Teachers' Cognition in Changing Practice: Implementing Group Discussion in EFL Classes in Universities of South-western China

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Abstract
This article reports on a study which sought to explore the implementation of group discussion in EFL classes delivered at universities located in Yunnan Province, an under-resourced region of south-western China, and to consider the impact of local issues on their use and effectiveness. It focuses, in particular, on the role of pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical reasoning in implementing group discussion in tertiary level English classes. The data was collected via a combination of classroom observations and interviews with a group of teachers who had recently completed an extensive professional development programme and were seeking to bring about change in their practice as a result of having attended the workshop. The study indicates that although most teachers understood the importance of group discussion to students' learning and to responding to the new English language curriculum's emphasis on developing their communicative competence, they did not necessarily have the pedagogical knowledge and reasoning needed to implement such tasks effectively or to respond to challenges this presented within their institutional cultures.

Keywords
Group discussion, teacher cognition, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical reasoning, innovation in the EFL language classroom in China

Introduction

Since the arrival of the communicative approach to language teaching, group discussion has been widely regarded as a staple of English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms and a means through which to promote authentic communication by encouraging students to use language purposefully in the completion of tasks. Allwright (1984, p.159) has suggested that "successful pedagogy, in any subject, necessarily involves successful interaction", and Brown (2001, as cited in Ibrahim et al., 2015, p. 346) has argued that student participation and the learning experience could be improved through collaboration and interaction between learners and a reduction in their dependency on teachers. Yu (2008), meanwhile, has argued for greater interaction in EFL classes on the grounds not only of it being a productive teaching technique offering opportunities for language practice and for learners to construct the grammar of the target language through testing their hypotheses, but also promoting knowledge of the interactive norms of the target culture (Braddock et al., 1995).

Recent policy initiatives in English language teaching in China have emphasized the development of students' communicative language abilities (Ministry of Education, 2022). This means that there is a significant requirement for teachers to implement more communicatively focused teaching in their classrooms, including group work. Despite a general consensus that group discussion has the potential to improve students' communication skills irrespective of context, its effectiveness is ultimately dependent on teachers' knowledge and their ability to apply that knowledge in a reasoned manner that reflects the symbiotic relationship that exists between teacher cognition and classroom practice (Borg, 2003). In particular, teachers need to develop a strong pedagogical reasoning (Shulman, 1987) as they implement new ways of teaching. Tertiary teachers, especially those in less affluent and well-supported areas such as Southwest China, may have little access to external support in their implementation of group work so that, once they have received initial professional development, they may have to rely on their own conceptual resources to plan and structure the application of their newly acquired knowledge in practice. It is significant, therefore, that few studies have considered the impact of teacher cognition on the implementation of group discussion in language classrooms. Research on the relationship between language teacher cognition and their classroom practice more generally indicates that the former has a powerful influence on the latter in that the way in which cognition affects how teachers create and shape the learning environment is one of the most important influences on instructional quality and students' learning success (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2009).

Teacher cognition has been described by Borg (2003) as having to do with what teachers think, know and believe, and as such refers to the unseen dimensions of their work (Borg, 2019, p.1152). Crucially, these dimensions affect what methods, approaches and techniques teachers choose to implement in their practice and how they do so, and the notion of pedagogical content knowledge implicates all three dimensions. According to Shulman (1987, p. 8), pedagogical content knowledge "represents the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction". Changing classroom practice involves more than simply introducing into the classroom new ideas not previously employed; it requires teachers to have a thorough understanding of those ideas and to know what kind of learning specific practices will support, how those practices articulate with other aspects of students' learning and what they will contribute to overall learning development. This means that pedagogical knowledge is a complex construct that covers the what, the why and the how of pedagogical practice (Dadvand & Behzadpoor, 2020; Morine-Dershimer & Kent, 1999). Thus, a belief in the potential efficacy of a particular idea, careful deliberation in respect of its relevance and appropriate deployment, and skill in implementing it are all essential if it is to take hold and be effective. In this way, knowledge is enmeshed within teachers' decision-making process, thereby constituting a kind of pedagogical reasoning (Bennett, 1996; Pang, 2016). Bennett (1996) understands such reasoning as a reflective, knowledge-based process through which teachers develop intentions to teach in some way, work through the process of implementing their intentions in their practice, and reflect on this implementation and engage with the problems that arise. It is thus a process of synthesizing knowing how to teach in particular ways, knowing why to teach in those ways, and reflecting critically on what is achieved through such teaching. The facility to approach practice and the introduction of new ideas in this way needs to be developed in teachers, whether pre-service or in-service.

The study we report on here explores the role teachers' pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical reasoning play in the implementation of group discussions in higher education contexts in the Chinese province of Yunnan. It formed part of a larger research project the

purpose of which was to evaluate the impact of a one-month English Language Teacher Professional Development Programme (ELTPDP) designed to equip university teachers working in under-resourced, hinterland regions of China with pedagogical knowledge and skills relevant to their educational contexts. Among other things, the project sought to address "the need for rich data on how institutions introduce … educational innovation into a new context, and how teachers may have the capacity to contextualize and adapt in EFL settings" (Chen & Wright, 2017, p. 518). Its underlying premise was that if innovative ideas are to translate into teaching practice, then it is essential that teachers' beliefs and the context that shapes them are clearly understood (Zhang & Liu, 2014, p. 188). Group discussion emerged as one of the salient themes of the research, and the findings we report on are the result of field notes taken during classroom observations and interviews with the teachers immediately following observation of their classes.

The hinterland context in which the study was conducted is significant in that teachers' beliefs and pedagogical reasoning are necessarily governed by the constraints and affordances at play in their training and development as teachers. While all teachers are, of course, subject to such constraints and affordances, there is a widespread perception, supported in the literature (Jin et al., 2013; Murray et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2018), that teachers trained and working in hinterland regions have less exposure to new ideas and thinking and less access to professional development opportunities that give them the wherewithal to develop the kind of mindset needed to think about their practice in critical and innovative ways.

Research Design

Background and participants

This study was based on data collected from fieldwork conducted over a one-week period in May 2019 as part of the ELTPDP, referred to above, and delivered jointly in 2018 by the University of Warwick and Shanghai Jiao Tong University. A key element of the programme consisted of coaching teacher participants in the use of classroom activities; this included group discussion, which was received with particular interest and enthusiasm.

Sixty-eight university English language teachers from institutions located in Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces took part in the programme. Nine months after completion of the programme, classroom observations and interviews were conducted the purpose of which was to determine whether, to what extent and how teachers were implementing what they had learnt as a result of having attended the programme. Nine teachers were selected for observation and interview based on their degree of engagement in the ELTPDP, their high level of performance, and their level of enthusiasm throughout. The nine participating teachers were from six different institutions, with three universities each being represented by two teachers as shown in Table 1 below.

Data collection

The nine teacher participants were observed teaching their regular classes to students studying English either as a major or a minor subject. All nine teachers knew in advance that their classes were going to be observed and they were free to choose which of their classes was to be observed and its teaching content. Field notes were taken by the researchers during the observations. All interviews were conducted immediately after the classroom observations had taken place and were subsequently transcribed.

Group discussion emerged as a salient feature in both the classes observed, and the interviews and the field notes recorded were reviewed and analysed with a view to identifying where and

how group discussion was used, the nature of the tasks involved, and students' participation in the tasks. A thematic analysis was conducted with a view to exploring teachers' thinking behind employing group work as a pedagogical strategy and their perceptions of its success (or not) and the possible reasons.

Table 1
The Nine Participating Teachers

Institution A (IA)	Teacher 1 (T1)
Institution B (IB)	Teacher 2 (T2)
Institution C (IC)	Teachers 3 & 4 (T3/T4)
Institution D (ID)	Teacher 5 (T5)
Institution E (IE)	Teachers 6 & 7 (T6/T7)
Institution F (IF)	Teachers 8 & 9 (T8/T9)

The Implementation of Group Discussion Tasks

During the course of the data analysis, a number of issues emerged that shed light on why and how group work was used by the participating teachers and the problems they reported experiencing during the process of implementing this type of activity in their particular context, with a focus on how teachers' knowledge and pedagogical reasoning is consequential for the effectiveness of its implementation.

Teachers' approach to task design

Teachers' knowledge and pedagogical reasoning are centrally important in task design (Pang, 2016), and clearly defined, well-structured pre-task planning has been identified in the literature as a key facilitator of task accomplishment (Ellis, 2005; Foster & Skehan, 1999; Lam, 2009). As they sought to integrate group discussion tasks into their practice, problems appeared concerning the designing of tasks and there was evidence that these had a significant impact on the implementation of group work in their classrooms.

In many cases, teachers drew on tasks from the assigned textbook which were then repurposed as group discussion tasks. This was the case in Example 1.

Example 1
(Observation; T2; class size: 37; class type: reading class; students: non-English majors)

> *The teacher gives out a handout/worksheet relating to the reading text and groups students into seven groups and assigns each group a part of the worksheet to complete together. Completing the worksheet will be a group competition. Students will receive stickers for good answers or good questions for other groups to answer and the group with the most stickers will receive sweets. There are three sections to the worksheet, each of about three paragraphs of the text, so that 2-3 groups work on each section. Part 1: Introduction (paragraphs 1-2) and conclusion (paragraph 10), Part 2 'Different management styles' (paragraphs 3-5), Part 3 'Reasons and obstacles (paragraphs 6-9).*

The focus of the task here is on locating information in the textbook and, in this respect, it replicates the textbook reading comprehension tasks, but with implementation involving a group format. The emphasis in the task design is placed on the competition element, but the teacher seems not to have considered the ways in which interaction is relevant to the performance of the task or how the task design facilities and is facilitated by group discussion. In Example 2, the Teacher 2 similarly attempts to adapt a textbook task to generate group discussion.

Example 2
(Observation; T7; class size 28; class type: reading class; students: pre-school education)

> *Vocabulary: The teacher sets up a vocabulary task – matching words and definitions. The textbook has a list of vocabulary with definitions that students need to match up. He sets the groups the task of discussing word meanings and gives permission to use some Chinese in the task. The students begin by finding Chinese definitions for the words on their phones. The discussion is in English and Chinese and the relative amounts vary with the groups.*
>
> > *As the teacher monitors the groups, he asks them to look for the words in context and identify the correct definitions in the list provided. The relevant words are in italics in the text, but he does not mention this. When the teacher is not present, they return to using their phones to look for Chinese definitions.*

As in Example 1, this teacher also uses a textbook task as the basis for group discussion despite the fact that, once again, the task does not seem to be particularly suited to group discussion, involving as it does students simply matching items in two lists presented in English and provided in the textbook. Furthermore, instead of matching the words with their English definitions as the task requires, the students use their mobile phones to find Chinese translations of the English words and match these instead.

In these examples, rather than designing their own tasks, the teachers attempt to adapt existing textbook tasks as group discussion tasks, but without appearing to consider their suitability as such in terms of their learning potential. The tasks they employed were originally designed for students to work on independently, the aim being to locate information through scanning texts rather than to promote discussion. In attempting to repurpose them for group work, the teachers appear not to have sufficiently considered the pedagogical consequences and value of doing so; that is, their application lacked sufficient pedagogical reasoning.

Not all tasks taken from the textbook were equally problematic, however, as Example 3, taken from a listening class, illustrates.

Example 3
(Observation; T4; class size 51; class type: listening class; students: non-English majors)

> *Warm-up: The teacher poses 3 questions from the textbook for discussion in pairs (Do you like collaborating? What are the advantages of collaboration? When do you collaborate?). The focus of the task is 'collaboration', and she asks students if they know the meaning of the word. She provides a translation in Chinese and explains the word in English. She allocates one*

> *minute for the discussion (it actually takes longer, and most students do not complete the task even in the extended time). The questions are shown on the screen. Most students form pairs with peers sitting nearby, but this is not easy given the physical setup of the classroom and odd student numbers in some of the rows, so some students form groups of different sizes. Some students do not form groups and continue to wear headsets.*

In this class, the teacher again uses material from the textbook as a group discussion task. In this case, however, the task is designed as a pre-listening stimulus task that requires students to produce their own responses to the questions rather than locate answers provided in a written text. The problem at issue here is not with the design and learning potential of the task itself but rather the unrealistic nature of its implementation, with only one minute being allocated to discussion of all three questions. The teacher here is introducing a discussion task but minimizing its potential by constraining the time available for discussion. It may be possible that the time constraint reflects the way that teaching is planned in the teachers' institution, with each teacher given a set amount of the textbook to cover in the lesson, meaning that the time for doing additional work is limited. This suggests that aspects of institutional culture may constrain pedagogical possibilities for teachers – something we return to later – but the consequences of these constraints are not well considered in designing tasks.

Problems were also observed both in the way tasks were communicated to students and in teachers' attempts to integrate group tasks into traditional patterns of teaching and learning in the classroom, which frequently seemed incongruent. This led to tasks which, while having the potential to introduce innovative elements into the classroom, ended up instead being little more than minor, often ineffectual tweaks to traditional activities and which failed as such to achieve their intended purpose.

Example 4
(Classroom observation; T5; class size: 30; class type: English literature; students: 2nd year Translation majors)

> *Students were instructed to work in groups to answer a set of reading comprehension questions on Wordsworth's poem "The Daffodils", provided on a handout. At the end of the activity, they were asked to feed back to the class their answers to the questions.*

In this lesson, the task was designed by the teacher, but consisted of traditional reading comprehension questions that, again, related to locating information in the text. In this case, the task illustrates a similar design problem to that of the previous examples in that the purpose of the design of the task as a group discussion is not clear. It seems that the task is done to introduce discussion with little sense of what the discussion adds to the task or to students learning. Moreover, there is little indication in the way the task is presented to students of what it is that they will discuss in doing the task, as the questions relate to locating information in the text.

Example 5
(Observation; T6; class size: 38; class type: reading; students: Law majors)

> *In this class, the teacher instructed the students to work in groups in order to answer the question, "What do you think is an ideal job or an ideal life?".*

> *The teacher did not elaborate on what was meant by "an ideal life" however, and it was likely for this reason that the discussion that followed focused entirely on an ideal job rather than an ideal life. The students' task performance was characterized by often quite elementary English, along with some Chinese.*

In this lesson, the design of the task and its presentation to the students created problems for them with engaging in the discussion. While the topic of an ideal job was closely linked to the textbook exercises, that of an ideal life was not and felt like a rather ad hoc additional element of the task that made the task less focused. As result, the students to steered away from the novel topic in favour of discussing an ideal job. Furthermore, the notion of 'an ideal life' might be regarded as overly broad, abstract in nature, and thus quite difficult for students to discuss meaningfully. However, the teacher offered no further elaboration in terms of defining the phrase and how students might go about thinking about and discussing the notion. Having two elements (ideal job and ideal life) meant that the focus of the discussion was somewhat ambiguous, and is it is likely that, this along with the fact that the notion of an ideal job was less vague and aligned more closely with the topic they were currently working on in the textbook, meant that students naturally gravitated towards it.

The events and incidents described above, as recorded in the field notes, indicate problems for teachers in operationalizing group discussion as a task type and with applying pedagogical reasoning in the process of designing and implementing the tasks. One interesting facet of teachers frequently taking more traditional, individually-focused comprehension-type tasks from the set textbook and simply adapting or repurposing them in order to generate a group learning activity and thereby create opportunities for communication in the classroom was that the students themselves appeared to struggle to make the shift of mindset required for the task to succeed as a group activity, reverting instead to an individual learning mode and the behaviours associated with more traditional Chinese classrooms. This was observed, for example, in T7's class (*class size: 28; class type: reading; student: 1st year Pre-school Education*) where, prior to the group discussion, the teacher asked students to read a text on inventions and gave them an accompanying set of comprehension questions to discuss as groups. During the discussion, many students worked individually to identify the relevant information, often reading the texts in their entirety. This task did not require discussion for its successful completion. Also, the amount of time allowed for the task was not sufficient for students to read the text, locate the answers and engage in discussion. As a result, the interaction was minimal.

Problems sometimes occurred when teachers attempted to implement group work where the physical classroom environment was not conducive to this type of activity. This was the case with T8's class (*class size 51; class type: listening; students: non-English majors*), where the teacher presented three questions, based on a text from the set textbook, for students to discuss among themselves and to agree on answers. The classroom had a traditional layout with rows of desks that could not be reconfigured, thereby restricting students' ability to interact and thus effectively carry out the task. This difficulty interacting meant that students again adopted familiar traditional behaviours and worked largely independently to complete the task. In this task too, the questions could be addressed successfully without discussion, and the task was completed successfully by most students without promoting interaction. Furthermore, because it involved taking a traditional reading comprehension task from the textbook and employing it as vehicle through which to generate interaction, it lacked the kind of authenticity associated with information exchange/gap activities that require interaction in order complete the task; as

such, it did little for students' level of engagement. This suggests that insufficient consideration by teachers of the form and goals of the task had an impact on students' motivation and participation in the discussion activities.

The propensity for students to revert to traditional behaviours in cases where comprehension tasks were taken from the textbook and adapted for group work seemed to contribute their use of Chinese and code-switching, which did not seem to be related to their level of English language proficiency. This was captured in the following field notes.

Example 6
(Observation; T1; class size: 45; class type: intensive reading; students: non-English majors)

> *During the discussion, the teacher circulated around the groups as they engaged in discussion, intervening only occasionally. Students used a mix of English and Chinese although the teacher constantly encouraged them to speak English.*

Example 7
(Observation; T5; class size: 30; class type: English literature; students: Translation majors)

> *Instructions for the activity were given in English and students were told to use the textbook in order to complete the task. As they did so, the dominant language was Chinese and there was a sense that many students struggled with the activity, and certainly struggled to complete it in the time assigned. The quality of the answers was mixed, suggesting varying levels of comprehension.*

Example 8
(Classroom observation; T6; class size: 38; class type: reading; students: Law majors)

> *During the group discussion, quite a lot of low-level English was used by the students, although there was also some Chinese. Much of the subsequent discussion was in Chinese.*

In these three tasks, it was not necessary to use English to complete the task successfully and where this was the case, students' use of English in the discussions was limited. In the post-class interviews, it became evident that some teachers were aware of problems concerning task design and they expressed their intention to improve their practices in this regard. However, they gave no real indication of understanding what exactly the problems were and how they might go about addressing them beyond designing tasks "appropriately" (however defined) and simply trying something new, such as assigning them in advance of the class; and, even here, whatever pedagogical reasoning may have underpinned the activity was not made clear:

Example 9
(Teacher interview: T2)

Researcher 2: That kind of suggests to me that there some things you would like to make better. What are those things?
T2: Umm because this is the first round for me to try some new thing, so I think there can be some more improvement about this activity.

Researcher 2: Okay.
T2: For example, just now the groups … actually I think I can … uh … before the class I can assign them the task not just … uh … assign the task in the class.
Researcher 2: Hmm.
T2: That-it will cost us some time. And to design the task appropriately will improve the quality of discussion.
Researcher 2: Hmhmm.
T2: So next time I will improve it.
Researcher 2: Okay. So you're thinking about ways of=
T2: Umm.
Researcher 2: =keeping your practice developing over time.
T2: Yeah.

The way teachers designed group discussion tasks and communicated them to students thus emerged as a major problem. Rather than developing tasks that were centered on group discussion, the tasks adopted were often originally intended to be completed individually by students, and their successful completion rarely necessitated discussion. In this way, there was a mismatch between the pedagogical objectives of the teachers and the tasks they used to achieve those objectives. In addition, the instructions given to students in setting up the tasks frequently failed to indicate what was expected from the collaborative work and to provide sufficient context to enable them to engage easily and meaningfully in discussion, possibly indicating a problem the teachers had in formulating these tasks as group tasks and thus the need for a better understanding of the notion of reasoned pedagogy. All of the teachers stated in the interviews that they employed group work out of a desire to develop students' speaking and listening skills through providing opportunities for practice. They therefore recognized group discussions as pedagogically useful to achieve their teaching goals but had difficulty in operationalizing the tasks in ways that achieved these goals. This suggests that while the teachers appreciated the pedagogical value of group discussion tasks, they had developed neither sufficient pedagogical knowledge to realize their teaching goals through appropriate group task design, nor the pedagogical reasoning needed to conceptually link the activity to whether, why and how it promised to promote learning.

Contextual Issues Influencing Group Work

In implementing group work in their classrooms, these teachers needed to draw on their pedagogic knowledge to negotiate some of the complexities of institutional culture (Liddicoat, Scarino & Kohler, 2018) involved in implementing group work. These problems ranged from issues relating to classroom layout that reflected a transmissive approach to teaching and learning, to more complex issues such as the fossilization of pedagogical practices and associated institutional expectations. The teachers in this study worked with comparatively large classes, which in some cases comprised over seventy students. The difficulties this presented were exacerbated by classrooms where, typically, students sat in long rows of fixed seating with only a central aisle for access, something Teacher 6 highlighted as follows:

Example 10
(Teacher interview: T6)

Researcher 1: Are there any other obstacles umm that make it difficult to implement new ideas?

T6: Yeah, I have a class and in that class there are 76 students. That was really huge. It was hard for me to split them into groups. And in that huge classroom … classroom, all the desks and … and chairs are fixed.
Researcher 1: Hmm.
T6: They cannot move. Yeah, that was a challenge for me.
Researcher 1: Right, Okay.

Teacher 3 saw large classes as depersonalizing the teaching context and preventing her from developing rapport and getting to know the names, personal circumstances and ability levels of her students in a way that would enable her to plan tasks better. Importantly, these and similar challenges were a common source of frustration in that teachers felt they did not have the knowledge and/or time needed to resolve them in a manner that would render group work an effective classroom activity.

Most of the contextual issues mentioned in the course of the post-class interviews had the effect of impacting teachers' agency in that none of them had ultimate control over their teaching arrangements, not only because of the physical constraints imposed within the classroom but also institutional requirements that they cover the curriculum in a set time period, often to the extent of having to complete a specified number of pages of the textbook during a particular class. This time pressure was commonly cited as one of the main reasons why they were generally cautious about using group discussion tasks that they saw as time consuming, and why, when they opted to employ group discussion, they often simply repurposed textbook tasks as group discussion activities and devoted only around ten minutes to the activity. They were very conscious of the fact that failure to complete the syllabus would be regarded as a "teaching incident" and as such reflect badly on them and be detrimental to their promotion prospects (Murray et al., 2020). In the following extract, Teacher 5 makes reference to the pressure he felt around having to complete the syllabus to schedule:

Example 11
(Teacher interview: Teacher 2)
Researcher 2: So … some other constraints?
T5: Uh … some … umm … some other constraints … umm … and the teaching syllabus …
Researcher 2: Hmm.
T5: You know … uh we have … umm … um … have to finish all the content of the … umm teaching syllabus, you know. Umm if you do the group works … uh some other things in the class, umm you … you cannot finish your content to teach.
Researcher 2: Right.

Another aspect of institutional culture that presented challenges for teachers and the negotiation of which required complex pedagogical reasoning if they were to involve students in communicatively-oriented group discussion was the emphasis given to 'traditional' teaching approaches, defined by Jin and Cortazzi (2011, p. 558) as "a cluster of practices including explicit grammatical explanations, detailed examples illustrating grammatical rules, bilingual vocabulary lists and translation exercises, and perhaps a focus on reading literary texts". Many of the teachers interviewed for our study complained about the prevalence of such traditional approaches and the implications for the utilization of group discussion:

Example 12
(teacher interview: T6)

Researcher 3: Umhmm. Okay. Why do you think the uh th-the Dean or the deputy, whatever his title was, found things that in your practice a problem? What was this person thinking uh about teaching?
T6: You know a lot of teachers I think still prefer our traditional way of teaching.=
Researcher 3: [Umhmm.
T6: =[A teacher is supposed to you know stand there lecturing students. You know to give them lots of knowledge. It's not important whether you divide your students into teams or not. It's not important to have group discussion.

Here, once again, allusion is made to the fact that traditional methods allow teachers to cover the syllabus in the time allotted and are, therefore, considered to be pedagogically sensible in the sense of being efficient, whereas group discussion constrains their ability to do so, despite what it offers in terms of learning potential. Their decisions to implement group discussion in their classes were often questioned by their colleagues and senior academics/managers as they were viewed as being unnecessary, superficial innovations not in keeping with traditional expectations of effective and appropriate practice. Teacher 7 for example, commented as follows on the negative reactions of their superiors and colleagues to their attempts to be innovative in their pedagogy:

Example 13
(teacher interview; T7)

T7: Uh the other uh difficulties is that umm uh I-I think the pressure from uh you know from our school from our university
[uh not only the common teacher can come to my class,=
Researcher 1: [Mhmm.
T7: =observe my class and also the leaders or the Dean or someone else will observe my class.
Researcher 1: Mhmm.
T7: So if I believe differently some people will question. What are you doing in your class? You're just uh like a market. Yeah.
Researcher 1: Mhmm.
T7: It's not like uh activity, how to learn, how to blah blah blah. You cannot behave well in your class.

Teachers such as T7 felt that by employing group discussion in their classrooms they were not only challenging established pedagogical practice and ingrained attitudes, but also often doing so from relatively junior positions in the institutional hierarchy. Furthermore, the fact that group discussion was frequently implemented without being underpinned by sufficient pedagogical reasoning and underlying theory – and the self-confidence an understanding of this might well have instilled in the teachers – would likely have made it difficult for them to rationalise their attempts to be innovative and in doing so bolster their credibility.

A further element of the context that made it difficult to implement group discussion, and captured in extract 14 below, was the impact of the well-documented examinations-based culture of Chinese education (Deng & Carless, 2010; Dong, Fan & Xu, 2023). In the case of high-stakes English language exams, such as the College English Test and the Test for English Majors, both teachers and students are graded based on student achievement in these tests. In

many schools, the scores they achieve will count towards their graduation requirements, and in the case of teachers can affect their career prospects. These tests, however, are very form-focused in nature with the result that teachers feel under pressure, from their institutions and their students to shape their pedagogy accordingly and thereby maximise the likelihood of students performing well on such tests; that is, they feel bound by a sense of professional and moral obligation to both their students and their institutions.

Example 14
(teacher interview: T5)

Researcher 1: Have you had any difficulties implementing and using any of the ideas that you took from last summer?
T5: Hmm …
Researcher 1: Have some of them been … Have you tried to implement some of them but found it very difficult?
T5: Umm … yes. I actually, umm … last year's training program-umm I think some activities are very important, such as group discussion. But I think it is not so useful in college English course =
Research 1: Hmm.
T5: Umm-you know for college English maybe we will just focus on the language points. Yeah. The words or the grammar uh … or writing or reading.
Researcher 2: Yeah-[yeah.
T5: [And students have to pass the CET-band 4 or 6. And they are written tests for the most part.
Researcher 1: Yeah.

These various contextual factors meant that there was a general lack of support for – even opposition to – the kinds of elements perceived as innovative, such as group discussion, that the teachers aspired to introduce into their practice. Most experienced difficulties in adapting their teaching to accommodate new ideas they felt to be of pedagogical value because of constraints on their agency of which they were often all too well aware, and the implications for them and their students of pushing the barriers and moving away from established and longstanding norms. These constraints seem to have been even more difficult to negotiate because the adaptations teachers made to their practice involved a rather mechanical implementation of techniques that they understood only superficially and which were not embedded in a well-conceived understanding of the nature, needs, and affordances of group discussion as a learning device. Because changes in their practice with respect to group discussion – but also more generally – ran counter to prevailing ideas and beliefs about effective teaching, teachers needed to have recourse to and be able to articulate a strong, well-founded pedagogical rationale with which to defend such changes and their desire to be innovative. The fact that they did not was indicative of a need for professional development, something they themselves alluded to.

Conclusion

A number of features were common to the classes observed in our study, including high student numbers, generally low-level speaking skills among students, and teachers' strong motivation to improve their teaching. The interviews conducted with the teachers indicated that they appreciated the importance of group discussion as a means through which to provide opportunities for language practice that would help overcome students' limited spoken language abilities; consequently, they sought to incorporate this activity into their pedagogical repertoire. Their efforts, however, were in part confounded by factors which, to a large extent,

were beyond their control such as class size and set-up; a rigid curriculum and a requirement to complete the prescribed material to a strict schedule often specified on a class-by-class basis; a testing and evaluation system grounded in a tradition of language learning that is form-focused and emphasises reading and writing; and ingrained attitudes of senior staff that sustained these traditional beliefs and frowned upon innovative practices seen as deviating from them and often regarded as unhelpful, inefficient, irrelevant and superficial. However, these constraints notwithstanding, the problems arising from attempts to implement group work were also a consequence of the teachers themselves: their knowledge base and understanding of how and when to employ the activity optimally and in a principled way that would promote learning. Through observation of their teaching and the interviews conducted, it became evident that there was a common perception that group discussion could simply be bolted on to a traditional lesson rather than integrated in a manner that was theoretically informed, pedagogically reasoned, and required little adaptation of their overall practice.

Explanations of discussion tasks often lacked precision and teachers usually utilized textbook tasks such as reading comprehension and vocabulary questions that were not designed originally for group discussion work and were not suitably adapted for use as such. This meant that correctly answering the questions tended to take precedence over interaction in English, which was not central to the task design in that its successful completion did not require collaboration; in practice, the answers to the questions could be found in the textbook or other reading materials provided to students, without the need for discussion. This compromised the authenticity of the activity: students were focused on completing the task successfully even if that meant resorting to Chinese and simply reading the text rather than discussing it.

The teachers' pre-task work was brief and usually consisted of little more than an instruction to form groups and an overview of the questions to be answered, but little in the way of guidance for students. During group discussion, some teachers, not all, circulated and monitored groups, occasionally intervening only minimally and encouraging students to speak in English; however, the issues of large class size, classroom layout and time constraints highlighted earlier undoubtedly presented obstacles to anything other than cursory monitoring.

While it is widely accepted that opportunities for group discussion are important to developing students' speaking skills, our study reveals that it demands careful attention to task design and implementation, which in turn requires a significant investment of time and effort and the development of teachers' pedagogical knowledge and reasoning. Furthermore, adequate resourcing, sufficient time to develop, prepare and implement the activity, and recognition by senior colleagues of its validity and value – and thus the affirmation of teacher agency – are crucial if it is to be effective in achieving its pedagogical purpose. Based on our observation of their classes and the post-class interviews we conducted, it emerged that the teachers in our study appeared not to have developed the pedagogical knowledge and reasoning needed to integrate group discussion into their practice such that it served its purpose effectively as a tool to promote student learning. The consequence of this was that rather than adapting the task in a way that necessitated such communication and which thereby brought with it a certain authenticity, group discussion usually amounted to little more than a superficial repurposing and repositioning of a textbook reading/writing task merely in order to include a group work component but where successful completion of the task did not actually require peer communication.

These findings highlight the importance of pre-service and in-service language teacher professional development programmes that go beyond building participants' knowledge of

methods and the mechanics of teaching to encompass consideration of when, why and how to strategically implement particular approaches, methods, techniques and activities in order to achieve clearly articulated learning goals. This involves engaging with teachers' cognition as they think about and ultimately seek to make theoretically and practically well-reasoned pedagogical decisions. There is well-documented evidence in the literature (Jin et al., 2013; Murray et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2021) that English teachers working in rural regions of China, such as Yunnan Province where our study was conducted, lack sufficient opportunities for professional development, unlike their counterparts in the country's metropolises. Consequently, fossilized attitudes and lack of exposure to new ideas and practices and knowing how to think about them in certain kinds of ways so that they can be implemented effectively, can be problematic. While these challenges are by no means confined to rural regions of the country, and indeed are widespread outside of China (Netra et al., 2023), they draw attention nonetheless to the need for education policymakers to consider how best to meet the professional needs of those working in such areas in the interests of equitability, for the teachers themselves, and an even quality of experience for students of English and for whom the English language is seen by the government as a key element of its ambition to increase opportunity and thus much-needed social mobility in these areas.

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