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A cross-cultural comparison of Value Orientation of English curriculum of Basic Schools between China and the Czech Republic

**Introduction**

Of the 4,000 to 5,000 living languages, English is by far the most widely used (Geoffrey Broughton et al., 2003). Spread of English as an international language is widely believed to provide economic, educational, and sociocultural benefits (McKay, 2008). However, the goals and means of language study continue to be hotly debated (Isabel Dulfano, 2011). On the one hand, language is considered to be principally instrumental, a skill to use for communicating thought and information. On the other hand, it is understood as an essential element of a human being's thought processes, perceptions, and self-expressions; and as such it is considered to be at the core of translingual and transcultural competence (Isabel Dulfano, 2011).

The curriculum is the core of education and the basic approach to the realization of educational aim. The educational contents and values mainly are materialized by curriculum. This research originates from the cross-cultural perspective, takes China and the Czech Republic basic schools English curriculum as the object, value orientation as the subject.  Based on expositing the standards (or syllabus structure) of China and the Czech Republic basic schools English curriculum and English textbooks, and analyzing the investigations of students’ communicative competence and English teachers’ value orientations of curriculum and their instructional practices, this research attempts to find out the similarities and differences of English curriculum orientations between two countries, and explains its cultural reasons. Via cross-cultural comparisons, this research will offer profitable opportunities for exploring the value orientation of foreign language curriculum in different cultural contexts; generalizations of value orientation of curriculum within one culture—or within one religious worldview—may not hold among others.

**Definition of basic concepts**

**Curriculum**

The word, curriculum, derives from the Latin word for ‘racecourse’. Although there are over 100 definitions of curriculum in the professional literatures, we could specify five basic definitions (Allan C. Ornstein, 2009:10): defined as a plan for achieving goals which popularized by Tyler and Taba, defined with the learner’s experiences which in Dewey’s definition of experience and education, defined as a system for dealing with people, and defined as a field or study with its own foundations, knowledge domains, research, theory, principle, and specialists. Curriculum is a highly symbolic concept (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman, 1995: 847). In the 1970s, Pinar (1974) produced a different term, ‘currere’ – the Latin infinitive of curriculum, because he wanted to highlight the running (or lived experience). He argued ‘school curriculum is what older generations choose to tell younger generations’. Whatever the school subject, the curriculum is historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological, and international (Pinar, 2004:185-186).

This research adopts the viewpoint of Pinar et al. ‘Curriculum is a extraordinarily complicated conversation’ (Pinar et al. 1995: 848).

**Value**

Although there are various discussions on value, we could understand its definitions from four aspects: value can be defined as ‘the concept of action or belief of action’, ‘attitudes, tendencies, or beliefs’, ‘cognitive representations of human requirement’ and ‘synthesis ’ (Ying Liu, Yong Lei, 2012). For the purposes of this study, value ‘is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable, which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action’ (Kluckhohn, 1951: 388-433). Meanwhile, the viewpoint of Lesthaeghe and Moors is referable. They considered ‘Kluckhohn takes a functionalist, deterministic view in which values are cultural imperatives that necessarily lead to certain actions’ (Lesthaeghe and Moors, 2000).

**Value orientation of curriculum**

Curriculum orientations are widely discussed in educational literatures. The relationship between philosophical beliefs and education is discussed in some literatures as curriculum orientations (Sharon Billburg Jenkins, 2009). ‘What knowledge is of most worth?’ (Herbert Spencer, 1859) is a fundamentally critical question which lies at the heart of the curriculum debate. Eisner and Vallance (1974), Schubert (1986), Tanner and Tanner (1995), and McNeil (1996) identify five prevailing curriculum orientations: Cognitive Process; Curriculum as Technology (Behavioural); Curriculum for Self-Actualisation (Humanistic); Curriculum for Social Reconstruction; and Academic Rationalism. A sixth curriculum orientation, the Eclectic or Practical Integrative, is identified by Joseph Schwab (1970). (Sharon Billburg Jenkins, 2009)

Van Brummelen(2002) defines ‘curriculum orientation’ in terms of a worldview perspective: A curriculum orientation (sometimes called a curriculum platform) sets out: (1) Basic worldview assumptions and how these suggest an overall vision for education; (2) A view of knowledge and of the person, and how these affect classroom learning and teaching, and how we go about planning programs; (3) The general aims of the curriculum. The purpose of a curriculum orientation is to provide a school, a department, or a teacher with a clear sense of direction for an educational program.

To discuss the Value orientation of curriculum, our comprehension need to be deepen on three questions: What kinds of value should be permeated within curriculum? Whose value? How to realize them?

**Research purposes**

1. To examine the relation of culture and curriculum as well as the relation of value and value orientation of curriculum.
2. To present an overall and in-depth picture of the value orientation of compulsory education curriculum in China, including the historical changes during Chinese contemporary curriculum reform of basic education.
3. To examine the influential theories which are great importance in the practice of English curriculum, they are: children’s language learning theories, Krashen’s second language acquisition theory, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), humanistic learning theory, and basic school students’ cognitive characteristics.
4. To analyze the value orientation of Curriculum Standards for English Curriculum of Compulsory Education in China and foreign language curriculum standards of basic school (set out in FEP BE) in the Czech Republic, and compare them.
5. To analyze the value orientation of China and the Czech Republic basic school English textbooks, compare them, and explain the reasons of their similarities and differences.
6. To investigate Chinese and the Czech Republic basic schools’ English teachers’ elements of knowledge (subject knowledge, pedagogy and teaching knowledge), their value orientation of English curriculum and instructional practices, and compare them.
7. To investigate Chinese and the Czech Republic basic school students’ English communicative competence, and compare them.
8. To narrative the life stories of teachers and students who come from diverse cultural contexts, namely Han, Tibetan and Czech culture.
9. To provide some probably suggestions to both Chinese and the Czech Republic curriculum studies and curriculum reform, such as to teachers, to school directors, to curriculum experts and so on.

**Research methodology**

In order to probe the value orientation of English curriculum, it is important to combine quantitative and qualitative methodologies for data collection. A mixed methodology will be used for the empirical data collection, using numerical and verbal data, in order to gather rounded, reliable data. Survey and case studies approaches will be used to gain an overall picture, and a more fine-grained analysis will be achieved through questionnaires, interviews and observations. Cross-cultural research study, therefore, offers great promise for exploring the value orientation of foreign language curriculum in different cultural contexts, and trying to discover why the variation exists.

**Research methods**

Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observations (participant observation, classroom observation) and documentary data will constitute a necessary minimum. More details on questionnaires:

1. The modified-COI will be used to collect data from a sample of English teachers both of Chinese and the Czech Republic basic schools. The Value Orientation Inventory (VOI; Ennis & Chen, 1993) was designed to assess the value orientations of physical education teachers. The Curriculum Orientations Inventory (COI) developed by Cheung and Wong (2002) was slightly modified by Mahlios et al. (2004) to include the curriculum orientation of Schwab’s Eclectic. Mahlios et al. developed six questions using the same structure as Cheung and Wong: intent, content, organisation, teaching strategies and instructional assessment. Some inspirations from previous researches are helpful for modification of COI.
2. The self-made questionnaire based on ACTEL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines, students’ cognitive characteristics and children’s language learning theories will be used to collect data from the sample of Chinese and the Czech Republic basic schools students.

**Sampling**

In public document ‘Framework Educational Programme for Basic Education (with amendments as at 1.9.2007)’, it stipulates the content of basic education within the education framework is divided into nine, Language and Language Communication (Czech Language and Literature, Foreign Language) is one of the educational areas. The educational content of the educational field of Foreign Language is mandatory for grades 3 to 9 (students are from 8 to 14 years old). It is same as Chinese foreign language curriculum of compulsory education.

I don’t understand Czech language and lots of teachers in basic schools in the Czech Republic can’t speak English. Considering the feasibility of this research, purposively sampling will be used.

First, basic schools in Olomouc offering English course will be chosen for questionnaire survey. Their English teachers and students (13 to 14 years old) are also to be samples.

Second, a set of English textbooks from grade 3 to grade 9 will be chose both in China and the Czech Republic.

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