that there is a discrepancy between teachers' teaching beliefs on autonomous learning and their actual teaching practice, which is consistent with Huang and Francis' (2018) study.

#### **4.2. The results of interview**

After the deep communication with the interviewed teachers, the following conclusion can be drawn. Both of the two teachers, reading course teacher YSH and writing course teacher HXD, supported autonomous study in the class, but they also expressed that their teaching practice can't always be consistent with their teaching beliefs due to various reasons.

First, YSH mentioned that the class time is reduced, but the teaching contents have no change. For example, for sophomores, there used to be a reading class every week previously, with two class periods per week. However, the new syllabus scheduled the reading class to be held every other week, still with two class periods each time. In other words, the teacher needed to complete the same teaching plan in less than half the time as before. So it is difficult for the teachers to finish the teaching tasks in a limited time, much less give students more time to learn autonomously in the class. Secondly, both of the two teachers said that the heavy workload of teaching tasks, including occasional additional assignments, would have an impact on teachers' overall teaching throughout the semester, leaving insufficient time for students to engage in autonomous learning. Third, HXD pointed out that students' reaction in the class will also influence the teacher's instruction. If the students are uncooperative in the class, teachers may modify their teaching methods temporarily, which can also affect their teaching effect. For example, teachers may cancel group discussions, classroom debates, and similar activities because of students' lack of cooperation, which is directly related to students' independent study.

To address the above issues, the following strategies can be employed: rewriting the curriculum, extending the duration of compulsory courses, updating teaching methods, encouraging students to use online resources, and enhancing students' ability for autonomous learning outside of class.

### **5. Summary**

Through observation and interview, this study identified that there is a discrepancy between teachers' teaching beliefs on autonomous study and their actual classroom teaching behavior owing to various reasons, such as reduced teaching time, heavy workload, outdated teaching methods, and lack of cooperation from students. Consequently, it becomes imperative to make adjustments to both the teaching plan and the associated teaching methods in order to address this current situation effectively.

Nonetheless, it's essential to acknowledge that there were certain limitations in the present study.

First, the duration allocated for class observations is insufficient. Among the six teachers, only two lessons for each were observed, which was considerably limited in time. Consequently, this might result in incomplete and biased records, potentially affecting the data's validity. In the future, it is advisable to observe at least one complete unit to ensure the data's comprehensiveness and accuracy.

Second, listening, speaking, reading and writing are the four basic skills for English majors to master. In this study, only reading and writing courses were observed, and the observations in this study have already revealed the differences between output courses and input courses. Therefore, for future research, it is recommended to include listening and speaking courses in the observations to enhance the comprehensiveness of research data.

Thirdly, it is advisable to increase the number of interviewees and consider incorporating additional questions during the interviews to ensure a more comprehensive collection of important information. Furthermore, designing a questionnaire can further support and enhance the completeness of the data.

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