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Teacher Mediated Agency in Educational Reform in China

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Acknowledgments

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Acronyms

CET	College English Test
CERP	College English Reform Program
CMoE	The Chinese Ministry of Education
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
HEQRP	The Higher Education Quality and Reform Project
The ZAD	The zone of actual development
The ZFD	The zone of far development
The ZPD	The zone of proximal development

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Educational reforms in many countries have been focusing on curriculum development, student assessment and teacher evaluation, which have a strong impact on teachers' work (Lo et al. 2013). It has also been accepted as a fact that a successful reform implementation requires transformation in teacher beliefs, commitment and capacity (Yin 2012), which helps teachers understand and translate new curriculum principles into their classroom practices. However, policymakers often assume that schools and teachers will respond to reform initiatives without taking into account the complexity of policy implementation in the classroom (Ball 2012). Therefore, it has become imperative to conduct research about teachers who are the front-line agents during educational reforms to ensure the implementation is successful and sustainable (Day and Gu 2013; Hargreaves 2003). To this end, this book reports on a study on the work and lives of teachers in the light of educational reforms in China. Chinese teachers, who work in a context with distinctive historical, political and cultural features, have experienced different challenges, difficulties and rewards from their counterparts in the West who have been widely researched in the existing literature (Gu 2013). Nevertheless, their experiences may also echo what their Western counterparts have been going through in educational reforms.

In China, the government has enacted a series of deep structural curriculum reforms in both basic education in 2001 and higher education in 2002. Like teachers in many other countries in the world, Chinese teachers' work, lives and identities have encountered significant challenges in a series of national curriculum reforms (Dai et al. 2011; Lee and Yin 2011). Because of the highly centralised Chinese education system, teachers were expected to follow curriculum standards and use mandated textbooks (Fan et al. 2004). Teachers were considered 'good' if they could transmit knowledge to students and follow the teaching plan set by the school. Therefore, when reforms set new expectations for teachers to develop new sets of capacities and skills, this requires a major cognitive shift in teachers and teaching. This means teachers need to experience the process of 'unlearning, learning and relearning to meet the curriculum reform requirements in their classrooms' (Qian and Walker 2013, p. 306). Therefore, it is necessary to research how Chinese

teachers respond to curriculum reforms and how their knowledge and beliefs are influenced by these reforms.

This book reports on a study which is concerned with curriculum reform for non-English major students in the Chinese tertiary level education context, known as 'College English'. English has been given a crucial role by the Chinese government (the Central Ministry of Education (CMoE)) in strengthening the national competitiveness. It is also viewed by millions of Chinese students as a key to better academic, professional and social advancement (Cheng 2008). However, the embarrassing situation is that on the one hand, employers could not find satisfactory graduates because most candidates lack language and communicative skills, and on the other hand, a huge amount of graduates are unemployed (Wang 2008). As a result, the quality of English education has become a major and pressing issue. In response, in 2002, the Chinese government launched the Higher Education Quality and Reform Project (HEQRP) (CMoE 2002), with the 2007 College English Reform Program (CERP) as a major component. Curriculum reform does not guarantee an effective change in classroom practices. It is teachers, rather than curriculum, that actually change classroom practice (Walsh and Gardner 2006). The key challenge for this reform in China is whether college English teachers can implement and change their classroom teaching according to the reform mandates. Therefore, this study explored how Chinese teachers respond to this curriculum reform. In the following sections, the purpose and research questions of the study will be presented. Then the theoretical framework that guided the inquiry will be discussed before the research methods of the study are briefly described.

1.1   The Inquiry

The study explored how Chinese English teachers respond to curriculum reform. Now, according to the mandates of the new curriculum and test reform, College English teachers need to incorporate a top-down approach in classroom teaching and teach students a variety of reading strategies. Personally, I have a strong interest in researching this topic. My interest is the result of my 7 years of teaching experience in the People's Republic of China as an EFL tertiary level teacher. After finishing a Master's degree in TESOL abroad and researching teaching reading strategies, I attempted to innovate my teaching methods and to incorporate teaching reading strategies in the College English reading course. However, Chinese teachers traditionally use a bottom-up approach to teaching reading in an intensive reading course, emphasising detailed explanation. In addition, because of the large university population and the entrenched examination-oriented education system, it is difficult to implement reform in classroom teaching and practical activities without relevant research informing such pedagogic efforts. Therefore, I am interested in understanding or identifying how teachers can take active action to change their teaching.

I further researched teacher roles in relation to curriculum and assessment reform. Coming across sociocultural theory, I learned that a sociocultural perspective on teacher roles in reform, rather than viewing the teacher as an individual, isolated person, proposes that 'human behaviour results from the integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into human activity' (Lantolf and Thorne 2006, p. 18). Teacher learning and teaching are mediated at the social plane and then controlled by themselves at the intrapersonal plane. In brief, sociocultural theory helped me to explore how teachers respond to reform from a broader perspective.

Besides my own teaching and research experiences, the review of relevant studies on teacher roles in reform also indicates the need to explore how teachers respond to reform. Previously, educational reform research has largely focused on top-down policies set by the government (Cooper 1989). More recently, the emphasis has shifted to recognise and integrate a localised understanding of language policy and bottom-up language planning efforts in historical, sociopolitical and cultural contexts (Hornberger 2003; Pennycook 2001; Ricento 2000). Regarding teacher roles in relation to reform, many studies still focus on whether teachers are ready for the reform, and teachers are regarded as compliant followers of policy (Chatterji et al. 2002; Ghaith 2003; Kumar et al. 2008; Walsh and Gardner 2006). In addition, curriculum reforms in China also have a deficit view of teachers and fail to consider the importance of teacher commitment and desire to change (Gao 2008). Other researchers argue that administrators and teachers are not only executors of policy but active constructors of practices as a result of their interpretation of policies within their own context and experiences (Cohen and Ball 1990). However, relatively little is known about the ways teachers interact with a reform mandate, especially when the reform creates new tools, such as curricula or accountability practices, and expectations for teaching (Lasky 2005). This study would address this gap by exploring the concept of teacher agency in responding to reform. Agency is defined as the human capacity to act and make choices (Johnson and Golombek 2011). Teacher agency in large-scale educational reform is to take responsibility not only for their own thinking and learning but also for the development of the professional community, for instance, by innovating ideas and forms of implementation, coordinating with peers and monitoring the proceedings of their collaborative efforts (Engeström 1999; Smith 2006). Teacher agency can enable them to play an active part in the era of reform.

Although the educational reforms in China aim to improve the quality of education, in reality, few studies to date have explored the views of Chinese university teachers on their professional practice (Wette and Barkhuizen 2009). In addition, teachers have experienced many difficulties in the process of implementing curriculum reform (Wang and Lam 2009). Although some studies indicated the impact of context on reform implementation and teacher learning, these studies failed to theorise the relationship between teacher agency and the reform community. Besides, most research on teacher roles in reform in Chinese context lacked an explicit theoretical or conceptual framework for analysis. Fullan (2001) points out that the nature

of educational change is a complex and multidimensional process which involves multiagents. Activity theory offers a holistic framework to analyse the complex sociocultural issues and depict the inherent complexity within the community of practice (Roger 2010). In addition, a sociocultural approach to teacher agency emphasises the social contexts and cultural tools that mediate the development of teacher beliefs, values and ways of acting (Wertsch 1991). Therefore, this study aims to explore teacher agency in relation to reform from a sociocultural and activity theory perspective including factors which account for different levels of teacher agency.

The concept of agency is useful in analysing whether government reform policy creates a mediational system with new tools and expectations for teaching and how teachers understand and interact with new reform mandates by using these tools (Lasky 2005). From a sociocultural perspective, agency shapes and is shaped by the structural and cultural features of society and school cultures (Datnow et al. 2002). In this context, reform policies are adopted, appropriated or ignored. Teachers are not simply taking orders in the reform process—they are active agents, no matter whether they act passively or actively (Datnow et al. 2002). Research on teacher agency in relation to reform therefore has implications for how to improve teacher capability to transform teaching and how to improve the implementation of reform mandates.

Hence, in order to implement educational reform and innovation, both participants and their contexts need be to taken into consideration. Most Chinese teachers currently face a contradictory challenge where they must address the goals of the new reform, as well as maintain the traditional goal of knowledge consolidation for exam preparation. Considering these cultural and contextual factors which influence teacher beliefs and teaching practices, this study investigated two key research questions:

1. What is the nature and extent of teacher agency in relation to the demands of the new educational reform?
2. What factors account for differences in teacher agency?

The study is set in a medium-sized joint venture university in Henan province located in Central China. Most studies on Chinese educational reform have been conducted in developed and well-resourced areas. Therefore, it is necessary to offer a snapshot on reform implementation in developing provinces, such as Henan, which is an essentially agricultural and relatively underdeveloped inland province in China. This study therefore chose one university located in Henan province as the research setting. This university was founded about 17 years ago and now has about 20,000 students. Since the aim of this study is to explore teacher agency in relation to the College English curriculum reform, the participants in this study are teachers in the College English Department in the School of Foreign Languages. There are 53 full-time teachers in the Department teaching the course *New Horizon College English*. The Dean in the Faculty of Foreign Languages agreed for me to do research and collect data in this university. The specific cultural contexts of Henan Province and the teaching community of the selected university will be introduced in Chap. 3.

My study uses activity theory as the framework to explore teacher agency. Activity theory, or cultural historical activity theory (CHAT), as an extension of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, is used as a framework for analysing object-oriented, collective and culturally mediated human activity, with particular reference to the mediation of human action by 'cultural artefacts'. From an activity theory perspective, a person's agency is constantly constrained and empowered by social groupings, material and symbolic resources, as well as other social and personal processes. Agency is not only intentionality but also a culturally informed attribute shaped by participation in specific communities of practices and affected by transformation of activities within these communities (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). Moreover, activity theory can be used to analyse the difficulties people encounter in translating ideas about the future into practical reality (Blackler and Regan 2009). Internal contradictions in an activity system have the potential to generate transformational activities if they can be resolved (Engeström 2001). In the context of this study, if teachers take agentive action to resolve these contradictions, it might be assumed that there is the potential to generate transformation of teaching (Engeström 1987, 1993).

As discussed previously, a successful curriculum reform should achieve transformation in both external teaching objectives and teachers' internal world. Activity theory offers a framework to analyse an object-oriented, collective and culturally mediated human activity. As for internal transformation, this study uses the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978) to conceptualise the realisation of teacher's inner potential and the process of internalisation. In addition, activity theory has been criticised for having no humanistic origin (Davydov 1999), whereas the ZPD indicates the potentiality of the individual and a space where individual cognition originates in and emerges through participation in social activity (Johnson and Golombek 2011). In a teacher education context, the ZPD can be viewed as a space where the teacher's potential skills are developing under the assistance of more experienced others (Goos 2005). Therefore, this study uses an activity theoretical framework and the ZPD to analyse teachers' classroom teaching activity and their agency to change their teaching.

1.2   The Methodological Approach

Since this study drew on Engeström (1987)'s activity theory and Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD to explore the nature and extent of teacher agency in relation to local educational reform, case study was chosen to be the methodological approach since it provides an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon. Although a case study cannot be generalised to the whole population, the theoretical principles and models of some case studies can be relevant to other studies in a process of 'analytic generalisation' (Dornyei 2007, p. 153). In addition, this study adopts multiple case analyses which can present and portray multiple perspectives on activities and issues in the same context. In order to provide an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon,

R. K. Yin (1994) suggests the research takes into account different data from a variety of sources to ensure research validity by providing a means of triangulating data. In this study, multiple data sources are used, such as those deriving from questionnaires, interviews, focus group interviews, classroom observation and policy documents.

1.2.1   Participants

The participants are the teachers who teach the course New Horizon College English, which is the English course for non-English major students. This study uses typical sampling, which is to develop a form of the targeted features possessed by the participants (Dornyei 2007). In this study, participants' previous teacher education experiences and teacher practices in teaching reading strategies are typical concerns of the research focus. Although it cannot be generalised that every teacher has the same experiences, the typical features of that experience can be selected (Dornyei 2007). In this study, there are two criteria for typical sampling.

The first sampling criterion is whether teachers teach reading strategies in their classroom teaching, because the focus of the study is to explore whether teachers are agentive in relation to the reform to teach a variety of reading strategies. The second sampling criterion is their previous teacher education or training background. According to activity theory, subjects' motives are socially and historically constructed (Gillette 1994). The teachers' previous education or training will influence their beliefs, knowledge and motives to teach. Therefore, the teachers' previous education or training background is the second criterion for selecting cases.

According to the two sampling criteria, teacher practices and teacher education background, the first case should be chosen from teachers who have not received teacher education but still teach reading strategies. The second case should be selected from teachers who received teacher education but do not teach reading strategies in the class. Finally, the third case should be selected from teachers who received teacher education on strategy instruction and indicate that they teach reading strategies in their class. This strategy enables the study to explore the variation among the cases and also highlights any commonalities (Dornyei 2007). An initial questionnaire was used to select participants for the following qualitative stage. According to the two sampling criteria, in the first case, Sunny (pseudonym) was chosen from teachers who have not received training but still teach every reading strategy in the textbook. In the second case, Jenny (pseudonym) was selected because she has researched teaching reading strategies in her Master's degree study, but in the questionnaire she indicated that she did not teach any reading strategy in her class. Finally, in the third case, Lynne (pseudonym), who has comparatively longer teaching experience than the first two cases (17 years teaching English and 7 years teaching this course), reported in the questionnaire that she had researched reading strategies and also teaches every strategy in the textbook. This strategy enabled me to explore the variation among the cases and also highlights any commonalities.

1.2.2   Data Collection

In the following stage, with both teachers' and students' agreement, the three teachers' classroom teaching was observed and videotaped, for three units of instruction, about 18 h for each teacher. The observation of the three case teachers' classroom teaching lasted for about 2 months. During this period, three focus group interviews (see Appendix C) were conducted with six students from each case teacher's class. After classroom observation, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) were conducted with each case teacher about their beliefs about reading and reading strategy instruction and their agency to change their teaching. In addition, a short semi-structured interview (see Appendix B) was conducted with the Head of the Department, who was in charge of teacher evaluation, all teaching events organisation and the regular weekly meeting for the teachers who taught the course New Horizon College English.

The main ethical issue is teachers' concerns about participating in the study, which was addressed both at the beginning and during the course of this study. First, I am not a teacher or administrator in the university where data were collected. Therefore, there are no institutional and power relationships with any participants in this study. The participants felt no pressure to participate in this study. Second, the purpose, significance and procedures of this study were explained clearly to the participants in advance to ensure that they could make decisions based on a clear understanding of what and why. Third, questionnaires and interviews in this study were anonymous, except for the teachers who were willing to participate in the research. Fourth, all information collected in this study was treated with high confidentiality. No participants were identified by name and pseudonyms were used in all reports of this study.

1.2.3   Data Analysis

To analyse the data, I adopted activity theory and Vygotsky's ZPD as the analytical framework. The analysis can be divided into three stages. Firstly, three levels of activity systems were analysed in the broad reform community. In the second stage, the levels of contradictions were analysed in each case study teachers' classroom activity system. Finally, the analysis focused on how each teacher's agency is explored in their ZPD.

In the first stage, this study analysed the context of College English teaching in China, the Chinese Ministry of Education who enacted the reform and the College English Department, where the participants and their community are situated prior to the analysis of the activity system of each case study teacher at the classroom level. In addition, these levels of analysis helped reveal the contradictions and interactions between and within them during the process of reform implementation.

In the second stage of data analysis, this ethnographic study used Engeström's (1987) concept of levels of contradiction to analyse the degree of each teacher's

agency in their activity system. The analysis at this phase also comprised three steps. The analysis at the first step started from primary level contradictions, which may be identified within each element of the activity system of each teacher's classroom teaching. Primary contradictions were reflected in the conflicts between an ideal model of teaching and the real one in practice (Pasanen et al. 2005). The analysis aimed to reveal whether the teacher feels a need for change because of the tension between their ideal form of teaching and the reality. The second step was to analyse secondary level contradictions which are seen as a potential force to generate transformation and innovation (Engeström 1990, 2001). Changes from outside of the activity system can cause disturbance in practice and raise secondary level contradictions among the components of each activity system. If a teacher takes agentive action to resolve the contradiction by changing their teaching, the teacher can learn and improve. In the third step, tertiary level contradictions were analysed by adopting the third generation of activity theory. Tertiary level contradictions arose between the central activity system and the advanced activity systems, when practitioners or the system resisted reforms and wanted to continue conventional practices (Jóhannsdóttir 2010). The analysis focused on whether the activity system of the national reform aroused tertiary level contradictions and further secondary level contradictions in the activity system of the classroom teaching.

However, the analysis of contradictions only gave a partial picture about teacher agency. In order to view teacher agency from the developmental perspective, the third stage of analysis was to analyse case study teachers' agency in their ZPD. The analyses focused on how teachers function with mediational means. If the teacher created new tools or transformed their teaching, their potential matched their zone of proximal development. The analysis of teacher agency focused on how each teacher interacted with their students and school leaders on the interpsychological plane and how mediational means were appropriated by individuals and furthermore resulted in growth/development on their intrapsychological plane. Based on the analyses of contradictions in the second stage, the analysis at this phase aimed to see whether the teacher created new tools or could seek help from people or material to resolve contradictions to achieve their objective. If he or she could construct new understandings for new problems, it could be argued that his or her potential to transform their teaching was at their proximal development.

1.2.4   Transparency and Trustworthiness

Researchers have suggested a range of strategies that may be adopted by qualitative researchers to present a convincing case and ensure their work is academically sound. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Erlandson et al. (1993) recommend prolonged engagement between the researcher and the participants so that the researcher can establish a relationship and develop a comprehensive understanding of an organisation. As I had been working with these participants in that Department for seven years, we had developed a friendly collegial relationship. In addition, during the

process of data collection, I gave them suggestions for improving their teaching and often had lunch or dinner with them. In the process, they trusted me even more and were willing to share their thoughts with me.

According to Guba (1981) and Brewer and Hunter (1989), different methods of data collection can offer their respective benefits and compensate for their limitations. Therefore, this study used observation, focus groups and individual interviews. In addition, data were also obtained from documents from CMoE and the selected university to provide a background and verify particular details that participants have supplied.

In addition, tactics recommended by Shenton (2004) were also used to help ensure honesty in informants when contributing data. In particular, each participant was informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without being required to give an explanation so as to ensure that the data collection sessions involved only those who were willing to take part. Participants were also informed that there were no right answers to the questions that would be asked. The independent status of the researcher was also emphasised. Since I had resigned from that university, participants could, therefore, contribute ideas and talk of their experiences without fear of losing credibility in the eyes of managers of the organisation (Shenton 2004).

Guba and Lincoln (1989) consider member checking as the single most important strategy to bolster a study's credibility. In this study, the transcripts of interviews and observations were sent to participants for member checking. In addition, as Brewer and Hunter (1989) and Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended, participants were asked if they can offer reasons for particular patterns observed by the researcher.

1.3 Outline of the Book

The book is summarised as below. After this introduction, Chap. 2 reviews two areas of the relevant research literature. The first area is the review of research on teacher roles in curriculum reform. The second section of the literature review summarises the impact of the reform on EFL reading instruction, including a review of reading instruction and reading strategy instruction. In each section of the literature review, based on the implications of the reviewed literature, the study argues for the need for research on teacher agency from the perspective of sociocultural theory and the need for using activity theory to analyse teacher classroom teaching.

Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 present findings and discussion of this study. Chapter 3 analyses the context of College English teaching in China, the activity system of the Chinese Ministry of Education in relation to the curriculum reform and the activity system of the College English Department where the data were collected. These two advanced activity systems provide a large reform community for individual teachers. However, the results indicate that there is little congruence between the reform requirements and the local needs of the Department.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present individual focused case studies from three selected case teachers. Each chapter begins with a brief introduction about the case teacher and then analyses the six elements of each teacher's teaching activity system. The third section is the analysis of the levels of contradictions of each case and their agency in resolving the contradiction. The last section discusses each teacher's agency from a sociocultural developmental perspective by using the concept of the ZPD.

Chapter 7 compares the findings of the three cases and then draws conclusions based on these comparisons and then provides a critical evaluation of the limitations of this study. Finally, this chapter concludes the implications of this study for research on teacher development and reform implementation, including the directions for future research.

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Chapter 2
A Sociocultural Perspective on Teacher Agency

To contextualise this inquiry in current literature, the relevant research studies on teacher change in educational reform in both international and Chinese contexts are reviewed in the first section of this chapter. The need to use mediated agency as an analytic focus to investigate teacher roles in reform will then be argued. Since the study focused on the College English reform in relation to reading instruction, the second part of the chapter reviews the literature on reading instruction and the models of teaching reading strategies, which help locate the use of activity theory in analysing Chinese EFL teacher agency in reading classes. Based on this review, the theoretical framework for analysing teacher agency will be developed by using activity theory and the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

2.1 Teacher Roles in Educational Change

Since teachers have been recognised as critical agents for effective educational changes, there is a need to review research on teachers' roles in educational reform. This review first starts with different perspectives on teacher change before it examines studies on teachers' roles in educational reforms in contexts including that of China. The review will also relate this study to teacher agency in educational reforms.

Teacher development programmes have been long dominated by a 6 model, which assumed that there was a deficit in teacher skills and knowledge (Guskey 1986). In the light of preparing teachers for educational changes, this deficit model has been recently criticised by many researchers (Fullan 1991; Guskey 1986; Howey and Vaughan 1983; Wood and Thompson 1980) because this model conceptualised change as an event 'done' to teachers who were seen as passive participants. As educational change is seen as a complex process that involves teacher professional learning, the efforts to prepare teachers for changes have shifted to teachers as active learners who can shape their professional development through reflective

participation in programmes and practice (Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002). This notion of teachers' ongoing professional learning has been researched by many authors, most notably Fullan (1991) and Schön (1987).

In contrast to the deficit model, Fullan (1991) claimed that change is not an event, but a process. Fullan identified four phases of educational change: initiation, implementation, continuation and outcome. He pointed out that change does not only mean a new teaching approach or style in using new materials but also a change in beliefs, which is more difficult but more essential than acquiring new skills (Fullan 1991). He indicated that educational change requires individual teachers to react, to work out their own meaning of the change, to form their own position, to interact with other implementers and to obtain technical assistance. In such a conceptualisation, change is multidimensional and can involve people's conceptions of both education and skills. Fullan (1991) also pointed out the difficulties teachers may encounter in educational change: low procedural clarity, the high personal cost of change and the anxiety of loss caused by change. He argued that change will fail if the subjective reality of teachers is not taken into account, their situational constraints and their values, ideas and experiences. He advocated the need to build shared understanding among participants about change, so that they have a basis to reject, accept or modify the proposed change in their own context. In comparison with the deficit model, Fullan (1991) focuses more on teacher beliefs and thinking in the process of change and the need to consider local capacity rather than compliance. However, Fullan did not explicitly adopt the concept of agency in theorising teachers' social learning and the importance of teachers' peer interactions for teachers' social learning.

In comparison with Fullan's (1991) focus on teacher beliefs, Hargreaves (1994) regards teachers as social learners and emphasises both their capacity to change and their desire for change. He argues that such desires spring from disposition, motivations and commitments and are at 'the heart of good teaching' (Hargreaves 1994, p. 12). He relates teachers' desires to successful implementation of educational change as follows:

> If we can understand teachers' own desires for change and for conservation, along with the conditions that strengthen or weaken such desire, we will get valuable insights from the grassroots of the profession, from those who work in the frontlines of our classroom, about how change can be made most effectively, as well as what we should change and what we should preserve. (Hargreaves 1994, p. 11)

For this reason, Hargreaves (1994) takes teacher perceptions and perspectives seriously, criticising policy frameworks for change which do not take full account of teachers' own desire for change and fail to conceptualise teachers as social learners. To enhance teacher desire for change, Hargreaves suggests that schools should build common goals and beliefs, along with shared expectations to strengthen teachers' sense of efficacy, motivation and beliefs in improving the achievement of all their students.

In addition, Hargreaves (1994) also emphasises the importance of the culture of teaching in school for the implementation of educational reforms. The culture of

teaching includes the attitudes, beliefs, values, habits, assumptions and ways of doing things that are shared within a particular teacher group or wider teacher community. Hargreaves explains that a cultural view of teaching regards existing practices as heavily determined by deep-rooted beliefs, practices and working relationships among teachers and students. Therefore, in this view, change is achieved by acting on and supporting the culture of teaching.

Hargreaves (1994) argues that deep cultural changes are much more effective in improving classroom practices than quick structural fixes. Particularly, Hargreaves argues that it is more effective for groups of teachers to discuss and search out ways to organise their programme and take action in their own school community than to submit to centralised curriculum reform control. Hargreaves highlights individualism and collaborative culture as the basis of understanding some limits and potentials of educational change. He warns that teacher isolation and teacher individualism are the barriers for reform implementation and teacher professional development, as well as the development of shared educational goals.

Both Fullan and Hargreaves regard teacher beliefs as one significant factor in their response to reform. Many studies on teacher roles in reform discuss the importance of teacher beliefs in influencing teacher classroom practices as well as the implementation of reform (Adamson and Davison 2008; Andrews 2007; Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002; Kaniuka 2012; Stritikus 2003; Zheng and Davison 2008). In addition, Kaniuka (2012) argues that teacher beliefs are one of the sources for teacher agency and for building teacher capacity. Many researchers construct beliefs primarily as cognitive entities located in a teachers' mind (Borg 2006; Harvey 1986) and tend to ignore the specific context within which teacher beliefs and actions emerge. In addition, the relationship between beliefs and actions is regarded as a simple cause–effect relationship. However, this relationship might be reciprocal. Therefore, a more interactive approach to the study of the relationship between teacher beliefs and actions is needed.

Some researchers seem to assume that beliefs are static and rarely change in adulthood (Nespor 1987). However, others appear to accept that beliefs can be shaped. For instance, when discussing educational change, Fullan (1991) argues that 'change can be very deep, striking at the core of learned skills and beliefs and conceptions of education, and creating doubts about purposes, sense of competence, and self-concept' (p. 42). Furthermore, he emphasises that if this problem is ignored, the result is superficial change and people unreflectively reject all proposed changes (Fullan 1991). At the same time, Fullan (1991) argues that changes in beliefs are more difficult than changes in teaching approach or style in using new materials, because changing beliefs challenges the core value of the purpose of education. Fullan's claims suggest that beliefs can be changed, and this change is essential for the implementation of educational reform.

Fullan (1991) points out that it is difficult to change teacher beliefs partly because beliefs are not often explicitly discussed and understood. In Vygotskian thinking, a language user is shaping and constructing his knowledge while speaking or writing. Therefore, teacher knowledge and beliefs are being constructed and shaped every time they are asked about them. For instance, when teachers are asked about their

beliefs about language teaching and learning, they are constructing their beliefs (Alanen 2003). Thus, it is important to look at the language used in dialogue. Therefore, this study will use semi-structured interviews and classroom observation to explore how teacher beliefs are constructed and shaped during the process of social interaction.

Most studies assume that changes in beliefs and attitude will lead to changes in classroom practices. Fullan (1991) argues that beliefs can be most effectively discussed after people have had at least some behavioural experiences in attempting new practices. Moreover, changes in behaviour precede rather than follow change in beliefs (Davison 2001; Fullan 1985). Therefore, the relationship between behaviour and belief is not a direct causal relationship as claimed by proponents of a cognitive and metacognitive approach, but is complex, reciprocal and ongoing, with change in behaviour as a necessary experience to cause change in beliefs. This relationship is informed by two important factors: people's awareness of their beliefs and the actual context where they work or study (Barcelos and Kalaja 2003). Therefore, it is necessary to explore how action and beliefs, if used as mediational tools, mediate each other in the specific context.

A number of studies about teacher beliefs and knowledge also focus on the differences between novice and expert teachers in L2 teaching. Andrews (2007) claims that novice teachers tend to have lower levels of declarative teacher language awareness than their more experienced peers in the same context. Expert teachers are able to move through the agenda of a lesson in a cohesive and flexible way. In contrast, novice teachers have less developed schemata (Livingston and Borko 1989). The way teachers adopted or adapted new practices related to whether their beliefs matched the assumptions of the new programme or methods (Anders and Evans 1994). This is in accordance with the claim that language teacher beliefs about themselves and their instructional practices are influenced by their previous experiences as language students, that is, 'teachers teach the way they were taught' (Johnson 1999, p. 41) or 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie 1975, p. 60).

Viewing beliefs only from a cognitive perspective can enrich our understanding about teacher beliefs and knowledge but cannot capture the whole picture of this area. Beliefs can be observed in social interactions and in the context of activity (Alanen 2003). From a sociocultural perspective, beliefs are both individual and social, occurring on both a mental and social plane. Beliefs are mediational means or means in the making used to regulate learning, problem-solving activity and thinking (Alanen 2003). In addition, more work needs to be done to specify the nature of beliefs as a type of psychological and cultural tool (Alanen 2003). Therefore, this study aims to use Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to explore how teacher beliefs mediate their agency to change and how their beliefs are mediated by the contextual and historical influences.

Fullan and Hargreaves' ideas and concepts regarding teacher change and development have built a good foundation and promoted research in this area. Many studies of teacher change have adopted Fullan and Hargreaves' concepts as the theoretical framework. Although Fullan and Hargreaves emphasise teacher capacity and desire for change, they do not elucidate how teacher's intention and action to

make changes could be theorised, identified and analysed in educational practice. There is still a need to explore the process of teachers' choice making and their actions to make changes. In the reviewed studies, except for some studies (Hu and McGrath 2012; Wang and Cheng 2008; Zembylas and Barker 2007; Zheng and Davison 2008), most research on teacher roles in reform lacked an explicit theoretical or conceptual framework for analysis. In addition, even though most reviewed studies focus on teachers' efforts and capacity to meet reform requirements (Joong 2012; Liu and Dunne 2009; Yan 2012), teachers in these studies are viewed as followers of the reform. However, teacher should be the main agent for change (Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2005). The concept of teacher agency can describe one's capability and intention to make changes which make transformations in one's life and in the community (Pyhältö et al. 2012). Analysing teacher agency to respond to reform can reveal the process of teacher change in addition to what has been known so far.

Using Fullan's (2001) 'new professionalism' and Hargreaves' (2003) 'principled professionalism', Day and Smethem (2009) reviewed and discussed the effect of reform in England on teachers' work, lives and effectiveness. Their study suggests that teachers should be entrusted to make evidence-informed and accountable judgements about their teaching, not only in response to reform but also as professional development for teachers themselves. Moreover, the authors suggest that friendly collegiality, sensitive leadership and teachers' sense of purpose are a stronger impetus to enhance teacher capability than compliance. However, Day and Smethem (2009) did not theorise the relationship between these factors and teachers' professional development.

Informed by Hargreaves' ideas about teacher efficacy, Kaniuka (2012) investigated how teacher capacity, efficacy and experiences can enforce elementary school reform implementation in the USA. The results suggest there is significant professional growth along with self-doubt, resistance, acceptance and finally advocacy during the process of implementation. The idea of teacher efficacy is close to teacher agency. However, Kaniuka's (2012) study also lacks a theoretical framework to frame and analyse teacher efficacy, whereas Stritikus' (2003) study claims that sociocultural theory offers a powerful explanatory framework for analysing teacher's reaction to policy. Stritikus (2003) identified several factors in exploring teacher roles in policy implementation, such as teacher beliefs and experiences, the nature of the local school context and ways in which teachers learn from the policy context. Therefore, this study uses a sociocultural theory to explore teacher agency in responding to curriculum reform.

Using Hargreaves's conceptualisation of 'emotional geographies', Zembylas and Barker (2007) conducted a 2-year ethnographic study with six elementary science teachers in Illinois to explore these teachers' spaces and emotional responses to the reforms advocated by the National Science Educational Standards (NRC 1996). The findings of this study suggest that personal, social and emotional aspects have great effects on teacher classroom practices and reform efforts. Moreover, this study concluded that social sharing and collegial relationships provide spaces and a

friendly environment for teachers to cope with reform. These findings offer some insights in interpreting factors influencing teacher agency in responding to reform.

As shown in the studies reviewed above, teacher beliefs are one significant factor in their response to reform which has drawn great attention from researchers. Keys (2007) adopted a theoretical knowledge filter model to explain how teacher knowledge (defined as beliefs, practices, practical theories and craft knowledge) shaped the implementation of a science curriculum in Australia. Keys concluded that professional development needs to focus on all aspects of teacher beliefs and engage teachers to reflect on their beliefs and practices. This study emphasises the notion that beliefs and knowledge can filter and shape practices but overlooked the point that beliefs and knowledge are formed during practices. This study not only explores the impact of teacher knowledge on reform implementation but also argues for the construction of teacher knowledge during the interaction with reform policies.

On the whole, most of the reviewed studies have drawn on Fullan and Hargreaves' concepts of teacher change and development. In summary, these studies suggest that social sharing, friendly collegiality, supportive leadership, as well as reflective teaching are important factors to enhance teachers' capacity in reform implementation. Many of the reviewed studies also indicate that teacher beliefs and knowledge are critical factors influencing teacher development in reform. Therefore, this study will also focus on teacher beliefs and knowledge. However, some of the reviewed studies lack a theoretical framework to explore teacher change and to theorise factors influencing teacher development. In addition, teachers are expected not only to follow the reform requirements but also take actions to makes changes in both their own professional life and the community by using various mediational means. This study argues that analysing teacher agency in responding to reform can provide a new perspective on how teachers take actions to make changes in both their own learning and the professional community. The studies reviewed so far were conducted in the USA, England and Australia. Their findings are helpful in analysing factors which account for teacher agency in other contexts. As Walker and Dimmock (2000) argued, with the growing internationalisation of educational policy and practice, it is necessary to explore Asian perspectives on the implementation of educational policies. Therefore, the next section reviews studies of teacher change conducted in China.

2.1.1 Studies in the Context of the People's Republic of China

A central aim of the national educational reform in China aims to transform from the traditional examination-oriented education to quality-oriented and student-centred education to improve the educational quality (NCIoER 2002). The Chinese Ministry of Education has enacted basic education curriculum reform since 2001 and launched the Higher Education Quality and Reform Project in 2002. There is inadequacy of research on reform implementation and development (Zhang 2004) and lack of research on teachers in China (Gu 2013).

H. Qian and Walker (2013) explored curriculum reform implementation from the perspective of school principals. They claim that most principals mainly rely on an inheritance of past practices and more focus on taking measures to improve the quality of curriculum and instruction directly, rather than increasing the change-making capacity of teachers. Curtis and Cheng (2001) argue that the alternative to the more usual top-down approach is to provide support based on teacher needs. Therefore, it is necessary to explore teacher perceptions and responses to educational reform.

As for the influence of two elements of the basic education reform in China, decentralisation and quality improvement on school-level practices, Y. Liu and Dunne's (2009) study focuses on the effects of the educational policy reforms in China at the school level. The findings of this study indicate that improving student academic performance in the state examinations is still the top concern for schools, local authorities, teachers, parents and students. In contradiction with the national policy, this reaffirmed exam orientation within Chinese schools and has resulted in an increasingly stratified education system. Joong's (2012) study also concluded that the biggest hindrance for Chinese secondary teachers to implement activity-based and student-centred teaching is the examination system, which left little space for teacher to make changes. Similarly, the results of Cheng and Wang's (2004) survey study also indicate that the challenges the Chinese English teachers face are relevant to the centralised examination-driven educational system. However, these studies focus more on the influence of policy but less on how to support teachers to make changes within such a situation. Therefore, there is need to explore how to enhance teacher agency in responding to curriculum reform.

X. Gao et al. (2011) conducted an inquiry into a group of primary school English language teachers' research experiences in Guangdong province in China. They point out the decentralisation in basic education in China is actually 'recentralisation' due to the implicit control from the state on teachers through market competition and performance appraisal. Their study concludes that teachers' research engagement just serves to confirm the reform initiated from above, instead of cultivating sustainable capacity for school-based curriculum development. The findings of X. Gao et al.'s (2011) study are helpful for this study to further explore the influence of teacher research engagement on teacher pedagogical agency.

Many studies show that teacher commitment is significantly influenced by responses from students (Fullan 1991). Moreover, as reviewed in the previous section, studies have also indicated that students are one of the factors impacting on teacher implementation of reform mandates (Adamson and Davison 2008; Dello-Iacovo 2009; Yan 2012). For most Chinese EFL teachers, students' reticence and resistance to respond in the classroom is a major problem due to the traditional dominant role of teachers (Tsui 1996). In addition, students' low language proficiency, fear of making mistakes, teachers' intolerance of silence and teachers' incomprehensible input all contribute to students' reticence (Tsui 1996). Hence, Andrews (2007) suggests that teachers need to have awareness or knowledge of their students and their students' perspectives, as well as awareness of the extent of the difficulties materials have for students. Therefore, this study will consider the

influences of students on teacher beliefs and practices in the context of the classroom.

As for the general position and policy of school reform in China, Dello-Iacovo (2009) reviewed relevant studies in this area and suggested that the Chinese government's efforts to promote a revised school reform reflect a more holistic approach under the name of quality education. The author claimed that although a number of schools achieved the innovation required by reforms with considerable principal support, the implementation of the reforms on a wider scale is still constrained by insufficient resources, conceptual ambiguity and conservative resistance. Moreover, the goals of the new curriculum are contradictory to the examination tools and the goals of teachers, students and parents in an exam-oriented culture. To get a wider picture of curriculum reform in China, this study explores the factors influencing reform implementation at the higher education level. In addition, Wong and Tsui (2007) pointed out that research on teacher professional development in China has not paid much attention to the voice of teachers, especially teachers in private schools. Therefore, this study will focus on exploring teacher responses and perceptions towards educational reform and locate the research site in a private university in China.

As regards the subject of curriculum reform, specifically, there is a lack of research in foreign language education theory and a general lack of originality in research in the PRC (Hu 2009). C. Yan (2012) undertook a study focusing on Chinese English secondary school teachers' perceptions and implementation of the new English curriculum in Hubei province, China. The results indicate that implementation gaps were caused by the considerable professional and psychological challenges to teachers, the students' resistance, the lack of support from school administrators and most importantly the prevalent examination culture. Therefore, Yan suggested that it was necessary to address teachers' challenges and difficulties in the process of reform implementation. However, C. Yan's (2012) study still focused on whether teachers could follow reform mandates. She did not theorise about teacher roles in change. Therefore, this study will use a sociocultural theoretical framework to analyse teacher agency for change.

Using Adamson's (1998) conceptual framework, X. Zheng and Davison (2008) conducted research into how Chinese secondary school teachers become decision-makers and interact with the intended pedagogy enacted by the new English curriculum for junior secondary schools in China. Their study analysed the curriculum reform at both the process and the product levels, with a focus on the relationship between curriculum and teaching materials, teachers' lesson planning and teaching practices. This study concluded that teacher beliefs played an important role in participant teachers' classroom practices, even when some of their beliefs contradicted each other. Moreover, school principals, school cultures, and collegial networks were found to have a crucial impact in teachers' decision-making, in renewing their beliefs and in professional development. These findings also have some contributions for analysing teacher agency in responding to reform in mainland China.

In contrast with the progress of the reforms in basic education, the curriculum reform in higher education in China is still implemented in a more centralised and

top-down manner. Although almost all the top-level education policies after 1985 have been emphasising decentralisation and autonomy, the actual progress has been small and slow. Both the central government and provincial government have been tightly controlling the subject development and student recruitment of higher education in China (Zhao 2012). At school level, the management structure is tightly hierarchical and teachers usually work in isolation without sufficient support (Qian and Verhoeven 2004; Walker and Dimmock 2000).

As regards the College English reform, H. Wang and Cheng (2008) explored the implementation of an English language teaching project 'Rolling Project' in the College English Department at a major provincial university, in Xi'an city, a provincial capital city in Western China. Based on the framework of educational change and cultures of teaching (Fullan 1982; Hargreaves and Fullan 1992), the authors analysed the change process, the challenges to the main stakeholders in the university and the impact of this innovative English project on the culture of teaching in this university. Their analyses suggest that the project's failure is due to the top-down curriculum reform implementation, which excluded teachers from being the main stakeholders and participating in the decision-making process. Although their study indicates the important role that teachers play in achieving successful reform implementation, they failed to reveal what the factors are that enhance teacher agentive role in educational reform.

Chinese national reform of College English teaching in China called for the integration of ICT into English classroom teaching. Z. Hu and McGrath (2012) used Fullan's concept of educational change as the conceptual framework to analyse the ICT implementation in a Chinese university. The findings indicate that the reform requirements are challenging for teachers, and constraints included insufficient ICT facilities, teachers' limited ICT skills and pedagogical knowledge, and lack of technical support and training. One limitation of this study is that researchers only described the reform implementation in a renowned university, which cannot depict the whole picture of national reform implementation. Therefore, this research is located in an ordinary university in China.

As for the implementation of College English reform at university level, J. Gu (2012) reported on the reform of the College English curriculum in one university in Jilin province, which is one of the second round demonstration sites for the National College English reform. The author described how the university leaders reformed their College English curriculum, teaching management and teaching resources according to the requirements of the national curriculum. However, in the quoted university policy which was claimed to guarantee the English reform, the university paid great attention and emphasis on students' scores, such as relating students' scores to both teacher and student evaluation, relating scores to student graduation and relating scores to student cadres, by repeating the word 'score' five times. This indicates the implementation of the national reform at a local level is still test-oriented, which is contradictory to the original motive of the national reform. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how the reform is implemented at the local level in specific contexts as well as factors that affect the implementation.

In addition to the implementation gaps, Z. D. Zhang (2006) suggests that foreign language teaching in China needs to have a diverse theoretical framework. Especially, Z. D. Zhang highlights the necessity of developing a more comprehensive and scientific series of policies on foreign language education. At the same time, he also argues that at micro level, innovation in foreign language teaching should be achieved through teachers' active self-development. This indicates the importance of teacher agency in curriculum reform.

Overall, this review of the literature has revealed common issues and concerns with educational change in different countries. These studies have contributed in a number of ways in the area of curriculum reform implementation. Firstly, in contrast to studies conducted in Western countries, the examination-oriented or teacher-centred culture is one prominent factor impacting on and constraining reform implementation in China (Dai et al. 2011; Dello-Iacovo 2009; Gu 2012; Halstead and Zhu 2009; Joong 2012; Liu and Dunne 2009; Yan 2012; Zheng and Davison 2008). In addition, different from most Western countries, curriculum reforms in China have a centralised implementation system and top-down style implementation (Gao et al. 2011; Hu and McGrath 2012; Wang and Cheng 2008). Moreover, many studies reveal that conceptual gaps exist between the intended reform and teacher understanding (Dello-Iacovo 2009; Joong 2012; Lai and Lo 2011; Liu and Dunne 2009; Yan 2012). In addition, studies indicate that support from schools' administration (Yan 2012; Zheng and Davison 2008) and teacher learning and professional development (Dai et al. 2011; Gao et al. 2011; Lai 2010; Wong and Tsui 2007; Zembylas and Barker 2007) are also important for successful reform implementation.

However, there are only a few studies on how to help teachers to play active roles in the era of reform and transformation (Zhong 2006). Most research in this area has been conducted from a normative perspective on equipping teachers for reform. In these studies, teachers were viewed as passive followers of the reform requirements (Joong 2012; Liu and Dunne 2009; Gu 2012; Yan 2012). This study shifts to a more explanatory form by examining how teachers' pedagogical agency can enable them to play an active part in the era of reform. This may have implications for how to help teachers to become more able and willing to transform their teaching and reach their potential, even exceeding the requirements of the reform. At the same time, this research can offer some insights into the gaps between the top-down policies and the practices at the local level. A sociocultural approach to teacher agency emphasises the social contexts and cultural tools that shape the development of teacher beliefs, values and ways of acting (Wertsch 1991). Given the nature of mediated agency as a group property with mediational means in a broader social and historical community (Wertsch et al. 1993), activity theory links the individual with the social structure (Johnson and Golombek 2011). Therefore, this study uses activity theory and sociocultural theory as the framework to analyse teacher agency in responding to the reform.

In addition, most research about Chinese educational reform has focused on the curriculum reform in the basic education sector. In contrast, only a few studies have researched College English reform. This study is concerned with the College English reform and has the potential to enrich the relevant literature by shedding some light on curriculum reform at tertiary level. The review studies in the Chinese context are also limited in terms of geography. Most of these studies on China's curriculum reform were conducted in developed and well-resourced areas, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong province, Shandong province and Fujian province. However, it is equally necessary to pay attention to more conservative and less developed regions which contribute more insights into the complexity of curriculum reform. Therefore, this study was conducted in Henan Province, a relatively conservative, agricultural province located in Central China.

2.1.2   *The Need to Explore Teacher Agency in Response to Curriculum Reform*

Hargreaves (1994) argued that teacher responsibility and capacity to change is more significant than centralised control of curriculum reform and implementation. Previous research on teacher roles in educational reform has largely explored whether teacher capacity and practices match the reform requirements. It has also become necessary to research how teachers' agency motivates them to take initiatives in improving their teaching from within rather than reforming them from without (Werner, as cited in Fullan 1991, p. 132).

Only a few empirical studies have examined teacher agency in education reform (Lasky 2005; Priestley 2011). Priestley (2011) investigated the gaps between reform policy and practice from the data from two schools in Scotland. The analyses focus on culture, structure and agency using the social theory of Margaret Archer. This study demonstrated that teacher culture and different management styles have influenced external reform policies. However, one limitation of Priestley's study was that he still viewed teacher agency as an individual property and did not fully address the relations between psychological and sociocultural processes, although not denying sociocultural factors. Agency is regarded as action potential, mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors (van Lier 2008).

Pyhältö et al. (2012) focused on teacher perceived professional agency in school reforms on undivided basic education in the context of Finland. Results indicate that teacher professional agency can trigger teacher learning. The results reflect the fact that teacher learning takes place first between the teachers and then triggers more profound changes at the intrapersonal level. This is in line with Vygotsky's (1962) theory of learning that human development firstly occurs on the social plane and then on the psychological plane. Pyhältö et al. pointed out that the relationship between teachers and their working environment can either promote or hinder

teacher learning in terms of active professional agency. Therefore, the findings suggest that more attention should focus on creating different kinds of opportunities for teacher participation.

Lasky (2005) used sociocultural theory and mediated agency as a lens to explore the dynamic interplay among teacher identity, agency and context in secondary school reform in Canada. The teachers reported experiencing professional vulnerability in terms of their purposes in teaching students. The analysis shows that two mediational systems shaped teacher agency and their professional vulnerability: early influences on teacher identity and the current reform context. Data reveal gaps/disjuncture between teacher identity and the expectations of the new reform mandates. Teacher agency was constrained in the new reform context. This study offered an effective conceptual framework to address teacher-mediated agency.

As for reform, the failure of change and development may be caused by the resistance from practitioners who encounter disturbance in their work activity in the process of shifting to new practice. Van Lier warns of the mistake of viewing agency through 'a window of conformity with established classroom practices and rejecting forms of resistance (however subtle) as expressing lack of agency' (van Lier 2008, p. 179). Resistance indicates that the practitioners' will, engagement and agency are functioning (Engeström 2000). Greenberg and Baron (2000) list the reasons for such teacher resistance. One is the failure to recognise the need for change. Another is habit, as it is easier to continue in the same way than to develop new skills. Teachers resist because the new intervention or technology does not fit their needs or is too risky (Yamazumi 2007). The findings suggest that young teachers are more open to accept the temporal changes in language teaching, but more experienced teachers usually hold their own beliefs and resist changes (Johnson 1992; Lasky and Sutherland 2000).

Lasky's (2005) study suggests that the concept of mediated agency is useful in analysing whether government reform policy creates a mediational system with new tools and expectations for teaching and how teachers understand and interact with new reform mandates. A sociocultural approach to mediated agency emphasises the social contexts and cultural tools that shape the development of teacher beliefs, values and ways of acting (Wertsch 1991). From a sociocultural perspective, agency shapes and is shaped by the structural and cultural features of society and school cultures (Datnow et al. 2002). In this context, reform policies are adopted, appropriated or ignored. Teachers are not simply taking orders in the reform process—they are active agents, even if some of them seem passive (Datnow et al. 2002). Research on teacher agency in relation to reform can have implications for how to improve teacher capacity to transform their teaching and how to improve the implementation of reform mandates. Therefore, this study aims to explore how teachers, as active agents, implement educational reform and innovation. Since the focus of this study is how Chinese EFL teachers respond to the reform and innovate in their EFL reading class, the next subsection will review research in EFL reading instruction.

2.2   The Need to Study EFL Reading Instruction from the Sociocultural Perspective

In China, many researchers have studied English reading courses at tertiary level (Cortazzi and Jin 1996; Ge 1993; Wu 1990; Zhang 1997). Researchers and teachers have criticised the ways these courses have been taught, arguing that these courses are teacher-centred, grammar-translation training courses rather than reading-based language courses. X. Zheng and Davison (2008) argue that although the grammar-translation method is criticised as having little emphasis on speaking and communicative skills, it is still popular and employed today in classroom teaching in China (Rao 1999; Stern 1983; Wyss 2002) because it can be applied with masses of students by teachers who lack oral fluency in the target language (Steinberg and Sciarini 2006). Consequently, Chinese students have a tendency to use bottom-up reading approaches in their English reading.

However, the requirements of the 2007 curriculum reform for reading comprehension emphasise that students need to grasp the main ideas and understand major facts and relevant details. This suggests pedagogical changes are required in teachers' classroom teaching. Teachers need to incorporate both bottom-up and top-down approaches in their reading instruction. Bottom-up approaches assume a reader constructs meaning from word recognition, phrases, clauses and sentences that represent lexical meaning and then build meaning in a linear manner (Hudson 2007). Top-down approaches assume that a reader understands a text with conceptualisations above the textual level. A reader needs to make a prediction about the incoming information and apply background knowledge to the text to create personally and contextually related meaning (Goodman 1967; Smith 1982). More recent developments in psycholinguistic theory have suggested effective reading is a combination of both bottom-up and top-down processes, called an interactive approach. This model assumes that if sight word recognition is successful, then readers can move to using higher-level skills (Hudson 2007).

In regard to curriculum reform mandates, it might be inferred that the curriculum expects teachers to change the situation, whereby grammar-translation and bottom-up approaches are widely employed in reading instruction. The reform requirements seem more sympathetic to the features of the interactive model, that is, students are expected to incorporate their background knowledge into the reading process to get the main ideas and major facts (Anderson and Pearson 1984; Hudson 1991), and students apply lower-level skills to understand details of the reading (Gough 1995). This suggests pedagogical changes are required in teachers' classroom teaching. Teachers need to incorporate both bottom-up and top-down approaches in their reading instruction. Concerning this requirement, this study will explore whether teacher beliefs and classroom practices are mediated by this mandate and whether teachers have set or intend to set mutual goals with the reform.

The 2007 College English curriculum also expects students to use a variety of reading strategies, again underlying certain expectations for teacher pedagogical practice. Researchers concerned with reading instruction and reading development

claim that strategy use and the development of strategic readers are central issues for comprehension (Grabe 2009). In the Chinese context, many studies have focused on student use of strategies in learning comprehension (Feng and Mokhtari 1998; Gu 2003; Gu and Johnson 1996; Li and Munby 1996; Pang 2008; Parry 1996; Tang 1997; Yuet and Chan 2003; Zhang 2008). These studies have revealed similar findings: successful students were aware of and able to use a variety of reading strategies to achieve success.

Much research in the Chinese context focuses on the distinction between good and bad readers (Chen 1998; Liu and Bever 2002) or an empirical examination of the reading strategies students use. At the same time, more research is needed to investigate instructional practices under different circumstances with different students and their integration with dominant curriculum frameworks (Grabe 2009). As stated, this study focuses on whether teachers respond to curriculum requirements by implementing reading strategy instruction in their practices. Therefore, it is necessary to explore teacher beliefs and knowledge about how to teach reading strategies, which is a significant factor influencing decision-making and classroom practices. This study uses beliefs elicitation instruments by asking teachers to evaluate three models of teaching reading strategies: reciprocal teaching (Palinscar and Brown 1984), transactional strategies instruction (Pressley 2002a, b, c) and direct explanation model (Duffy et al. 1987).

These three models of teaching reading strategies are regarded as effective, even though they have different characteristics. Reciprocal teaching and direct explanation both present a more open framework for instruction in which multiple tasks are included. There is an equal emphasis on comprehension and on learning from the text while developing strategic reading abilities (Grabe 2004). In addition, reciprocal teaching has been validated in many studies (Grabe 2004). As for transactional strategies instruction (TSI), it provides a larger curricular framework for strategic comprehension instruction. Besides teaching reading strategies, it also incorporates activities related to comprehension instruction, such as vocabulary development, fluency practice and extensive reading. Its effectiveness has also been validated by multiple studies, and it fully engages students in all aspects of strategic reading instruction (Guthrie and Ozgungor 2002; Pressley 2002c). Although these models are from L1 settings, it is claimed that strategies use does not differ much between L1 and L2 reading (Block 1986; Sheorey and Mokhtari 2001).

However, it cannot be blindly assumed that these models are as effective in L2/FL teaching as in L1 settings. Farrell (2001) conducted a case study of how a teacher employed strategy training in a secondary school English reading class in Singapore. Farrell claims it is important to consider the effects of using some 'Western' approaches to instruction in Asia. The concept of reading strategies and the methods of teaching reading strategies originated from research on L1 reading comprehension and hence may appear 'foreign' to Chinese teachers. Therefore, it is worth exploring whether there are conflicts between teacher beliefs and reform mandates to have better understanding about teacher attitudes and agency in relation to the reform.

Although there are many suggestions about how reading strategy should be taught in L2 reading, there are also few classroom-based studies which have described the role of the classroom teacher and details of the settings (Erler and Finkbeiner 2007). This is despite the fact that some major English reading course books in China now have sections on reading strategy. For example, the textbook designed for the 2007 College English curriculum reform, New Horizon College English, also has a section for teaching reading strategies. These textbooks are mostly used without the support of empirical research (Pang 2008). Therefore, it is worthwhile to put effort into researching this area.

As reviewed so far, most studies on EFL reading instruction and studies on teaching reading strategies in diverse contexts in China only pay attention to the cognitive aspects of reading, such as the effectiveness of teaching methods, effective use of strategies and the good reader's and bad reader's differences in using strategies, but social, cultural, and contextual factors are neglected. However, reading is not only a transmission of information from the text to the mind of the reader but also a social practice in which readers are required to use text in a culturally defined way. Making meaning from text is a result of participation in a particular cultural–historical context (Gavelek and Bresnahan 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to study classroom practices as one activity system in a specific cultural–historical context.

Activity theory argues that human behaviour results from the integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into human activity. It aims to understand a person's goals through action and motives through activity and analyses systems in activity from the broad perspective of the larger social system. Therefore, analysing Chinese EFL reading classes from an activity theory perspective may reveal teachers' difficulties in applying theory in their classroom practices and the process of how teachers and students construct their understanding of reading in a particular context. In addition, activity theory can reveal how teacher classroom teaching is mediated by tools and artefacts, such as teacher beliefs and knowledge, teaching methods and approaches, textbooks, classroom activities and students as part of the classroom community. Concerning the reform requirements, this study will explore whether teacher beliefs and classroom practices are mediated by this mandate by observing teachers' classes and whether teachers have set or intend to set mutual goals with the reform. The detailed procedures of how activity theory is applied in analysing a teacher's reading class are discussed in the next subsection.

2.3   Theoretical Framework for Analysing Teacher Agency

2.3.1   Teacher Agency in Activity System

Various theories have different perspectives on the concept of agency. Social cognitive theory (Bandura 2001) emphasises intentionality as the core aspect of agency. However, agency is only viewed as internal goal setting, emphasising self-control

and beliefs as one's self-efficacy, independent of external input. Sociological approaches take stances on agency that focus on creativity and intersubjectivity (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Activity theory and sociocultural theories depict agency as a human being's ability to act (Engeström 2008), including the capacity for goal-directed and purposive action and for using mediating means to perform this action (Wertsch et al. 1995). Compared with the other two theories, activity theory offers a dialectical system linking individuals with the social structure (Johnson and Golombek 2011).

As for large-scale educational change, teacher agency is to take responsibility for both their own learning and the development of the professional community, for instance, by generating new ideas and forms of implementation, coordinating and testing the ideas with one another, and monitoring the proceedings of their collaborative efforts (Engeström 1999; Smith 2006). Concerning the nature of teacher agency in reform, activity theory provides a holistic view of the human agency within certain human practices (Engeström 1993; Thorne 2004). In addition, activity theory offers a useful framework for analysing a given activity system, diagnosing problems and implementing innovation (Thorne 2004). The second generation of activity theory can be used as a framework for analysing an object-oriented, collective and culturally mediated human activity, emphasising the mediation of human action by cultural artefacts in a broader social and historical community (Wertsch et al. 1993). Therefore, this study uses the second generation of activity theory as the framework (Fig. 2.1) to analyse teacher agency in responding to reform.

As illustrated in Fig. 2.1, a human activity system consists of six components. The subject refers to the individual or group of individuals whose agency is the focus of the analysis. The object refers to the 'raw material' or 'problem space' which the activity aims to transform into outcomes with the help of physical and symbolic mediating artefacts, including both tools and signs. The community includes multiple individuals and/or subgroups who share the same object. The division of labour includes both the division of tasks between the community members and the division of power. Finally, the rules refer to the explicit and implicit regulations and norms that constrain actions and interactions in the activity system (Engeström 2002).

The multidirectional arrows in Fig. 2.1 illustrate how each component in the activity system influences the other either directly or indirectly. For example, the national curriculum sets a new teaching goal for teachers, which requires teachers to use different teaching artefacts, in particular the new teaching methods.

Fig. 2.1 The structure of a human activity system (Engeström 1987, p. 78)
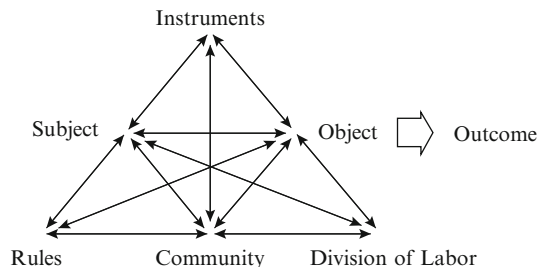
Accordingly, this change also requires changes in the rules and division of labour in the education community. When this study analyses teacher agency, components of the activity system of the teacher's teaching, such as his or her object of teaching, tools, rules, community and division of labour in the classroom, will be considered simultaneously. As for the data analysis in this study, the coding was set based on the framework of the second generation of activity theory, focusing on the interrelations between the individual subject and his or her community.

Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001) suggest that the recent formulation of activity theory (Engeström 1987) can provide a way to view the relational construction of agency, because the individual actor is mediated not only by material and symbolic tools but also by social formation. From an activity theory perspective, agency is constrained by social constructs and material and symbolic resources, as well as other social and personal factors (Johnson and Golombek 2011).

Moreover, activity theory reveals the difficulties people encounter in translating ideas about the future into practical reality (Blackler and Regan 2009). These conflicts between individual action and the whole activity system is defined as inner contradiction (Engeström 1987), which reveals the unstable and unpredictable nature of human action. Inner contradictions in an activity system have the potential to generate transformation if they can be resolved (Engeström 2001). Engeström (1987) identifies four levels of contradictions: primary, secondary, tertiary and quaternary. Analysing contradictions can offer us an in-depth understanding of the whole activity system as well as the changes in the activity system. Therefore, in order to explore teachers' agency to change their teaching, it is necessary to analyse contradictions in a teacher's activity system.

Primary-level contradictions exist within each component of an activity system. For example, teachers may have conflicting beliefs about how to teach certain subjects. Secondary-level contradictions are between the components of a human activity system. For instance, a teacher sets a new object for teaching, but the textbooks are not adequately designed for achieving this new teaching object. Tertiary-level contradictions arise when a culturally more advanced activity system, such as the government, imposes a new factor into the central activity system. For instance, the national curriculum reform requires teachers to use a new teaching method. Finally, quaternary contradictions exist between a central activity system and its neighbour activity system. For example, a teacher is dissatisfied with his or her in-service teacher education course. As a result, he or she resists using what has been taught in the in-service teacher education course. The quaternary level contradiction, therefore, arises between the teacher's activity system and its neighbour activity system, the system of the in-service teacher education programme (Engeström 1987, p. 89).

As for the curriculum reform, if the novel factor imposed by the national reform does not cause secondary-level contradictions in the activity system of teachers' classroom teaching, the tertiary-level contradictions may result in teachers' resistance or the consequence of giving new names to the old practices (Engeström 1987). However, if the national reform causes secondary-level contradictions within the components in teachers' activity systems, and if teachers take agentive action to resolve the contradictions, it might be assumed that there is the potential to generate transformations of the teaching (Engeström 1987, 1993). The contradictions

mutually influence each other in an activity system, indicating the constantly changing nature of the activity system. This study mainly focuses on primary and secondary contradictions within the case study teachers' classroom activity system, as well as tertiary-level contradictions between the activity system of the national reform and the activity system of the case study teachers' classroom teaching.

A number of studies have used activity theory and the concept of contradictions in analysing teacher roles in reform. Bourke and McGee (2012) conducted a study on how an in-service teacher education organisation coped with cultural innovation in New Zealand. They used activity theory to examine individual and institutional changes by analysing both tension and learning. Kim's (2011) study used activity theory to analyse teachers' experiences of communicative language teaching curriculum reform in Korean middle schools. Kim analysed contradictions in the teachers' activity system of classroom teaching and found that the teachers' beliefs contradicted the mandates of the Korean Ministry of Education. Similarly, in another study conducted in Korea about the extent to which four pre-service English teachers internalised and enacted communicative language teaching (CLT)-oriented English language curricular reforms in South Korea, Ahn (2011) used sociocultural and activity theory to analyse teachers' learning and contradictions in the teachers' activity system. In the Chinese context, L. Hu and Webb (2009) used activity theory to analyse how seven Chinese English teachers implemented ICT pedagogy. The results revealed the potential driving force for change was the conflicts between the traditional teacher-centred pedagogy in the educational system and the student-centred pedagogy which was advocated by the introduction of ICT.

All these studies suggest that the activity theory model is useful to understand individual teacher experience within multiple activity systems and to gain insights into why curriculum reform is unsuccessful. However, although these studies construed the teacher role as an active learner, there was no explicit conceptualisation of teacher agency to initiate change. In addition, these studies failed to reveal the interacting and dynamic relationship between each level of contradiction. In contrast, this study takes teacher classroom teaching as the central activity system and investigates teacher agency through an analysis of contradictions at different levels. At the same time, the analysis also focuses on the dynamic relationship among the contradictions.

2.3.2 Teacher Agency in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

2.3.2.1 Rationale for Using the ZPD

Besides activity theory, this study uses the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to analyse teacher agency to change their teaching. The ZPD is defined as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem

solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (Vygotsky 1978, p. 86). Lantolf further defined it as 'the difference between what a person can achieve when acting alone and what the same person can accomplish when acting with support from someone else and/or cultural artefacts' (Lantolf 2000, p. 17).

There are two reasons this study uses the ZPD together with activity theory to analyse teacher agency. The first reason is because activity theory has been criticised for involving a certain technicist activism that has no humanistic origin (Davydov 1999). In addition, Toomela (2000) also criticises that activity theory focuses more on the analysis of the activity system and actions, rather than personal development. Although Engeström (2009) strongly argues that activity theory represents development, there is not much evidence for that. The triangular framework of activity theory has been criticised for being rather static and not dynamic enough to show the process of a person's development and potential (Langemeyer and Roth 2006), whereas the ZPD indicates the potentiality of the individual and a space where individual cognition originates in and emerges through participation in social activity (Johnson and Golombek 2011). Therefore, the use of activity theory with the ZPD can indicate the development of teacher cognition.

The second reason is concerned with transformation. As a key notion of activity theory, transformation is usually understood as changing the object. However, not every change is a transformation because transformation means changing the internal essence of the object. Many changes only affect the object externally rather than changing it internally (Davydov 1999). Take curriculum reform as an example, the aim of curriculum reform is to achieve changes in both teacher practices and teacher cognition. On the one hand, activity theory offers a framework to analyse an object-oriented, collective and culturally mediated human activity. On the other hand, the ZPD can be used to indicate the realisation of teacher's inner potential and the process of internalisation. Therefore, in this study, the use of activity theory and the ZPD complement each other. After analysing the activity system of each teacher's classroom teaching, this study uses the ZPD as a tool to explore their pedagogical agency.

The ZPD incorporates both the maximum potentiality of the individual and unconscious components which are viewed as the seat of creativity and problem solving (Robbins 2003). In a teacher education context, the ZPD can be viewed as a space where the novice teacher's potential skills are developing under the guidance of more experienced people (Goos 2005). From this perspective, this study argues that the extent of teacher agency can be indicated by the potential levels of development which are suggested by the kinds of assistance, both conceptual mediational means and material tools, needed to form a new object of instruction and the teacher's ability to use external assistance to solve contradictions in the current teaching activity (Lantolf and Thorne 2006).

2.3.2.2   Thresholds of Development in the ZPD

Specifically, the extent of teacher agency can be indicated by the zones of development (Fig. 2.2), which are discussed in this subsection.

Fig. 2.2 Teacher agency in
the ZPD (Adapted from
Michell 2012)
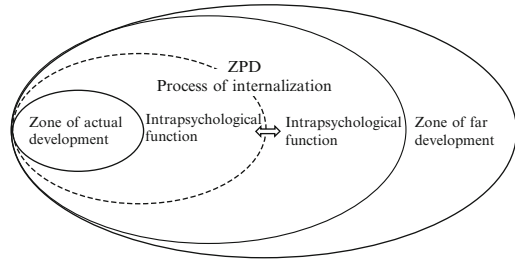
Zone 1: The Zone of Actual Development

Vygotsky proposed two developmental levels. The first is the 'the actual develop-
ment level' (Vygotsky 1978, p. 85), which is the level of development of a child's
mental functions that has been established in an already completed developmental
cycle. The second is the ZPD, which has been discussed in the previous section. The
zone of actual development (ZAD) is indicated as the first level or zone 1 in Fig. 2.2.
If the novice teacher lacks active intention to seek assistance, either material tools
or conceptual mediational means to improve his or her teaching practices to the
potential level he or she can achieve with assistance or guidance, then his or her
extent of agency to change or improve the teaching can be assumed to be associated
with the first zone.

Zone 2: The Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky (1978) claimed that humans gain control over natural mental functions by
bringing externally (socioculturally) formed mediating artefacts into thinking activ-
ity (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). This happens as a consequence of internalisation,
which is indicated as the second level or zone 2 in Fig. 2.2. Internalisation is con-
ceptualised as the process of ingrowth that leads to personal transformation. In addi-
tion, it is a process of 'reorganization of the person-environment relationship that
itself emerges with person-environment relationships' (Lantolf and Thorne 2006,
p. 155). No single view of the ZPD or internalisation exists. There is a dialectical
relationship between social and internal (shown as the left–right arrow between
intra- and interpsychological functions in Fig. 2.2). The goal of internalisation is
self-regulation (Robbins 2003). Self-regulation is when a learner has complete con-
trol and ability to function independently and takes over complete responsibility for
carrying out the goal-directed task (Wertsch 1985).

  Vygotsky claimed that internalisation was not unidirectional, and it forms a close
unity with externalisation (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). In the process of internalisa-
tion, semiotic material is brought from the social domain into the personal domain
and then is put back into the social environment in the process of externalisation
(Lantolf and Thorne 2006). From the perspective of activity theory, externalisation
is the creation of new artefacts which makes transformation possible (Engeström

and Miettinen 1999). That is in accordance with the definition of agency from an activity theory perspective. As for teacher development, teacher agency reaches the proximal level if the teacher has the ability to create new goals and tools after internalising the mediating artefacts from the interaction with experts, peers or even his or her students.

Zone 3: Zone of Far Development

This zone represents the area which lies beyond the zone of proximal development. Even with the assistance from mediational means, teachers are incapable of achieving some goals or tasks. Such tasks or goals may lead to frustration or feelings of being overloaded, and therefore, efficient learning cannot take place in this zone. This study will analyse the goals or cultural tools which are too far for teachers to take agentive action and the factors which account for this.

According to Vygotsky (1962), human development firstly occurs on the social plane and then on the psychological plane. The key to understanding human cognition and activity is the organisation of interpsychological functioning (operation on the social plane) that gives rise to intrapsychological processes (operation on the internal plane). In other words, social interaction will bring about growth in a person's individual consciousness. Therefore, mediational agency in interpsychological functioning in socialisation settings is the root of the cognitive values that characterise individual mental functioning (Wertsch and Rupert 1993). Wertsch and Rupert (1993) suggest that we need to understand how and why individuals hold cognitive values about preferred solutions to various problems through analysing the mediational means in interpsychological functioning in consideration of the cultural, historical and institutional forces that shape them. Then it is possible to make principled connections between sociocultural context and individual mental functioning (Wertsch and Rupert 1993). As for reform, policy mandates, curriculum guidelines, teaching material, students' beliefs and the culture of teaching in the local community are the tools produced in social, cultural and historical evolution and will evolve as people use them in their lives (Vygotsky 1962). Therefore, this study will analyse the mediation of these means/tools on teacher thinking and beliefs. Fullan (1991) argues that educational change should strike at the core of beliefs and conceptions of education. Here, Vygotsky's ZPD seems to push the meaning of change to a further step to analyse whether teachers can internalise the changes from the social plane into their knowledge systems at the mental plane.

Vygotsky (1978) claims that the learner who is able to respond to help is considered to be at a more advanced development level than the one who fails to do so, because the learner who responds to help is expected to have a more rapid rate of actual development. The transformation of teaching activity also requires an ability to make use of available resources, such as tools, both material and conceptual, or other people, to support one's action on the object (Edwards and D'Arcy 2004). Both Fullan (1991) and Hargreaves (1994) emphasised the importance of teacher collaboration for reform implementation. Relational agency is not just collaborative

action on an object, but 'a capacity to recognize and use the support of others in order to transform the object' (Edwards and D'Arcy 2004, p. 149). Similarly, instrumental agency is the ability to use tools and artefacts available to make transformation. In this study, reform may bring new tools, such as curricula, guidelines, technology and expectations for teaching. Agency is both constrained and empowered by mediational means and cultural tools (Wertsch 1998). By engaging with other agents and tools within a ZPD, teachers may gain new insights into the problems they are facing and hence experience further development. The detailed procedures used to operationalise the ZPD in analysing the data will be explained in the last section of this chapter.

The review of the literature and studies of teacher roles in educational reform suggest that most studies lack a theoretical framework to explicitly address teacher agency. Addressing these gaps in the literature, this study uses activity theory and the ZPD to explore how teachers, as active agents, interact with the mediational system created by the reform. The concept of mediated agency from a sociocultural perspective shifts the focus of educational reform research beyond individual teachers, because sociocultural theory regards teachers as learners and argues that learning first happens on a social level and then on the individual level (Vygotsky 1978). Activity theory is used to analyse teacher classroom teaching as one system and teacher agency to resolve the contradictions. The use of the ZPD can indicate the teachers' potential to transform their teaching and the internalisation of teacher learning. A sociocultural approach to agency means examining individual's actions. In this process, the focus is on the social contexts and cultural tools that shape the development of a person's beliefs and ways of action (Wertsch 1991).

2.4 Summary

In this chapter, the review of the teacher roles in educational reform indicates that some studies still position teachers in a compliant role. Some researchers, such as Fullan and Hargreaves, regard teachers as active agents but fail to theorise the concept of teacher agency explicitly. Concerning this issue, this study aims to study teacher agency from a sociocultural theory perspective. The concept of 'teacher as learner' in sociocultural theories of learning may provide a more nuanced picture of the process of reform implementation (Stritikus 2003). Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning provides a starting point for how sociocultural perspectives inform policy research (Stritikus 2003). Therefore, a sociocultural perspective on teacher learning might inform educational reform research to consider how teachers interact with their immediate context and explain the complex process of learning and teacher action (Stritikus 2003).

The review on reading instruction also suggests most studies on EFL reading instruction and studies on teaching reading strategies in the Chinese context only pay attention to the cognitive aspect of reading. In order to explore EFL reading instruction while considering contextual, social and cultural factors, as well as the

teacher roles, it is necessary to use activity theory as the analytical framework. Finally, based on the review of the literature, this chapter argues for the contribution of activity theory and the ZPD in exploring teacher agency in relation to educational reform. The next chapter will analyse the activity systems of the National College English reform and the College English department where the case study teachers were selected. These two advanced activity systems compose the broad reform community for individual teacher agency to innovate their reading instruction in response to the reform.

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Chapter 3
Advanced Activity Systems

This chapter depicts the three-level contexts of College English teaching. First the development of College English in China is introduced, including the context and the problems of curriculum and test reform, as the macro-level context of College English teaching. After that, the activity system of the Chinese Ministry of Education (CMoE) is analysed in relation to the national curriculum reform as well as the national reform implementation style and strategies, as the meso-level context. Then the activity system of the College English Department where this study was conducted is presented, as the micro-level context. Following that, the interactions and the contradictions generated between the activity system of the CMoE and the activity system of the Department are analysed, to reveal the hierarchical power relationships between these two activity systems and foreground the broader context for the analysis of each individual case teacher's agency in the following chapters. Finally, the impact that these three-level contexts have on individual teacher agency is summarised. These three-level contexts are taken as advanced systems framing the activity systems of classroom teaching, which provides information about teacher agency within the context of the broader social and historical community.

3.1 Macro-level Context: Development of College English in China

In China, EFL teaching at university level is divided into two strands; one is for English major students and the other for the majority of students who are non-English majors, officially called College English. This study focuses on the reform of College English. In Chinese universities, non-English major students are required to study English for at least 2 years (four semesters). The main course for College

English is a highly condensed reading course, called intensive reading, 4 h/week. However, it is actually not just a reading course, but a foundation course emphasising reading, the use of vocabulary, knowledge of grammar and translation. The widely adopted approach used for teaching is the grammar-translation approach, overwhelmingly influenced by the Chinese native language literacy mode, the bottom-up approach (Wang 1999).

Textbooks play an important role in both the teaching and learning of College English because the textbook in Chinese culture is regarded as an embodiment of knowledge and truth (Wang 1999). A government-appointed panel of experts designed and compiled the textbooks according to the curriculum set by the government for the universities and colleges (Wang 1999). The textbooks for the intensive reading course usually include three main parts: new vocabulary and expressions in bilingual form, a reading passage, and exercises assessing students' comprehension of the text and their mastery of keywords and sentence structures (Wang 1999).

College English education in China has received significant policy attention in recent years. The Chinese government regards higher education as an important contribution to national strength and competitiveness in the global context of the knowledge economy. As for students' personal development, English proficiency is a key for graduates to gain employment and achieve academic success. As a result, English language providers are expected to help students achieve higher standards in learning English, yet, at the same time, the quality of College English education is facing challenges from a huge increase in student enrolments in higher education (from 1,080,000 to 6,618,000 students between 1998 and 2010) (CMoE 2011b).

One prominent problem in College English is test-oriented teaching. In 1985, the College English Test (CET) system was adopted to reinforce the effective implementation of the syllabus. During that period, as the exclusive assessment instrument of College English education, the CET-4 passing rate became a criterion for ranking higher education institutions and determining teachers' evaluation and promotion (Wang 2007). All non-English major students are required by their universities to take the CET (Zheng and Davison 2008). However, the test neither promoted English learning nor a rapid development of tertiary EFL education as expected by the test designer. On the contrary, it directed teachers and the institutions' attention to the test instead of English learning itself and directed students to mechanical multiple-choice skills, rather than towards communicative competence (Yang 2003). Li Lanqing, the then Vice Premier Minister in 1996, criticised College English education as 'low in both efficiency and effectiveness' (spending a great deal of time, yet achieving little effect) and urged more be done to promote effective English learning. A government official in charge of foreign language education, Cen Jianjun, remarked: '… The speed of reform is seriously hampered due to the overly low foreign language proficiency of our university students' (Chen 1998, cited in Gao 2009, pp. 64–65). This has been the impetus behind the College English syllabus and test reform since 1999.

3.1.1   College English Syllabus and Test Reform in 1999

The syllabus in 1999 was designed to promote a more communicative language teaching approach, as a response to the problem of 'low efficiency and effectiveness', and the needs of China's economic reform. It gave equal weight to speaking and reading and included an oral session for students who gained a score of 80 in the CET-4 or a score of 75 in the CET-6 (CMoE 1999). However, despite the government's intentions, this reform did not result in any positive impact on English teaching and learning. The CET-4/CET-6 Certificate increasingly continued to be used as a 'passport' to higher degree education and general employment. CET Certificate 'addiction' and test-oriented English teaching led to the College English curriculum being overwhelmed by coaching materials; students spent most of their time memorising vocabulary, doing mock tests and developing examination-wise skills rather than developing their communicative competence (Wang 2007).

As for reading comprehension, the test only focused on reading for details and required only memory and retrieval strategies (Song and Cheng 2006). Teachers were therefore inclined to follow a text-explanation approach (Li 2009). Consequently, students lacked declarative knowledge to activate their reading strategies (Zhang 2000) and focused on correctness and product instead of meaning and process of reading due to the multiple-choice test format (Huang 2005). Moreover, students relied strongly on translation and more concrete 'bottom-up' decoding strategies rather than 'top-down' strategies in reading (Zhang 2001). On the whole, the present educational system in China continues to rely on examinations for selecting academically more able students to have access to the highly competitive higher education and job market (Li 2009). These utilitarian values are evident in the College English education culture and are regarded as a major cause of the failure of the 1999 College English curriculum reform (Hu 2004).

3.1.2   College English Curriculum and Assessment Reform in 2007

In response, in 2002, the Chinese government launched the Higher Education Quality and Reform Project (HEQRP) (CMoE 2002), with the 2007 College English Reform Program (CERP) as a major component. In 2007, the Chinese government implemented the revised College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR), aiming to raise the standards of English proficiency so that graduates would achieve sufficient communicative competence in English for their academic and professional careers (CMoE 2007a).

The reform encourages the use of multimedia courseware and the Internet and introduces a new CET testing system, characterised by individualisation, collaboration, modularisation and hyper-textualisation (Hu, cited in Q. Chen and Klenowski 2009). The 2007 College English Curriculum Requirements state that the basic

requirements for reading comprehension are that students can grasp the main ideas and understand major facts and relevant details and be able to employ effective reading strategies while reading (CMoE 2007a). The detailed procedures of the 2007 College English reform will be introduced and analysed in the next section.

3.2   Meso-level Context: The Activity System of the National College English Curriculum Reform

This section discusses the curriculum reform system with respect to the elements of subject, object, rules, tools, community and division of labour in the activity theoretical framework, which all evolve interactively and are constantly changed by their interaction. First, the subject of any activity is the individual or group of actors engaged in the activity (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy 1999). In the case of the national curriculum reform, the Chinese Ministry of Education, who initiated the reform, is the subject of the activity system. The College English curriculum reform in China is a 'top-down' change because it is initiated and implemented by the CMoE in China. The next five subsections analyse the objects, implementation tools, community of practice, rules and division of labour of the activity system of the 2007 curriculum reform (see Fig. 3.1).

3.2.1   Brief Introduction to the CMoE

The Chinese Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China undertakes the work of studying and drafting policies and guidelines for educational work, drafting laws and regulations concerning education, initiating and implementing educational reform and developing strategies and national plans for the development of education, as well as providing guidance and coordinating the policies implementation. Therefore, the CMoE could be viewed as the subject of the activity system of the College English reform. The ministry consists of 18 departments. The Higher Education Department is responsible for the College English curriculum reform.

Under the guidance of the Higher Education Department of the Chinese Ministry of Education, each main subject in higher education is advised by a committee of experts. These committees are responsible for giving guidance for higher education reform, designing curriculum requirements, designing teaching materials and resources, evaluating curriculum and increasing the higher education quality. The expert committee on foreign language teaching was firstly called the Teaching Material Editorial Committee for Engineer students in 1962 and then changed to the Higher Education Foreign Language Teaching and Research Committee in 1996. In 2010, the 3rd Higher Education Foreign Language Teaching and Research Committee (CELTRC) was composed of 80 experts in the area of language teaching

Tools of reform implementation
1. Policy of the reform;
2. Research projects on College English teaching.
3. Textbook and course software;
4. Test reform;
5. Demonstration sites for the curriculum reform;
6. Seminars on the reform and teacher online training;

Subject:
The Chinese Ministry of Education

Objects for reading instruction:
Teaching main idea and details; teaching variety of reading strategies.

Outcome:
Uneven implementation

Rule:
Curriculum requirements

Community:
The CMoE; universities and teachers; curriculum and materials designers

Division of labour:
CMoE--- the role of control and authority
Universities and teachers--- the role of compliance

Fig. 3.1 The National College English curriculum reform as an activity system

from 73 top universities in China. These experts were authorised by the CMoE to design and keep modifying the 2007 College English curriculum. In addition, they also select the reform demonstration sites, monitor the implementation of the reform in the sites and conduct research on the College English teaching.

As introduced in the previous section, College English in China has undergone several waves of curriculum reform enacted by the Chinese Ministry of Education. In 1985 and 1986, the former State Education Commission (the current Ministry of Education) issued the first National College English Teaching Syllabus for both Science and Technology students and the Liberal Arts students. In 1999, the CMoE issued the 1999 National College English Syllabus which promoted communicative language teaching. In 2004 and 2007, the CMoE authorised some experts to design the College English Curriculum Requirements, as a response to the Higher Education Quality and Reform Project.

3.2.2   Objects and Outcome of the National Curriculum Reform

The object of the activity is the physical or mental goal or product that is sought by agents. Thus, an activity system is an object-oriented system. The object is acted on by the subject and is represented by the intentions that motivate the activity (Jonassen

and Rohrer-Murphy 1999). The aims of a curriculum reform embody a set of social beliefs and ideologies about schooling, learning and teaching (Zheng and Davison 2008). Therefore, this section analyses the objects of the 2007 College English curriculum reform and the beliefs and theory it both reflects and promotes.

The 2007 College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR) states that the objectives of college English are:

> … to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way… so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges. (CMoE 2007a)

This reflects that the aim of EFL education in China has shifted from one of language knowledge to one of more communicative ability and cultural knowledge. In addition to the general objectives of the curriculum reform, there are also specific requirements for teaching at different levels, course design and teaching models.

In relation to reading instruction, the CECR states three levels of objectives: basic, intermediate and advanced requirements. Besides the specific requirement for reading speed at each level, the basic requirements for reading are illustrated in Table 3.1.

These data indicate that besides the requirements for specific reading speeds and reading materials at different levels, the common requirements are that students can grasp the main ideas and relevant details and are able to employ effective reading strategies while reading, especially skimming and scanning (CMoE 2007a). However, the problems in reality are students' lack of declarative knowledge enabling them to use more concrete 'bottom-up' decoding strategies rather than

Table 3.1 Three levels of requirements for College English reading instruction

Levels of requirements	Specific requirements for reading instruction
Basic level requirement	'Students should be able to do skimming and scanning. With the help of dictionaries, they should be able to read textbooks in their areas of specialty, and newspaper and magazine articles on familiar topics, grasping the main ideas and understanding major facts and relevant details. They should be able to understand texts of practical styles commonly used in work and daily life. They are expected to be able to employ effective reading strategies while reading' (CMoE 2007a)
Intermediate level requirement	'Students should be able to skim or scan reading materials. When reading summary literature in their areas of specialty, students should be able to get a correct understanding of the main ideas, major facts and relevant details' (CMoE 2007a)
Advanced level requirement	'Students should be able to read rather difficult texts, and understand their main ideas and details. They should be able to read English articles in newspapers and magazines published abroad, and to read English literature related to their areas of specialty without much difficulty' (CMoE 2007a)

'top-down' strategies in reading (Zhang 2001). At the same time, the widely adopted approach in teaching is the grammar-translation approach and the bottom-up approach (Wang 1999). Therefore, according to the 2007 curriculum reform requirements, teachers need to adjust their current model of teaching practice by incorporating a top-down approach and teaching students to use both top-down and bottom-up reading strategies. This study focuses on whether teachers take agentive action to adjust their teaching according to these requirements.

In relation to the model of teaching, the reform requires major changes in teaching philosophy and practice. The reform implies a shift from a teacher-centred approach, in which only knowledge of the language and skills are emphasised by the teacher, to a student-centred approach, in which the ability to use the target language and learn independently are cultivated in addition to language knowledge and skills. Moreover, the curriculum reform also emphasises lifelong education, geared towards cultivating students' lifelong learning capability (CMoE 2007a). In addition, the requirements for both teaching model and course design mandate the use of information technology. The new curriculum claims that the use of information technology can make teaching 'free from the constraints of time or place and geared towards students' individualized and autonomous learning' (CMoE 2007a). Moreover, the CECR puts emphasis on the education and development of College English teachers, encouraging them to conduct teaching and research with a focus on the improvement of teaching quality and promoting effective cooperation among them, so that they can better adapt to the new teaching model (CMoE 2007a). This demonstrates the CMoE's intention to cultivate teacher instructional capability. However, whether appropriate tools exist to implement this intention will be discussed further in the next subsection.

The objectives of the reform in relation to reading instruction, in brief, are to teach the main ideas and details as well as a variety of reading strategies. Although there are detailed descriptions of the curriculum requirements at different levels, there is no specific statement about the expectations for teaching methods. The mandates for the new teaching model are student-centred instruction and the employment of information technology in teaching. However, the curriculum objectives are not clear or explicit about what teachers should do differently. There is no explanation about what 'student-centred teaching' means. The goals are prescribed clearly but the means of implementation are vague. Teachers without adequate understanding of these terms may misinterpret the intention of the reform. In addition, the art of teaching and curriculum development is more than a list of objectives for a curriculum. Grabe (2004) suggests researchers explore how a teacher or institute progresses from a list of objectives to an effective curriculum. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how teachers interact with these mandates and whether they can align their objectives with the mandates.

This situation then poses a dilemma. If policies are ambiguous and general, it is easier for local institutions to adopt and adapt, but this may result in a lack of implementation at later stages. On the other hand, if policies are too prescriptive, it may result in resistance (Fullan 1991). Thus, effective implementation is a process of clarification and negotiation. Fullan (1991) claims that educational change has two

main aspects: what changes should be implemented (theories of education) and how to implement such changes (theories of change). These two aspects interact and shape each other. Having analysed the changes advocated by the reform, the next subsection will now analyse the tools facilitating implementation of the curriculum reform.

Regarding the outcome of the activity system, the CMoE has achieved reform implementation in some universities. In July 2009, the Higher Education Department organised a seminar on College English curriculum reform implementation. The minutes of the seminar offered evidence with figures to indicate the success of the curriculum reform implementation (CMoE 2009c). One piece of evidence was that the CET test passing ratio had increased 15 % since 2005. The second piece of evidence was an increase in teacher research capability. The data indicate that the number of teacher publications from the selected 311 universities from 1998 to 2001 was 736 articles in top-rank journals and 6645 articles in ordinary journals or proceedings. In contrast, since 2005 to 2008, the teachers from 215 selected universities published 1,035 articles in top-rank journals and 19,558 articles in other journals and proceedings. However, the memo vaguely pointed out that some universities did not have an adequate understanding of the reform, which resulted in failure in reform implementation. Therefore, the seminar required universities to study reform policies more carefully and to implement the reform with more effort. Although the memo focused more on describing the achievements and only vaguely mentioned the existing problems in reform implementation, the limited figures and data indicate only partial implementation of the reform. The reasons for the partial implementation will be discussed in the next section on the analysis of the tools for reform implementation.

3.2.3   The Tools of the National Curriculum Reform

In an activity system, tools can be any instrumental means used in the transformation process (physical or mental). The CMoE has issued a series of plans for implementing the 2007 College English curriculum reform from 2002. Altogether, the CMoE has applied about six steps for the reform implementation. Firstly, the CMoE launched the Higher Education Quality and Reform Project (HEQRP) in 2002 (CMoE 2002). The College English Reform Program (CERP) is a major part of it. Then, from 2003 to 2004, the CMoE launched pilot projects on the curriculum reform in 180 universities (CMoE 2003, 2004b). Thirdly, in January, 2004, the College English Curriculum Requirements (trial) was issued nationally (CMoE 2004a). Fourthly, from 2004 to 2007, about 65 universities were chosen as the demonstration sites for implementing the trial curriculum requirements (CMoE 2006a, 2007b). After implementing and researching the trial curriculum requirements for three years, the formal College English Curriculum Requirements were announced in July 2007 as the fifth step (CMoE 2007a). Afterwards, there were research projects, seminars and online teacher education programmes to ensure the implementation of the 2007 curriculum reform. During the reform implementation, the CMoE

used about six kinds of tools, including reform policies, reform research projects, demonstration sites for the curriculum reform, the CET test reform, textbooks and course software and online teacher education programmes. These tools used for the reform implementation are discussed in this section.

Reform Policies The General Office of the Chinese Ministry of Education issued different documents about the policies of the reform, such as the College English Curriculum Requirements (both trial and formal ones) (CMoE 2004a, 2007a). The Higher Education Department of the CMoE also issued different notifications for implementing activities related to the reform. In the CECR (CMoE 2007a), it states explicitly that 'Taking into account the school's circumstances, colleges and universities should follow the guidelines of the Requirements and the goals of their College English teaching in designing their College English course system' (CMoE 2007a, p. 1). The documents communicate the authoritative role of the policy in the curriculum reform. Therefore, the reform policies are the effective tool, as well as rule, for implementing the reform.

Reform Research Projects For the purpose of incorporating teacher capacity to implement the reform, the CMoE has implemented two kinds of research projects in universities around China: pilot research projects and expansion research projects. In 2003, the Higher Education Department issued a document for launching the pilot project of the trial College English Curriculum Requirements (CMoE 2003). This document calls for different levels of universities to apply for this project, but one of the conditions is that the university should have enough multimedia technology classrooms and the time for multimedia-based teaching should occupy at least 60 % of the whole teaching hours (CMoE 2003). Two hundred eighty eight universities applied to join this project and 180 were authorised by the Higher Education Department in January 2004 (CMoE 2004b). These 180 universities were divided into four groups for the pilot study, using the textbooks and course software designed by four top press companies in China. The duration of the pilot study was 1 year. The Higher Education Department allocated 100,000–120,000 RMB to each university as project funding and organised the training for teachers, who are regarded as the mainstay in each university (CMoE 2004b). After that, in November 2004, the Higher Education Department called for and approved 239 expansion research projects on the College English Curriculum Reform from 239 universities. In addition, approximately 10,000 RMB was allocated to each university as project funding (CMoE 2004c). In February 2005, the second round of expansion projects was launched and 195 projects from 195 universities were approved by the Higher Education Department. Approximately 10,000 RMB was allocated to each university as project funding (CMoE 2005). From 2004 to 2005, 434 universities have participated in the expansion research projects on the curriculum reform. These activities are in accordance with the requirement of the curriculum reform that teachers should conduct research to improve their teaching quality (CMoE 2004a). These initiatives were the key benefits held out by the government to encourage universities to enact this new curriculum. They are called the capacity-building tools (Morris 2000) of the reform.

Textbooks and Course Software   As curricular artefacts, textbook resources should reflect the intended curriculum and pedagogical approaches explicitly or implicitly (Tong et al. 2000). Four kinds of teaching materials were developed along with the curriculum reform. The Chinese Ministry of Education appointed four major press companies in China to design the textbook and course software in 2003. The design had to follow the College English Curriculum Requirements set by the government. One of the four new designed materials is the *New Horizon College English* produced by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (CMoE 2003). The designed textbook was the core, with a variety of available resources, such as website, workbook and classroom CD.

The whole set of textbooks has four series; each book is designed for one semester and comprises ten units. Every unit starts with a 100-word text, called the Preview, introducing the theme of the unit. After the Preview, there are two sections: Section A and B. Each section contains one passage and related exercises. The exercises in Section A comprise: Pre-reading Activities (one exercise), Comprehension of the Text (two exercises), Vocabulary (three exercises including Banked Cloze), Word Building (two exercises), Collocation (one exercise), Sentence Structure (two exercises), Translation (one Chinese-English and one English-Chinese), Cloze, Text Structure Analysis (one exercise) and Structured Writing (one exercise). The exercises in Section B comprise: Reading Skills (1), Comprehension of the Text (one exercise) and Vocabulary (two exercises). Here, Reading Skills in Section B teaches one reading strategy in every unit. Reading Skills in Books 1 and 2 are all new reading strategies, while Books 3 and 4 review all the reading strategies which have been taught in the first two books.

The above introduction to the textbook indicates that in every unit the majority of exercises are for vocabulary (nine exercises). In addition, there are altogether four exercises for sentence structure and three exercises on reading comprehension. The common format of vocabulary and sentence structure exercises involves changing structural forms or substituting various 'parts of speech' such as nouns or verbs, which reflects behavioural approaches by using repetition and response (Hood et al. 2005). The Comprehension of the Text comprises several comprehension testing questions, plus two or three discussion questions. Although the curriculum advocates that students should understand the main idea, major facts as well as the details of the text, most of the exercises in the textbook aim at vocabulary building rather than training students to read for the main idea and major facts.

As for teaching reading strategies, Books 1 and 2 provide explanations and examples of each strategy, as well as exercises for applying it in Text B. Books 3 and 4 omit the explanation and examples perhaps because they are just a review of the strategies taught in the first two books. On the whole, the whole series covers 14 reading strategies (Guessing New Words, Recognizing Differences Between Facts and Opinions, Key Ideas in Sentences, Reading for Main Ideas in Paragraphs, Reading for Major Details, Understanding Idiomatic Expressions; Reading Between the Lines, Scanning, Predicting, Understanding Figurative Language, Identifying the Writer's Purpose, Types of Reading Comprehension Questions, Denotation and Connotation, Recognizing Paragraph Patterns). In this list of strategies, half are

top-down reading strategies and the other half bottom-up reading strategies. On the whole, the design of the instruction of the strategies, the variety of reading strategies and the review of strategies which have been taught are in accordance with one principle of effective strategy instruction, that strategy learning requires intensive, persistent effort with continual recycling (Grabe 2009). However, whether teachers can teach these strategies explicitly through modelling in the process of teaching text comprehension (Grabe 2009) needs to be explored in classroom observations. In addition, Grabe (2009) points out that effective comprehension instruction is not just teaching one strategy a week or doing exercises for checking predictions or writing a summary. Rather, effective reading strategy instruction should involve multiple strategies in combination and consistent practice while reading and discussing the text. This study will investigate what teachers think of the design of the textbook and how they carry out the teaching of reading strategies in the classroom.

However, as the above analysis of the textbook reveals, there is little evidence of innovation because most of the exercises comprise practice of vocabulary and grammar rules. This is not congruent with the requirements for teaching main ideas in reading. In addition, the format of the exercises is designed according to the format of the CET test. Therefore, it may be inferred that this textbook reflects the requirement of the CET test rather than the curriculum reform. An approved textbook may become the curriculum of the classroom (Fullan 1991), especially given the culture of textbook-centred teaching in China. Therefore, if the textbook fails to incorporate significant features of the innovation, teacher reliance on the textbook may distract practitioners from the behaviours and beliefs which the innovation aims to achieve and further entrench test-oriented teaching. Given this problem, it is worth examining further how teacher teaching and beliefs are mediated by the textbook.

The CET Test Reform An examination-oriented culture pervades education in China. Tests, therefore, are powerful tools for implementing curriculum reform. In July 2006, the General Office of the Chinese Ministry of Education issued a report announcing that the reform of the CET-4 and CET-6 would be launched from December 2006 and June 2007 (CMoE 2006b). The new CET test reflects significant changes in the scoring system, test content and format. The overall score range is similar to TOEFL and the content of the test is said to reflect a greater breadth of skills being tested, such as reading in depth (20 %, Short Answer Questions, Banked Cloze and Error Identification) and reading skills (15 %, skimming and scanning and understanding the contextual meaning of vocabulary) (Yan 2010). Importantly, these changes require students to use both top-down and bottom-up reading strategies to achieve understanding of the reading passages. Here, students are required to make use of background knowledge, contextual variables and inferencing and synthesising from text to make meaning. Moreover, in order to be in line with the rest of the world, there is a tendency for the CET to use Internet-based tests to replace paper tests in the future and become more similar to the TOEFL test.

However, the increase in the number of test takers (12,000,000 in 2006) indicates that certificate addiction is still strong. Compared to the ambitious changes in policy, some experts challenge and question the utilitarianism of the reform, which

suggests the eagerness for quick success and immediate profits in contemporary English teaching. They point out that contextual realities should be considered, such as the significant linguistic differences between Chinese and English, the lack of target language culture in the learning environment and the shortage of teaching resources given social demands (Gao 2009). However, despite these challenges, the curriculum reform is continuing.

Demonstration Sites for the Curriculum Reform In February 2006, after careful evaluation, the Higher Education Department chose 31 universities in China as the demonstration sites for implementing the College English curriculum reform (trial) (CMoE 2006a), most being first-rank universities. In June 2007, another 34 universities were authorised as the second group of demonstration sites for the 2007 curriculum reform (CMoE 2007b), most being second-rank state-owned universities. At the beginning of 2011, another 35 universities were approved as the third group of demonstration sites for the 2007 curriculum reform (CMoE 2011a), again most being second-rank state-owned universities.

Online Teacher Education Program As indicated previously, in July 2009, the Higher Education Department organised a seminar on College English curriculum reform, which provided a summary of the achievements of the reform since 2002, the measurements for continuous implementation of the reform and the problems arising (CMoE 2009c). In January and August 2009, the Higher Education Department organised two-day online training courses for College English teachers from 200 universities (10 teachers selected from each university). The content of the training course included an explanation of the 2007 College English Curriculum Requirements, the new teaching models, the application of the College English course software and the new CET (CMoE 2009a, b).

Good ideas and visions of change need to be combined with good conceptualisations of the process of change; otherwise, the ideas are wasted (Fullan 1991). Overall, there was a comprehensive plan and a variety of tools for reform implementation from 2002 to 2011. In addition, the research project advocacy indicates the government's effort to increase teacher capacity in carrying out the innovation. However, there were also problems. The first problem was that only a small number of universities were able to be included in research projects and training. As many second-tier universities in China are on the periphery of the higher education system without enough resources and support, this situation tends to encourage resistance, misunderstandings or superficial compliance. As well, textbook and test reform cannot fully reflect the desired object of the reform and may well hinder its successful implementation. Reform implementation is mediated by the social and cultural factors in the diverse contexts in China, which are discussed in the next subsection.

3.2.4 The Broader Educational Community of the Reform

Activities are socially and contextually bound, and any activity system can only be described in the context of the community in which it operates. The community is the participants who share the same object (Thorne 2004). The community negotiates the rules and division of labour that mediate its activity (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy 1999). This section first introduces the reform implementation organisation in China and then describes the participants who are involved in the broader curriculum reform community.

China has a centralised educational system in which decision-making usually is made by the centralised government and communicated to different levels of the education system (Qian and Verhoeven 2004). Although after 1985, decentralisation and autonomy have been advocated in policies, in reality, the progress of decentralisation is relatively slow. The higher educational institutions are highly controlled by the government in three aspects. Firstly, all the major educational policies are made at the state level. When the policies are implemented at the local level, higher education institutions need to study these policies and collect data to report back to the state or provincial government. This top-down implementation manner and external evaluation system result in a compliance culture and some reform requirements become bureaucratic burdens for universities (Liu and Rosa 2008). Secondly, the subjects and programmes universities can offer and the number of students that can be recruited are also strictly controlled by the central or provincial government (Zhang et al. 2012). The third aspect is that presidents of public universities are appointed and dismissed by the government (Zhang et al. 2012).

Within the system of curriculum reform, there are a number of participants involved at different levels with different roles (see Table 3.2). The hierarchy and centralised educational reform in China tend to treat teachers as passive implementers. As a result, the interaction between the Chinese Ministry of Education and teachers is unidirectional. In addition, the reform enactors/adopters usually fail to consider the contextual realities of specific universities or colleges.

Table 3.2 Participants in the curriculum reform

Participants in the reform	Their role
Adopters	Chinese Ministry of Education
Implementers	Universities and teachers
Clients	Students
Suppliers	Curriculum and materials designers

Adapted from Murray (2008, p. 6)

The documents cited in the subsection on implementation tools suggest that 134 universities were selected as the demonstration sites and 200 universities for teacher online training, which are only a small percentage of all universities in China.[1] In addition, most of the universities who participated in the projects and training for the reform were first-rank universities, with only a minority being second-rank universities or institutions. It is understandable that it is easier to implement and demonstrate reform in good universities because of the higher quality of teachers, students and equipment. However, it is difficult to guarantee the successful transfer or extension of these models to other contexts. Therefore, more research is needed on whether the requirements of the reform can be implemented by peripheral universities at other levels. For this reason, this research is focused at a university which is on the periphery of the universities involved in the reform implementation plans.

3.2.5   The Rules of the National Curriculum Reform

According to activity theory, rules are explicit or implicit norms that regulate actions and interactions within the system (Engeström 1993). Rules are usually mediated by the community of practice. In the case of curriculum reform, such rules decide how the reform is to be implemented and evaluated.

As mentioned in the section on object and outcome of the national curriculum reform, all universities and colleges are required to follow the CMoE curriculum requirements (CMoE 2007a). Therefore, the curriculum requirements function as one set of rules for the reform activity system. The documents cited also suggest that many activities and plans are made according to these requirements. In addition, curriculum requirements also act as the criteria for the evaluation of the reform implementation within each demonstration site. It could be inferred that in centralised educational systems, the curriculum requirements are determined by the government as the rule for the system of education reform.

3.2.6   The Division of Labour in the National Curriculum Reform

The division of labour within an activity system refers to the interaction among members of the community, which gives rise to different positions for the participants, who have their own history, perspective and voices (Engeström 1996). The division of labour in the curriculum reform enacted by the CMoE is allocated between the CMoE and the universities selected to participate in the reform

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[1] There were 2,358 regular higher education institutions, 1,112 universities and 1,246 nonuniversity tertiary institutions, in China in 2010 (CMoE 2011b).

implementation plans. The reform rules and the broader reform community mediate this division of labour. As described above, the CMoE has the authoritative role in the reform activity system. Therefore, it is in charge of every step in the reform, such as issuing policies, implementing reform, selecting universities for demonstration sites, evaluating research projects and reform implementation and organising training and seminars.

In the reform system, the universities' role is relatively passive. The selected universities have to design the teaching model according to the curriculum requirements and select teachers to join the online training. Although some universities are selected and approved to conduct expansion projects related to the curriculum reform, only relatively small numbers of universities are involved in this activity. The general reform implementation plan is developed from a normative perspective, focusing on equipping teachers without much focus on their pedagogical capability or agency. Therefore, this study shifts to a more explanatory form to examine the nature of teacher agency in transforming their teaching according to the reform requirements. In this case, the division of labour in the activity system of the reform assigned universities and teachers to a compliance role. The preoccupation with compliance may hinder implementation because it diverts energies and attention away from developing local capacity to make improvements (Fullan 1991). An effective reform system should therefore shift towards capacity-building, not compliance through control.

To summarise this section, the 2007 curriculum reform is a rather complex reform as it advocates the use of new material and technology, as well as the use of new teaching approaches and possible alternate beliefs. It has set clear goals for teaching but is vague concerning what teachers should do to achieve these objectives. All documents indicate that there are comprehensive implementation plans, ranging from 2002 until 2011. However, because of the centralised education system, the reform implementation focuses more on compliance rather than capacity-building. Little allowance is given to universities and teachers to exhibit agency in changing their teaching. In addition, the demonstration and training of the reform only cover a small number of universities. Lower-tier universities are left outside this system and lack access to these resources. These problems may cause slippage between the goals and tools of the reform and university systems, along with teacher classroom systems.

The new curriculum aims to revolutionise the old teaching model. However, a good idea with good direction does not guarantee that the curriculum is sufficiently developed and tested to be used everywhere (Fullan 1991). Moreover, reform needs to be evaluated according to the specific values, goals, events and consequences that obtain in a concrete situation (Fullan 1991).

Whether the reform can be implemented successfully depends on the congruence between the reformers and local needs and how the changes are introduced and followed through. If policymakers and practitioners are ignorant of each other's needs and beliefs, implementation will fail (Fullan 2001), because what is expected in the curriculum is not always implemented by teachers in reality (Kelly 2004). Therefore, uncovering the gap or slippage between curriculum intention and implementation is

a central issue in curriculum studies (Kelly 2004). In order to explore these gaps, the next section analyses the College English Department and the teachers as practitioners at the local level.

3.3 Micro-context: The College English Department

The university where I collected data is located in Henan province, one of the more backward provinces in Central China. The university was chosen to offer a snapshot on reform implementation in an economically disadvantaged contexts in contrast to those in previous research on Chinese educational reform (e.g. Dello-Iacovo 2009; Liu and Dunne 2009; Yan 2012; Zheng and Davison 2008). The university is a joint venture university which is administratively a branch college under one prestigious public university in this province but sponsored by organisations in the USA. This university (pseudonym ZS University) is also cooperating with an American university. This university, which was founded in 1990, has about 20,000 students in 2011 (Document 2011). The site where this study was conducted was the College English Department in the Faculty of Foreign Languages.

As reflected in Fig. 3.2, the Faculty of Foreign Languages has four departments: the Department of Business English, the Department of English Translation, the Department of Japanese and the College English Department, which organises all English courses for non-English major students. There were 53 full-time teachers in the College English Department teaching the course New Horizon College English course. The College English Department is in charge of the English courses for all non-English major students in this university: listening, speaking, reading and writing courses. The Department uses *The New Horizon College English* series as the textbook for the reading and writing courses, as well as the listening course.
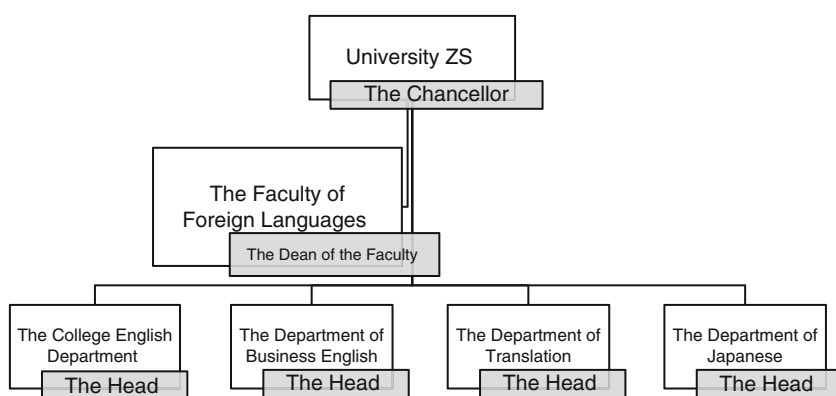
Fig. 3.2 The organisation system of ZS University

The university has a noteworthy hierarchy of power relationship among personnel at different levels. The Dean of the Faculty is appointed by the Chancellor, and the Head of this Department is appointed by the Dean of the Faculty. All the academic and administrative staff are employed for renewable contractual terms by the University subject to satisfactory performance review. The Head of the Department evaluates the Head of the Department. Similarly, although the Head of the Department has no powers over teacher employment, his or her evaluation of staff plays a vital role in deciding whether a teacher's employment contract will be continued.

In the process of reform implementation, educational leaders play an important role in translating the reform programme into local education practices and sustaining its implementation by supporting teacher professional development and pedagogical innovation (Stoll et al. 2006). Therefore, it is important to explore how the Head of the Department manages the Department as an activity system and to reveal how this system translates and affects the reform enacted from the top-level to the ground activity system of the classroom practices. The basic proposition of activity theory is a structure that includes interaction between a subject, an object, rules, tools and community, which are each affected by their interaction. Figure 3.3 illustrates the elements in the activity system of the College English Department, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

3.3.1   The Subject of the Activity System of the Department

The subject of any activity is the individual or group of actors engaged in the activity. The Head of the College English Department is in charge of the teaching, teacher management and other administrative work in this Department and thus is the subject of the activity system at the department level. The Department has autonomy in creating their curriculum and choosing their instructional methods and textbooks.

As previously mentioned, the Head of the Department plays a key role in translating the curriculum reform into classroom practices. He has been teaching College English in this Department for about 6 years and working in this position for about 4 years. As stated in Chap. 1, I had a semi-structured interview with the Head of the Department. The interview data indicate his beliefs about English teaching and style of leadership management. The next five subsections therefore analyse how he shapes the teaching practices at the university. The analysis and discussion aim to show how these activities interrelate with the curriculum reform and the nature of support for teacher pedagogical innovation.

Tools:
1. The Head's beliefs about EFL reading;
2. Policy documents and oral
reinforcements about the focus of teaching;
3. CET model tests;
4. Course curriculum & Curriculum plan;
5. Teacher evaluation;
6. Research meeting;
7. Class observation;
8. Criteria for recruiting teachers.

Subject:
The Head

Object:
1. Increase CET passing ratio;
2. Teaching sentence structure;
3. Keep the department running

Outcome:
Keeping his position

Rule:
Explicit rules:
1. The Chancellor want higher test passing ratio;
2. Contract employment;
Implicit rules:
Status access to classroom with internet and projector;

Community:
The Chancellor, the Dean, teachers and students

Division of labour:
School leader: decision maker and controller.
Teachers: Compliance role.

Fig. 3.3 The activity system of the College English Department in ZS University

3.3.2   The Objects of the Activity System of the Department

The object of the activity system is the physical or mental product that is sought and acted on by the subject. The object represents the intention that motivates the activity (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy 1999). Concerning the object of the College English Department, the interview with the Head of the Department indicates that he has three main objects for this department. The first object is to increase the CET passing ratio in this university; the second object, relating to the course of College English, is to teach sentence structure and grammatical knowledge; the third object is to keep the Department running smoothly. This section discusses how he articulated these objects.

In the interview, the Head of the Department stated that the pressures on him to increase the CET passing ratio came from the Chancellor. The excerpt below reveals the reason he set passing the test as the goal (the interviews and classroom observation were transcribed according to the transcription conventions from (Duff 1996)):

Excerpt 3.1

Why does the Chancellor emphasize [the CET passing ratio]? Because he wants to compete with the universities around us. He cannot compete with the top universities [naming the two best universities in this province], but he can compare with (xxx) [naming one university at the same level].

(Interview with the Head, 1 June 2010)

As can be seen in the excerpt above, the Head of the Department indicates that the Chancellor uses the CET passing ratio as an indicator of teaching quality to compete with other universities at the same level. The CET passing ratio, as an indicator of high teaching quality, is also used to attract more students, which is an essential economic resource. In the Chinese cultural context, schools and departments have long been accustomed to taking orders from authorities (Qian and Verhoeven 2004). Accordingly, the Head of the Department set increasing the CET passing ratio as the prime object for his department. However, when asked about the 2006 CET test reform, he did not answer, appearing not to know much about the test reform requirements.

The second object of the Department's activity system is to require teachers to teach sentence structure. Although the Head of the Department kept saying that there were no dogmatic rules about teaching practices, he emphasised that College English teachers must teach sentence structure. This object is influenced by his beliefs about English learning and his concern about the problems in the current teaching community. The following excerpt from the interview with the Head of the Department indicates his beliefs about English learning and teaching:

Excerpt 3.2

There was a kind of argument about Chinese students' English learning. [It was said that] Chinese students cannot learn English well because the teacher teaches too much grammar. [It was said] English is a kind of practical course. You need to speak, to express [yourself]. Just like an old Chinese farmer, he can speak Chinese without knowing about grammar. However, it is too partial. Chinese students are not living in America or England, immersed in English use every day. Anyhow, you are living and learning English in China, (xxx). You even make mistakes in a composition. You are making mistakes indeed. Why do you make mistake? [Because of] wrong sentence structure, wrong grammar, wrong sentence structure.

(Interview with the Head of the Department, 1 June 2010)

The excerpt above reveals the Head of the Department's fundamental beliefs that sentence structure and grammar are key elements for English learning. In addition, he also expresses his concern about some problems with teacher's classroom practices:

Excerpt 3.3

(D = the Head; I = the interviewer)

D: [Some teachers] just, eh, speak some colloquial English, right? Just some English expressions, daily phrases and conversations. That's all. However, the rest [of his teaching], for instance, he just reads and translates paragraphs one by one, [explaining] some phrases. That's all. Only did such kind of work.

I: You think what his teaching lacks is =
D: = lack of sentence structure. Sentence structure.
(Interview with the Head of the Department, 1 June 2010)

From this data, it can be concluded that his beliefs about the EFL reading and teaching is closer to a structural linguistic view or a 'bottom-up' approach to reading, focusing on the decoding of letters to sounds, words and sentences. By contrast, the national curriculum reform advocates that teaching should not only provide knowledge about English but focus more on the development of students' cultural knowledge and learning abilities. This contradiction is clearly evident in the curriculum developed by the Department, which will be analysed as the tool of the activity system of the Department.

Besides his concern about the problems in teaching, the Head of the Department also claims that teaching needs to consider students' English proficiency level. In this university, students' English proficiency levels are lower than those at the top universities. Therefore, the Head of the Department believes that the College English course should focus on reviewing and summarising all the sentence structures students learned in their high school. During the interview, when asked about the standards for good teaching, he mentioned 'sentence structure' 26 times, showing his strong emphasis on this area. Teaching sentence structure therefore constitutes the second object of the teaching of this department. In particular, this objective is mediated by his beliefs about English teaching and the contextual factors, such as students' English proficiency level, in the university community.

The third object of the Head of the Department is to keep the Department running smoothly. As previously mentioned, this university adopts contract-based rather than permanent employment practices in its administration and every member of staff has to sign a 3–5-year contract, including the Head of the Department. Continuation of a teacher's contract depends on the results of his or her end-of-term evaluation, including evaluation by students, peer teachers and their immediate superiors. The Head of the Department has pressure from the university management and the responsibility to evaluate teachers within his department. He therefore has to keep this department running if he is to keep his position. The outcome which he has achieved is keeping his position as the Head of the Department at the present stage. The particular tools he uses to manage this department are discussed in the next subsection.

Overall, then, the three objects of the activity system of the Department are mediated by the Head's beliefs about teaching and the community in the university. This mediated relationship between the Head, his beliefs, his objects and the Department community is in accordance with the claim that activity theory is an object-oriented and artefact-mediated activity system (Engeström 1996). However, the Department does not have shared reform-related objects with the activity system of the CMoE. Since the objects motivate tool-mediated activity, the next subsection discusses the tools and artefacts the Head of the Department employed to achieve these objects.

3.3.3   The Tools of the Activity System of the Department

In the activity theory, tools can be anything used in the transformation process (physical or mental). The use of culture-specific tools shapes the way people act and think. The last section analysed the three objects of the activity system of the Department. This section discusses the tools the Head of the Department uses to achieve these three objects. These tools or artefacts can be categorised into three categories: the curriculum plan, policy documents and the CET model test. Each is used to achieve the first object of increasing the CET passing ratio. A second category of tools used to ensure teachers teach sentence structure includes verbal reinforcement about the focus of teaching, criteria for recruiting teachers and teacher evaluation. A third category of tools includes the Department's curriculum, regular research meetings and classroom observation, which are used to manage the teaching and research of the Department. The tools and artefacts in these three categories are discussed in this section.

3.3.3.1   Category 1: Tools for Object 1 Increasing the CET Passing Ratio

In order to increase the CET passing ratio, the Head of the Department organised a special curriculum plan for teachers who teach the second-year students who need to take the CET test. Usually, teachers should finish teaching ten units from the textbook each semester. However, teachers who teach the second-year students (using Books 3 and 4) only need to finish eight units. The Head of the Department asks them to use the other two or three weeks to practise the CET model tests. In addition, he also emails every teacher a document, called *New Horizon College English Unified Classroom Teaching Content*, listing some parts of the textbook that must be taught. Here, it is explicitly stated that:

> As for the after reading exercises in Section A, teachers must guide students to do the exercises related to the CET test in the class, such as (1) *Fill in the blanks in the following passage by selecting suitable words from the Word Bank.(2) Sentence Structure; (3) Translation; (4) Cloze*. For other exercises, teachers only need to check the completion.

Besides the model test and the oral reinforcement about the importance of the CET, this document is also a specific tool which the Head of the Department uses to achieve this object. The requirements in this document indicate that he still focuses more on vocabulary exercises and sentence structure. However, the reformed CET focuses on reading in depth (20 %, Short Answer Questions, Banked Cloze and Error Identification) and reading skills (15 %, skimming and scanning and understanding the contextual meaning of vocabulary) (Yan 2010). Of all test items, *Banked Cloze* exercises is just one kind of test form. This *Unified Classroom Teaching Content* document reveals that the Head of the Department only emphasises the form of test items, but neglects the underlying content and theory of reading. One possible reason for this mismatch seems to be that he does not know the detailed mandates of the CET reform (as mentioned above). In addition, his

emphasis on the CET passing ratio reflects the Chancellor's pressure and prime object. Therefore, it could be inferred that the need for job security results in his compliance with the Chancellor's demands and merely superficial compliance with the reform mandates. Furthermore, this superficial compliance makes him focus on the form rather than the content of the test reform. From these data, we can infer that there is no shared theory of teaching between the curriculum and the Department. Indeed, these tools also shape teacher thinking and classroom practices. This process will be explored in the individual case analysis in the next three chapters.

3.3.3.2 Category 2: Tools for Object 2 Teaching Sentence Structure

As for the Head of the Department's second object—teaching sentence structure—he mentioned in the interview that he stressed this to teachers in his department. At the same time, he stated that he also informed the Head of the School about the importance of teaching sentence structure to get support from the superior leader. These language artefacts he used were important tools to reinforce this objective. Besides this verbal reinforcement, the Head of the Department also considers sentence structure as a key criterion for recruiting new teachers and evaluating effective ones:

Excerpt 3.4
'I only pay attention to [the teaching of] sentence structure in the interview with some postgraduates'.
    (Interview with the Head of the Department, 1 June 2010)

This criterion for teacher recruitment is an important tool in ensuring most teachers teach according to the Head of the Department's perception and expectations. In this process, however, teachers are positioned as compliant followers, rather than active agents. There seems to be no much space for teachers and the Department leaders to negotiate a shared conception about teaching. Teachers are also undermined in their efforts to change or innovate their teaching. If agents are positioned as mindless and helpless consumers of others' mediational means within their sociocultural settings, such settings end up restricting their freedom of action and making invisible the productive tensions that may exist between agents and cultural tools (Wertsch 1998), an issue which will be further explored in Chaps. 4, 5 and 6.

3.3.3.3 Category 3: Tools for Object 3 Department Management

In relation to the third object—keeping his department running—the Head of the Department uses several tools to manage teacher pedagogical activity, such as the course curriculum, research meetings, teacher evaluation and classroom observation. Four teachers were appointed to develop the curriculum for this course in 2008 (Document 2010), with reference to the curriculum requirements (trial) made by the Chinese Ministry of Education (CMoE 2004a). Concerning the curriculum reform,

the Head of the Department in the interview acknowledged the College English Curriculum Requirements issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education. He regarded this curriculum as 'a guideline' but he emphasised that 'We have our own curriculum'; 'We refer to (other universities' curricula) and combine with our contextual features. But on major issues these curricula are identical though with minor differences'.

Table 3.3 reveals the comparison between these two curricula in terms of course objectives, the requirements for reading comprehension, the teaching model and teaching method requirements, teaching materials and testing and evaluation.

Table 3.3 reveals that although the Department's curriculum copied the course objectives and the requirements for reading comprehension at both basic and intermediate levels exactly from the national curriculum, its underlying pedagogical theory is different. For example, the national curriculum aims at increasing students' independent learning abilities, cultural knowledge and English use abilities, especially listening and speaking abilities. In contrast, the Department's curriculum aims at language knowledge and language skills, focusing on reading comprehension as the basic language input for improving students' language ability. In addition, in relation to teaching model/methods, the national curriculum advocates a shift from teacher-centred teaching to student-centred teaching, as well as computer-based teaching. However, the Department's curriculum does not mention this but focuses on basic language knowledge only. The third difference is the requirement for teaching materials. The national curriculum advises student selection of teaching materials, but the Department emphasises the role of the textbook as the guarantee for achieving teaching objectives.

Although there are some similar discourses across these two curricula, the Department's curriculum has fundamentally different teaching objectives and teaching ideology. The national curriculum indicates a preference for an interactive approach to teaching reading and emphasises not only basic language knowledge but students' cultural capacity and knowledge about the world also. In contrast, the Department's curriculum suggests a preference for a bottom-up approach to reading, emphasising language structure and grammar teaching, and high dependence on the textbook. The copying of requirements from the national curriculum appears to be lip service or 'pseudo-compliance' (Davison 2006, p. 245) with the intended innovation of the reform. This underlying discrepancy can only direct teachers' classroom approaches away from the reform requirements.

In addition, other discursive similarities just reflect superficial compliance. For example, the Department's curriculum states that it 'must prevent test-oriented teaching' (Document 2010), but the curriculum plan and the documents issued by the Head of the Department actually require teachers to teach according to the test. In addition, although the Department curriculum echoes the national requirements for multimedia teaching, in reality, there are not enough classrooms for teachers to use Internet access and multimedia equipment in their teaching. In this case, the Department's own context has filtered and shaped the implementation of the national curriculum.

Table 3.3 Comparison between the national curriculum (trial) (CMoE 2004a) and the curriculum made by the College English Department in ZS University

	The national curriculum requirements (CMoE 2004a)	The Department's curriculum requirements (Document 2010)
Objectives for this course	(1) Students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking (2) Their ability to study independently (3) To improve their general cultural awareness	Copied the same objectives, but added one more contextual objective: developing students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills
Requirements for reading comprehension	There are three levels of requirements: basic, intermediate and advanced level	Copied the basic and intermediate level requirements, but omitted the advanced requirements
Requirements for teaching models/methods	There are no specific requirements/descriptions about teaching methods: 1. 'Colleges and universities should remould the existing unitary teacher-centred pattern of language teaching by introducing computer- and classroom-based teaching models' 2. 'For teaching methods, the reform consists of changes in teaching philosophy and practice, and in a shift from a teacher-centred pattern, in which knowledge of the language and skills are imparted by the teacher in class only, to a student-centred pattern, in which the ability to use the language and the ability to learn independently are cultivated in addition to language knowledge and skills, and also to lifelong education' (CMoE 2004a)	There are no specific requirements/descriptions about teaching methods: 1. 'To build language basics, including language knowledge and the ability to use English. The correct pronunciation and intonation, solid grammar, certain amount of vocabulary and the ability to use vocabulary are useful to improve the ability to use language. In addition, improve student's cultural awareness' 2. 'English language ability is based on input, esp. reading comprehension' (Document 2010)
Teaching materials	1. 'The new model should enable students to select materials and methods suited to their individual needs' (CMoE 2004a) 2. 'Colleges and universities should adopt good teaching software and encourage teachers to make effective use of web multimedia and other teaching resources' (CMoE 2004a)	The Department's curriculum requirements regard the textbook as the best language sample and material for classroom teaching and also encourage the use of multimedia to improve teaching quality
Testing and evaluation	Suggest both formative and summative tests	Tests should focus on language knowledge and language use ability with certain amount of subjective questions. Must prevent test-oriented teaching

The Head of the Department also has other management tools, apart from the curriculum set for this course. With his past experiences of working in the military services, he focuses on discipline, obedience and cooperation as the characteristics of being a good teacher. In his interview, he mentioned that he was strict with teachers, especially young teachers. He commands every teacher's attendance at the weekly research meeting, in which teachers can discuss any difficulties they have met when preparing lessons. He also requires the leaders of every office, including himself, to observe young teachers' classes regularly. In addition, young novice teachers are also required to observe other teachers' classes and hand in their observation notes. Here, the weekly meeting, classroom observation and observation notes are a further set of tools which he uses to regulate teachers' teaching and learning activities.

The Head of the Department also uses teachers' working contract as an important tool to manage teachers. In this university, evaluations by both students and the Head of the Department determine whether a teacher can continue his or her contract. Therefore, most teachers, especially young teachers, are anxious to have high scores in their final teacher evaluation in order to keep their job. Such contract and performance-based employment practices reinforce teachers', especially young teachers, compliance with the Head of the Department's orders.

In summary, analysis of the tools indicates that the College English Department at ZS University reflects a different theory of teaching and learning from that of the national curriculum reform. The Department has adapted national educational policies according to their own needs and values. Although there is superficial compliance in terms of discourse, the tools for managing pedagogical practices in this department do not offer much support or space for teacher innovation. It is understandable that the Head of the Department concentrates on his own policy and institutional setting (Czerniawski 2009). The tools he creates reflect his attempts to keep a balance between compliance with higher authorities and his own situated understandings and values about teaching.

3.3.4 The Community of the Activity System of the Department

The university is a learning community with multiple levels of administration and practices. Therefore, there are inevitable contradictions between the different agents of this complex organisation, such as teachers, students and school leaders, who all have different perspectives and expectations of teaching practices (Pyhältö et al. 2011). Such communities negotiate the rules and division of labour that mediate their activities (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy 1999). This section now analyses the culture of teaching that forms the community of the College English Department.

Cultures of teaching comprise beliefs, values and agreed ways of doing things among teachers who share membership of the same community (Hargreaves 1994). Hargreaves argues that cultures of teaching, as one of the most significant aspects of

teachers' lives and work, provide an essential context for teacher development and practices. Surveys about the College English teaching in the Henan province indicate that the prominent English teaching model in the universities in that province is still traditional teacher-centred teaching and does not focus on language use (Zheng 2012). In addition, the Chancellor uses the CET passing ratio as a means to compete with other universities. As a result, the emphasis on the test passing ratio results in test-oriented teaching. Consequently, the curriculum and instructional methods in this department are also oriented towards these leaders' test passing expectations and are influenced by the general teaching model in this province. In this department, test-oriented and teacher-centred teaching has been developed and sustained over time and has become a prominent feature of its teaching culture, which is incongruent with the student-centred teaching model required by the national curriculum.

Data from the sampling questionnaires on teacher beliefs also shed light on the culture of teaching in this department. Of the 52 full-time teachers teaching the course College English in this department, 44 agreed to participate in the questionnaire survey in this study. Table 3.4 illustrates the composition of this group of teachers.

This table shows that, among these 44 teachers, 84.1 % of teachers (37 teachers) had 5 years or less teaching experience. This figure includes ten teachers (22.7 %) with less than 1 year teaching experience. As indicated in the table, there are only five teachers with more than 10 years' teaching experience. The results reveal that most of the teachers in this department are young, novice teachers, as this university was founded only about 10 years ago. This situation may account for the Head of the Department maintaining strict requirements for young teachers. However, these restrictive requirements also constrain young teachers' agency in innovating in their

Table 3.4 Years of teaching English reading

Years of teaching	Number of teachers	Percentage
0–1 year	10	22.7
1 year	5	11.4
1.5 years	1	2.3
2 years	6	13.6
2.5 years	1	2.3
3 years	5	11.4
3.5 years	1	2.3
4 years	3	6.8
5 years	5	11.4
6 years	1	2.3
8 years	1	2.3
10 years	3	6.8
20 years	1	2.3
23 years	1	2.3
Total	44	100.0

teaching. At the same time, this situation also suggests that in this department, teachers with more experience are treated as precious human resources, with relatively higher social status than young teachers. Such differential social status also impacts on teacher agency in changing their teaching and is discussed in the individual case study analyses in Chaps. 4, 5 and 6.

In previous sections, it has been revealed how the curriculum developed by this department reflects its general ideology of teaching, emphasising discrete points of language and grammar. Such conceptual tools shape teacher thinking and beliefs about teaching. As indicated in Table 3.5, the teacher questionnaire offers some contextual information about teacher pedagogical beliefs.

This table indicates that 77.3 % teachers agree/strongly agree that reading comprehension is about understanding the content of a text. In addition, 72.7 % of teachers agree/strongly agree that reading comprehension is about relating content of a text to its setting and purpose. Half of the teachers (50 %) agree/strongly agree that reading comprehension is about understanding the structure of a text. Fewer teachers (47.7 %) agree/strongly agree that reading is about relating the knowledge of the text to the real world. Only 4.5 % of teachers still agree with the idea that reading comprehension is about understanding every word in a text. These results lead us to infer that teachers in this department pay more attention to global understanding of main ideas, but value relating reading with the real-world knowledge less. However, the results from the questions on teacher beliefs about the important factors in reading comprehension reveal some contradictory findings (Table 3.6).

Somewhat contradicting the findings in Table 3.5, the results in Table 3.6 indicate that most teachers think vocabulary is the most important factor for reading (93.2 %), with the second factor being knowledge of syntax, semantics and discourses (81.8 %), followed by reading strategies (75 %) and linking one's own knowledge to reading (56.8 %). This suggests that most teachers emphasise the importance of language knowledge for reading comprehension. As mentioned above, the curriculum in this department emphasises vocabulary and language knowledge for EFL reading. However, teachers' perceptions of students' difficulties in EFL reading comprehension (Question 32 in the questionnaire) ranked critical reading (72.7 %), inferencing (61.4 %), predicting (56.8 %), applying knowledge and skills in real life (56.8 %) and understanding text structure (50 %) as relatively difficult skills for students to master (see Table 3.7). This indicates that students have more difficulties in top-down reading skills.

Most of the teachers (85.3 %) express their intentions/strong intentions to adopt new approaches to teaching reading. This indicates their desire to change their teaching. Overall, it could be inferred from the data that teacher beliefs about EFL reading instruction are mediated mostly by the local teaching curriculum and a situated ideology of teaching. Contradictory results from the questionnaire also indicate the need to supplement interviews with observation to get more in-depth information, as much information yielded from questionnaires appears rather superficial (Dornyei 2007).

In relation to the teaching of reading strategies, relevant data from the questionnaires were grouped into four tables (Table 3.8, 3.9, 3.10, 3.11), showing teacher beliefs about teaching reading strategies.

Table 3.5 Teacher beliefs about EFL reading comprehension

	Reading comprehension is to understand the meaning of every word in a text	Reading comprehension is to understand the content of a text	Reading comprehension is to understand the structure of a text	Reading comprehension is to relate the content of the text to its setting and purpose	Reading comprehension is to relate the content of the text to the real world
Strongly disagree	15.9	4.5	2.3	0	0
Disagree	52.3	0	9.1	0	11.4
Neutral	22.7	18.2	38.6	27.3	40.9
Agree	4.5	43.2	43.2	38.6	31.8
Strongly agree	0	34.1	6.8	34.1	15.9
Total	95.5	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Missing	4.5	0	0	0	0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3.6 Teacher beliefs about the important factors in EFL reading comprehension

	Vocabulary	Knowledge of syntax, semantics and discourse	Ability to link the reading with one's own knowledge	Reading strategies	Critical thinking
The least		0	0	0	4.5
Less	2.3	4.5	6.8	4.5	9.1
Neutral	4.5	11.4	36.4	20.5	43.2
More	65.9	56.8	47.7	52.3	43.2
The most	27.3	25.0	9.1	22.7	4.5
Total	100.0	97.7	100.0	100.0	100.0
Missing	0	2.3	0	0	0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3.8 indicates that most teachers (86.3 %) agree/strongly agree that reading strategies are helpful for students' reading, but nearly half of them (40.9 %) strongly agree that reading strategies are more helpful for passing the CET. This reflects the test-oriented teaching culture of the Department. In addition, the table shows that teachers prefer to teach more top-down reading strategies (93.2 %) than bottom-up reading strategies (72.7 %). Although more than half of the teachers express confidence in teaching reading strategies (61.4 %), half of them strongly express their desire to receive more training in teaching reading strategies (54.5 %).

Data from Question 5 in the questionnaire reveal that more than half (54.5 %) of these teachers indicated that they teach strategies in every unit of the textbook and that only one teacher never taught any reading strategies (see Table 3.9). Their beliefs about the exact procedures of teaching reading strategies are listed in the Table 3.10.

The data in Table 3.10 indicates that more than half of the teachers consider that they are competent at scaffolding students' use of strategies (75 %), modelling the use of strategies (70.4 %), giving students time for practice (70.4 %), explaining reading strategies (56.9 %) and explaining when, how and why to use reading strategies (52.3 %). On the other hand, more than half of the teachers (54.5 %) chose 'neutral' for their knowledge about designing and teaching reading strategies (column one), indicating their uncertainty about teaching reading strategies. This is consistent with the data in Table 3.8 where 85 % of teachers indicated their wish to receive more training on teaching reading strategies and their answers to Questions 3 and 4 in the questionnaire where 70.5 % of teachers did not receive in-service training on teaching strategies (see Table 3.11). Moreover, most (84.1 %) of the teachers expressed their desire to have opportunities to discuss reading strategy instruction with other teachers (see the last column in Table 3.8). This indicates teachers' strong expectation for more peer interaction around pedagogical innovations.

With regard to teaching materials, the results from Questions 28, 29 and 30 provide information on teacher beliefs about the textbook and self-designed materials (see Table 3.12).

Table 3.7 Teacher perceptions about students' difficulties in EFL reading comprehension

	Decoding vocabulary and sentence meaning	Paragraph pattern	Understanding structures in texts	Reading for main ideas	Determining author's intentions and drawing inference	Predicting	Critical reading	Applying knowledge and skills in real life.	I am willing to adopt a new approach to teaching reading
The least	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Less	15.9	11.4	6.8	20.5	11.4	6.8	4.5	6.8	4.5
Neutral	38.6	45.5	43.2	43.2	27.3	34.1	20.5	34.1	9.1
More	36.4	34.1	45.5	31.8	43.2	40.9	54.5	34.1	31.8
The most	9.1	9.1	4.5	4.5	18.2	15.9	18.2	22.7	54.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	97.7	97.7	97.7	98.9
Missing	0	2.3	0	0	0	2.3	2.3	2.3	1.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3.8 Teacher beliefs about teaching reading strategies

	I believe reading strategy instruction can help students with their comprehension	I believe reading strategy instruction can prepare students to deal with the CET 4 and other English tests	I am confident in teaching reading strategies in my class	I prefer teaching more lower-level reading strategies to my students	I prefer teaching more higher-level reading strategies to my students	I would like to allocate more class time for teaching reading strategies.	I would like have more training in reading strategy instruction.	Have more opportunities to discuss reading strategy instruction with other teachers.
Strongly disagree	0	2.3	0	0	0	0	0	2.3
Disagree	0	0	4.5	6.8		11.4	2.3	2.3
Neutral	13.6	11.4	34.1	20.5	6.8	38.6	13.6	9.1
Agree	47.7	38.6	50.0	56.8	70.5	31.8	29.5	27.3
Strongly agree	38.6	40.9	11.4	15.9	22.7	18.2	54.5	56.8
Total	100.0	93.2	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	97.7
Missing	0	6.8	0	0	0	0		2.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3.9 How often teachers teach reading skills in the textbook

	Q5. How often do you teach the section 'Reading Skills' in the textbook?
Never	2.3
Occasionally	2.3
Sometimes	22.7
Often	18.2
I teach that section in every unit	54.5
Total	100.0
Missing	0
Total	100.0

The results in Table 3.12 indicate that most of the teachers (84.1 %) prefer using materials and activities students are interested in, as well as materials that prepare students for exams (63.7 %). Teachers seem to be not so interested in using the materials assigned by the school (45.5 % for neutral and 34.1 % agree). This suggests that most teachers are concerned about student interests despite the significant impact of test-oriented teaching on teacher beliefs.

Overall, the questionnaire data provide information about teachers' beliefs in this department. Teachers in this department focus more on language knowledge for reading comprehension, reflecting the influence from the Head of the Department's emphasis on sentence structure. At the same time, teacher beliefs about reading and teaching reading strategies also reflect test-oriented teaching. In addition, most teachers expressed the desire to innovate their teaching and to receive more training in the teaching of reading strategies. However, as stated before, questionnaire data sometimes can only give superficial information. From a sociocultural theory perspective, teacher beliefs are constructed through their social practices and are best observed in social interactions in the course of activity (Alanen 2003). Therefore, in-depth understanding of teacher beliefs is best derived from interview and classroom observation. The next section discusses the rules and norms for teaching in the community of the Department.

3.3.5 The Rules of the Activity System of the Department

The norms of the school community govern how school work is done, recognised and evaluated through the institutionally defined ways of displaying knowledge or learning (Lantolf 2000). In the activity system of the Department, some tools also function as explicit rules for teaching. As mentioned previously, although the curriculum states that test-oriented teaching should be discouraged, high-stakes testing along with the Head of the Department's requirements for teaching test-related exercises encourages superficial compliance with the curriculum reform. The test actually constitutes a rule that regulates teaching. As revealed in the analysis of

Table 3.10 Teacher beliefs about the procedures of teaching reading strategies

	I know how to design and implement reading strategy instruction	I can explain the reading strategies being taught	I can explain when, how and why to use reading strategies	I can model the process of using reading strategies in the reading process	I give time and opportunities to students to practise reading strategies	I give students feedback and assist in their usage of reading strategies
Strongly disagree	2.3	0	0	0	0	0
Disagree	4.5	0	2.3	0	2.3	4.5
Neutral	54.5	38.6	43.2	29.5	27.3	18.2
Agree	34.1	45.5	40.9	54.5	56.8	63.6
Strongly agree	2.3	11.4	11.4	15.9	13.6	11.4
Total	97.7	95.5	97.7	100.0	100.0	97.7
Missing	2.3	4.5	2.3	0	0	2.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 3.11   Information about teacher training on teaching reading strategies

	Q3. Has teaching reading strategy been part of your teacher education or research?	Q4. Have you ever had in-service training for teaching New Horizon College English course??
Yes	61.4	29.5
No	38.6	70.5
Total	100.0	100.0

Table 3.12   Teacher beliefs about teaching materials

	I prefer using texts and activities in the textbook which the school has decided for us	I prefer using texts and activities focused on examination preparation	I prefer using texts and activities that interest students
Strongly disagree	2.3	0	0
Disagree	2.3	6.8	4.5
Neutral	45.5	29.5	11.4
Agree	34.1	52.3	56.8
Strongly agree	15.9	11.4	27.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Missing	0	0	0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

community, the institutionally defined ways of displaying knowledge focus on sentence structure and vocabulary. The Head of the Department's emphasis and the curriculum development by the Department all reinforce this as another rule regulating teaching. Further, the curriculum reinforces the importance of the textbook. In addition, the Head of the Department uses classroom observation and curriculum plans to ensure that teachers teach according to the textbook. Moreover, the final exam is designed according to the coverage of the curriculum plan. Therefore, the textbook and curriculum plan have explicit regulatory functions, which in turn are also reinforced by the overall regulation of the final exam.

While the above-mentioned rules are explicitly stated in the Department's policy and curriculum documents, others are implicit. At this university, only some classrooms have Internet access and multimedia equipment. An implicit rule here is that only teachers with higher status, for example, professors or associate professors, have priority to access these multimedia classrooms. As low-status professionals, most young teachers have little access to this resource. In the context of the national curriculum reform requirement for the high use of Internet and multimedia resources, the limited resources at this university make it difficult to meet these reform mandates.

In summary, both implicit and explicit rules for teaching operate in this department. Among them, the Department's curriculum and the curriculum plan function both as tools and rules for teaching. Just how these rules mediate the division of labour in the Department and case teachers' classroom teaching will now be discussed.

3.3.6   The Division of Labour in the Activity System of the Department

The division of labour in an activity system gives rise to different positions for the participants, who have their own history, perspective and voices (Engeström 1996). The labour of the Department is distributed among the Head of the Department and teachers, and rules mediate this division of labour.

The Head of the Department has two distinct roles: on one hand, he has a compliance role in relation to obeying the Chancellor's authority; on the other hand, he has the regulatory role of directing what and how teachers teach. As described in the section outlining the rules of the Department, most teachers do not have much autonomy and many of them choose to obey and follow others' rules. These include rules about the content of teaching, the pace of teaching, teaching materials and teaching resources. In this system, the teacher's role is one of compliance: just obeying rules. This situation suggests that there is little space for teachers' initiative and self-regulation. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 will explore further this issue of whether and if so how teachers exhibit agency to transform their teaching.

To sum up, the objects of the activity system of the College English Department are mediated by pressure from the Chancellor, the Head of the Department's beliefs about reading instruction and contextual factors such as students' English proficiency level. Since organisational activity is an object-oriented and artefact-mediated system, the tools and artefacts used to achieve these goals indicate that the underlying theory of teaching in this department is different from the theory advocated by the national curriculum reform, although the curriculum developed by the members of the Department indicates a superficial compliance with the national curriculum. To a large extent, tools mediate teacher thinking in the community of the Department. At the same time, many tools are also functioning as rules for teaching practice, which in turn reflects the division of labour in this department. Both the Head of the Department and teachers are positioned within a compliance culture where they have to take orders from above. In addition, because of the strict management rules, especially for young teachers, there is not much space for teachers themselves to carry out pedagogical exploration and innovation. Theories of teaching underlying the curriculum reform are different from those endorsed by the Department and these differences consequently affect the reform implementation by the Department. Successful implementation of reform initiatives involves the construction of shared understandings among different levels within one programme. Therefore, the next subsection focuses on whether and how the administration of the Department supports the change advocated by the national curriculum reform.

3.4   The Interaction Between Two Activity Systems

As discussed in Chap. 2, the 'third-generation' activity theory enables the analysis of hierarchical power relationships within an organisation and the distribution of management rules within the activity system of primary productive work, as well as
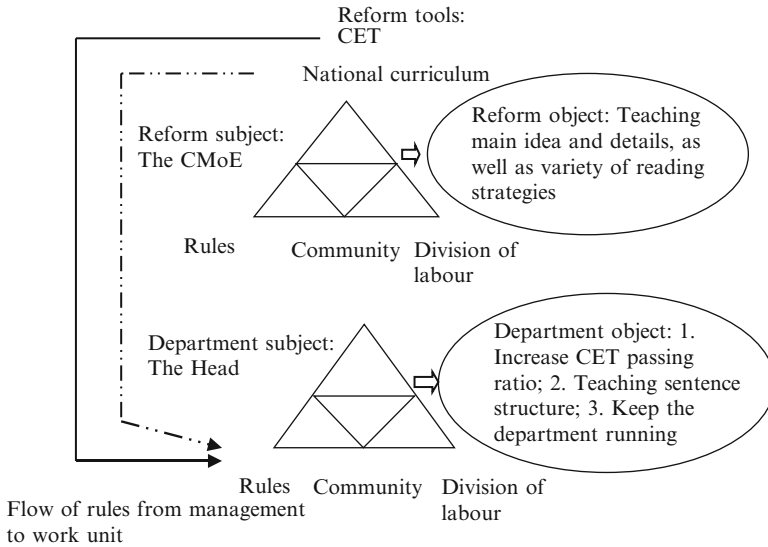
Fig. 3.4 The interaction between the activity system of the curriculum reform and the activity system of the Department

the potential shared object between these two activity systems (Engeström 2009). Figure 3.4 reveals the power relationships between the two activity systems of the national curriculum reform and the activity system of the Department.

The activity system of the Chinese Ministry of Education under the national curriculum reform has a role of managing the whole reform. As described above in 'The Tools of the Activity System of the Department', the national curriculum made by the Chinese Ministry of Education has been adapted by the Department as a rule for teaching. However, this adaptation is based on a different teaching ideology and objective (the dotted arrow line in Fig. 3.4). In addition, the CET itself becomes another rule for the Department, as it leads to test-oriented teaching in the Department (shown as the full arrow line in Fig. 3.4). Furthermore, test-oriented teaching leads the Department to have different objectives from those of the national curriculum and causes them to create their own localised curriculum.

The way in which the Department shapes the national curriculum for itself may be explained by the concept of 'appropriation' outlined by Bakhtin (1981, p. 53), meaning one takes something that belongs to others and makes it one's own. As Wertsch (1998) claims, cultural tools are often not easily appropriated by agents. Instead, there is often resistance and friction between mediational means and agents in mediated actions. The Department is borrowing an existing set of linguistic terms from the national curriculum but adapts it according to its own needs and objectives. This situation reveals the friction between the ideologies of teaching in these two activity systems. As Wertsch (1998) mentions, the resistance between agent and

mediational means gives rise to mediated action and has a major influence on the development of the agent. Sometimes it is not a matter of conscious resistance or other form of reflective intention when the user shapes the tools (Wertsch 1998), as it occurs even when agents express a desire to subordinate themselves to a cultural tool and to use it precisely in accordance with socioculturally prescribed norms. Although the Head of the Department proclaims that the Department based their curriculum on the government's curriculum and even describes the two as 'identical on major issues though with minor differences', the comparison between these two curricula suggests that the Department has transformed its curriculum according to its particular context.

To summarise, the analysis of these two activity systems reveals two similar features. Both features generate problems in reform implementation. One feature is the two-tier system in the communities of these two activity systems. In the system of reform, only top-level universities are involved. Most ordinary universities, which lie on the periphery, cannot access the training resources and thus maintain existing practices. In the case of the ZS University, the Head of the Department does not know much about the reform content. One reason for this may be the lack of access to state training and curriculum reform projects. However, a similar hierarchical structure exists within the Department itself. Only teachers with high status have access to classrooms with Internet resources and young teachers are excluded from these resources. That means many young teachers cannot make use of multimedia technology to innovate their teaching as advocated by the national reform. Consequently, this two-tier system results in gaps between the national and locally implemented curriculum. In this context, there is no shared understanding about teaching or how to make changes according to the reform at the Department level. To successfully implement the reform, it is important to build and negotiate understanding across different reform sites and levels (Pyhältö et al. 2011; Resnick and Hall 1998). This requires shared meaning-making between both the national level and university level about what changes should be made. Individual case analyses will explore further the extent to which there is a shared theory of teaching between the national reform and individual teachers' perception and practice.

The second feature is the control–compliance pattern that operates though the division of labour in these two activity systems. In the national curriculum reform system, the doers, the selected universities and press companies, have a compliant implementation role. Similarly, in the activity system of the Department, the Head of the Department's role is to take orders from senior managers. For their part, teachers in this department also have a compliance role. This compliance culture does not allow space for universities to exercise their agency in innovation nor for teachers to develop capacity to change teaching practice at the classroom level. However, if successful innovation and development is to occur, teachers need to be treated as active professional agents. Therefore, the school managers should try to utilise teachers' pedagogical expertise and broaden their sense of professional agency (Pyhältö et al. 2011).

3.5   Summary

By way of summary, the CMoE set clear goals for the reform, but remains vague about what teachers should do to achieve these goals. In terms of implementation, the reform outlined a comprehensive plan with particular emphasis on encouraging teachers to undertake research into the reform. However, reform implementation still required compliance instead of capacity-building. In addition, only top universities are entitled to get research funding and participate in the national training programmes. Many universities, like the one where I collected data, were left on the periphery. Analysis of the activity system of the College English Department in this university therefore indicates there is slippage between the curriculum intentions set by the CMoE and teacher needs, values and goals. Facing pressures to maintain stability, the Head of the Department set norms for teaching according to his own beliefs about language teaching. At the same time, many tools, such as curriculum plans and tests, also act as management rules that constrain teacher pedagogical practices. Consequently, the teaching culture of this department encourages teachers' compliance rather than agency and innovation.

As discussed previously, the successful implementation of reform depends on the congruence between the reformers and local level needs, as well as with the process of introducing and following through the desired innovation (Fullan 1991). However, there is little congruence or shared understanding between the reform requirements and the local needs of the Department. Even though the Department acknowledged the national curriculum issued by the CMoE, its staff developed their own curriculum with appropriated discourse but fundamentally different aims and beliefs about teaching. National educational policies are thus filtered by the Department's need to strike a balance between compliance to higher authority and teacher beliefs about EFL reading instruction. This requires shared meaning-making and negotiation between the reform level and the university level about what change should occur. Otherwise, the reform is possibly reduced to a series of reactions and counterreactions instead of sustainable development work (Pyhältö et al. 2011). In addition, sustainable educational reform needs a coherent shared pedagogical theory and the development of a coherent learning culture in the university (Pyhältö et al. 2011). Based on such shared understandings, new structures of participation and new practices can develop at the university level (Hargreaves and Fink 2004).

Reform implementation means change to both behaviour and thinking (Fullan 1991). However, the analysis in this chapter reveals that there is no clear sign of change of beliefs or conceptions about the curriculum issued by the Department. This does not mean that there is no change in individual teachers' beliefs and conceptions of teaching; however, in such situations, teachers face a dilemma between autonomy and control. On the one hand, their work is controlled by university and government level decision-making; on the other hand, they are autonomous practitioners in their class (Pyhältö et al. 2011). In this context, teachers need time to negotiate and construct a shared conception with their leaders at different levels about the reform's pedagogical implications and plans and steps to achieve these

goals. This situation makes teacher agency and teacher beliefs critical variables in the efficacy of reform initiatives (Olson 2009). It is necessary now to explore whether teachers construct a shared conception, with the national reform, of the reform's pedagogical mandates and how they manage to achieve these goals of the reform in their teaching practices. The next three chapters therefore explore the nature and development of case study teachers' pedagogical agency in relation to the reform. As stated in the research method of this study, the three cases were chosen from 44 teachers, and then interviews and classroom observation were utilised to investigate the two research questions. Each case study chapter starts with a biographical vignette. After that, each chapter analyses the activity system of one participant's classroom teaching. The focus of the analysis then moves on to consider the levels of contradictions in that participant's activity system and her agency in resolving them. The final section explores each participant's agency in relation to her ZPD as well as the factors accounting for her agency.

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Chapter 4
The Case Study of Sunny: The Prisoner

This chapter focuses on Sunny (pseudonym), who was the teacher who had not received any training in teaching reading strategies but still taught every reading strategy in the textbook. Sunny was 28 years old. She had been teaching the course *New Horizon College English* for about 5 years. Her previous education experiences included an English literature major in a Bachelor's degree and a short training programme for teaching the course, conducted by the press company which published the textbook. She mentioned in the interview that there was no training about teaching reading strategies in that programme. Nevertheless, she was regarded as an excellent young teacher by the Head of the Department. She was planning to go abroad to pursue postgraduate study. Sunny had a desire to change her teaching, but struggled with many situational constraints and was 'shackled' in her capacity to do so. Therefore, I gave her the name 'prisoner'. Sunny's agency was constrained by a lack of theoretical knowledge of teaching as well as lack of support from the Department. This chapter firstly analyses the activity system of Sunny's classroom teaching, which is followed by analysing the levels of contradiction in Sunny's activity system as well as her agency to resolve these contradictions; and finally the third section explores Sunny's agency in relation to her ZPD as well as the factors accounting for her agency.

4.1 The Activity System of Sunny's Classroom Teaching

As outlined in Fig. 4.1, this study uses an activity theory framework to analyse each teacher's classroom teaching as a simple activity system. The basic proposition of activity theory is a tripartite structure of human activities in which the relationship between an organism and its environment is mediated by various cultural artefacts, signs and tools (Miettinen 2001, p. 298). A subject, an object, rules, tools and community evolve interactively and are constantly changed by their interaction. The

framework of Sunny's activity system is shown in Fig. 4.1. This section discusses each element in this activity system.

4.1.1 Sunny as Subject of Her Activity System

The subject of any activity is the individual or group of actors engaged in the activity (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy 1999). In this case, Sunny is the subject of the activity system. Sunny believed that the reading process should start from reading for main ideas, then for general organisation and finally move to in-depth understanding and language appreciation. Her beliefs about English reading then reflected a top-down approach to reading, although Sunny did not know the terms 'bottom-up' or 'top-down' in reading. After I explained these two reading approaches to her, she thought her teaching of Section A constituted a bottom-up approach and her teaching of Section B a top-down approach. For the reading text in Section A, she firmly believed that both main ideas and detailed language points were the focal points of teaching because that was the teaching goal set by the Head of the Department. For the text in Section B, Sunny thought the focus was teaching reading strategies. Here, the text was relatively easier than the text in Section A. With this text, she used a top-down approach and gave more time for students to read.

Although Sunny did not participate in any teacher education programme or research in teaching reading strategies, she thought reading strategies were helpful for students in their reading comprehension and in passing their test, especially 'skimming' and 'scanning' or 'fast' reading. She pointed out that her students would sometimes use reading strategies without knowing the strategy being used. Sunny therefore thought that explicit reading strategy instruction would improve students' application. This issue of conscious strategy use figured in her comparison between students' strategy use and her own teaching:

Excerpt 4.1
I: Previously [the students used reading strategies] unconsciously. Will they use strategies better after they know that explicitly?

S: Yes, it will be more helpful. Just like my teaching. I have also used [some teaching methods] but without knowledge. It will be better for application after knowing that.

(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

In exploring how she taught reading strategies, I asked her to read three narratives about different methods of teaching reading strategies and to identify the one she agreed with the most. Sunny mentioned that she agreed the most with the first method, the direct method of teaching reading strategies, and disagreed with the peer discussion in reciprocal teaching as she firmly believed that reading was an individual behaviour and unsuited to peer interaction. She thought that group discussions could be arranged after individual reading, but definitely not during the process of reading. As for transactional strategy instruction, she regarded it as dif-

ficult to manage. When asked to evaluate her own reading strategy instruction, Sunny mentioned in the interview that she would usually offer definition, examples, explanation and demonstration, but she was not good at designing her teaching activity and did not give enough feedback and guidance for student practice.

The Head of the Department regarded Sunny as a competent teacher. During the data collection, she was also preparing for the TOEFL test and applying to get her Master's degree in the USA. Her intention to shape and adjust the objective of her teaching is analysed in the next subsection.

4.1.2   Objects and Outcome of Sunny's Activity System

In activity theory, the object represents the intention that motivates the activity. In terms of teaching, the object of a teacher's activity system is usually the objectives he or she sets and tries to achieve in his or her class programme. This object, however, is transformed in the course of teaching activity (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy 1999). Teacher agency can be observed when they form a new object for their activity system. In Sunny's case, she exerted her agency in developing and changing the objects of her teaching.

Sunny's Previous Objects In the interview, Sunny mentioned that the primary goal of her teaching was to help students pass the College English Test (CET). Her second goal was to educate students morally through reading and language appreciation. She stated clearly that she set test preparation as one objective because of the Head of the Department's requirement.

Excerpt 4.2
He, the Head of the Department, requires that you must teach the test, <u>must</u>! Therefore, my main objective is preparing students to pass the test.
(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

The data from the focus group interview with Sunny's students suggested that her students had formed almost the same object as Sunny. Indeed, four out of the six students in the focus group stated that the primary goal for this reading course was to pass the CET. The aim of other two students' was to learn more about humanity from reading.

Teacher classroom practices reflect the object of the activity. This section describes Sunny's classroom practices to see whether she took action to achieve her objectives. Because there were too many exercises in each unit, Sunny only chose to teach the exercises relevant to the CET. In Unit 7, when teaching the reading strategy 'Scanning', she emphasised to her students that this reading strategy was important for the CET 4 and 6. Sunny mentioned in the interview that after finishing the eight units as the curriculum plan required, there were 2 weeks for preparing for the CET 4. During these 2 weeks, she would give students model tests and drilling exercises. Sunny thought that she had almost achieved the objective of students passing the test.

Excerpt 4.3

The main aim is passing the test. My students in that class have high pass ratio, more than 60 %. More than 30 people passed. I think it is ok.

(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

However, from the observation of her teaching, it was apparent that Sunny did not give students the opportunity to discuss what kind of humanity or moral principle they could learn from reading. In the interview she agreed that she did not achieve her second object this semester. She mentioned that she had organised student group discussions on the topic of each unit last year and still had this activity on her previous lesson plan. However, she did not implement it this semester. Sunny indicated that she gave up on the second object of moral education because of time pressures and for personal reasons:

Excerpt 4.4

As for this objective, I need to spend time and energy in organising some activities. But time is limited. In addition, I don't want to spend too much time and energy because I have many things to do. I have my personal matters. I wanted to study abroad. I have been preparing for this.

(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

This curriculum is another reason. If you are a bit slower, you cannot finish.

(Interview with Sunny, 26 May 2010)

As for the reform mandate, Sunny mentioned in the interview that the Department did not provide any information to teachers about the policy of the curriculum reform. Therefore, it is difficult for Sunny to align her objectives with the activity system of the 2007 College English curriculum reform. Sunny's objectives were mediated by particular social and contextual influences. She set the first objective because of the Head of the Department's requirements and gave up her second objective because of the stress of the curriculum plan and her personal needs for further study. To resolve the contradiction between her personal needs and her second objective, her agentive action was to give up her moral object of teaching. However, this change did not develop her teaching. The second objective is mediated and changed by other factors in the activity system. However, Sunny developed tacit knowledge about the top-down reading approach from the interaction with her students, which is one of the outcomes of her activity system. The other outcome of Sunny's teaching activity system is that she lacked transformational tools to change her teaching, even though she desired to make changes. Therefore, the next section will analyse the tool mediation in Sunny's activity system.

4.1.3   The Tools of Sunny's Activity System

Tools can be anything used in the transformation process (physical or mental). Since the aim of this study was to evaluate teacher agency to create new tools/artefacts to achieve their new object for teaching, I focused on the tool/artefact-mediated

activity in Sunny's classroom teaching. The tools and artefacts used in mediating Sunny's teaching included: the textbook, teacher's beliefs and knowledge, instructional media as well as classroom activities.

4.1.3.1   The Textbook

The textbook was an important cultural tool used in mediating Sunny's teaching activity because she regarded it as necessary language learning material.

Excerpt 4.5
Although I do not think [the textbook] is so good, it is the material. You need reading material if you want to study a language, including the complementary material you found from other resources. But no need to offer complementary material every time, because this material is enough for learning, enough for what you need to master. I think it is a language material and learning material.
    (Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

In addition, Sunny expressed her dependence on the textbook because of the pressure from the Head of the Department and her students:

Excerpt 4.6
I think I have to depend on it. You cannot break away from the textbook. If your teaching breaks away from the textbook, not to say the Head of the Department disagrees, students also disagree.
    (Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

Similarly, the students in Sunny's focus group regarded the textbook as the sole resource for learning English because they seldom read English after class. They put most of their energy into studying the textbook because they believed it could help them pass the CET and the final exam. However, they all thought the exercises in the textbook were excessive and boring, even though they regarded them as necessary. In addition, they also expected the teacher to teach outside the textbook, which could increase their interest in studying English.

Sunny's practices matched her beliefs about tools. Her teaching followed the textbook and she spent most of her time in class analysing the content in the textbook and doing textbook exercises. Classroom observation records indicate that use of the textbook mediated Sunny's teaching in such a way that her teaching could be described as textbook centred.

Although Sunny acknowledged the authoritative role of the textbook in her teaching, she also complained that there were too many exercises in the textbook:

Excerpt 4.7 This new edition is different from the old version, which has fewer exercises. This [new edition] has too many [exercises]! If you do not teach, the leader requires that we must teach so much content. If you teach, you cannot finish.
    (Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

Sunny regarded the requirements for teaching exercises as a constraint but did not dare to break the rule set by the leader. Sunny also complained that the texts were old and boring. Therefore she could not develop discussion activities for students and could not find any related complementary reading materials. The textbook also appeared to play a part in her giving up on her second objective of moral education. In addition, the excerpts above indicate the influence of the Head of the Department and students at the interpsychological plane on Sunny's beliefs about the textbook and her dependence on the textbook at the intrapsychological plane. However, such textbook reliance can distract teachers' attention from altering their practices and beliefs to achieve desired changes (Fullan 1991). As Wertsch (1998) claims, cultural tools are not always acting as facilitators but also as constraints on mediated action. In Sunny's teaching, the textbook became the rule, which both assisted her classroom teaching and also constrained her agency in making changes to her teaching.

4.1.3.2   Sunny's Beliefs and Knowledge

From a sociocultural theory perspective, beliefs and knowledge are psychological tools, occurring on both mental and social planes as object-oriented action. Therefore, teacher beliefs and knowledge mediate classroom teaching activity. In order to explore teacher agency in changing teaching practice, this study focuses on how teacher beliefs mediate, and are mediated by, teachers' classroom practices and other factors. This section explores this issue in two parts: (1) Sunny's beliefs and knowledge about EFL reading instruction and (2) Sunny' beliefs and knowledge about teaching reading strategies.

1. *Sunny's beliefs and knowledge about EFL reading instruction*

Sunny thought her teaching of Section A constituted a bottom-up approach and her teaching of Section B a top-down approach. Nevertheless, classroom observation records noted that her teaching of the text in Section A incorporated both, reflecting an interactive approach to reading. Data from the interview conclude that Sunny was rather unclear about her beliefs and there was incongruence between her stated pedagogical beliefs and her teaching practices. When I pointed out this incongruence and asked about her reasons, she explained that she taught the main idea before the detailed explanation in Section A because of student needs:

Excerpt 4.8
(S = Sunny; I = interviewer)
S: Yes, I think it is according to students' characteristics. They do not have the ability to learn the details first and then summarise afterwards. They need more time to understand in this way. You have to give them plenty of time to do like this.
I: To summarise?
S: I think so. In addition, the effect was not good either. I had taught like this before. They still need to understand ###
I: The main idea?

S: Yes! And then they can understand the text. I think it depends on the students.

(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

The excerpt above suggests that Sunny chose to teach the global understanding of texts before the detailed explanation partly because of her knowledge of her students' needs. From past experiences, she knew that it was more effective to let students read for main ideas first and then to read in detail. Sunny mentioned in the interview that she learned her current approach to teaching from observing other teachers' classes and from her own teaching practices.

Sunny's knowledge about her students was confirmed by the data from the student focus group interview. Five out of six students in the focus group believed that the top-down approach was more effective for their reading because it gave them a direction and context for reading and could cultivate their skills in summarising. One of these five students remarked that the approach Sunny applied to teaching Section B was effective. Only one student preferred a bottom-up approach because he had been taught in this way since he had started learning English. In addition, the students also agreed with summarising of the text at the end of the lesson because they could practise their oral expression and the skills in summarising.

The data above suggests that although Sunny was not fully aware of her teaching approaches, her practical knowledge of her students mediated her teaching in the way that she adopted different approaches in relation to her students and different texts. However, she cannot articulate these approaches, which means that she didn't fully internalise this tacit knowledge.

As documented in the classroom observation, in every unit, after teaching the vocabulary section, Sunny began teaching the text of Section A by asking students to skim the whole text, summarise the main idea and analyse the text structure. After that, she usually asked students to read the text aloud and spent most of the time on a detailed analysis of the text, focusing on phrases and sentence structure, translating and paraphrasing sentences and introducing background information when needed. For Section B, she would usually explain the reading strategy involved and then ask students to read the whole text and summarise its main idea, and then she usually assigned some comprehension questions for students to read the text again and find answers. At the same time, she would ask students to practise the reading strategy in their reading and explain the meaning of several difficult sentences.

When analysing difficult sentences, she always asked students to identify the basic structure of the sentence by pointing out parts of speech such as subject, verb and object and then translated the sentence into Chinese. The excerpt from the classroom observation records of Sunny teaching Unit 4 indicates her usual method of analysing text and sentence structure:

Excerpt 4.9
(T = teacher; S = student; SS = two students; SSS = more than two students)

T: …好, 我们看下一句 [repeating in Chinese] 'Widespread access to information technologies, for example, promises to condense the time required to change from labour-intensive assembly work to industries that involve engineering, market-

ing, and design'. 'For example', what does it means? Who is the subject? 主语, 找一下 [repeating in Chinese]. Access, 是不是呀? [Translation: Access, isn't it?] Access. What does 'access' means? 'Have access to', 这个句型 [translation: this sentence structure] Access, 'you have access to something', that means you have opportunities to use something, yes? 有机会做某事 [repeating in Chinese], 'have opportunities to do', see or to reach. So here 'access' is a noun, 是个名词 [repeating in Chinese] Ok, how about verb? 动词呢 [repeating in Chinese]? Promises, yes? Promises to condense the time 这个是句子的主干 [Chinese translation: this is the main structure of this sentence]. What kind of time? 什么样的时间呢 [repeating in Chinese]? 'require to do something', 要求做什么事情的时间, 需要做什么事情的时间 [repeating in Chinese twice]. Ok, for example, why put 'for example' at the beginning of the sentence? This sentence is the example of the first sentence, 是就着第一句话来举得例子 [repeating in Chinese].可以这么说 [translation: it can be put in this way]: Promises to condense the time required to change from labour-intensive assembly work to industries that involve engineering, marketing, and design, **for example,** widespread access to information technologies. 'for example' 可以放在这句话的句首, 表示例如 [translation: 'for example' can be put at the beginning of the sentence, means 'for example']. Widespread, 'widespread' here is an adjective that means spread, widely, yes? 就是说很多地方都可以怎么样了? 使用这种信息了, 是吧? [Translation: That means what are happening to many places? [Many places] are using this information, aren't they?] 信息技术. [Translation: Information technology.] What does promise means? 是承诺么 [repeating in Chinese]?

SSS: 期望 [answering in Chinese]

T: 期望, 就是有机会使用这种信息技术, 能够让整个变成现实。是不是呀 [translating this sentence in Chinese]? 变成可能, make something possible, yes? Make something possible. Condensing the time, condensing the time, 缩短时间怎么样呢? 使缩短时间成为可能 [translating this sentence in Chinese]。Ok, 接下来的 change from, 从什么变成 [repeating in Chinese], Change from to.

(Transcripts of Sunny's class, 14 April 2010)

The data above reveals that Sunny's beliefs about reading were influenced profoundly by her interaction with the Department's requirements, specifically the Head of the Department's emphasis on sentence structure as a focus of teaching. However, in practice, Sunny adjusted her teaching methods according to student's needs and the type of text (shown in Excerpt 4.8). Without knowing it, she used an interactive approach to reading, based on her teaching goal. In the interview, Sunny acknowledged that she had never received teacher education in English language teaching. It is apparent that Sunny can identify that she lacked theoretical knowledge about teaching. As she mentioned in the interview, she used theory, but could not name it. Therefore, she only had practical knowledge of teaching. Social interaction with students and the texts had enabled her to develop a tacit knowledge about teaching on the interpsychological plane. As Vygotsky (1978) claims, social interaction brings about growth of knowledge on the internal plane. However, as discussed previously, Sunny did not internalise this knowledge. Therefore, in order to improve Sunny's potential teaching within her zone of proximal development, she needs more theoretical knowledge about teaching.

Although the Department operated with a different theory of teaching from the reforming CMoE and did not inform teachers about the new curriculum, Sunny's recognition of the importance of main ideas in students' reading was nevertheless congruent with reform requirements. Sunny therefore taught for both the main idea and detailed understanding in her class. However, because of the Head of the Department's influence, her teaching tended to focus more on detailed text explanations. The focus of the next subsection is Sunny's beliefs and knowledge about teaching reading strategies, the other reform mandate.

2. *Sunny' beliefs and knowledge about teaching reading strategies*

Interview data indicate that in Sunny's beliefs about teaching reading strategies, the teacher has a dominant role in delivering knowledge and that reading was an individual activity. Therefore, she did not believe that peer scaffolding had value in fostering reading comprehension. Consequently, in classroom observation records, she did not provide opportunities for students to discuss their reading strategy use. She also thought it was difficult to manage multiple strategy instruction, most probably due to her lack of theoretical knowledge about reading strategies. Indeed, Sunny indicated that some strategies were difficult to teach, such as 'making inference' or 'reading between the lines', as they were not easy to demonstrate, and regarded other strategies as easier to teach, for instance, 'guessing word meaning', 'sentence meaning' or 'skimming and scanning'. She acknowledged her limited understanding of the theory of reading strategy instruction and that the textbook was her 'teacher'.

Excerpt 4.10
In the beginning, I only knew skimming and scanning, oh, word meaning as well. I was not clear about other strategies. I cannot move up to a theoretical level**.** New Horizon College English is so good that I learned these theories from this textbook.
(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

Although she taught reading strategies in every textbook unit, her students in the focus group admitted that they had no interest in learning reading strategies. When asked about her views on students' lack of interest in learning reading strategies, Sunny stated that these students paid more attention to bottom-up knowledge and she did not have sufficient knowledge about reading strategy instruction:

Excerpt 4.11
[Students] still don't know the advantages. They need more guidance. The teacher didn't teach enough about it.
(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

She indicated that she wanted to learn more about reading strategy instruction:

Excerpt 4.12
I taught all strategies, but what I want to know is how to teach. I hope there would be better support than what I have now.
(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

This suggested that although Sunny had learned how to teach reading strategies from the textbook, she felt that she still lacked comprehensive knowledge about reading strategy instruction. This made her believe that it was difficult to teach multiple reading strategies. In addition, her knowledge and beliefs mediated her classroom teaching in the sense that she taught some strategies in a more detailed way than others and could not provide adequate teaching of all reading strategies. She thought that was the reason students were not interested in reading strategies.

As documented in the classroom observation of Unit 6, Sunny's way of teaching reading strategy 'Reading between the lines' is:

Excerpt 4.13

T: My plan of today. I plan to finish Section B Unit 6, Ok? Now we get reading skills, 看一下阅读技巧 [repeating in Chinese]. It is a review, 这一次是对以前学过的一个复习 [repeating in Chinese], 叫 reading between the lines, reading between the lines. What is called reading between the lines? What is 咱们说的这个在字里行间阅读是什么意思 [repeating in Chinese]? So you will draw some interferences from your reading, 读的时候是不是自己要推测一些信息阿 [repeating in Chinese]? Read with some impressions in your mind, such as here we have several questions. There [are] five [questions], yes? You can answer the questions. I will give you several minutes, and you will read by yourself. My tasks, here, the first is answering the question, the five questions, and then three sentences for you to translate.

(Transcripts of Sunny's class, 06 June, 2010)

After this introduction, Sunny gave time for students to read and then checked answers for these five questions and analysed some difficult sentences. She mentioned that she felt 'reading between the lines' was difficult to teach, so her teaching of this reading strategy comprised only definitions and students practising. There were no examples, explanations or demonstrations of how to use this strategy, and no feedback was given for student practice either.

By contrast, her teaching of 'scanning' in Unit 7 was a more elaborate process. The excerpt below indicates that Sunny was more confident in teaching the strategy 'scanning'. Sunny taught definitions and gave explanations about when and how to use this strategy and then gave students time to read and practise this strategy in the text. After that, she checked the answers and provided the students with an evaluation, 'you did a good job'.

Excerpt 4.14

T: Reading skills, *scanning*. 这个技巧之前都学过了, 今天复习一下 [translation: we have learned this skill before. Today is review]. Scanning, scanning is a very useful skill for Band 4 and 6. We have learned scanning and skimming. 非常重要, 对于 fast-reading非常重要, 再来复习一下 [translation: very important, very important for fast reading. Let's review it again]. What is scan, scan?

SSS: 浏览 [repeating in Chinese]

T: 浏览 [repeating in Chinese], that is for extensive meaning, right? For extensive reading, 用来做什么啊, 泛读, 广泛的阅读 [repeating in Chinese], scan, if you

want to scan, you should have purpose, what kind of information you need to find? 首先你在浏览之前要知道你在找什么信息，是不是? [repeating in Chinese] If you want to find somebody, you need to find 'who' If you want to find when, you will find the time in the text. 如果你找谁作了这事，你就在文章中找人，如果你找时间，你就在文章中找时间 [repeating in Chinese]. So you will follow three steps: first one you need to make sure or decide what kind of information you want to find。首先要清楚自己要干嘛，要想找什么 [repeating in Chinese]. Then you will read the passage quickly, not sentence by sentence, not word by word, 不是一字一句的读，很快的把这个文章浏览一下 [repeating in Chinese], try to locate the key word. 然后下一步干嘛? 来进一步定位来找关键词 [repeating in Chinese], try to find the information. And then, if you find the correct answer or the information you want, you will move to next. 找完以后呢，继续找下一个 [repeating in Chinese]. This is called scan. Now there are five questions, 是不是有五个问题啊 [repeating in Chinese]. You will use several minutes and try to read, using the skill of scanning to try to find the answer. 一会儿大家花些时间来回答这些问题 [repeating in Chinese].

(Transcripts of Sunny's class, 15 June 2010)

Overall, as can be seen, Sunny's beliefs and knowledge about reading strategy instruction and the textbook mediated her practice. Her beliefs about the direct method mediated her teaching, which resulted in a sense of responsibility for delivering knowledge and avoidance of peer interaction methods. She learned about reading strategy instruction from the textbook. Therefore, her teaching was mediated strongly by the textbook, especially for strategies she was not so familiar with. As a result, her tacit knowledge about reading strategy instruction was formed through the interaction with the tool, the textbook, which facilitated her teaching, but, at the same time, also constrained it. If the textbook did not provide examples or explanations about reading strategies, she did not know how to teach. In addition, Sunny's knowledge about reading strategies was similar to that of her students. She knew more about reading strategies at word and sentence level than strategies at a higher level, though she wanted to move her teaching up to a higher level. Therefore, she was not capable of teaching the variety of reading strategies the reform required, especially the ones like 'reading between the lines'. Her lack of theoretical knowledge about teaching reading constrained her from being able to initiate improvements to her teaching in the proximal level of development.

The analysis of Sunny's beliefs and knowledge, then, revealed an interesting phenomenon. Although she had not been informed about the reform and did not have theoretical knowledge about reading instruction and reading strategies, her practices did follow what the reform required for this reading course. Although she spent most of her class time explaining sentence structure, she also incorporated the teaching of main ideas and reading strategies in her teaching. This was due to the mediation of her teaching experiences, her knowledge of her students and, importantly, the textbook. As Fullan (1991) argues, changes in behaviour occur before changes in beliefs. In the case of Sunny, the incongruence between her beliefs and behaviour suggests that the change in Sunny's teaching behaviour was in advance of the change in her pedagogical thinking. This is also in congruence with Vygotsky's

theory of learning, which argues that learning takes place firstly on social plane and then brings about growth on an internal plane. However, Sunny's lack of theoretical knowledge remained a major constraint in her ability to transform her teaching. Besides beliefs and knowledge, the classroom activities Sunny created are also a form of tools used to achieve her teaching objectives.

4.1.3.3   Classroom Activities

Sunny's agency in creating classroom activities was mediated by contextual factors, such as student responses to her teaching. At the beginning of each class, Sunny would always teach some English expressions in relation to the latest news and events or some popular English usage. She would usually write these expressions on the blackboard before class. She believed this would arouse student interest in learning English:

Excerpt 4.15
They like this. They think 'What we learn is not out of date. If you only teach the textbook, what I know is only in the textbook, not related to daily life'. If you teach something about the World Exhibition, or Olympic Games, they will feel 'the English I learned is useful, not just the textbook'. My students quite, quite like this.
     (Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

The data from the focus group with Sunny's students confirmed that they liked the introduction of news and events at the beginning of each class as a lead-in for the reading text and that this offered them more topical knowledge of English. In the excerpt above, Sunny justified her actions with reference to her students' perspective. It is apparent that students' responsiveness strengthened Sunny's agency in persisting with this activity. At the same time, she also realised that the textbook, as the sole class tool, could not completely satisfy her students' needs, even though she stated that the textbook was adequate for teaching. Therefore, although she had given up redesigning discussion activities, she maintained this news and event activity in order to make her teaching more interesting for her students.

4.1.3.4   Instructional Means

Instructional means are the tools teachers employ to deliver instruction and include instructional language, blackboards or other technological tools. Activity theory claims that the use of material objects as cultural tools can result in changes in the agent (Wertsch 1998). In Sunny's class, the instructional means were mainly the instructional language and the blackboard.

Language is a kind of artefact, which mediates thinking and communication between people as well as intrapsychologically within an individual. Sunny mentioned that in the past she usually used English for instructional language but now she used both English and Chinese because her students could not understand English-only instructions. She reported that she gained this feedback from observing students' reactions in class.

Excerpt 4.16

Now I use both Chinese and English. But previously I had never used Chinese when I taught the first-year students. But the students in this class are not used to this. I took this class from another teacher. When you teach [using all English], [the students] look very dull. So gradually I get used to [teaching in both Chinese and English].

I can see from their faces. They are quiet, staring at you like this. You ask, but no response.

(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

Classroom observation records and transcript analysis revealed that she often translated complex English instructions into Chinese. It is evident that Sunny used Chinese as the artefact to resolve the problem of not understanding English instruction. This artefact created a dilemma, however. On one hand, the use of Chinese assisted students' understanding; on the other hand, students learned not to pay keen attention to the English instructions since they knew the teacher would always translate them into Chinese. Students becoming used to Chinese language instructions might constrain the teacher from changing her instructional approach. In addition, the repetition of this approach would take up more class time, which might be another factor contributing to time pressure in Sunny's class.

Besides language artefacts, another key instructional media is the blackboard, which is used frequently in Sunny's class. The things she wrote on the blackboard included: English expressions related to news and events, difficult words, sentence structure, example sentences and a diagram of text organisation. In order to save time in writing, she would usually write the example sentences on the blackboard before class. Accordingly, in the interview, Sunny indicated that she wanted to use multimedia equipment in her class, especially for presenting text organisation. She identified the advantages of using multimedia in her class:

Excerpt 4.17

I need [multimedia] when there is something needs to be presented by image, for example, the unit about Chaplin. In addition, [it is needed] when there is a lot of information. Once I had a lot of information, for instance there are a lot of example sentences when teaching grammar, or practices, it was troublesome to write on the blackboard. I need it in this kind of situation.

(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

It seemed that Sunny used the blackboard more for detailed explanations, but preferred multimedia technology for teaching background and top-down information. However, at this university there were not enough classrooms with multimedia technology and only some senior teachers could access these resources. This lack of access to such tools constrained Sunny's agency in teaching. Even though one of the reform requirements was to use multimedia technology in teaching, limited resources at the local level made it difficult for teachers to meet these reform requirements.

Overall, among all the tools mediating Sunny's teaching, the textbook was the most important, as Sunny learned to teach from the textbook. In addition, her

practical experiences and knowledge about her students' needs also mediated her teaching, which actually differed from what she believed. Although she gave up redesigning some activities, student responses made her keep lead-in activities. In addition, Chinese was another important artefact which she used frequently in her teaching. Overall, the analysis in this section suggests that Sunny's use of different tools and artefacts was enhanced or constrained by the contextual factors, such as the impact of her superior colleagues and her students, as well as the resources offered by the university. Therefore, in order to explore Sunny's agency to change her teaching, the next section analyses the community in Sunny's activity system.

4.1.4   The Community of Sunny's Activity System

Activities are socially and contextually bound, and any activity system can be described only in the context of the community in which it operates (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy 1999). Sunny's teaching and decision-making were mediated by contextual factors in the community of Sunny's classroom, as well as the community of the Department. The pressure from the Department made Sunny to change her teaching objectives. At the classroom level, Sunny's students disagree with the dominant role of their teacher in the class.

Community at the Department Level As highlighted in the activity system of the Department in which Sunny belonged, the Head of the Department required teachers to focus on test preparation, which determined the dominant object of the Department and shaped the teaching goal and community. In the interview, Sunny referred to this situation in her concerns about the test:

Excerpt 4.18
(I = interviewer; S = Sunny)
   I: Is the pressure for passing the CET test heavy?
   S: Quite heavy. Actually not pressured, we all concerned about it, all the teachers. Actually, there is no benefit. Even you have a lot of students passing the test, there is no [benefits for teachers]. But all teachers pay attention to it.
   I: Does the university calculate pass rates in your class?
   S: No, but we calculate by ourselves.
   I: No stress?
   S: No, [the university] does not get involved. But you would expect your teaching to have some achievements. I put effort by myself.
   I: Is the test pass rate one of the criteria for teacher evaluation?
   S: No…But this is a kind of affirmation for yourself, but it is only one aspect, it's not comprehensive.
   (Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)
   This excerpt suggests that Sunny had already taken the initiative to set test passing as a measure of her achievement. This intrapsychological function was formed from the interpsychological function in the social community in this department.

This influence of the university community accounts for the fact that Sunny set passing the CET test as the prime object of her teaching.

Besides passing the CET test, in his interview, the Head of the Department stressed that sentence structure was an important focus for this course. Sunny also recollected one episode when the Head of the Department observed her class, he pointed out that one language point was missing in that lesson:

Excerpt 4.19

[The Head of the Department] even didn't bring the textbook with him, but he told me that I missed one language point.

(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

This episode mediated Sunny's teaching and thinking so that she believed language points and sentence structure were important for this reading course. That might account for her belief that the reading instruction had to focus on detailed language knowledge.

In addition to the Head of the Department's requirements, Sunny stated that the Department also offered teachers some support through the regular weekly meetings for the teachers who taught the same course, called the *Teaching and Research Meeting*. Sunny considered it helpful to discuss issues with other teachers in the regular weekly meeting. She mentioned they usually communicated about language knowledge, classroom management, teaching methods and students' enthusiasm in learning.

Excerpt 4.20

We have [activity], which is the research office activity. We did that very well. We have meeting every week, [discussing] the difficulties, the things we can share, what we learned from other teachers. [We] did summarization at the end of each semester.

(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

However, other than the support from the Department, Sunny indicated that there were no other resources for teaching. The only resources they had were the textbook and the reference book which included the text translation and answers for the exercises. This might account for why Sunny believed that the textbook was sufficient for teaching and learning.

In addition, Sunny also experienced pressure from her teaching peers. She mentioned in the interview that other young teachers around her had already obtained a Master's degree, while she, as a university teacher, only had a Bachelor's degree. Therefore, she felt under pressure to pursue her Master's degree study. She was spending more time preparing for the TOEFL test and applying to study abroad. The excerpt below from the interview indicates this stress:

Excerpt 4.21

S: [My pressure] is obvious, because other teachers all have at least a Master's degree. I came to this university in 2005 with only a Bachelor degree. Therefore, you will feel subconsciously the need for improvement. If your teaching is not good either, then you are absolutely left out.

I: Does the university expect all teachers have a Master's degree?

S: [The Head of the Department] said all teachers should have a Master's degree in several years.

I: Does this bring pressure?

S: Yes, yes.

I: Will this pressure affect your teaching?

S: Yes, I am sure! I will try my best, but [preparing for her Master's degree] will distract [her from teaching] on some aspects, for example, I want to improve myself.

(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

The community at the Department level mediated Sunny's beliefs and practices. The Head of the Department's emphasis on test preparation and sentence structure influenced Sunny in the way she set passing the CET test as one of the teaching objectives and stated that language points should be the focus of teaching. In addition, due to pressure from peer teachers, she gave up on her second objective of moral education to save time to prepare for her own study. However, the analysis of Sunny's beliefs about reading instruction highlights that Sunny's students preferred a top-down reading approach. This also mediated Sunny's teaching in that she incorporated this approach in her teaching practices even though she expressed her beliefs differently. The next part of this section analyses perceptions of students in Sunny's classroom community.

Community at the Classroom Level This study used focus group interviews with the students from each case teacher's class to elicit their perceptions about their teacher and his or her class teaching. In Sunny's classroom community, the students in the focus group thought that teaching was an activity in which both teachers and students co-constructed; students therefore should participate in the class. Ideally, students should be at the centre of the class. They described the difference between their ideal and real classroom community:

Excerpt 4.22

I feel now the classroom is the teacher's Main Battle Field. Students cannot be much involved in the classroom. The teacher should change the classroom into our own Main Battle Field, so that we can involve more.

(Focus group with Sunny's students, 29 May 2010)

I asked what 'Main Battle Field' meant. They explained that it was a term used in computer games, meaning the dominant role of the classroom. They also used the computer game to describe their ideal role in learning English:

Excerpt 4.23

S1: Just like playing game, if the enemy comes, we attack. If English is our enemy, we will initially conquer it.

(Focus group with Sunny's students, 29 May 2010)

This suggested that students wanted to have more autonomy in learning. They complained that they were not the dominant force in the classroom; instead their teacher was just 'inculcating' them with her teaching. They wanted their teacher to

ask more questions and leave space for them to look for answers and discuss. One student pointed out that 'Our teacher asks us questions but never gives us a chance to answer'. As mentioned previously, Sunny spent most of her class time delivering knowledge, rather than engaging students in the class. This caused a contradiction between the students' perception of the classroom community and the actual division of labour in the classroom.

In addition, the physical environment of the classroom also impacted on teacher–student interaction. Sunny's class had 54 students and all seats were fixed in rows. The blackboard and the teacher's desk were in the front of the classroom. The observation records revealed that most of the time Sunny was standing in front of the whole class giving a lecture. This physical position put Sunny in a higher position over her students and reduced opportunities for interaction.

Overall, Sunny received some support from the university-level community, but also experienced certain pressures. In the classroom community, her students agreed with her top-down approach of reading but disagreed with the division of labour in her class. As the Department and classroom community negotiated the rules and division of labour that mediated its activity (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy 1999), this will be discussed in the next two sections.

4.1.5   The Rules of Sunny's Activity System

There were both explicit and tacit rules of teaching at both university level and classroom level governing Sunny's teaching, which were mediated by the influences from the community. Firstly, the Head of the Department required all teachers to teach all the exercises relating to the CET. Sunny also regarded the percentage of students who passed the exam as the measure of her success. Therefore, in this case, the test functioned as both object and implicit rule for this activity system.

In addition, as illustrated in the previous section on community, there were inadequate resources for teaching, except for the textbook. Because of the Head of the Department's requirements for teachers to follow the textbook and cover a certain range of exercises, and because of Sunny's dependence on the textbook, the textbook itself became an implicit rule regulating how this course was taught.

The third rule mediating Sunny's classroom teaching was the curriculum plan set for all the teachers who taught the course. The curriculum plan included the goals for this course and the learning task to be completed each week. Sunny mentioned in the interview that the teaching goals were set by the Head of the Department, but she had not even read those teaching goals. However, she still ensured her teaching was in accordance with the plan because the Head of the Department might observe any teacher's class without notice.

The fourth rule for teaching set by the Head of the Department was that sentence structure and language points should be a focus of the teaching. This was evident in the episode when the Head of the Department observed Sunny's class and pointed out that she missed one language item.

On the whole, these four rules worked together to construct teaching as test oriented, textbook centred and language detail focused, which led to the teacher spending most of her class time in text-based explanations and less time in enabling student participation. The nature of this participation is discussed in the next section, the division of labour.

4.1.6   The Division of Labour in Sunny's Activity System

The division of labour in an activity gives rise to different positions for the participants, who have their own history, perspective and voices (Engeström 1996). The division of labour in the classroom is between teacher and students who may have a different position and history with regard to English learning. In Sunny's class, her students negotiated and mediate this division of labour in the classroom.

Teacher's Role Sunny stated that her teaching was teacher centred as she regarded herself as giving 'monologues' instead of being a facilitator for students' learning. In the interview, Sunny acknowledged that the only interaction in her class was Initiation–Response–Evaluation (IRE), which she had learned from other teachers. She thought that her students were so lazy that they would not bother to copy the answers if she did not teach the exercises. She expected students to be more autonomous and hardworking in their study. She hoped that they could go through the text, background knowledge and exercises before class and would take the initiative to ask questions during the class. In addition, she also expected students to notice the difficult points in the reading passage and appreciate salient language by themselves. However, she thought it was wasting time to ask students to do that at present because of their limited language level and passivity in learning. Interestingly, she acknowledged that some good students were challenging because they might use words that she did not know. These could be reasons why Sunny chose 'monologue' in her teaching.

Students' Role The students in the focus group described the division of labour in the class in the following terms:

Excerpt 4.24
The teacher is teaching her own class, and we are learning our own things.
   (Focus group with Sunny's students, 29 May 2010)

This comment suggests that there was not much interaction between teacher and students. Students also acknowledged their language proficiency was low and they were not active in learning. However, as mentioned in the last section on community, they expressed their desire to be at the centre of the classroom and to have more interaction with their teacher.

These excerpts demonstrate the contradiction between students' perceptions and the real division of labour. Students sometimes wanted to express their voice in the classroom by talking and presenting their opinions, as described in the next subsection. However, their attempts did not alter the established division of labour in the classroom.

As recorded in the classroom observation, the interactional pattern in Sunny's class was mostly under the teacher's control. Apart from calling students to read the text aloud, in many cases, Sunny asked questions about the text and then answered the questions herself without waiting for students to answer. The teacher talk was long, while students' answers were usually short, often involving one-word answers or giving Chinese word translations. One excerpt from the observation records of Unit 6 revealed the nature of the teacher–student interaction in Sunny's class:

Excerpt 4.25
(T = teacher; S = student; SS = two students; SSS = more than two students)

T: 就是指你的商业道德 [translation: That means your business ethics]. OK, pay up, what does 'pay up' mean?

SSS: 算清 [repeating in Chinese]

T: pay up means offering him a substantial bribe, 就是指前面那句话说的 [translation: that refers to the previous sentence], 向他提供贿赂, 而且是大量的钱 [repeating the sentence in Chinese]。是不是阿 [translation: Isn't it]? *Pay up* means you will pay something unwillingly. 是愿意还是不愿意 [translation: willingly or unwillingly]?

SSS: 不 [translation: No]

T: 不太愿意的 [translation: unwillingly]. OK, stand by, who stand by? OK, we can say, I will stand by my promise? I will keep my promise. So here it means keep my principles. 指什么呀? 坚守遵守 [repeating the sentence in Chinese]. 这是第二段, 接着看第三段 [translation: this is the second paragraph, next look at the third paragraph], the longer one [calling one student].

S: [reading aloud]

(Transcripts of Sunny's class, 14 May 2010)

As documented in the classroom observation, some students seemed eager to speak so they often spoke simultaneously with the teacher. However, the teacher's voice always over-dominated or stopped the students' voice.

During the observation, there was only one conversation (from one excerpt in Unit 6) in which both the teacher and students negotiated the meaning of the text. This talk happened exclusively in Chinese.

Excerpt 4.26
T: 这个故事有点隐晦。 … [explaining the words and phrases in Chinese]… 这是什么意思? Preface?

S: 钱, (一个学生): 他说钱不够然后给他送钱。 T: 我感觉他是不是觉得两万美金有点少? SSS: 啊? (怀疑的) T: 大家觉得呢? 然后他说你是不是还能够再送一本, 对不对? 然后那个人说 '我们剐司如果再送一本的话有点多, 但是可能会再给你送一点, 但是可能没有你想象的那么多。'是这个意思吗?

SSS: 不对! T: 前言是不是表示更多呢? SSS: 前言表示是先批准了, 再给更多。 T: 前言是意思意思, 但是为什么说我们买不起两卷本的阿? SSS: 就是说 (xxx) T: 哦!这样我就理解了! 我理解了半天, 我不太懂。哦!按照这个说法就可以理解了! 这样只是一个前奏, 哈? SSS: 阿。 T: 如果你批准的话这样的钱会给你更多的, 我理解啦! 我比较迟钝! SSS: (笑) T: 太迟钝了! 昨天晚上讨论半天, 他们没有反应过来。这样理解我能理解了。

(English translation)

T: This story is bit … [explaining the words and phrases in Chinese]… What does this mean? Preface?

SSS: Money.

S: He means the money is not enough, and later will give him money.

T: I think he feels twenty thousand dollars are too few, right? SSS: [doubtful] Huh? T: What do you think? And then he said 'can you give me another edition', right? And then that person said, 'It is too much for our company to give you another edition, but we can offer you a bit more [money], but not as much as you want'. Is this the meaning?

SSS: Incorrect! T: Does 'Preface' mean more money? SSS: 'Preface' means if you approve, then give you more [money]. T: 'Preface' means giving money, but why does he say 'we cannot afford two editions'?

SSS: That means (xxx) T: Oh! Then I understand! I have been trying to understand for a long time, still not understand. Oh! I can understand by this explanation. This is just a prelude, huh?

SSS: Ah [confirming] T: If you approve, more money will give to you, I see! I am relatively slow. SSS: [Laughing] T: Too slow! Last night we discussed for a long time, and [another class] didn't understand as well. I can understand in this way.

(Transcripts of Sunny's class, 14 May 2010)

This time the teacher was not sure about the meaning of the example in the text (as she acknowledged later), so she asked the students to explain their understanding first. After the students stated their understanding, she sought confirmation by saying 'right?' However, the students disagreed. Then she asked directly, 'What do you think?' and stated her understanding. After the students denied her answer directly, she began seeking help from them by presenting her query. The first 'yes/no' question suggested that she wanted to confirm whether her interpretation was right. After the students gave their interpretation, she accepted it by repeating their answer and then asked a 'why' question to clarify her confusion. The students seemed happy that their teacher asked for help instead of checking answers, so everyone was excited and eager to give her an answer. After listening to the students' answers, the teacher admitted that she had not understood it before and expressed her excitement at the new understanding. Then she checked whether her new interpretation was right by asking them 'huh?' After being approved, she happily admitted that she was 'relatively slow', 'too slow!' The students' laughter demonstrated their sense of achievement and their forgiveness of their teacher's mistake.

The genuine negotiation of meaning between the teacher and students brought about better understanding. In this conversation, the students changed their teachers' opinion and helped her to have better understanding. When the teacher offered the chance for the students to talk about their thinking for the purpose of communication, instead of answer checking, they were willing to contribute their ideas. The students' beliefs and knowledge became the tools mediating the teacher's understanding and teaching. In addition, they used their first language as the tool to express and negotiate their understanding with their teacher; therefore, their English language proficiency was not a communication barrier anymore. During this conversation, there was a change of roles in the division of labour in the classroom.

Students used their understanding of the text and their first language as tools to change their role from passive listener to active speaker, gaining the power to use their voice and contributing their ideas to the conversation. Throughout the conversation, the teacher's role changed from delivering knowledge to involving students in the negotiation of meaning in the classroom. As Ochs (1990) points out, this episode also confirms the problem of former accounts of the acquisition of knowledge in which it was assumed that the novice had little impact on the development of competent members of the society. This episode in Sunny's class also implied that both novices and more competent speakers transferred their structure of knowledge and understanding vis-à-vis discourse and culture (Ochs 1990). However, such an episode only happened once during this observation and did not change the general discourse pattern and the division of labour in Sunny's class.

The interview data and classroom observation records demonstrate how the community and the rules for teaching mediate the division of labour in the classroom. The test-oriented teaching made Sunny spend a fair amount of time teaching exercises related to the test. Therefore, there was limited time for classroom activity. The teacher-centred and textbook-centred teaching, as well as the focus on language points, led Sunny to spend most of her class time on text explanation without leaving space for student talk. The pressure for further study distracted Sunny from preparing lessons and designing classroom activity. All these factors mediated Sunny's decision-making and the division of labour in her class.

On the whole, in Sunny's teaching activity system, all the factors mediated each other while undergoing changes in the process of their interaction. Sunny changed her objectives for teaching and gave up redesigning some activities because of pressure from the community and the constraints of the curriculum plan. Sunny learned how to teach reading strategies from the textbook but was also constrained by it. Both the Head of the Department and her students, who preferred different approaches to teaching reading, mediated her teaching. Overall, these data lead us to infer that there were various conflicts among and within these factors. Therefore, the next section will analyse how Sunny resolved these contradictions and whether these contradictions brought about transformations in her teaching.

4.2   Levels of Contradictions in Sunny's Teaching Activity

After having analysed the activity system of Sunny's classroom teaching, this study now considers the levels of contradictions within this activity system. Contradictions can indicate the difficulties when people translate their ideas into practices. In addition, activity theory claims that there is potential to generate changes if a tertiary contradiction sparks a strong novel factor (or factors) in another activity system and causes secondary contradictions within it (Engeström 1993). However, in Sunny's case, most of the contradictions were not effectively resolved and there was no novel factor imposed from the reform agenda on Sunny's teaching activity.

4.2.1   Primary-Level Contradictions

Primary contradictions exist within each element of the activity system or between an ideal model of teaching and the actual one in practice (Pasanen et al. 2005). In the interview, Sunny articulated her ideal form of teaching, which conflicted with the present realities of her teaching. It has been claimed that the resolution of primary contradictions leads to an emergence of secondary-level contradictions (Jóhannsdóttir 2010). However, Sunny did not successfully resolve the primary contradictions in her activity system.

4.2.1.1   The Distance Between Ideal and Real Subject

Sunny mentioned that her ideal way of being a teacher was to spend enough time and energy to prepare for the lesson, to understand the content of every unit thoroughly and to organise the classroom activity. Sunny indicated that she had always been reflecting and thinking about teaching at the beginning stage of teaching. However, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter, Sunny faced pressure to get a Master's degree and had to spend a great deal of time preparing for the TOEFL test. Her resolution of this conflict was to replace teaching predation time with her TOEFL preparation. In the interview, she admitted that she did not reflect on teaching anymore and just followed her existing lesson plans. Sunny's situation recalls Fullan's (1991) observation that the stress of work and study exhausts teachers' energy and limits their opportunities to reflect on their work.

4.2.1.2   The Distance Between Sunny's Ideal Tools and the Actual Tools

Another contradiction requiring resolution was the distance between Sunny's ideal and actual tools. In the interview, Sunny described her ideal way of using tools for teaching, such as the use of classroom activities and new teaching methods. As mentioned above, in spending less time preparing for teaching, Sunny gave up redesigning classroom activity involving student group discussion. As well as the tools she abandoned, Sunny stated that she would like to use new methods of teaching but did not know how. The distance between her ideal use of tools and reality made her dissatisfied and frustrated with her teaching. The excerpt below illustrates her frustration:

Excerpt 4.27
I don't want to teach because of nothing new. If I don't feel I can improve, always this pattern, very boring, I don't want to continue this pattern. Therefore, I don't want to teach anymore. If there are new methods to make students and me more enthusiastic, definitely [I] wouldn't be like this. I am not sick of teaching, but sick of teaching in this way.
    (Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

The excerpt above indicates that although Sunny was dissatisfied with her current teaching practice, she could not resolve her ideal–real tool contradictions because of the lack of time available for preparing for lessons and lack of theoretical knowledge for developing teaching strategies. This unresolved contradiction caused a sense of helplessness and negativity towards her work.

4.2.1.3   The Distance Between Sunny's Ideal and Real Division of Labour

Sunny expressed the hope that her students could be more autonomous learners and have more enthusiasm for learning. She thought the ideal learning situation was that students would preview the text before class, look for the background information and evaluate the language themselves instead of depending on her. However, she mentioned that, in reality, her current students were rather lazy and passive. They did not review work nor study any exercises. This gap between her ideal form of division of labour and the reality resulted in disappointment with her students. Accordingly, she resolved this contradiction by not involving her students in her class so much. Ideally, she wanted to have more interaction with her students, but in reality, she provided the monologue in her class. This formed a vicious circle in her classroom discourse, which will be discussed in the secondary-level contradiction.

4.2.1.4   Contradiction Between Sunny's Beliefs and Practices

There was incongruence between Sunny's beliefs about reading instruction and her practices. Her stated beliefs were that the reading course should emphasise detailed language understanding. However, her teaching of Section A was closer to an interaction approach and her teaching of Section B was more like the top-down rather than bottom-up approach. When asked the reason, she stated that her teaching experiences had proved that the top-down approach was more appropriate for her students, though she did not know what 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' approaches to reading instruction were. The interview data suggested that interpersonal interaction with the Head of the Department formed her beliefs on the intrapersonal plane that the detailed language points were important. At the same time, her teaching experiences and interaction with her students helped her form the tacit knowledge that a top-down approach worked better for her students, contrary to her stated beliefs. Compared with other studies about teacher beliefs, activity theory can reveal the reason which causes the incongruence between beliefs and practice by relating to the social context.

Polanyi claims that tacit knowledge underlines explicit knowledge and that tacit knowledge is more fundamental for all our knowledge (Polanyi, cited in Sveiby 1996). In Sunny's case, her tacit knowledge functions as a mediating tool to improve her teaching This result accords with the claims that the divergence of teacher beliefs and actions is due to contextual factors (Graden 1996) and that teacher

beliefs, knowledge and behaviour are socially constructed (Sakui and Gaies 2003). In Sunny's case, the socially conveyed knowledge (learned from the Head of the Department) and the tacit knowledge she gained from her experience of reality blended together.

Sunny did not realise this incongruence until being informed of it at the interview. Therefore, this unresolved primary contradiction did not cause any secondary contradiction. However, after articulating her beliefs and the reasons for her behaviour, she expressed her desire to change her teaching methods. This behaviour reflects Sveiby's (1996) idea that when tacit knowledge is articulated in language, it can become a focus for reflection and an object of critique. From a sociocultural perspective, Sunny did not have enough scientific knowledge about reading approaches, but had everyday knowledge gained from five years of teaching experience. The distance between her everyday and scientific understandings, bridged by instruction, indicates the potential for further development (Lave and Wenger 1991). Sunny also realised and expressed this need (in contradiction 1-2).

In summary, the analysis above reveals that there was still a large gap between Sunny's ideal form of teaching and its reality. However, these contradictions were either unresolved or were resolved in a passive way, for instance, by giving up time for teaching preparation, giving up designing activities or giving up involving students. There was no new tool created to resolve these contradictions—as Sunny mentioned, 'Nothing new'—which also caused Sunny's negative attitudes and constrained her agency in improving her teaching. The further influence of such affective experiences on her agency will be discussed in the analysis of Sunny's agency in her ZPD.

4.2.2   Secondary-Level Contradictions

Secondary contradictions exist between the components of an activity system. They have the potential to generate innovation to change the activity, making the ZPD an invisible 'battleground' (Engeström 2006, p. 28). However, Sunny seems to lack the capacity to resolve the secondary-level contradictions in her teaching activity system.

4.2.2.1   Contradiction Between the Tool (Textbook) and Teacher's Object (Passing the Test)

The textbook, as the tool created by the reform, does not adequately reflect the requirements of the reform. Although it has a section on teaching reading strategies and most reading strategies taught in the textbook are top-down reading strategies, most exercises in the textbook affect bottom-up reading strategies, such as vocabulary drills and sentence level understanding. As Fullan (1991) says, an approved textbook, which fails to incorporate the significant features of a policy it is promoting, might readily become the curriculum of the classroom. Due to her lack of knowledge about the reform, Sunny was unaware of the contradiction between the

textbook and the reform requirements. In her class, the textbook became the curriculum. Moreover, under pressure to cover the curriculum, she usually just checked the exercise answers, rather than training students to apply the reading strategies they had learned. This contradiction in her teaching (see the elbow arrow 2-1 in Fig. 4.1) was neither identified nor resolved. As a result, it could not generate any innovation required by the reform because the textbook, as a pedagogical tool, failed to operationalise the object of the reform mandate.

4.2.2.2   Contradiction Between the Rule (Curriculum Plan) and Her Object (Moral Education from Reading)

Besides preparing the students to pass the test, another object of Sunny's teaching was student moral education from the reading of the texts. However, she gave up doing that because she did not have enough time to prepare the necessary discussion activities. She complained that there were too many exercises in the book. She had to follow the curriculum plan set by the Department and taught a certain amount of exercises which were related to the test in every unit. As discussed, the textbook was the effective rule regulating all aspects of Sunny's classroom teaching, consistent with the Department's policy requiring that teaching follow the textbook. This rule was reinforced when the Head of the Department occasionally visited teachers' classrooms to ensure teachers were following the curriculum plan. Consequently, there was not much time left for moral education after most of the class time was spent going through the textbook. This class rule then was in fundamental conflict with Sunny's object (see elbow arrow 2-2 in Fig. 4.1).
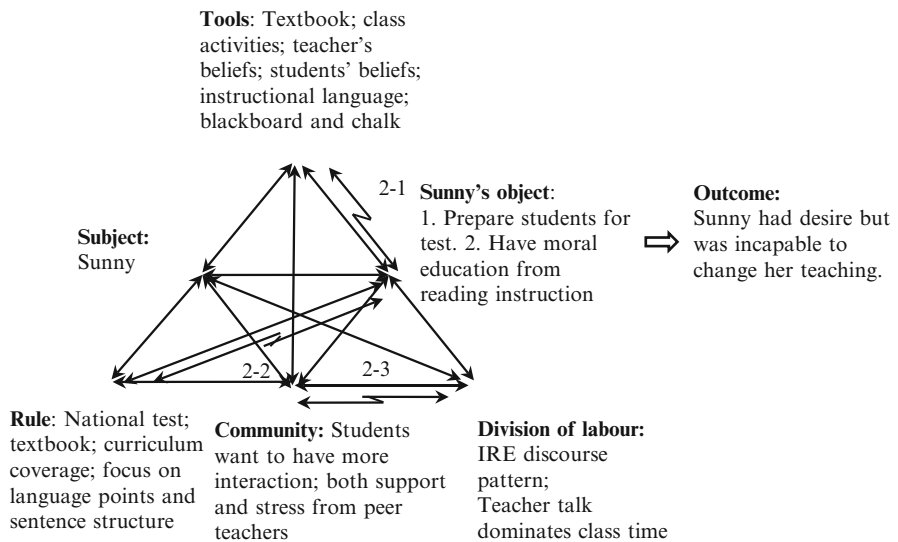

Fig. 4.1 Sunny's classroom teaching as an activity system

Besides the constraints of the curriculum plan, as analysed in the primary contradictions, Sunny's pursuit of further study also diverted her from lesson preparation. Further, she always translated all instructions into Chinese. As a result, these two factors caused time pressure in Sunny's class. Sunny's resolution of this problem was to give up designing activities for moral education and just follow the curriculum plan and the textbook. Although the contradiction was resolved, no new tools were developed which could transform her teaching. In this situation, when the textbook–tool completely regulated teaching, it constrained Sunny's agency in creating new pedagogical tools.

4.2.2.3   The Contradiction Between the Community (Students) and Division of Labour

Data from the focus group interviews suggested that students desired greater autonomy and interaction. However, conflict existed between students' desire for autonomy and the division of labour in Sunny's classroom teaching (see elbow arrow 2-3 in Fig. 4.1). Although Sunny indicated that she expected students to be more autonomous in their study and more involved in class, she failed to design activities that promoted learner autonomy and participation. The IRE discourse pattern constrained classroom interaction, with teacher talk dominating classroom talk and minimising opportunities for student talk. In turn, the classroom discourse pattern shaped the teacher's beliefs about her students: 'they do not want to talk'. As Vygotsky claims, the use of psychological tools in social interaction fundamentally transforms human functioning (Wertsch et al. 1993). Thus, Sunny's beliefs about her students mediated teaching practices, which further reduced opportunities for student talk. Another reason for this contradiction was the pressure of curriculum coverage, which resulted in Sunny just wanting to complete the teaching tasks as soon as possible. As Tsui (1996) claims, teacher's intolerance of silence is one of the reasons causing students' reticence. Sunny did not allocate time for students' talk in her class. At the same time, the students felt they were being ignored and were discouraged from talking. This feeling mediated their classroom behaviour so most students were silent unless called upon to speak. This process constituted a vicious circle of non-participation in the classroom. Sunny had thus become a 'prisoner' of her own pedagogic discourse and did not realise the problem lies in her classroom discourse pattern rather than her students. Although she could not adequately resolve this contradiction, this conflict nevertheless made her want to improve her classroom management skills.

Sunny expressed her desire to improve her class management, in particular, spending more time and energy motivating students to learn and discuss, instead of following the textbook. She wanted to stimulate students' enthusiasm to learn as well as her enthusiasm to teach, but she admitted that she did not know how to do this. She acknowledged that a lack of theoretical knowledge hindered her from developing her teaching: '(I) want to change, but don't know how'. '(I) really want to learn 'how to teach'!' She demonstrated a desire to change, but the IRE pattern,

false beliefs about her students and a lack of theoretical knowledge all constrained her from taking action that would transform her classroom interaction.

4.2.3   Tertiary-Level Contradictions

Tertiary-level contradictions occur between a culturally more advanced activity system, such as the government, which enacts the reform, and a central activity system. In this study, the more culturally advanced activity system is the curriculum and test reform initiative enacted by the Chinese Ministry of Education. In the interview, Sunny mentioned that there was no information from the Department about the policy of the curriculum reform. When she was asked whether she was aware of the test reform, she stated that she was. Her knowledge of the reform, however, was limited to test format changes. In this respect, there was no tertiary-level contradiction between the activity system of the reform and the activity system of Sunny's teaching. At the same time, however, there was no shared object between these two activity systems either (see Fig. 4.2).

On the other hand, there was a shared object between the activity system of the Department and the activity system of Sunny's teaching, because both the Head of the Department and Sunny stated that preparing students for the test was the prime object of the teaching programme. In addition, the test and textbook, which were the key tools created for the educational reform, were also functioning as the rules for classroom teaching (see the full arrow lines in Fig. 4.2). In contrast, the reform requirements for teaching main ideas and reading strategies were subordinated to the old practices, instead of becoming the object of classroom teaching, and thus did not result in any secondary contradictions. Consistent with Engeström's (1987) theory, if the curriculum reform initiative does not bring about secondary-level
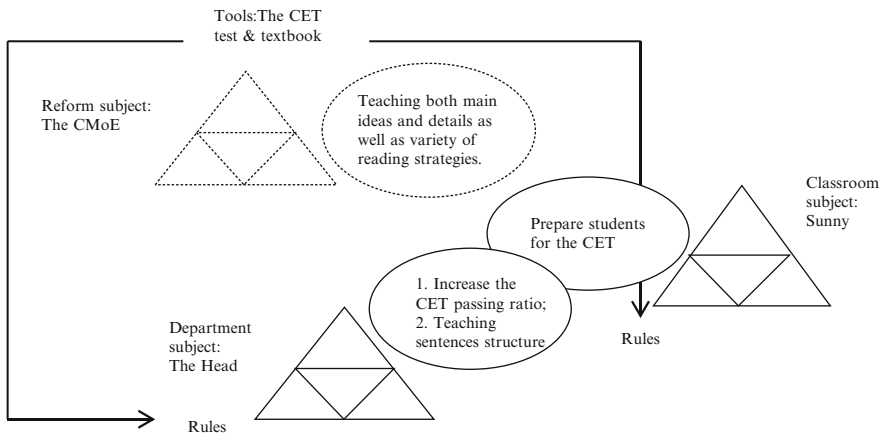

Fig. 4.2   The tertiary-level 'contradictions' in Sunny's teaching activity system

contradictions or stimulate efforts to resolve them, then the curriculum reform activity becomes subordinated to the old forms of activity and is confined to tertiary-level contradictions. In Sunny's case, the reform requirements did not cause any tertiary- or secondary-level contradictions in her teaching practice. Therefore, it can be concluded that the reform is just functioning merely as a new discourse within the Department and Sunny's activity systems (the activity system of the reform is indicated with a dotted line in Fig. 4.2). Consequently, there were no novel factors influencing or transforming the activity system of Sunny's teaching.

Sunny's ignorance of the content of the reform might be attributed to a test-oriented teaching and learning culture. Stress from meeting a high pass rate target for tests made school leaders and teachers view the test as the dominant rule for teaching and led to reform resistance, due to increased workload. This analysis leads us to infer that test-oriented and textbook-centred teaching filtered the reform efforts so that the reform did not bring novel factors into the activity systems of the Department and Sunny's classroom, except for the test and textbook. Consequently, both the school leader and teachers ignored the content of the reform and still engaged in the same old practices.

In this situation, then, it is difficult for Sunny to exhibit any agency in relation to the educational reform. However, observation records and interview data did indicate that Sunny had attempted to incorporate a top-down reading approach and teaching reading strategies in each unit. She learned from her teaching experience that teaching main ideas first worked better for students' understanding. In addition, she learned how to teach reading strategies from the textbook. The tacit knowledge she gained from her teaching experience and the textbook mediated her teaching in a way which met the reform mandate to a certain extent. This congruence meant that reform requirements somewhat matched teaching and learning practices in reality. However, because of a lack of explicit knowledge, Sunny still subordinated reform mandates to the Head of the Department's requirements, instead of making them the object of her teaching. This meant that change did not happen at the level of beliefs and conceptions. To improve her teaching, Sunny needed formal teacher education to provide her with more scientific knowledge about teaching and support.

Overall, the analysis of contradictions in Sunny's activity system revealed that there was a conflict between Sunny's ideal model of teaching and her actual practice. In addition, there was a mismatch between her beliefs and practices. However, these primary contradictions were either unresolved or resolved by giving up on designing new tools. The passive resolution of these primary contradictions still caused secondary contradictions in Sunny's activity system. Similarly, Sunny's resolutions of these secondary contradictions can also be classified as avoidance: giving up creating activities and not involving students. However, these resolutions did not bring improvement and transformation to her teaching and instead created more stress and frustration. In addition, because the Department and Sunny were ignorant of the curriculum reform, there was no tertiary contradiction between the activity system of the reform and the activity system of Sunny's teaching. In the mediation of her tacit knowledge gained from teaching experiences and the textbook, Sunny's practices matched with the reform mandate to a certain degree. However, no change

had taken place in her perceptions and beliefs and there were no new tools created to transform her teaching. According to Fullan (1991), it is more effective to change belief systems after people have experienced some behavioural change. Therefore, Sunny might need more time to alter her beliefs about her practices. In addition, in order to activate Sunny's agency to change her teaching, she would need more theoretical knowledge and support from the Department. However, the analysis of the contradictions only revealed Sunny's agency in changing her activity system. It is also necessary, however, to view teacher agency from a developmental perspective. Therefore, the next section analyses Sunny's agency from the perspective of the zone of development.

4.3 Sunny's Agency in Her ZPD

The unit of analysis for agency is a person using mediational means, or 'individual(s)-operating-with-mediational-means' (Wertsch et al. 1993, p. 341), which means that a person's actions are shaped by the mediational means he or she employs. From the perspective of activity theory, agency is the agent's potentiality to create new tools or artefacts and forms of activity which enable them to transform both their inner and outer worlds (Engeström 2006). The analysis in the last section concluded that Sunny did not create many new tools to resolve contradictions in her teaching activity system. This section considers how Sunny used available mediational means and her potential capacities to generate specific forms of development for the future. The main mediational means discussed in this section are the textbook, Sunny's past experiences, her students and her emotional experiences, which all explain the development of her agency. This section considers Sunny's agency and potential ability to change in relation to the two requirements of the curriculum reform: teaching both main ideas and detailed understanding of the text and teaching a variety of reading strategies.

As Engeström (1996) suggests, classroom instruction needs to be analysed against the history of the local education institution and against the more global history of the teaching concept employed in the local activity. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the teacher's previous learning and teaching experiences in order to see processes of development and transformation. Sunny's reading instruction perceptions and practices were mediated by both her past learning experiences and by interaction with her students. These will be dealt with in turn. When Sunny was a university student majoring in English literature, her teacher emphasised paraphrasing and often paraphrased difficult sentences in her class. Sunny regarded this approach as helpful for preparing lessons. Being a teacher, without prior teacher education, she learned how to teach from observing other teachers' classes and from her own practices. She mentioned in the interview that the IRE discourse pattern was learned from observing other teachers. In the community of this university, general ideas about reading course instruction still focused on detailed language points, and many teachers used grammar-translation methods. Sunny's past learning experiences mediated her teaching in a way that she kept paraphrasing and translating her instructions as well as the text. In addition, the historical and

contextual influences of the Department also encouraged her to believe that detailed language points should in fact be the focus of the English course. However, because of the feedback from her students, Sunny's teaching practices were undergoing changes and seemed different from her stated beliefs, despite Sunny verbally expressing her resistance to changing this bottom-up language approach.

Student reaction to her teaching was an influential factor mediating Sunny's pedagogic agency. Her teaching practices, especially for Text B, were more in accordance with top-down reading strategies because she knew from her interaction with her students that they needed to have the main idea of a text before a detailed understanding of it. In addition, her students' endorsement of the pre-class activity strengthened her decision to offer some daily language use activities. When there was an opportunity for the students to express themselves, their understanding informed teacher's knowledge. This is in accordance with Ochs's (1990) claims that both experts and novices use language to create contexts of shared understanding. Sunny's case seems to prove that second-language learners are also capable of providing a kind of scaffolding for their teachers (Donato 1994). Here, diffuse feedback from students scaffolded Sunny to engage in pedagogic practices higher than her actual development level. Interaction with students on the interpersonal plane developed in Sunny a tacit knowledge of top-down reading approaches in her intrapersonal plane. This knowledge, however, was not fully internalised until she articulated it. At the same time, Sunny's IRE pattern and false beliefs about her students limited her opportunities to learn from her students.

Sunny's pedagogical growth was therefore taking place slowly and unconsciously. Significantly, after she articulated her contradictions in the interview, she expressed a desire to change her teaching approach and attitude towards the struggles she had experienced. It was in this context that she also recognised that she lacked theoretical knowledge of teaching and acknowledged feelings of frustration because she did not know how to develop her teaching practice:

Excerpt 4.28

I: I found in the questionnaire, you mentioned that you would like to use new methods for teaching the English reading course.

S: Yes, I hope so, but I don't know how to improve, because I haven't studied this and never received teacher education in this aspect. I learned by myself, or learned from others by observing their class. They are all like this.

(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

Excerpt 4.29

[I also want to] communicate [with other teachers] about teaching methods on theoretical level. I also used [some teaching approaches], but cannot articulate the theory of these methods.

(Interview with Sunny, 25 May 2010)

In summary, Sunny's agency in relation to reading instruction was mediated by students' preferences, the school leader's preferences, her own beliefs and her tacit

knowledge, which all resulted in contradictions between her beliefs and actions. She required greater theoretical knowledge about teaching beyond her immediate classroom experiences and independent of experiential strategies for day-to-day coping (Fullan 1991). Instruction about theories of teaching was necessary to help Sunny bridge the gap between everyday concepts and scientific concepts and help her grow in the zone of potential for development.

As for the second reform requirement, teaching reading strategies, Sunny's agency was mediated and strengthened by the textbook, which functioned as a teacher education resource. Sunny gained her knowledge of teaching reading strategies during her use of the textbook. In this case, the textbook mediated the teacher's learning on an intrapersonal plane and stimulated growth in knowledge higher than her actual level of development. However, every coin has two sides. When the textbooks are set as the rules for teaching, they also constrain teacher agency in creating new transformative pedagogical resources. Young teachers, like Sunny, who lack knowledge and experience in adapting resources, may in fact be deskilled by the textbook, by being forced to operate in their zone of actual development.

Apart from these mediational means, people's emotional experiences and attitudes towards their environment determine its influence on the course of their development. Real change always involves anxiety and struggle (Fullan 1991). Therefore, teachers' emotional experiences need to be taken into account in order to understand their change agency. As analysed in the primary-level contradictions in Sunny's activity system, the contrast and distance between her ideal teaching and her reality caused frustration and a sense of failure. Having taught this course for five years, Sunny mentioned that she felt tired and had little enthusiasm for teaching. On top of this, the stress of studying a Master's degree and the frustrations of being unable to improve her teaching resulted in negative attitudes towards both teaching and students. She admitted that she faced problems, such as not being fully prepared before class or not being in a good mood: '[Sometimes I] do not want to see them [her students]'. All these negative attitudes hindered her from engaging students in her class and learning from her students.

In summary, with diffuse feedback from her students and the textbook, Sunny practised teaching at a higher level than her actual developmental level. However, these changes were not reflected in her belief system. At the same time, her lack of knowledge of the curriculum reform prevented her from consciously responding to reform requirements. Even though the CET test itself functioned as the object and rule for her classroom teaching, the reform agenda was too remote to mediate Sunny's classroom teaching and her beliefs about reading instruction. In Sunny's case, therefore, the reform may be located in her zone of far development (ZFD). Although there were many constraints and limitations, Sunny still expressed her intention to improve her teaching. Her potential to realise this goal would be increased further if she had more theoretical knowledge about teaching and more professional assistance to help her make critical changes.

4.4   Summary

In summary, the analysis of Sunny's classroom teaching reveals the conflicting interactions among these elements in her activity system. These interactions caused her to give up her previous teaching goals or objectives. Analyses of the different levels of contradictions lead to the conclusion that Sunny's passive resolution of these conflicts failed to bring about transformation and instead caused her to have negative feelings towards her work and her students. Even though some aspects of her teaching matched reform requirements, her lack of knowledge about the reform hindered her from mastering and engaging with them. At the same time, however, Sunny had a strong desire to make changes and also recognised that she lacked the theoretical knowledge about teaching necessary to make these changes. If greater support was provided for her professional development, it is likely that she would be 'released' from her constraints and no longer be a 'prisoner'.

   Implications from the analyses in this chapter are that reform implementation has to reach teachers at the classroom level, so that teachers can understand the expectation of the reform and interact with the key mediational system of the reform. Reform needs to cause change not only in teacher practices but also in their beliefs (Fullan 1991). In Sunny's case, her lack of knowledge about the reform requirements hindered the changes she was able to make in her beliefs. With understanding of reform requirements, teachers can make decisions about accepting or resisting the changes the reform advocates.

   There is a need for a better culture of learning in education organisations, since the culture of a department also shapes a teacher's psychological state for better or worse (Fullan 1991). As mentioned before, the Head of the Department's strict management constrained young teachers' agency in making innovations to their teaching practice. Therefore, young teachers require the provision of both learning opportunities and emotional support. In Sunny's case, the stress of obtaining a Master's degree caused her to sacrifice lesson preparation and the quality of her teaching, resulting in negative attitudes towards her work and her students. This accords with Tsui's (2007) conclusion that beginning teachers' 'survival' phase may lead to negative experiences, underscoring the need for appropriate school-based professional induction support.

   As for Sunny herself, she was able to identify her own professional learning needs and expressed her desire to gain more theoretical knowledge about teaching. To grow professionally, Sunny needs to develop a clear belief system that offers criteria for her planning (Fullan 1991) and helps her think both theoretically and practically about her teaching. These results suggest that young EFL teachers need both theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as feedback from their students, in order to enhance their agency to make pedagogical innovations and develop professionally.

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Chapter 5
The Case Study of Jenny: The Unresponsive Apprentice

This chapter focuses on Jenny (pseudonym), the second case study participant. She may be described as an 'unresponsive apprentice' who did not want to change and did not respond to the reform. Jenny was selected because she had received teacher education in reading instruction and because she had conducted research on reading strategies. Jenny is 28 years old. She recently obtained a Master's degree in Teaching English as Second or Other Language (TESOL) from a university in the USA, specialising in researching reading strategy instruction. Before studying for her Master's degree, Jenny taught English major courses for 4 years. Although Jenny had a Master's degree in TESOL and 4 years teaching experience, she had been struggling and frustrated in teaching this course. She still clung to traditional teaching methods which she obtained from her own 'learning apprenticeship' as a student and failed to teach any reading strategies in her teaching practice. Jenny was the opposite of Sunny, demonstrating no intention to become equipped with knowledge and training for the reform task. This chapter will first analyse the activity system of Jenny's classroom teaching before it discusses the contradictions in Jenny's activity system and her agency in resolving them. The third section of the chapter then analyses Jenny's agency to change from the perspective of the ZPD and the factors that influenced her agency.

5.1 The Activity System of Jenny's Classroom Teaching

Consistent with this study's use of activity theory to analyse teachers' classroom practices, this section presents six elements in the activity system of Jenny's classroom teaching—subject, object, tools, community, rules and division of labour (see Fig. 5.1)—and analyses how these elements change during the course of their interaction.

Mediating artefacts
1. Her beliefs
2. Textbooks
3. Needs analysis questionnaire
4. Traditional teaching methods

Subject:
Jenny

2-2   2-1

Previous objects:
1. Teach learning strategies
and arouse students'
interests
2. Teach reading strategies;
in learning;
3. Prepare for test

Outcome:
Resistance to
change

Rule:
1. Textbook
2. Traditional
teaching
methods
3. Students'
requirements

Community:
Classroom level:
Students have no
interest in her
teaching; university
level: no interaction
with other teachers

Division of labour:
Teacher
talk dominates the
classroom

Fig. 5.1 Jenny's classroom teaching as an activity system

5.1.1 Jenny as Subject of Her Activity System

In contrast to Sunny, Jenny developed explicit understanding about top-down and bottom-up reading approaches. During the interview she stated that her knowledge and perceptions about reading instruction changed following the education she received in the USA:

Excerpt 5.1
Eh, for example, before I studied [my Master's degree], I thought teaching English was just teaching English, teaching vocabulary and grammar. Now I have a stronger concept which is to teach students learning methods, learning strategies and language abilities. Cultivate language ability. That means my understanding towards English language teaching is different. Previously, [I] just knew teaching vocabulary and grammar; now I have different understanding.
   (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)
   [My] reading instruction is also like this. Previously, [I] only focused on teaching vocabulary and grammar. Now I want to teach them reading strategies. I want to tell them what the connection between what the author writes at the beginning and at the end. Why does he write like this? How is [the text] developed? I will focus on this. (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)
   One interpretation of the excerpts above is that Jenny's beliefs and knowledge about reading instruction shifted from an approach emphasising a detailed explanation to one focused on global understanding.

It is evident from a review of Jenny's research project for her Master's degree that she exhibited adequate knowledge of the significance of reading strategy for ESL and EFL students and the procedures required for effective reading strategy instruction. She listed five classroom procedures for teaching reading strategies: discussion about the strategy, teacher modelling, practice by the students, feedback and discussion. During the interview, Jenny was asked to read three narrations about different methods of teaching reading strategies and to identify the one with which she mostly agreed. She regarded the third episode, *transactional strategy instruction*, as the most effective method for teaching reading strategies. Jenny thought that long-term multiple reading strategy instruction was the most effective method and she believed that students could learn from peer scaffolding, which accords with the principle of effective reading strategy instruction outlined by Grabe (2009). What may be concluded from this data is that Jenny had acquired the theoretical knowledge about reading strategy instruction during her Master's degree research project. However, her course in the USA did not have a practical component. It is in this context that Jenny identified her own limitations. She mentioned in the interview that she gave up the object of teaching reading strategies partly because she had not used all the reading strategies herself; she therefore lacked the practical knowledge about reading strategy use.

At the time when her class was being observed, it was Jenny's first year of teaching the *New Horizon College English* course, having just returned from the USA. Even after living and studying in the USA for one and a half years, Jenny continued to experience culture shock and had to readjust to her life as well as her teaching practices following her return to China. This process of adjustment and Jenny's teaching goals and conceptions are discussed in the next sections.

5.1.2   Objects and Outcomes of Jenny's Activity System

Jenny had set three teaching objectives before she started teaching this course. However, the object of her activity system changed during the course of activity (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy 1999). This change was so similar to that experienced by Sunny that Jenny also went through a process of giving upon old objects of her teaching activity. This section analyses Jenny's agency in changing the objects of her teaching activity.

5.1.2.1   Jenny's Previous Objects

Jenny stated that since her return from the USA, she had three teaching objectives for this course: to increase students' interest in learning English, to teach the students both learning and reading strategies and to help the students with their CET test. During the interview Jenny articulated the reasons for these objectives:

Excerpt 5.2

Passing the test is students' need. Interest in learning and learning strategies is what I lacked in my previous teaching and learning. But I think they are very important. I believe if students acquire learning strategies, they can learn by themselves without dependence on teachers. I believe the aim of university education is to cultivate their independent learning abilities. It is also a lifelong education. If you acquire the learning strategies and methods, you can learn other knowledge after you graduate from university. Therefore, I think methods and strategies are very important. As for interests [in learning English], English, eh, not everyone loves learning English. He can enjoy learning English only if he has the interests in it [laughing].

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Excerpt 5.2 indicates that the three objectives factored in both the students' practical needs (passing the test) and their lifelong education needs (acquiring learning strategies). Jenny set both these objects on the basis of her past teaching and learning experiences and her beliefs about the aim of university education. However, she mentioned in the interview that she gave up all of these objectives when she started teaching this course. Excerpt 5.3 from the interview suggests that Jenny now has no particular teaching objective:

Excerpt 5.3

(I = the interviewer; J = Jenny)

    I: Do you have a new object?

    J: Hehe [laughing]. New object, ###, basically no [laughing].

    I: Just teach like this?

    J: Right, just teach like this.

    (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

5.1.2.2   Jenny's Reasons for Changing Objects

From Excerpts 5.3–5.7 it is apparent that Jenny experienced certain events or difficulties which caused her to give up all three objectives. This is evident from the interview when she first stated the reason for giving up teaching for the test:

Excerpt 5.4

Now, it is difficult to help them for test preparation, because there are the CET 4, CET 6 and the Michigan Test. I cannot give them a general supervision for [all] tests.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

During the interview Jenny admitted that she did not know the content of the test reform. She did not know whether or not the Department leader informed her of the reform policy because she had not attended the Department meetings. It appears that a simple lack of knowledge about the test reform may be a reason for Jenny giving up this object.

As for the object of teaching learning strategies, Jenny admitted that it was simply her intention to teach reading strategies and that she did not have a detailed plan to implement this objective.

Excerpt 5.5
As for the first two objects, learning strategies and interests in English, eh ###, later, this was not so specific, then [I] forgot.
    (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

With regard to the object of teaching reading strategies, Jenny explained there were three reasons for giving up on this. The first reason, which Jenny emphasised several times in the interview, was that she had not yet used all of the reading strategies herself and she was therefore not confident to teach them:

Excerpt 5.6
I haven't used them. I don't know the effect. I don't know; I can teach only if I feel it is effective and feel the advantage; otherwise it is not effective.
    (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)
    A second reason was the inadequacy of the textbook design:

Excerpt 5.7
I wanted to teach, to prepare [them]. For example, *prediction* can be used. The examples in the textbook are narrative, but [they are] not very good examples [for that reading strategy], cannot reflect the strategy. There are examples [in the textbook] but not very typical for the strategy. Therefore, I have to look for [examples] by myself. These were blind attempts. [It is] too difficult [to look for examples]. Therefore it was not well prepared and I could not teach [reading strategies].
    (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

The third reason Jenny cited was that she assumed that the students had no interest in reading strategies. Yet, at the same time, she also admitted this was an excuse for the fact that she thought that the object of teaching reading strategies was beyond her ability:

Excerpt 5.8
I: You had an assumption that and you were afraid that they had no interest?
    J: Ah, right. [I was] afraid they had no interest.
    I: Why did you assume this? How can you be sure they had no interest without teaching them?
    J: That's true. I cannot know without teaching them. Maybe it is just an excuse because I don't want to teach. Haha [laughing].
    I: What is the reason you don't want to teach? You had been ambitious to teach. Why?
    J: Because of my limited ability. If this course is easy, I can teach it anyway. If this course is difficult and is in a foreign language, I have to understand the reading texts thoroughly in order to teach. Then it is beyond my ability to ask me to teach reading strategies which I have never taught. I feel unwilling, want to flinch, and

have no confidence to teach. If it is something which I am very familiar and good at, I am certainly willing to teach it.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

In the excerpt above, Jenny expressed her fear of teaching reading strategies. She used the words 'afraid', 'my limited ability', 'beyond my ability', 'flinch' and 'no confidence', indicating her resistance to using new tools to achieve her object. Her lack of practical knowledge about reading strategies may also have made her feel deficient in her teaching.

Activity theory claims that the object is most often transformed during the course of the activity (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy 1999). The initial objects of Jenny's teaching activity system changed and her object became merely to keep on teaching. As Engeström (1996) claims, an expansive transformation of activity is achieved when the object and motive of the activity are reconceptualised to have a wider horizon of possibilities than in the previous form of the activity. In Jenny's case, although she took agentive action in changing the object of her teaching, the changed object narrowed the possibilities for developing the activity and prevented transformation or improvement in her teaching. In addition, the experiences of giving up her teaching objectives seemed to discourage her from trying new things. Therefore, she chose to just cope with the job at hand rather than to establish new teaching objectives. It may be concluded that the outcome of Jenny's teaching activity system is her resistance to making changes in her teaching practice.

Jenny gave up her previously set goals due to the inadequacy of the tools available to achieve them: she had no implementation plan for achieving her objectives, she lacked knowledge about the test reform as well as practical knowledge of teaching reading strategies, and she was utilising an inadequately designed textbook. It seems that Jenny did not have the appropriate tools to achieve her objectives and that her objectives changed as a result of the tools available. The next section then discusses the nature of the tools of Jenny's teaching activity.

5.1.3   The Tools of Jenny's Activity System

Tools are used in the transformation process (physical or mental) and shape the way people act and think. The mediational tools and artefacts in Jenny's classroom teaching activity include the textbook, a needs analysis questionnaire, her pedagogical beliefs and knowledge, her instructional language and instructional media such as a blackboard and chalk. However, the analysis indicates that Jenny did not make effective use of these tools to improve her teaching.

5.1.3.1   The Textbook

The textbook is an important cultural tool for Chinese teachers' classroom teaching. In Jenny's case, the textbook plays a crucial role in that it encourages her to change her teaching object. The inadequacy of the textbook was one of the reasons Jenny

gave up her goal of teaching reading strategies. Like Sunny, Jenny also expressed her dislike of the textbook in the interview. Firstly, she thought the topics in the textbook were not relevant to students' lives. In addition, she complained that there were no references sourcing the selected texts, without which she could not know the background information or the original purpose of the texts.

Although Jenny pointed out these two shortcomings of the textbook, she admitted that, in reality, the textbook functioned as an authority mechanism in her teaching, even though she thinks that the role of a textbook in teaching should be as a facilitator:

Excerpt 5.9

[I] totally depend on the textbook. Actually I disagree with this [dependence on the textbook]. [The textbook] should be a facilitator. After all, it is learning a language, learning how to read. [The textbook] should only be a facilitator. [We] use this textbook to facilitate language learning and reading, instead of a leading role. But, but, now [I] just totally depend on this textbook for teaching.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Jenny articulated the difference between the two functions of the textbook and the reason why her teaching practices were different from her teaching ideal:

Excerpt 5.10

If the textbook is the authority, teaching is just repeating what the textbook says, taking it as the focus. [We] cannot view students' language learning from a higher level. Now it is seems that we are learning the book, taking the content of the book as the focus. If the textbook is a facilitator, we are learning language, language ability. The textbook is just an example. Students should understand any book, not just this textbook.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Although Jenny clearly acknowledged the limitations of her dependence on the textbook, which shifted her teaching to the learning of the textbook, she did not take any agentive action to resolve this problem. Jenny stated that the reason she could not use the textbook in her ideal way was due to her limited English language proficiency:

Excerpt 5.11

English is not [my] native language; therefore, it is very hard to stand on such a high level, consequently just depending on the textbook to teach the language, instead of using the textbook facilitating language teaching.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Jenny's reluctance to dispense with the textbook was due to her perceived limited language proficiency and lack of skills in using this tool, since it was her first year of teaching the course. Jenny's awareness of her limited English language proficiency made her highly dependent on the textbook and caused her to 'enter into a spirit of conformity or even defeatism' (Rajagopalan 2005, p. 293). Here, the textbook plays an important mediating role, both as tool and rule, because it is used as an authority mechanism. As the textbook became the focus of Jenny's teaching, its

inadequate design caused her to give up her initial object of teaching reading strategies. In addition to the textbook, there were also other tools and artefacts which mediated Jenny's agency to change her teaching.

5.1.3.2   Needs Analysis Questionnaire

During her initial lessons in the new course, Jenny conducted a questionnaire to obtain information from the students about their learning goals and their expectations of the teacher. However, the questionnaire was not well designed and did not provide the information that Jenny wanted:

Excerpt 5.12

The first time I introduced myself. The questionnaire asked 'Say something about you', introducing him/herself, for example, the goal of learning English this semester, what kind of exam he/she need to prepare, how he/she expects the teacher to help him. Just these kinds of questions. But some students said that [these questions] were too broad—these questions were too broad. They did not know how to answer them. Some said I have no goal. [Some students said] my goal is to pass the CET test. How can the teacher help me? Talk more about the test. That's all.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

The limited student responses to the questionnaire therefore discouraged Jenny from improving her teaching:

Excerpt 5.13

I: Your expectation has not been met. What kind of influence does this have on your teaching?

J: Yes. Hehe [laughing]. Previously I wanted to use, eh, different methods when just came back from studying abroad. At the moment, I cannot use. I still use the old teaching methods. I feel, eh, maybe, I cannot change the old [teaching] methods.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

As revealed in the excerpt above, Jenny's agency for change was greatly diminished because of the limited student response to the questionnaire. At the same time, there were problems associated with how she used the questionnaire tool. The first problem, as Jenny realised, was that the questions were too general to elicit useful concrete information for teaching. The other problem was that her expectations of the needs analysis were too high, as evident in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 5.14

I: What kind of information did you expect to get?

J: I think I had over-optimistic expectations, not so realistic. I expected to get relatively concrete information through this questionnaire. I expected to see their enthusiasm and interests in learning. Then I could know where to begin [teaching]. But [the results] were generally about passing test, big, general [information]. I felt they did not have any aims.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

The main purpose of the needs analysis was to involve the students and to identify their needs such as their goals, language attitudes and expectations for the course and their learning habits (Nunan 1990). To guarantee satisfying information for teachers was not its main purpose. Jenny's over-optimistic expectations were another reason for her disappointment. In general, her creation and use of the tool did not lead to transformation in her teaching. Instead, the unsuccessful response caused her to shift her teaching back to her old teaching methods.

5.1.3.3   Jenny's Beliefs and Knowledge

As argued in the literature review, teacher beliefs and knowledge are psychological tools that mediate teaching and decision-making. At the same time, teacher beliefs and knowledge are also mediated by their practices and interactions on the social plane. Wertsch and Rupert (1993) suggest that it is necessary to understand how and why individuals hold cognitive value by analysing the mediational means within interpsychological functioning in consideration of the cultural, historical and institutional forces that shape them. This section now analyses how Jenny's beliefs about reading instruction, reading strategy instruction and her students all mediated the development of her classroom teaching and decision-making.

1. Jenny's beliefs and knowledge about EFL reading instruction

Jenny mentioned in the interview that her beliefs and knowledge about reading instruction shifted from an approach emphasising a detailed explanation to one focused on global understanding because of the education she received in the USA. However, additional data from the interview revealed that Jenny held conflicting beliefs about how the reading course should be taught. Jenny stated explicitly her belief that English reading instruction should follow a bottom-up approach. The process of reading comprehension should be vocabulary, sentences and discourse level. Jenny emphasised that:

Excerpt 5.15
For non-native English speakers, especially non-English major students, whose language proficiency is lower, you need to explain vocabulary meaning, then sentences, and finally go to the discourse level.
    (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Jenny also mentioned that she adjusted her teaching according to the students' language proficiency level. Because she thought her students' current language levels were low, she concluded that her teaching had to focus on vocabulary. If the students had stronger language skills, she would have placed greater emphasis on sentence structure and discourse structure. During the interview she drew on this understanding to express her ambivalence about the teaching design of the course:

Excerpt 5.16
Actually I still think [teaching] should focus on vocabulary, as it is the basis for understanding. But on the other hand, I feel this is the second year, book 4, students'

level should not stay at the vocabulary level [and] should have discussion at the discourse level. But my students have various levels of proficiency. The students with lower proficiency still focus on teaching vocabulary use.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

From the excerpt above, it may be inferred that Jenny's beliefs about her students also mediated her decision-making about appropriate teaching methods. During the interview, when talking about her students, Jenny often compared her current students with the English major students she taught previously:

Excerpt 5.17

I think they are non-English major students. They won't understand without Chinese translation. I tried to explain in English when I teach English major students, to paraphrase.

Compared with English major students, the bad example of non-English major students is that they even do not study at all.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

The comparisons Jenny made between the non-English major students she was teaching and the English major students she previously taught indicated that she felt the traditional method of grammar translation was more suitable for her current, non-English major students. In addition, the students' indifference to her teaching fostered a negative attitude towards them and her work. It appears that Jenny did not have the skills required to adequately teach students with low levels of language proficiency. Throughout this process Jenny's agency was constrained and it subsequently changed during her interaction with the students. This type of change is in accordance with the claim made by Lantolf and Thorne (2006) that agency is relationally co-constructed and negotiated with others in a social setting and may change in the course of interaction.

Although Jenny's belief about the best way to develop reading skills was to use a bottom-up approach, she expressed her desire to move 'up' in the sense that she would teach sentence comprehension, discourse comprehension, writing techniques, author purpose and emotion, ideology and rhetoric. It is evident from her statement that although there was transformation in Jenny's knowledge about reading instruction, she did not apply this knowledge in her teaching practice. As documented in the observation records below, her actual reading instruction still focused on vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, Jenny's pedagogical transformations remained at a theoretical level, as inert knowledge, or what she called 'conceptual influences'.

Observation of Jenny's classroom teaching confirmed that her pedagogical practices are congruent with her beliefs about a bottom-up approach to reading instruction. She usually taught the textbook vocabulary first, focusing on pronunciation and word usage. At the stage of text explanation, she often gave a short introduction to the text and then asked students to read the text aloud, correcting their pronunciation during this process. After that, she read every sentence in each paragraph and then translated it into Chinese, sometimes explaining word meaning and sentence

structure in Chinese. The following excerpt from the classroom observation transcription of Unit 4 exemplified her style of teaching the text:

Excerpt 5.18

(T = teacher; S = student; SS = two students; SSS = more than two students)

T: 好, 接下来, 我们接着往下看, 第二段, 那么第二段大家在读的时候同样思考一个问题。作者仍然在讨论一些优势.

SSS: (Reading paragraph two aloud for 1 min 5 sec.)

T: 第二段中提到的这个 (xxx) 是关于什么的? 第一句话当中的 over… of economic development. Leap over 表示跨越. All developing ranges see advance communications as a way to leap over… economic development. 所有的发展中的区域呢, 把先进的通讯技术看作是一种跨越整个经济发展阶段的一个方法和途径。也就是拥有了先进的通讯技术可以帮助这些发展中国家能够跨越经济发展的那个阶段. 这里面这句话有一个句型是 see something as a way to do something 把什么看作是做某件事的方法或者途径. 那就是有了这个先进的通讯技术使得他们这个经济发展更加的顺利, 经济发展阶段这个过度的更加顺利。比方说, 后面紧接着举了一个例子. Widespread access to information technology, for example… Engineering Department and design. 这个 For example, 按说是应该放在这句话的开头, 但是它放在了中间, 所以前后用逗号隔开, 做了一个插入语的成 分.

English translations:

T: *Good, the next, we continue the next, paragraph two. Please think about one question when you are reading paragraph two. The author is still discussing some advantage.*

SSS: (Reading paragraph two aloud for 1 min 5 sec.)

T: *What is (xxx) mentioned in paragraph two about? In the first sentence* [reading the first sentence], 'leap over' *means* [Chinese translation of leap over]. [Reading the first sentence and translating into Chinese]. *That means having advanced communication technology can help these developing countries leap over the economic development. There is one sentence structure*: 'see something as a way to do something' [translating the meaning of the sentences structure into Chinese]. *That means this advanced communication technology can help them to develop economy better. The transition of economic development is more smoothly. For example, there is one example next* [reading the sentence]. *This* 'for example' *should be at the beginning of the sentence, but it is put in the middle. Therefore, there are commas put before and after this phrase, as a parenthesis.*

(Transcripts of Jenny's class, 20 March 2010)

The excerpt above reveals that Jenny's teaching primarily involved two parts: translating the English text into Chinese and analysing the grammatical structure of the sentence. This was the way in which she usually taught the reading course. The observation records lead us to conclude that Jenny's beliefs about a bottom-up approach to teaching reading mediated her instruction in a way that meant she spent most of the class time teaching vocabulary and translating sentences into Chinese. Although Jenny believes that reading should move from the word level to the discourse level, her reading instruction still remained at the vocabulary and sentence

level and relied on the grammar-translation method. In the interview she explained that this was the way she had been taught and was also the approach she used when teaching.

Excerpt 5.19

J: Hehe [laughing]. Because I feel psychologically secure with it. This is the way I have been teaching. I know how to do it, every step. If use the new methods which I have never tried, I don't know the effect and I will feel afraid that it doesn't work well. This has been the way I am used to and students are used to. No accident, just boring. Haha [laughing].

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

The properties of cultural tools such as the skills required when using particular mediational means have implications for understanding how internal processes exist and operate (Wertsch 1998). The excerpt above reveals that Jenny had already mastered the skill of using the grammar-translation method as a tool for teaching, a skill she learned through extensive observation of her apprenticeship experience as a student. However, Jenny did not demonstrate the skills needed to use the top-down approach when teaching reading, though she claimed to have learned these skills when completing her Master's degree. Therefore, notwithstanding that she had the intention, her lack of skills in using the 'new methods' constrained her agency in changing her teaching method. In the process Jenny identified limitations of the traditional method:

Excerpt 5.20

… it seemed that some students said they would like to study hard this semester. [One student] was enthusiastic if you encouraged him. But when he started learning, my teaching method did not change, still the traditional teaching method. Just 'duck feeding', reading the book, explaining the textbook, then he felt bored, didn't want to study. Still the old [method], [so] he lost interest.

Eh, there are needs for improvement; therefore, I also want to try new methods. On the one hand, both teacher and students are used to this old method. But [on the other hand], the bad part is that students are still at the level of vocabulary, very hard to move up to the level of discourse analysis and writing. Very hard to move to a higher level. In addition, I feel students are not interested. Always the old teaching method, students easily lose interest. It is also difficult for teacher to innovate. If try a new method, you won't know the effect. Hehe [laughing]. I still want to try new method to arouse their interest and improve teaching and learning.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Although Jenny identified the traditional 'duck feeding' transmission pedagogy as discouraging students' interest in learning and expressed her willingness to try new methods to teach the reading course, she remained concerned at the unpredictable effect of the new methods. This method discouraged students' interest and contrasted with her previous object of arousing students' interest in learning. As Wertsch (1998) notes, there is often resistance to changing a cultural tool even when it is recognised as being appropriate.

Although Jenny had the belief and intention to move her reading instruction from the vocabulary level to a higher level of understanding, her lack of skills in using new methods and her lack of confidence constrained her agency in making the necessary changes. Therefore, her reading instruction remained at the level of vocabulary explanation and sentence translation, and, consequently, there was no change in her teaching. To meet the reform mandate that the course should teach students both main ideas and detailed understanding, Jenny needed to incorporate the top-down approach into her reading instruction. As Wertsch (1998) observes, one becomes skilled by interacting with a tool long enough to have mastered the challenges the object presents. In order to move her reading instruction from the vocabulary level to the discourse level, Jenny needed more time and practice to incorporate the top-down approach to reading instruction as an internalised pedagogical tool into her classroom teaching.

2. Jenny's beliefs and knowledge about teaching reading strategies

Jenny's beliefs and knowledge about teaching reading strategies mediated her instruction and instructional decision-making. Further, these beliefs had been shaped by historical, contextual and cultural forces and this change in turn shaped the object of her teaching.

Jenny admitted that she had assumed reading strategies were helpful for EFL students when she chose this as the topic for her Master's degree research project. However, her beliefs changed following her return to China. During the interview she kept emphasising that the reading strategies were more helpful for ESL students than for EFL students:

Excerpt 5.21
I think they are different. As for ESL, they use English study every course, [which] all need reading strategies. We are EFL, only using reading strategies in English class. Not enough reading practices, no language environment. They use English studying mathematics, history, and encounter all kinds of genre, but we are confined to intensive reading and extensive reading courses.
    (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Therefore, given the different context of her Master's degree study in the USA compared to the teaching context she experienced in China, a number of historical and cultural factors have shaped Jenny's beliefs about teaching strategies. She recollected that:

Excerpt 5.22
The major I studied is designed for [ESL]. Most of my classmates are local [students]. The students are kids, K2 to 12. There is no [course] for university students. Many teachers are teaching kids. That's it.
    (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

It seemed that when Jenny came back to the EFL context in China she felt it was difficult to apply the knowledge she learned in the ESL context in the USA. Therefore, the change of cultural context shaped her beliefs about the usefulness of reading strategies.

In addition, Jenny's espoused beliefs about effective methods of teaching reading strategies have also been shaped during the process of teaching itself. Throughout her research project, Jenny stressed the importance and necessity of explicit strategy instruction as a result of her own teaching experiences as well as the gaps in the research relating to teaching reading strategies. Yet, in contrast, during the interview Jenny mentioned that she now believed implicit teaching was more suitable. As stated in Sect. 5.1.2, one reason that Jenny gave up teaching reading strategies is that she felt the task was beyond her ability. In addition, she indicated she was afraid that the students would not be interested if she taught reading strategies formally and explicitly. This data implies that her fear of applying reading strategy instruction made her prefer an 'implicit teaching' approach. In fact, her implicit teaching was not successful either, as revealed in the excerpt in the following section.

During the classroom observation, Jenny did not teach any reading strategies explicitly. However, she tried to incorporate the strategy 'prediction' implicitly into the teaching in Unit 4. The excerpt of the classroom transcription is below:

Excerpt 5.23

T: 那么下面我们在看文章之前, 我刚才说, 这个文章是关于 *bribery and ethics in business*, 我想让大家在读文章之前先来做一个小活动, 把你对这个主题的看法用一两句话写出来, 你看到这个题目 bribery and business ethics, 你会联想到什么? 你会联想到什么内容, 用简单的一两句话写下来, 然后再看看文章, 看看你所想的和作者所想的内容是不是一样, 不一样的话, 在哪里不一样?写在书上, 课本上, 或者哪一张纸来写也可以, 啊。

SSS: [Students were writing and reading for 4mins and 10secs]

T: 写好了么?写好了吧, 应该都? 好, 写好了的话我们就把课文看一看, 看看内容是否和你想的是一样的。我们这次找同学来读课文, 啊!读的时候慢一点, 大声一点, 不要着急啊!第一段,(xxx) 同学来读一下。

[After one class and a break, at the end of the second class]

T: 这样回过头来, 学完这一课, 你再看一看一开始我要大家写的看到这个题目你会联系到什么, 内容有什么不同. 找同学说一下吧? [calling one student's name]

S: First, I thought the article is about how to make money, but it's about bribery. It tells us the opposite thing.

T: 再找个同学说一说 [calling one student's name]

S: … sorry

T: 好, 请坐. 那这样的话, 我们来思考这样一个问题, 啊。Do you have a better solution for this? Whether bribery can be banned by law. Is it necessary to put business ethics in your schedule? Why? So what do you learn from this article? You want to learn how to bribe? Why is it necessary to have business ethics? How to make money in the right way? Class over, see you all!

SSS: See you.

English translation:

T: *Before we read the text, as I mentioned this text is about* bribery and ethics in business. *I would like you to do a small activity before reading the text. Please write down what you think of this topic. When you see the topic* 'bribery and business eth-

ics', *what can you associate? Please write in one or two sentences. After that, read the text to see whether your ideas are the same as the author's ideas. If different, what are the differences? You can write on your book, textbook or a piece of paper.*

SSS: [Students were writing and reading for 4mins and 10secs]

T: *Finish? Finish? Everyone should finish? Ok, if you finish, we will read the text to see whether it is the same as your ideas. This time we will invite one student to read the text aloud. Please be slow and loud when you are reading. No hurry. The first paragraph, (xxx) [calling one name] please read.*

[After one class and a break, at the end of the second class]

T: *After finishing this class, please look at what I asked you to write about at the beginning, what you can associate when you see the topic. Are there differences? We will invite one student to share* [calling one student's name].

S: First, I thought the article is about how to make money, but it's about bribery. It tells us the opposite thing.

T: *Another student?* [calling one student's name]

S: … sorry

T: *Ok, sit down please. Now let us think about one question.* Do you have a better solution for this? Whether bribery can be banned by law. Is it necessary to put business ethics in your schedule? Why? So what do you learn from this article? You want to learn how to bribe? Why is it necessary to have business ethics? How to make money in the right way? Class over, see you all!

SSS: See you.

(Transcripts of Jenny's class, 20 March 2012)

The excerpt above indicates that Jenny tried to incorporate the reading strategy 'prediction' in the context of the text; however, this attempt was not so successful. The purpose of prediction is to give students a chance to use their existing ideas or knowledge to help with their understanding of the text (Nuttall 1996). In addition, it may provide the students with time to discuss what they have predicted about the topic, several sentences or a paragraph (Nuttall 1996). However, as documented in the observation, Jenny asked the students to state their prediction after almost 2 h explanation of the text's meaning. This method did not achieve the point of determining whether students could use their knowledge to foster their text comprehension. In addition, she gave the students reflection questions about the text at the end of the activity, but she did not provide enough time for the students to discuss and present their ideas. During the interview Jenny also admitted that this was not an effective approach.

In this case, Jenny has developed conflicting beliefs about reading strategy instruction as a result of the impact of contextual and cultural change. This lack of clarity in relation to her belief system then mediated her classroom practice and made it more difficult for her to apply her theoretical knowledge when teaching. After giving up the goal of teaching reading strategy, Jenny still remained at the actual development level. Beliefs can be more effectively discussed after teachers have undergone new practical experiences (Fullan 1991). Therefore, it may be argued that Jenny needed more time and confidence to apply her inert knowledge

into instructional practice, as well as more time to clarify her belief system and her teaching methodology so that they might move up the proximal development level.

To summarise this subsection, Jenny's beliefs were mediated by historical, contextual and cultural influences, which, in turn, mediated her present decision-making and teaching practice. As Wertsch (1998) notes, cultural tools do not always act as facilitators of mediated action; they may also act as constraints. In Jenny's case, her beliefs about reading, reading strategy and the students had a constraining effect on her intention to teach reading strategy and to change her method of instruction. Because of these constraints, Jenny could not go beyond her zone of actual development (Vygotsky 1978). In addition, Jenny possessed theoretical knowledge about the top-down approach to reading and explicit reading strategy instruction. However, this was inert knowledge and had not been applied in her teaching. The gap between her theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge then presented challenges when attempting to implement her object. Confronted with these challenges, Jenny's agency was to give up her object. In addition, her beliefs about reading instruction and the students also mediated her choices of instructional media, to be discussed in the next subsection.

5.1.3.4 Instructional Media

The instructional means used by Jenny during her classroom teaching included instructional language, blackboards and other tools that teachers use for class instructions. This subsection discusses the influence of the instructional tools on Jenny's agency.

Language is a special kind of artefact which mediates thinking and communication interpsychologically between people, as well as intrapsychologically within an individual. This section firstly discusses the instructional language Jenny used for teaching and communication in the classroom. The data documented by the classroom observation and interview revealed that Jenny used Chinese as the main instructional language in her classroom when teaching the English reading course. She confirmed this in the interview:

Excerpt 5.24
Surely use Chinese to teach exercises as well as text explanation. [I use English] only when saying 'Let's read this' or 'Good morning'. These are so simple. It does not matter whether [I] speak English or not.
     (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Throughout the class observation, it was evident that Jenny translated all sentences and her own instructions into Chinese. As Vygotsky (1981) claims, the psychological tool determines the structure of an instrumental act. Jenny's beliefs about her students mediated her choice of instructional language. Hence, she adjusted her choice of instructional language based on the students' language level. In addition, Jenny stated:

Excerpt 5.25

I think they got used to [Chinese] because I taught like this from the beginning. Only a few students listen to me when I speak in English. Other students don't listen. They can understand and pay attention only when I talk in Chinese. It is like this.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Vygotsky (1981) argues that psychological tools alter the development and structure of mental functions. Jenny's instructional language established the communication pattern in her class. The pattern appeared to affirm her grammar-translation teaching method. Her dependence on Chinese as the instructional language constrained her agency to make changes, especially after her students became used to this method.

In addition to language, the blackboard and chalk were also instructional media in Jenny's class. It is claimed that the use of material objects as cultural tools results in changes in the agent (Wertsch 1998). The classroom observation records and interview data revealed that Jenny rarely used the blackboard when teaching, except when writing some sentence translations and words. She stated that she seldom wrote on the blackboard because she felt that her students did not want to take notes:

Excerpt 5.26

When I taught English major students, they were used to taking notes, forming the habit of taking notes. This class, the non-English major students, I feel they are too lazy to take notes [laughing].

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

These data suggest Jenny's beliefs and the teacher–student interactions constrained her agency in making use of the chalk and the blackboard as facilitating tools for her teaching.

In a way that is similar to Sunny, Jenny also expressed her desire to use multimedia equipment in her teaching. However, at the university there were only a limited number of classrooms with multimedia equipment, and as a young teacher at the university, Jenny could not access these classrooms:

Excerpt 5.27

When to use [multimedia]? For example, when I teach the unit about Chaplin, I can show students a short video of Chaplin, introducing some related information. In addition, I think another advantage of multimedia is in teaching lead-in activities. You can see that my lead-in is very boring and simple, just talking about this text. Actually I can try alternative ways, for instance, showing a picture, introducing another material for discussion. I think I can design a very good lead-in activity. We do not have any resources except multimedia technology. Too simple!

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Jenny's complaints indicate that the lack of teaching resources constrained her agency in improving her teaching. Without such tools there was nothing for the agent to act with, or to react to, and so sociocultural-situated skills could not emerge

(Wertsch 1998). Both Sunny and Jenny's requests for multimedia equipment hint at the importance of some instructional media in supporting teacher agency.

Given the analyses of the tools in Jenny's classroom, it may be concluded that the ineffective use of the tools and artefacts caused Jenny to modify her teaching objects. Her dependence on the textbook as the only teaching resource made her give up teaching reading strategies and not attempt to create new tools. In addition, Jenny's failure in conducting her needs analysis resulted in her reverting to traditional teaching methods. Although she had significant theoretical knowledge about reading instruction and reading strategies, in her belief system there were still many conflicts between the new concepts she had learned about throughout her Master's programme and the old practices she had internalised. Moreover, her beliefs about teaching and the students had a constraining effect on her intention to innovate in her teaching and her choice of instructional means. Finally, the data suggest that her beliefs and decisions were mediated by many contextual factors. The next section analyses the influences of a key factor—community—on Jenny's classroom teaching.

5.1.4   The Community of Jenny's Activity System

In addition to tool mediation, activities are socially and contextually situated. The school and classroom community negotiates the rules and divisions of labour that mediate its activity (Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy 1999). The analyses in this section indicate that Jenny did not take actions to seek support from both communities, which constrained her agency in improving her teaching.

Community at the Department Level Jenny was isolated from the Department community. The historical reason for her isolation is that she was previously teaching courses in the English major Department prior to going to the USA. However, when she returned from the USA, the school assigned her to the College English Department to teach the course for non-English major students, but without giving her enough time to prepare. Therefore, Jenny did not feel she belonged to the Department and felt isolated from other teachers. She mentioned that she did not attend the Department meetings and did not observe other teachers' classes. The following two excerpts from the interview illustrate this isolation from the other teachers and the Department's activities:

Excerpt 5.28
I: Did the Department adjust their policies accordingly [to the CET test reform]?

J: I don't know about this. I don't belong to this department [and] never attend their meeting. Therefore I don't know whether they have informed about these policies.

I: Do you want to have more communication with other teachers?

J: Yes.

I: Is there communication currently?

J: I have no [communication with them], unless I take initiative to talk with other teachers. I am not in their department. We are teaching individually.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

The excerpts above reveal that Jenny lacked a sense of belonging to the Department, which also diminished her sense of responsibility. Agency includes an awareness of the responsibility for one's own action and the environment and affected others (van Lier 2008). The isolation from the university-level community constrained Jenny's relational agency to seek assistance from peer teachers. Fullan (1991) suggests that teachers' interactions with each other can provide technical help and strongly relate to the degree of change that a teacher experiences. In contrast to Sunny, who had no teacher education background but who improved her teaching through peer interaction, Jenny's isolation from the Department community decreased the potential support she received from peer interaction.

In addition, although Jenny claimed she knows about the reform, she was not aware of the details of the reform policies and she showed no intention to know more about the reform. This constrained her agency in relation to reform. It might be assumed that a teacher who receives a Master's degree from a US university is both capable of teaching and prepared for teaching. However, it may also be argued that a young teacher like Jenny needs support and time to adjust and adapt what she has learned in a Western country to suit the local context. On this point, Tsui (2007) suggests that there is a need for school-based professional development support for beginning teachers.

Community at the Classroom Level   Students also played an important role in mediating Jenny's teaching and decision-making. Jenny recollected the following episode which occurred during the first lesson of the course:

Excerpt 5.29

Previously, when I taught English major students, I was used to teaching vocabulary in the context of the text. I had never taught vocabulary separately. This semester when I started teaching this class, I didn't manage very well. I asked them to read one paragraph and then picked out some vocabulary to teach. Then another paragraph, picked out some vocabulary. That was very slow and detailed. After class, the student who is in charge of learning came to talk with me: 'Teacher, your teaching is too detailed and too slow'. It seems that they are not yet accustomed to my teaching. She said 'Our previous teacher taught in this way'. Then I changed.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

This episode highlights how student feedback can mediate a teacher's classroom practice. When faced with the students' direct challenges and feedback, Jenny took agentive action to adjust her teaching according to the student's suggestions. Thus, change happened, without support of a new tool created by the teacher to transform her teaching. In addition, the incident took place at the beginning stage of the teaching programme and this may have diminished the young teacher's confidence to try out new methods of instruction.

The incident also reflected the students' internal processes such as their beliefs and perceptions about teaching and learning, which also mediated the interpsychological functions on the social plane. Data from the focus group interview with the six students from Jenny's class demonstrate their beliefs about reading instruction and reading strategy instruction. As for the approach to reading instruction, three students preferred the top-down approach, whereas the other three students preferred the bottom-up approach, with one of these students stating that the reason for this preference was because it was the approach that was previously taught and it was what he had become accustomed to. This is in accordance with one of the reasons Jenny stated as to why she chose to use the traditional methods, in that it was what the students were used to. However, she omitted the group of students who preferred the top-down approach to reading instruction. In turn, the implication of this for teachers is that they should adopt more interactive approaches when teaching the reading course.

With regard to reading strategies, the students in the focus group stated that they had no interest in reading strategies and did not appreciate the usefulness of reading strategies. The reasons they gave for their belief that reading strategies were useless included the teacher's coverage in class:

Excerpt 5.30
(S1 = the first student in the focus group)
  S4: The teacher didn't teach.
  S6: Mainly because [we] never use. We only feel it is useful until we apply it. Never use; therefore [we] don't feel useful.
  S5: *We learn by explicit teaching.* If the teacher often teaches about it, we know it is useful. If the teacher does not teach, we don't feel it is useful. Some students even don't know this part exists.
  S4: I think it is due to the environment. If the teacher doesn't pay attention, students pay less attention.
  (Focus group with Jenny's students, 30 May 2012)

The students emphasised that explicit teaching with examples would have been better for their reading strategy learning. It may be the case that students did not have an interest in reading strategies because their teacher did not teach them explicitly. This indicates that what a person believes and how a person thinks are shaped by cultural, historical and social mediational tools (Wertsch et al. 1993). The focus group data also revealed that the value students assigned to reading strategies was shaped by the teacher's practices on the social plane. In addition, this highlighted the importance of explicit teaching and the provision of adequate practice time to master the strategy learning.

Along with the impact from students, the physical environment of the classroom also shapes teacher decision-making. As was the case with Sunny's classroom, Jenny's class had 54 students and all students were seated in fixed rows. At the front of the classroom were the blackboard and the teacher's desk, with an elevated platform for the teacher to stand on. Jenny expressed her dissatisfaction with the physical arrangement of the classroom and the size of the class:

Excerpt 5.31
Too many people and all the seats are fixed. [Students] can only talk with their desk mate. I cannot rearrange the seats.

Too many people. It is very time-consuming for me to take care of every group in one activity. It is okay to walk around, but time is not enough for every group to demonstrate their results.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

The physical arrangement in the classroom was designed to place the teacher at a higher and more central position than the students. Much of the time Jenny was standing on the platform lecturing to the class and as a result her action zone was confined to this particular area of the classroom. The physical arrangement of the desks and chairs in addition to the class size emphasised the division of labour in the classroom and constrained Jenny's agency in organising classroom activities.

On the whole, Jenny's isolation from the community at the Department level limited her relational agency to seek support from other teachers. At the classroom level, students' beliefs and perceptions mediated Jenny's decision-making. However, there were gaps between what the students believed and what Jenny believed in relation to teaching and the division of labour in the class. In addition, the classroom's physical environment also constrained Jenny's agency to interact with the students, and this is significant because the community of the activity negotiates the rule and division of labour in the community. The next two sections discuss the rule and division of labour in Jenny's classroom teaching.

5.1.5   The Rules of Jenny's Activity System

The rules/norms of the school community govern how schoolwork is to be done and evaluated, an example of which may be the institutionally defined ways for displaying knowledge or learning (Lantolf 2000). With regard to Jenny's situation, her isolation from the Department community made her unaware of the institutional rules for teaching. Nevertheless, there were still implicit rules mediating her teaching.

As discussed in the section on the community of Jenny's activity system, Jenny's isolation from the Department community made her unaware of the concrete rules of teaching:

Excerpt 5.32
I: Do you agree with the curriculum design of this course?

J: Curriculum design? School's?

I: [The curriculum design of] this course?

J: I don't know about the curriculum design.

I: For example, the goals of teaching, the plan of teaching per week. What kinds of goals should be achieved?

J: I don't know whether there is goal for teaching. No. Hehe [laughing].

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Although Jenny could not articulate the rule explicitly, her teaching still followed the curriculum plan set by the Department. In addition, as described previously, Jenny took the textbook as the authority for her teaching, even though the learning activities were not in accordance with her own practices. In effect, the textbook functioned as the rule for her teaching. At the same time, Jenny's dependence on traditional teaching methods also guided her teaching practice. At the classroom community level, students' requirements and preferences for a certain way of teaching also functioned as a rule mediating Jenny's teaching. In summary, all of these rules seemed to constrain her agency to implement what she had learned and to develop more innovative teaching. Indeed, the rules also mediated the division of labour in Jenny's classroom. This division of labour will be discussed in the next section.

5.1.6   The Division of Labour in Jenny's Activity System

The division of labour in an activity gives rise to different positions for the participants, who each have their own history (Engeström 1996). The division of labour in Jenny's classroom was mediated between her and the students, with the latter potentially holding a range of different positions and histories in relation to English learning.

It is interesting that in Jenny's Master's degree research project, she stressed that students are the centre of learning and that teachers are the facilitators. However, the classroom observation records revealed that Jenny spent most of the time explaining and translating the textbook. As discussed in the previous section, the textbook functioned as the rule for her teaching. Jenny's classroom was therefore more reflective of 'textbook-centred' teaching. In addition, Jenny expressed her frustration at the students' passive participation and the difficulties in arranging group work with her class:

Excerpt 5.33
I found in practices that students just muddle through their work, for example, when you asked them to have discussion. They were not discussing as you expected. They were just doing it perfunctorily. They won't talk if you did not walk there. Because there are so many students in the class, I didn't divide them into groups, just asked them to talk in pairs in one desk. Only careful students do that. For the most of them, I don't know what they are talking about.
   (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Jenny also identified the problems she experienced in organising class discussions:

Excerpt 5.34
Another reason is I didn't design well. Have to be well prepared before group work. Everyone has a certain role. Otherwise, some people won't participate.

But I asked them to discuss after-reading questions about the text, because my guidance was not enough, too general, just asking them to discuss. This is because my guidance was not enough.

Another problem is that I didn't ask them to give answer after discussion. No feedback.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

It was observed that Jenny used only the IRE pattern for Unit 4 activities at the beginning of the class. As documented in the observation, class time was dominated by talk from Jenny except when asking students to read the text aloud. Students in the focus group all expressed their wish for the teacher's role to be the provision of guidance and supervision. Their complaint about the division of labour present in Jenny's class is best summed up in the statement: 'She is talking all the time and we are just listening'. However, the students also admitted that they did not contribute much during class discussions. In addition, they mentioned that they could understand that there was not a great deal of time available for teacher–student interactions because of the class size:

Excerpt 5.35
I: … Is there enough teacher–student interaction?
    S1: Time is not enough.
    S2: We have 54 students. If one student asks one question, then…
    S4: Right, I think one-to-one teaching is better.
    (Focus group with Jenny's students, 30 May 2010)

What is evident is that the dominance of traditional teaching roles and the use the textbook as the authority mediated the division of labour in Jenny's classroom. The traditional 'duck feeding' teaching approach established the teacher's role as monologue deliverer and the students as passive listeners. When the textbook was taken as the authority, most of the teaching time was devoted to text explanation and translation. Therefore, the teacher could not design appropriate lessons and make the time for teacher–student interactions.

We can see then that the six activity system elements in Jenny's classroom teaching worked interactively and changed during the process of mediation. Jenny gave up her teaching goals because she did not have necessary tools to achieve them. Analysis of the tools revealed that Jenny gave up designing and redesigning tools to improve her teaching when confronted with a range of challenges. Her isolation from the English Department community hindered her chances of being suitably informed of the reforms being implemented, and the lack of interaction with her students resulted in her developing negative attitudes towards her students. Observation records of Jenny's teaching practices revealed that her teaching approach conformed to textbook-centred, teacher-centred and traditional grammar-translation methods, which were not in accordance with the reform requirements. Mediated by these constraints in her activity system, Jenny gave up her intention to innovate in her teaching, even though she had an understanding of the theoretical knowledge relevant to teaching EFL reading. Hargreaves (1994) warns that teacher

isolation is one of the barriers for reform implementation and teacher development. The outcomes from this analysis imply a disconnection between Jenny's ideal model of teaching and the reality of her experience, as well as the impact of conflicts and changes during the teaching process. The next section analyses the contradictions present in Jenny's teaching activity system.

5.2   Levels of Contradictions in Jenny's Teaching Activity

From the perspective of activity theory, agency is the subject's potentiality to create new tools/artefacts to resolve contradictions and transform both their inner and outer worlds (Engeström 2006). In addition, the underlying contradictions also give rise to failure and innovation (Engeström 2005). This section will first analyse the primary-level contradictions in Jenny's activity system, followed by the analysis of the secondary-level and tertiary-level contradictions.

5.2.1   Primary-Level Contradictions

A primary inner contradiction occurs within each component of an activity system or between ideal and real models of teaching (Pasanen et al. 2005). The analysis of the activity system of Jenny's teaching revealed that there were many conflicts in her beliefs system, along with a number of gaps between her ideal way of teaching and the reality of her experience. However, she did not take effective measures to resolve these contradictions.

5.2.1.1   Contradictions in Jenny's Beliefs System

A fundamental contradiction lies at the heart of Jenny's beliefs about reading strategy instruction. On the one hand, Jenny thought that explicit reading strategy instruction would be helpful to the development of the students' reading skills and wanted to apply this in her teaching. On the other hand, she also thought that reading strategies were more suitable for ESL students than for EFL students and students should learn reading strategies implicitly. She had difficulty applying what she had learned in the ESL context to the EFL context. This pedagogical contradiction was not resolved. It is evident that Jenny needed more practical knowledge and the courage to apply her theoretical knowledge in her teaching practices in order for this contradiction to be resolved.

As Vygotsky (1978) asserts, practices on the social plane can result in growth on the intrapersonal plane. Therefore, if Jenny demonstrates the courage to teach reading strategies as part of her teaching practice, it may be possible for her to expand her everyday knowledge and to clarify her belief system. In turn, this may then help

her to conceptualise an overall plan for her teaching and to seek valuable learning opportunities. As Wertsch (1998) suggests, the change caused by introducing new cultural tools into mediated action is often powerful. Jenny gave up her ideal objects of teaching mainly because she did not create effective pedagogical tools.

5.2.1.2 Distance Between Jenny's Ideal and Real Classroom Divisions of Labour

Jenny described her ideal classroom interaction as follows:

Excerpt 5.36
Ideal classroom ###, I think there should be more teacher–student interaction. Students should have more opportunities to talk and practise. In addition, students should also be willing to talk, instead of being called on. They should be willing to participate.
(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

In reality, however, there was limited teacher–student interaction in Jenny's classes. Jenny employed a monologic style of delivery when teaching, and, as a result, her students seemed to show little interest in her teaching. Jenny recognised that this was a problem in her teaching method and that this resulted in student passivity:

Excerpt 5.37
I think the teacher is the main reason. Students have no interest, [but] they have reasons for that. It is not like that they do not want to study without a reason. On one hand, it is difficult; on the other hand, teachers' teaching method is too boring, still the old. [Therefore] they lost interest.
(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

However, Jenny did not take action to change her teaching methods, nor did she design any classroom activity encouraging students to talk. Indeed, she could not get access to the classroom with the multimedia equipment to design the specific types of activities that she wanted. Along with limited teaching resources, the fixed seating arrangements in the classroom were another element that hindered her capacity to improve her interaction with the students. Moreover, the students' indifference to her teaching also led her to lose confidence and to develop a negative attitude towards her work. Like a vicious circle, Jenny felt discouraged and gave up trying to be innovative.

Changes can often be traced back to the different skill levels of the agent and the introduction of new cultural tools into mediated action (Wertsch 1998). In Jenny's case, the lack of effective tools and her lack of skills in using the available tools (teaching methods) constrained her from achieving her teaching ideal. She did not attempt to incorporate into her teaching practices the theoretical knowledge she had learned about teaching. Consequently, this contradiction in Jenny's teaching activity system remained unresolved. If primary contradictions can be resolved, they may

lead to the development of secondary contradictions (Jóhannsdóttir 2010). However, in Jenny's activity system, the two unresolved primary contradictions did not lead to the emergence of secondary contradictions. Other existing secondary-level contradictions in Jenny's system of teaching are discussed in the next subsection.

5.2.2   Secondary-Level Contradictions

Secondary contradictions exist between the components of an activity system. They become a force for change within an activity system when 'a strong novel factor' is infused into any component of an activity system (Engeström 1993, p. 72). Secondary contradictions have the potential to generate innovation that changes the activity, making the ZPD an invisible 'battleground' (Engeström 2006, p. 26). Nevertheless, Jenny's resolution to these contradictions did not bring transformation in her teaching.

5.2.2.1   Contradiction Between the Textbook and the Object of Teaching Reading Strategies

The textbook, as a tool designed by the reform, led to the emergence of secondary contradictions in Jenny's activity system (see 2-1 in Fig. 5.1). As discussed in the analysis of the textbook as the tool, Jenny was dissatisfied with the design of the reading strategy instruction in the textbook, but she did not take agentive action to adapt the textbook or to create new tools to enhance her teaching. Her decision was to give up teaching reading strategies. Resistance between the agent and the tool can give rise to mediated action and have a major influence on the development of the agent (Wertsch 1998). In Jenny's case, the textbook functioned as both a tool and a rule for her teaching. Her dependence on the textbook, in conjunction with her dissatisfaction with it, led Jenny to make the decision to follow the textbook, but to omit the section pertaining to teaching reading strategies. However, this action did not bring about pedagogical transformation because human agency in changing given circumstances involves developing mediating artefacts in a qualitatively new way (Vygotsky 1978).

In Jenny's case, she did not create new tools to change the environment, but rather she used the tools in a non-transformational way. As this was her first year of teaching the *New Horizon College English* course, she did not have the skills required to adequately function with the textbook and utilise it as a transformational cultural tool (Wertsch 1998). The contradiction between the textbook and her teaching objective was resolved, but there was no qualitative transformation or identifiable improvement in her teaching. The result was that her teaching remained within her zone of actual development (ZAD), which indicated she lacked active intention in seeking assistance, either through material tools or conceptual mediational

means, to improve her teaching practices to the potential level she could have achieved with assistance or guidance.

5.2.2.2   Contradiction Between the Needs Analysis Questionnaire and the Subject

The analysis of the tools in Jenny's activity system revealed that the only new tool created by Jenny was the needs analysis questionnaire. However, there was a contradiction between this tool and Jenny's expectations (see 2-2 in Fig. 5.1). Jenny expected the results of the needs analysis to offer her concrete information about the students and to illustrate the students' enthusiasm in learning. For their part, the students thought that the items in the questionnaire were too general to answer. As Wertsch (1998) claims, the properties of cultural tools, including the skills in using particular mediational means, have implications for understanding how internal processes exist and operate. The agent needs skills in operating the new tools to transform their circumstances. Because Jenny was not adequately skilled at designing and applying needs analysis tests, in addition to her over-optimistic expectation, the tool was not used appropriately and this resulted in disappointment. Consequently, Jenny resolved to give up redesigning the new tool and this failure to act became one of the factors which hindered her from achieving her objective of teaching learning strategies and reading strategies.

5.2.3   Tertiary-Level Contradictions

Tertiary contradictions occur when another more 'culturally advanced' activity system (Engeström 1987, p. 89) such as the government imposes a novel factor for another activity system. Similar to Sunny's activity system, there is not a tertiary-level contradiction between the reform mandate and the activity system of Jenny's classroom teaching (the activity system of the reform indicated with dotted line in Fig. 5.2), but the reasons are different. Jenny's isolation from the Department made her unaware of the reform policy. Therefore, there was no shared object between the three activity systems (see Fig. 5.2). Consequently, it is difficult for Jenny to exhibit agency in changing her teaching in response to the reform.

In general terms, there was no transformation in Jenny's teaching due to the inadequacy of the tools needed to resolve the primary-level and secondary-level contradictions. In contrast to Sunny, who had the motivation to change but who lacked the knowledge to do so, Jenny lost her motivation to change even though she had the theoretical knowledge to do so. Hence, due to her lack of practical knowledge and skills to create new tools to improve her teaching, Jenny either left the contradiction unresolved or she resolved it in a passive way by giving up her goals or new tool. Consequently, there was no transformation in her teaching practice. What's more, there was no interaction between Jenny's teaching and the reform mandates and so it was impossible for Jenny to exhibit agency in relation to the reform.
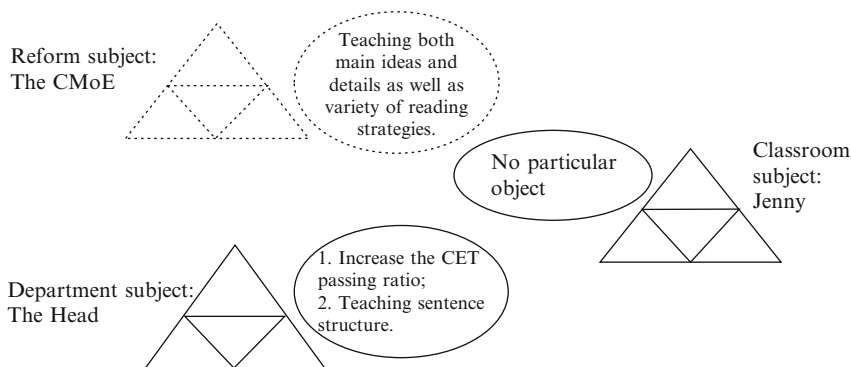
Fig. 5.2 The tertiary-level 'contradictions' in Jenny's teaching activity system

5.3 Jenny's Agency in Her ZPD

Analyses of the contradictions in the previous section revealed that Jenny did not create new tools to resolve the contradictions in her teaching activity system. This subsection now analyses Jenny's agency from a developmental perspective, using the concept of the ZPD to understand Jenny's potential capacities to generate specific forms of development in the future (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). The mediational means in Jenny's case include: her past learning/teaching experiences, emotional experiences and diffused assistances. Jenny's agency in relation to the test reform is also discussed in this section. However, she remained in her zone of actual development and did not take action to respond the reform.

In relation to the two reform mandates, analysis of Jenny's activity system revealed that her teaching did not meet either requirement of teaching, both main ideas and detailed understanding, or a variety of reading strategies. Vygotsky (1978) claims that we can only understand key aspects of mental functioning if we understand their historical origins and development. Jenny's classroom instruction therefore needs to be analysed against the history of the local education institution as well as against the larger history of the teaching concept employed in the local activity system. In Jenny's case, her learning experiences and teacher education experiences played different roles in the development of her pedagogical thinking. Her previous learning experiences shaped her belief that reading instruction was to teach vocabulary and grammar. On the other hand, her teacher education experience in studying TESOL abroad offered her theoretical knowledge that reading instruction should focus more on global understanding.

During the interview Jenny indicated that the way she had been taught had influenced her current teaching methods:

Excerpt 5.38

I think there is [influence]! Because there was no teacher education programme for me, no one trained me when I became a teacher. How to teach? Therefore

[laughing], I teach in the way my teacher taught me when I was a student. There is definitely influence.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

What can be inferred from this excerpt is that Jenny's apprenticeship experiences as a university student not only shaped her beliefs and practical knowledge about EFL reading instruction but also mediated her emotional experiences, as shown in the way that she regarded the traditional method of teaching as 'safe methods'. This was one of the reasons why she was reluctant to take agentive action to change her teaching by applying what she had learned in the USA. Another excerpt in the interview also alluded to is the emotional impact of Jenny's prior students' experiences:

Excerpt 5.39

I haven't taught for a long time. I am a little, eh, not confident when [I] started teaching again. I feel I don't know how to teach. Therefore, I have to choose a relatively safe method. Dare not innovate. This is the main reason. If, if I am confident, prepare the lesson well, have detailed plan, I am willing try new methods. I will explain to students if they disagree [with my teaching] and give them time to adjust. The main reason is myself.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

It can be inferred from the excerpt above that Jenny's pedagogical insecurity and her attachment to her apprenticeship experiences may be the fundamental reason why she could not make effective use of tools to achieve her objectives. When describing the reasons why she gave up on the new methods and teaching reading strategies, the words she used frequently were 'my limited ability', 'beyond my ability', 'afraid' and 'no confidence'. As Fullan (1991) argues, the anxiety of loss caused by change is one of the difficulties teachers encounter in educational change. Therefore, Jenny's agentive action was to choose the 'safe way' instead of trying the new object. By contrast, Jenny's experiences in studying TESOL in the USA had less impact on her teaching. She described the impact of this experience as follows:

Excerpt 5.40

I: Do you think this teacher education or research experience has influenced your teaching?

J: I think there are some conceptual influences. For practices, as for practices, I would like to apply the teaching activities I learned, but didn't try and didn't realise it. In addition, the context of their teaching is different from ours. One is they have smaller classes, only 20 to 30 students. We have bigger classes. Another reason, English is their second language. For the students in America, there is no separate English class. There are English training courses. They are studying other subjects in English, all in English. That is their context. However, for us, English is a foreign language. That is different. The content of the classes is different. The purposes of learning are different. Therefore, I cannot apply [what I have learned] directly.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Jenny acknowledged that she could not apply this knowledge and these concepts in practice. One reason was that her course in the USA had no practical component. Another reason or difficulty identified was that she believed the concepts and knowledge in her education programme were only suitable for ESL students. Therefore, she felt that it was difficult to transfer and apply these elements to an EFL context. This situation is in accordance with the idea that knowledge is not entirely formulated on teacher preparation courses—trainee views of how to teach are frequently formulated from their own student experiences in an 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie 1975, p. 60). As Wertsch (1998) claims, agents have a feeling of conflict or resistance with a cultural tool so that they do not view the tool as belonging to them and may even choose to reject it. Therefore, mastery of a cultural tool does not ensure appropriation of it. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) also suggest that internalisation is about making something one's own. In Jenny's case, although she acquired knowledge about teaching reading strategies, her hesitation in using this knowledge prevented her appropriating it in her teaching practices. She lacked the self-regulation necessary to carry out the goal-directed task independently (Wertsch 1985). In addition, Jenny's scientific concepts about reading instruction and reading strategies remained on an intrapsychological plane. She would not develop an everyday understanding of these areas until she applied her theoretical knowledge to her teaching practices. The generative interaction between everyday concepts and scientific concepts occurs in Vygotsky's ZPD (Lave and Wenger 1991). Therefore, it might be inferred from the analysis that she had not really internalised what she had learned as part of her Master's degree and as a result her teaching practices remained within her ZAD.

The discussion above also suggests that Jenny's emotional experiences determined the kind of influence the environment had on her psychological development, referred by Vygotsky (1994, p. 339) as '*perezhivanija*'. In addition to the lack of confidence to innovate, the distance between Jenny's teaching ideal and her teaching reality caused frustration and a sense of failure, which is evident in her answers during the interview:

Excerpt 5.41

I: Were there unsuccessful teaching experiences?

    J: Hehe [laughing]. There were a lot of unsuccessful experiences.

    (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

The contrast between Jenny's ideal and her reality caused her to develop a lack of confidence with regard to her teaching. At the same time, the student response also had a negative influence on her. She admitted that her traditional teaching methods caused student passivity in learning. Furthermore, the students' indifference to her teaching caused her to develop negative attitudes and self-doubt about her teaching. Jenny acknowledged her frustration with teaching and her students in the interview:

Excerpt 5.42

Just like that day, they were all reading other courses. They come here not for studying, not listening to your teaching. I even do not want to talk!

    (Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Excerpt 5.43

I: I often hear you saying 'I do not want to teach anymore'. Why do you have this feeling? What caused it?

J: No sense of achievement. I think mainly because, eh, I feel it is useless to teach, [because] they don't want to study. Students have no interest in studying! Students don't study. If they don't study, my teaching has no meaning!

I: Eh, so you don't want to teach anymore?

J: Yes, that means my job is meaningless. Wasting time! Feeling useless! Don't want to teach.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

Jenny's feelings about her work and her students constrained her relational agency to communicate with and engage her students. In addition, as mentioned in the section on community, her sense of isolation from the Department also constrained her instrumental agency to make use of other teaching resources. The main issue is that these complaints diminished Jenny's sense of responsibility to the point where she became accustomed to these problems. This lack of responsibility affected her action and affected others (van Lier 2008). As a result, she did not want to change. In this case, Jenny's negative attitude towards her teaching environment led to passivity and hindered her pedagogical growth or movement from her ZAD to her ZPD.

Overall, in regard to the reform mandates, Jenny knew little of the reform and her practices did not meet the reform's mandates. Surprisingly, even after being informed of the format and content of the reform, Jenny still thought that her teaching practices met reform requirements, except with regard to the training of 'fast reading' (skimming and scanning):

Excerpt 5.44

I: What kind of influence do you think this test reform will have on English teaching?

J: Oh###

I: Is there an influence?

J: I don't think there is any influence. As for fast reading, students have fast reading material, but no teacher to teach it—just ask students do it after class. As for reading in depth, we have been teaching this all the time. Intensive reading can be called reading in depth.

(Interview with Jenny, 26 May 2010)

The excerpt above indicates that Jenny is unresponsive to the reform, as she does not think the reform has any influence on her teaching. It suggests that she has no intention to change. Capacity for agency involves forming intentions, setting goals and acting creatively (Milne et al. 2006). During the observation phase, Jenny did not exhibit any agency to act in relation to the reform, as she did not pay attention to the reform agenda. What may be inferred is that the test reform did not have a great impact on Jenny's teaching, at least at present. The reform therefore remains in her zone of far development (ZFD). After being informed of the reform mandates,

however, Jenny indicated her intention verbally and formed a general plan in response to the reform. Follow-up observation is required to confirm whether she took agentive action.

5.4 Summary

To sum up, the analysis of Jenny's activity system undertaken in this chapter indicates that she did not exhibit agency to change her teaching in relation to the reform requirements. Moreover, she relinquished all of her teaching goals due to a lack of effective tools. In addition, Jenny lacked the agency to overcome the situational constraints of the community, rules and division of labour in her classroom. Further analysis of the contradictions in Jenny's activity system revealed that she left some contractions unresolved, or if the contradictions were resolved, it was as a result of giving up on innovation. The analysis of Jenny's activity system and levels of contradictions within it can be used to answer the first research question relating to the nature of Jenny's agency responding to the reform mandates. With regard to the second research question, what can be inferred from the analysis is that Jenny's agency to use what she had learned to help her teaching become more innovative was constrained by many factors including lack of effective tools, lack of practical knowledge of teaching, her isolation from the teaching community, her dependence on the textbook and her students. The analysis presented in the third section highlighted that Jenny had adequate theoretical teaching knowledge, but the potential of this knowledge was not realised because she had no determination in applying this knowledge to her teaching practice. In addition, Jenny's passive emotional experiences resulted in her having no desire to change, which subsequently hindered her further development.

On the whole, the analysis in this chapter leads to the conclusion that Jenny needed to apply what she had learned from her Master's degree to her classroom teaching so that she could acquire practical knowledge about reading strategy instruction and develop a clearer belief system. In addition, Jenny needed courage to make changes. As Fullan (1991) describes, innovations are acts of faith and require time and energy to learn the new skills. Jenny needed more time and support to form a voluntary agency to pursue pedagogical change.

The implication for teacher education is that teacher education programmes need to integrate practical and theoretical knowledge of teaching within their curriculum design. In addition, teacher education programmes should also help teachers to consider how education theory relates to their practical experience within the contextually based constraints of their community and their personal philosophies of teaching and learning. More importantly, it is necessary to help teachers to both cope with change and to initiate change.

On the basis of the analysis of Jenny's case, it is also possible to draw implications for teacher support initiatives offered by Chinese universities. Chinese universities should give novice teachers time and space to grow and offer specialised

education programme to help them apply what they have learned in their classroom practice. In addition, universities should provide teachers with the type of professional development and affective support that will allow them to learn from each other.

Like Jenny, many teachers currently study education or TESOL in Western countries. Upon their return to China, they and other people assume that they are ready to use the 'more advanced' knowledge or skills they have learned to implement changes and improvements. However, such high expectations may ultimately be a source of frustration for them when they are faced with the large gap that presently exists between theory and practice and the problem of how to 'transplant' a Western teaching paradigm in 'Chinese soil'. Sustained guidance and support need to be provided to help all teachers overcome this pedagogical gap and adjust to the local culture of teaching.

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Chapter 6
The Case Study of Lynne: The Reflective Practitioner

This chapter focuses on Lynne (pseudonym), the participant of the third case study. When compared to the two younger teachers—Sunny, the 'prisoner', and Jenny, 'the unresponsive apprentice'—Lynne may be described as 'a reflective practitioner', using available opportunities and resources to reflexively improve and develop her teaching. She exhibited greater agency towards changing her teaching practices in response to the reform mandates. Lynne is a 45-year-old woman who has been teaching English for about 17 years and teaching the *New Horizon College English* course for about 7 years. Compared to Sunny and Jenny, Lynne is regarded as an 'experienced' (older) teacher in the College English Department. She obtained her Master's degree in China, specialising in EFL reading instruction and the CET reform. Lynne actively researched the CET reform and EFL reading instruction; and she taught reading strategies as part of her classroom teaching practice. Lynne was highly respected by the Head of the Department, peer teachers and her students. As with the two other case analyses, this chapter begins with an analysis of Lynne's classroom teaching as a simple activity system. The focus of the analysis then moves on to consider the levels of contradictions in Lynne's activity system and her agency in resolving them. The chapter will then conclude with a discussion of Lynne's agency in relation to her ZPD and the factors which account for this agency.

6.1 The Activity System of Lynne's Classroom Teaching

In this section Lynne's classroom teaching is analysed in relation to the activity theoretical framework (Engeström 1987). Subject, object, tools, rules, community and division of labour and Lynne's agency in response to the reform mandates are also analysed. Figure 6.1 outlines the activity system underpinning Lynne's classroom teaching:
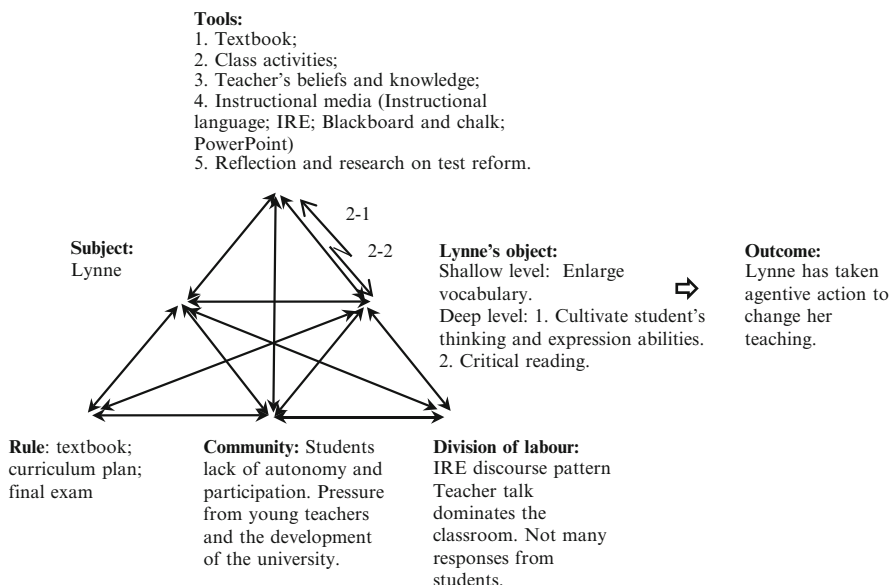
Tools:
1. Textbook;
2. Class activities;
3. Teacher's beliefs and knowledge;
4. Instructional media (Instructional language; IRE; Blackboard and chalk; PowerPoint)
5. Reflection and research on test reform.

2-1

2-2

Subject: Lynne

Lynne's object:
Shallow level: Enlarge vocabulary.
Deep level: 1. Cultivate student's thinking and expression abilities.
2. Critical reading.

Outcome:
Lynne has taken agentive action to change her teaching.

Rule: textbook; curriculum plan; final exam

Community: Students lack of autonomy and participation. Pressure from young teachers and the development of the university.

Division of labour: IRE discourse pattern Teacher talk dominates the classroom. Not many responses from students.

Fig. 6.1 Lynne's classroom teaching as an activity system

6.1.1 Lynne as Subject of Her Activity System

Lynne's Master's degree thesis was titled: *Analysis of characteristics of reading comprehension in the CET-4 and strategies for taking examination.* In her thesis she reviewed three reading models—bottom-up, top-down and interactive models—and four reading theories: schema theory, cognitive theory, sociological theory and interactive theory. Lynne pointed out the limitations of the bottom-up approach in teaching:

Excerpt 6.1

不少教师以解释课文中的语言点为主要目标, 其目的是帮助学生扫除语言障碍。可事实上, 学生的语言问题是解决了, 但他们对整个文章的理解不够全面, 对作者意图的理解也不透彻。"自下而上"阅读模式虽然突出了对词句的理解, 但却忽视了读者的主观能动性, 没有把阅读者看成信息的积极处理者, 因此, 利用这种模式进行语言教学显然是不够的。

English translation:

Many teachers focus on explaining language points in the text and aim at getting rid of the language barrier to students' reading. However, even though the language problem is resolved, students cannot have a comprehensive understanding of the author's purpose. The bottom-up approach only focuses on the word and sentence-level understanding, but misses the reader's autonomy and does not treat reading as active information processing. Therefore it is not adequate to only use this approach in teaching.

(Excerpt from Lynne's thesis)

Excerpt 6.2

相对而言， ‘自上而下’理论比起 ‘自下而上’理论来说， 对于阅读教学的影响要大些。

English translation:

Comparatively, the 'top-down' approach has more influence on teaching than the 'bottom-up' approach.

(Excerpt from Lynne's thesis)

In her thesis Lynne also identified the limitations of top-down reading strategies and expressed her opinion that an interactive approach to reading may be more appropriate for EFL teaching. It can be concluded from the data that Lynne's Master's thesis provided her with theoretical knowledge about reading, which accorded with her beliefs about reading.

In both the survey questionnaire and the interview, Lynne indicated that she had conducted research on how to teach reading strategies when she wrote her Master's degree thesis. In her thesis she briefly reviewed the literature on teaching and learning strategies for reading in the Chinese context, but that was not her research focus. Lynne's thesis reflected the fact that she had knowledge of the general theory and studies regarding reading strategy instruction in China, but it did not reflect whether or not she had knowledge of the detailed procedures relating to teaching reading strategies. Lynne believed reading strategies were helpful for students' reading comprehension and test preparation. Moreover, she listed the most important reading strategies: prediction, looking for topic sentences and looking for examples.

During the interview Lynne was asked to read three narratives about different methods of teaching reading strategies and to identify the one she agreed with the most. Like Sunny, Lynne identified the *direct method* of teaching reading strategies as the one with which she most agreed. She stated that she thought it was easier to teach one reading strategy at a time, rather than trying to handle the multiple strategy instruction such as *reciprocal teaching* and *transactional strategy instruction*. When a comparison is made between all three teachers' responses to this interview question, Jenny seems to have the most comprehensive theoretical knowledge of how to teach reading strategies because she favours multiple strategy instruction (Grabe 2009). However, Jenny did not take action to teach reading strategies to her class. In contrast, Lynne had clearer beliefs about teaching reading strategies, and in her classroom practice she involved more than one strategy in the process of reading and discussing the text.

Lynne is actively engaged in the teaching and research activities in this university. She is the leader of the *Teaching Research Office* in the College Language Department and has been working as an assessor of the *Teaching Demonstration and Competition* at her university. She was elected as the 'Research Backbone' for the Department, which meant she was regarded as an expert in both teaching and research. The key elements of her activity system are analysed in the next five subsections.

6.1.2   Objects and Outcome of Lynne's Activity System

In contrast to Sunny and Jenny, who both underwent the process of giving up their teaching goals, Lynne put considerable effort into forming and achieving her objectives. During the interview Lynne stated that she set both 'shallow'- and 'deep'-level objectives for her course. Her 'shallow'-level objectives were to increase the students' vocabulary through reading. In addition, the students could learn content knowledge as well as cultural knowledge through the reading activities. Lynne raised two 'deep'-level objectives. Her first deep-level objective was to cultivate students' thinking and abilities to express their thinking. The second deep-level objective was to teach critical reading. During the interview Lynne seemed to focus more on these two deep-level objectives and gave detailed reasons indicating why she set these objectives.

Lynne believed that reading is a kind of communication between the author and reader, just like oral communication. Moreover, she believed that students could learn how to express their ideas by studying an author's writing purpose and evaluating how the author organises his ideas in the reading texts:

Excerpt 6.3
How does the author express [his ideas]? How can I express [my ideas] when I need to? This is what I taught students in the class. What is your purpose and how can you achieve your purpose? This [can be learned from], for example, the way the author expresses themselves, by giving examples? Or by *cause and effect*?
   (Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

The excerpt above suggests that Lynne emphasised the importance of understanding the author's purpose and the theme of the reading to her students. Significantly, this objective is close to the requirements of the curriculum reform (in fact even more than what the reform requires) regarding the need for students to understand the main idea of the reading text. During the interview, Lynne stated that her reason for setting this objective related to her desire to cultivate the students' abilities in the context of long-term development:

Excerpt 6.4
I think it is what a reader should do. A teacher should cultivate students' comprehensive abilities. What are the comprehensive abilities? Firstly, [you should] have a theme for your talk and support your theme with other [information]. This is a person's ability. Don't accept whatever other people say. Have your own idea. I told my students it was a very important and useful ability for your future career if you can express your theme in one sentence.
   (Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

As for the second deep-level objective—teaching critical reading—the following excerpt provides an insight into Lynne's reasoning:

Excerpt 6.5
No need to have blind faith in the textbook. No one is absolutely right. There is never right answer in art, especially at university, except for some mathematics or

physics formula. An author's idea only represents his/her own opinions. You can agree or disagree [with the author]. [I want] students to know I cannot accept whatever others have suggested.

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

In contrast to Sunny and Jenny, who set passing the test as a prime object for their teaching, Lynne mentioned in the interview that passing the test was not her main focus:

Excerpt 6.6

It is lying if I said my teaching is not for test, because students need to pass the CET. I will mention about [the test], but it is not the focus of my teaching.

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

The data indicates that Lynne's shallow-level objective and her first deep-level objective met the reform requirements that students should have both detailed and global understanding of reading texts. However, Lynne's statements suggest that she formed these objectives based on her understanding of reading and the students' lifelong learning needs. This reflected her own voluntary opinions and intentions rather than those externally imposed on her.

In relation to the shallow-level objective, as documented in the classroom observation, Lynne usually spent up to 1 h on teaching vocabulary if there was a vocabulary list in each unit. She often introduced related cultural background knowledge when teaching vocabulary and when reading the texts. For example, when teaching the word *Holland*, she explained to the students how the two words *Holland* and *Dutch* are used in relation to the country and its people. On the whole, these teaching practices aimed to achieve 'shallow'-level objectives, namely, teaching vocabulary and cultural knowledge.

With regard to the first 'deep'-level object, Lynne focused her teaching in each unit on how the author expressed his ideas and analysed how the author organised the text when reviewing the text structure. As recorded in the classroom observation, Lynne usually asked students to identify the main idea and then analysed the structure of the text before moving to provide a detailed explanation and summary of the structure to finish the text analysis.

Lynne's focus on her second deep-level objective—teaching critical reading—was at times an explicit classroom strategy, as is evident in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 6.7

(T = teacher; S = student; SS = two students; SSS = more than two students)

T: …Now do you find that this passage is difficult to understand? Yes or no? Simple. We can say it is easy. From the introduction [pointing to the outline of the text on the board], the author tells us this is a research. Why do we have difficulty in understanding it?

SSS: [silence]

T: Do you find something not well written in the text? #

SSS: [silence]

T: 作者在develop his idea的时候,有没有什么地方讲的很*logical*,大家很容易接受的? [English translation: When the author is developing his idea, is there anything logical that makes you feel easy to accept?]

SSS: [silence]

T: 还是一会儿讲着, 一会儿讲那, 不太清楚的?有没有这种感觉?# [English translation: Or (he) is talking about this, and then shifting to another thing? Not so clear? Do you have this feeling?]

SSS: [silence]

T: 恩?感觉这个文章有没有写得不好的地方? [English translation: Eh? Do you feel there is something not well written?]

SSS: [silence]

T: This is mainly about a research. This research is about genes, genetics and human population genetics. And they, they, you can say a group of scientists work together for many years. And they discovered a lot of things. They have a lot of research findings. And they published, write down the research findings in a book, the discoveries they do. But the author in one paragraph tells us the book, then genetic map, then the research. [It] makes us confused. I think, yeah? 好, 今天的作业就是把这篇文章你重新给它整理一下。按照你的观点, 你认为一个research应该怎么样来介绍?主要是关于什么的? 它有什么research process? 有什么观点?有什么significance?   我觉得作者讲的这个挺乱的。好, 你用一百多字写brief introduction about this research. 重新给它打乱顺序改写一下。好, 题目还是这个Research into population genetics. 做的什么试验, 它是怎么做的, 它的整个过程, process 是什么,它的research finding, 重要的意义是什么。Understand? [English Translation: *Ok, today's homework is for you to reorganise this text. According to your opinion, what do you think a research should be introduced? What is it about? What is its research process? What are the ideas? What is the significance? I feel this author is not very organised in writing this text. Ok, you can write a brief introduction about this research in about 100 words, reorganise it. Ok, the topic is still research into population genetics. What experiments have been done? How have they been done? What was the whole process? What is the research finding? What is the significance?* Understand?]

SSS: Understand.

T: That's all for today.

(Transcripts of Jenny's class, 12 June 2012)

Overall, the data suggests that Lynne's shallow-level objectives and her first deep-level objective accord with the reform mandates. In addition, Lynne demonstrated agency to form a second objective which went beyond the mandate of the reform. Fullan (1991) draws a distinction between voluntary and imposed change. In this context, Lynne's intentionality in forming these objectives indicated her voluntary desire to improve her teaching rather than simply respond to an external reform agenda imposed upon her by the Department. It can be concluded from the excerpts of her classroom observation records that Lynne strived to achieve her goal of teaching critical reading. The outcome of Lynne's teaching activity system is her agency in making transformation in her teaching practice. The next section focuses on the pedagogical tools and artefacts which Lynne created in order to achieve her teaching goals.

6.1.3   The Tools of Lynne's Activity System

These tools and artefacts in Lynne's classroom teaching include the textbook, the teacher's beliefs and knowledge, classroom activities and instructional media. Tools change the activity and are, in turn, changed by the activity. Compared with Sunny and Jenny, Lynne is more capable in making use of these tools and creating new tools to improve her teaching.

6.1.3.1   The Textbook

As shown in the analysis of Sunny and Jenny, the textbook had an authoritative role in their classroom teaching. However, when Lynne was asked about whether or not the textbook was an authority or facilitator in her class, she sighed:

Excerpt 6.8
<u>Now it is the task</u>! The final exam covers eight units; therefore, I have to finish these eight units. Otherwise my students will lose in the final exam.
   (Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)
   She also indicated that she would change the textbook if there was no curriculum plan:

Excerpt 6.9
If I can teach by myself, I will delete it as I wanted. <u>I am sure</u>!
   (Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

   Moreover, Lynne mentioned in the interview that she planned to add good texts into the reading class but she gave up because of time pressure and out of concern that the school leaders and the students might dislike the idea. This response demonstrates that the textbook and the final exam are functioning as the rules regulating Lynne's teaching. However, in contrast to Sunny and Jenny, who regarded the textbook as the authority, Lynne's knowledge of and attitude towards the textbook suggests that she is more in command of how to use the textbook, even though her teaching was also constrained by it.
   When discussing textbooks during the interview, Lynne outlined her experiences and knowledge about different kinds of textbooks for College English. She compared at least three different textbooks that she had used in the past 7 years of teaching the course. She concluded that there was no textbook specifically designed for the universities at the third level. However, she stated that *New Horizon College English* (2nd ed.) was relatively good. Lynne indicated that she thought the textbook was more aligned with the test reform in relation to vocabulary and other language exercises such as 'Banked Cloze'. However, Lynne also cited two shortcomings of the textbook: the utilitarianism of the textbook in that it mainly catered to the CET test and the fact that the selections of texts were only authentic American texts or passages, rather than 'polished' language by which Lynne meant standard English. Lynne was also concerned that the students might learn non-standard language usage from the authentic passages, which was different from the grammar they

learned. Therefore, she preferred the 'polished' text as the model for language learning, yet she also acknowledged that some non-standard language uses might become a trend in English use in the future.

Lynne was not satisfied with the textbook tool assigned by the university. In addition, she did not regard the textbook as the authority and curriculum. Her attitude can be seen by her intention to set a second deep-level objective, critical reading. In this way, then, Lynne has identified the limitations of the textbook and also considered tools to resolve these problems.

Lynne's teaching followed the textbook because of the requirements of the curriculum plan. However she also adapted the text to achieve her teaching objectives, for example, including a critical evaluation of one text and asking students to reorganise the text as an assignment (see Excerpt 6.7). She also used Text B as the material for practising fast reading. In addition, she did not teach all exercises but only those related to the test. If there was non-standard English in the text, she explained to her students that this was wrong, as demonstrated in the excerpt related to Unit 7 below:

Excerpt 6.10

T: <u>What the eyes see</u>, 眼睛看到的东西 [repeating in Chinese], Yeah? Ok. Now where is the verb?

SSS: are

T: Are. 我们讲过的主语从句作主语, 谓语动词用什么形式阿? Is. 好, 这个地方就是一个*mistake,* 也可能是现在的一种趋势。我们一般讲主语从句作主语, 动名词作主语, 不定式作主语, 谓语动词一般都用单数。你看这里后面的表语是主系表结构,what eye sees are mainly a way. 后面的表语也是一个单数, 所以这里的are, formally 应该是is.   好, 你看这里是不规范的英语, 也是英语的一种趋势。像我们刚才第二段的最后一句, result: the closest thing we have… 也不是一个完整的句子。Yeah, 这就是not formal English. 这里面也是阿, 我认为用is 更为合适,What the eye sees is mainly a way.

(English translation)

T: <u>What the eyes see</u>, *what the eyes see* [repeating in Chinese], Yeah? Ok. Now where is the verb?

SSS: are

T: Are. *We have been taught what the predicate verb should be when the subject is a clause?* Is. *Ok, here it is a* mistake, *but may become a tendency. We usually teach that when the subject is a clause, a gerund, or an infinitive, the verb should be a singular form. Look at the predicate, whose structure is subject–copula–predicate,* what eye sees are mainly a way. *The predicate is also singular form; therefore here* 'are' *should be* 'is'. *Ok, you see, this is non-standard English, but also a tendency of English in the future. Just like the last sentence in paragraph 2, is not a complete sentence either.* Yeah, *this is* not formal English. *Same here, I think* 'is' *is more appropriate: What the eye sees is mainly a way.*

(Transcripts of Jenny's class, 12 June 2010)

Lynne used the first language, Chinese, as a tool to explain grammatical problems and to inform the students about the non-standardised English in the textbook. It can be seen from the transcript that Lynne took action to create new tools to achieve her objective of teaching main ideas and critical reading through an appropriate learning activity. In addition, when she did not like the assigned textbook, she adapted it according to her purposes, such as omitting exercises or explaining confusing parts according to her beliefs. These adaptations can themselves be understood as pedagogical tools created to fulfil her teaching objective. Although she gave up tools such as complementary reading materials because of time pressures, she demonstrated agency in creating new tools to resolve problems and to realise her teaching goals.

These results indicate that Lynne was skilled at using and adapting the textbook as a cultural tool for her teaching. A person becomes skilled in using a cultural tool by interacting with it sufficiently over time to master the challenges the tool presents (Wertsch 1998). In Lynne's case, she already had experience in teaching with different types of textbooks, and this experience provided her with the skills to evaluate and adapt the textbook according to her pedagogical beliefs and goals. The next subsection discusses Lynne's beliefs and knowledge about EFL reading instruction.

6.1.3.2 Lynne's Beliefs and Knowledge

A teacher's beliefs and knowledge are psychological tools mediating their teaching and decision-making. Wertsch and Rupert (1993) suggest that it is important to understand an individual's cognitive value by analysing their mediational means in light of the cultural, historical and institutional forces that shape them. This section analyses how Lynne's beliefs about reading instruction and teaching reading strategies mediated her teaching by comparing her beliefs and her classroom practices:

1. Lynne's beliefs and knowledge about EFL reading instruction

In terms of teaching generally, Lynne firmly claimed that her teaching favoured a top-down approach and that global understanding was the most important thing for reading, as articulated below:

Excerpt 6.11
[My beliefs about reading] formed gradually, depending on individual's understanding. Some people think structure or grammar is the most important, <u>but</u> I believe global understanding is the most important thing.
(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

During the interview Lynne shared the example that her beliefs about reading had been formed as part of her life experiences. She mentioned that she had been listening to someone for half an hour and could not understand what he/she wanted to express. She regarded this as a waste of time:

Excerpt 6.12

I don't want to waste [time]. Will I waste other people's time? Therefore, I am very purpose-driven. What am I doing? I think it is very useful and should teach my students this idea.

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May, 2010)

This excerpt reveals that Lynne's belief in the need to develop an effective mode of expression led her to believe that understanding the author's purpose was the prime objective of reading instruction. She wanted to use this approach to reading to train the students to express their purpose clearly in daily communication. In addition, her beliefs were formed during her daily interaction with others, which accords with the claim that social interactions shape the development of human beliefs, values and ways of acting (Wertsch 1991).

As documented in the classroom observation, Lynne's teaching was in congruence with her beliefs and knowledge about reading instruction. After teaching the vocabulary list, she conducted lead-in activities for the text, for example, introducing background information on the topic and asking students to predict the topic or to relate the topic to their life experiences. Lynne then asked the students to scan or read the text aloud and summarise the main idea. Following this she focused on the text's structure before conducting a detailed analysis of the text. When analysing each paragraph, Lynne usually asked the students questions pertaining to the main idea of each paragraph as well as questions to demonstrate detailed understanding. She then analysed sentence structure, language usage and grammatical points. Upon finishing the analysis of the text, Lynne usually reviewed the organisation of the text, produced a summary of the text or sometimes evaluated the writing technique of the author. During this last stage of the analysis, she led the whole class in an activity to highlight phrases in the text and to accomplish the after-reading exercises.

Although Lynne firmly believed in a top-down approach to reading instruction, her method of teaching reading reflected a more interactive approach. She spent a great deal of time on explaining vocabulary and detailed sentence analysis. One possible explanation for this approach is that she was responding to the students' low-level language proficiency. Lynne indicated that the students in the class being observed were majoring in computer science. As introduced in Chap. 3, in Henan province, two thirds of the population are from rural areas. In the observed class, most of the students came from families in the countryside, and so their English proficiency level was lower compared to the students in the other class she taught. During the interview Lynne stated that the biggest issue with regard to the students' English learning was their limited vocabulary. When asked whether the student's limited vocabulary affected the use of the top-down approach in the class, Lynne confirmed that:

Excerpt 6.13

Eh, but, I still focus on *Global understanding*. I will use simplified language to summarise the essence of the text according to what they can understand. Then there is less vocabulary involved.

I keep reflecting on this. Firstly, I need to understand the text thoroughly and then keep asking them questions.

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

Here, mindful of the students' language proficiency, Lynne created simplified language and instructional questions as the artefacts to teach global understanding. As Tsui (1996) suggests, varying questioning technique is one option to reduce students' language anxiety. The effectiveness of these tools and how they mediated the division of labour in Lynne's class will be discussed in the analysis of the instructional means and the division of labour in Lynne's classroom. Lynne's firm beliefs about the effectiveness of the top-down approach to reading instruction and her awareness of the students' need to increase their vocabulary both mediated her teaching. It is evident then that Lynne's teaching practices reflected an interactive approach to reading instruction, underpinned by clearer beliefs about effective reading instruction techniques.

2. Lynne's beliefs about teaching reading strategies

As with Sunny, the textbook also played a role in Lynne's decision to teach reading strategies:

Excerpt 6.14

Since the textbook has a particular section of reading skill for teachers to teach, I think it must be necessary. Since the textbook summarised [all the reading skills] for you, and they are necessary for reading, you definitely have to teach it.

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

It is evident that Lynne thought the design of the reading strategy instruction in the textbook was good because the four-book series contained all of the reading strategies. However, she pointed out that the textbook did not offer enough information about how to use each reading strategy. In addition, she indicated that some of the textbook examples were not adequate as practice activities and that she would look for more suitable examples herself. As for reading strategy instruction, she stated that the students' practice attempts were more important than the teacher's instruction. Furthermore, she pointed out that the students' main problem was that they only had a superficial understanding of reading strategies instead of an ability to use them in their reading. She further cited that the reason for this problem was that there were not enough practice activities.

Lynne's classroom practice reflected her beliefs and knowledge about teaching reading strategies. Her teaching of particular reading strategies reflected the direct method, including explanation about what, when and how to use each reading strategy. She also used examples more closely related to the students' life experiences instead of the examples included in the textbook. However, there was no evidence of student peer discussion about strategy use. The following excerpt provides an account of her teaching one of the reading strategies:

Excerpt 6.15

T: Ok, let's begin text B. Before reading the text, it is the reading skill: reading between the lines. <u>Reading between the lines</u>. This is the ability to understand

somebody or some passage. You know people sometimes don't say or express their meaning very clearly. We should guess. Now, what's the meaning of 'between the lines'? For example, [going to turn on the electric fan in the classroom] when I came into the classroom, I saw the electric fan is running. I will ask ##: "Is it hot enough to turn on the electricity fan? Is it really hot today?"

SSS: No!

T: [turning the fan off]

SSS: [laughing]

T: When I asked "Is it really hot day?" you needn't answer my question. It seems like a question, but meaning is ##

SSS: It's not hot.

T: It's not hot. It is better to turn it off, yeah? Yeah. It seems that it is a question, but I needn't, you needn't to answer it. You just do. I showed you what you should do. Right? That's the passage of reading between the lines ##. It is important, not only for the reading but also in the daily life. You know that, people say, for example, if you invite somebody for a dinner, "Have a dinner with me?"

SSS: Yeah! [Laughing]

T: Ok? Is a good idea?

SSS: Yeah! [Laughing]

T: But# I will imply meaning in it. You should understand it, right? ### Have we learned this reading skill? Let's read the explanation: "As you read Text B the first time, use context clues and common sense to guess the possible answers to the questions between the paragraphs." Context clues, you know the context clues?

SSS: 上下文 [Answering the Chinese meaning for context]

T: That means between the previous passage and paragraph and the whole paragraphs, usually, usually the previous paragraph. Context. Context clue.

(Classroom observation of Lynne, 18 May 2010)

When explaining the text, Lynne asked the students to practise the reading strategy again:

Excerpt 6.16

T: What is it? What's the author's attitude towards the police officer? [Walking to the middle of the classroom and looking around]

SSS: [silence]

T: Ok, if we, eh, ask you to give a point about police work, about the police officer, now, will you share the same idea with the author?

SSS: [silence]

T: But I think the author showed his attitude towards the police officer very clearly! Yeah? Have you sensed the author's attitude? [Calling one student]

S: 正面, 积极的 [answering the Chinese translation of the word *positive*]

T: Speak English

S: Positive [giggling].

T: Yeah, positive, right? Positive or negative?

S: Positive

T: More?

S: Some, some of (xxx) should (xxx)

T: Yeah, we should save the police officer. And the author understands the police officers very well. Yeah? Maybe the author is ## one member of the police? Anyhow, you can see the author's attitude. That means, <u>remember read behind the lines</u>, the author gives the hint. You can sense that the author wants to tell us ## from this passage.

(Transcripts of Jenny's class, 18 May 2010)

The above excerpt reveals that Lynne taught reading strategies, both explicitly and implicitly, and that she related the use of the reading strategy to the reading context. For instance, she often asked students to predict the text's content at the beginning of the reading, and she always asked students to summarise the main idea in every paragraph. The data suggests that Lynne's classroom teaching of reading strategies was mediated by her beliefs and knowledge, and her practices were congruent with these beliefs.

Overall, Lynne's pedagogical beliefs and knowledge are important psychological tools mediating her teaching practices. These beliefs and knowledge about reading instruction were clearly mediated by her life experiences and her research. Further, Lynne's beliefs about reading mediated her agency in setting the teaching goals. During class practice activities, she also formed beliefs about her students which further mediated her use of instructional questions as language artefacts. As Wertsch (1991) claims, social context and cultural tools shape the development of human beliefs and ways of acting, and these tools continue to evolve as people use them (Vygotsky 1962). Analysis also indicates that Lynne's beliefs about reading instruction mediated her beliefs and practices for teaching reading strategies. Because she believed in a top-down reading approach, the reading strategies she taught most frequently also belonged to higher-level strategies such as 'prediction' and 'looking for main ideas'. Compared to Sunny and Jenny, Lynne had a clearer, operationalisable knowledge and belief system which helped her to plan her teaching and to create effective tools such as language artefacts and classroom activities, which will be discussed in the next subsection.

6.1.3.3   Classroom Activities

Further comparisons with Sunny and Jenny revealed that Lynne created more classroom activities to achieve her objectives. At the beginning of Lynne's class, there were two activities: *News Report* and *Dictation*. With regard to the *News Report* activity, four students at a time prepared one English news item and reported the details in front of the whole class. Lynne mentioned in the interview that she thought the common greeting: 'How was your weekend?' was too boring so she prepared the English news activity as the opening task of each lesson. Yet, while her students liked the activity very much, she was too busy to try to look for news items all the time. She then decided to ask the students to prepare the news items, and the activity then became a student-centred news report. To assist the students, Lynne introduced resources that provided access to English news information such as the university's English websites, *China Daily* and *Daily English News*. The students were enthusiastic about participating in the activity:

Excerpt 6.17

I did not expect that they would be so careful about this task. They spent several hours preparing for the news, even until one or two o'clock in the morning.

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

Lynne indicated that students' out-of-class English activities mostly involved watching movies and listening to English songs. The students then had one more task to accomplish, and they gradually formed the habit of reading English news. Lynne believed that the process of searching for English news was a virtual learning process in which the student's English vocabulary and knowledge horizons were expanded. This process accorded with her 'shallow'-level teaching objectives. Lynne's students in the focus group also indicated their agreement with the *News Report* activity. One student commented:

Excerpt 6.18

I need to find good news and understand the sentences. In addition, this helps me to conquer my nervousness when reporting it in front of whole class.

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

In addition to the *News Report*, Lynne designed the *Dictation* activity as the opening task for each lesson. For this activity one student was required to recite two sentences from the text while the other students in the class wrote the sentences down. The reason Lynne designed this activity was because during the previous semester her students did not do very well in the *Compound Dictation* section in the CET listening test. Therefore, for the present semester, she designed the activity to force the students to recite the text and to practise dictation skills. Although the activity might not be considered directly relevant to reading, it demonstrated Lynne's agency in creating new pedagogical tools relating to the CET test.

In addition to the two opening activities, Lynne indicated that she had been putting in an effort to design classroom activities that involved all students in the class. She cited the text *Graceful Hand* as one example. She really appreciated the descriptive text but had no idea how to teach it to her students. After teaching the same text three or four times in previous years, she introduced a more innovative idea. She asked the students to draw a picture of hand movements according to the description in the text and to demonstrate the hand movements to the class to see whose demonstrations were the most vivid. This innovation reveals that Lynne had reflected on how to improve her teaching. Moreover, this reflection itself was an effective tool mediating her teaching. The following observation records also exemplify her reflection and innovation in teaching: during the observation of Lynne's class, when she taught the class about genes as part of teaching Unit 7, Lynne asked the students to form groups and prepare a PowerPoint which outlined the definition of DNA and genes and to present the PowerPoint to the class. Even though some students' presentation did not meet Lynne's requirements, their enthusiasm reflected their motivation to look for background information. The rationale for designing this activity also reflected Lynne's beliefs about the effectiveness of the top-down approach to reading instruction.

In general, these activities indicate that Lynne's teaching was object-oriented because she tried to use the tools to achieve a specific goal. The data also demonstrate that in the process of designing different classroom activities, Lynne's reflection on her teaching helped her to take agentive action towards improving and innovating her teaching. Reflection on practice is an essential problem-solving tool in teachers' professional development (Yost 2006). It is claimed that a teacher's tacit practical knowledge can be made explicit through reflection on practice (Probyn 2001). Lynne's reflection on her own life and teaching experiences helped her to bridge the gap between her theoretical and practical pedagogical knowledge (Probyn 2001). Concerning this feature, Lynne can be labelled a 'reflective practitioner'. In addition, Lynne made use of several kinds of instructional means to assist her teaching, which will be described in the next subsection.

6.1.3.4   Instructional Means

Instructional means include instructional language, blackboards and other tools teachers use to deliver class instruction. In Lynne's teaching situation, instructional means included her instructional language, blackboard and chalk and multimedia technology. Each of these means is now considered.

Instructional Language   In contrast to the dependence on Chinese language demonstrated by Sunny and Jenny, interview and classroom observation data highlighted that Lynne mostly spoke in English when teaching the course to her students. Lynne stated that the reason for adopting English instruction was because the students did not have much chance to hear spoken English. She mentioned that it was not necessary to translate the text because most students had the answer book which included a Chinese translation of whole text. Moreover, Lynne indicated that she would usually begin by using simple English paraphrases of the sentences. If students did not answer her question, she would then use simplified English language as a means of supporting her instruction and mediating students' understanding. This approach reflected her beliefs about reading instruction and her students' ability (see Excerpt 6.13). The excerpt below exemplifies how Lynne simplified her questions:

Excerpt 6.19
T: Read the text of Unit 6, and get a general idea of what the author tries to tell.
 [Students are reading. After 7 minutes 15 seconds]
 T: Ok, just get the main idea is OK. What does the author mainly tell us?
 SSS: [silence]
 T: What does the author say about bribery?
 SSS: [silence]
 T: ### [calling one student] What's the author mainly tell us?
 S: [No response]
 T: Just now we read the title, "bribery and business ethics" ###
 S: [No response]

T: Does the author tell us the definition of bribery, or just tell us ## this is a social phenomenon?

S: Social phenomenon.

T: What?

S: It is a social phenomenon.

T: Bribery is a social phenomenon, right? Very common among businessmen, yeah?

S: [No response]

T: Yes, OK! Is more? Sit down please [waving hand to let him sit down]! Firstly, the author tells us bribery is ## on increase? It is a common occurrence in many countries. The bribery occurs frequently, so it is a common occurrence in many countries. And there are some examples. What's more the author tells us?

SSS: [silence]

T: Did you have it?

SSS: [silence]

T: We know that when people give bribe or offer bribe, in what kind of form? Or, in what kind of category?

SSS: [silence]

T: Here the author tell us ###

SSS: Three categories of bribery.

T: Yes! The author give us three categories of bribery, the form, how. Yeah, how do people offer bribe, yes. Three main, broad categories of bribe.

(Transcripts of Lynne's class, 21 May 2010)

The discourse pattern used by Lynne in the classroom is Initiation–Response–Evaluation (IRE). The excerpt above reveals that questioning was an important language tool that allowed Lynne to initiate and control the classroom discourse. She mentioned that she used questions as a tool to make students think:

Excerpt 6.20

In my class, I ask students to think, not just listen. I have to guide them to follow me. Yes! [I must make] them think actively instead of listening passively.

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

Lynne kept modifying her questions to engage the students in talk. When she asked one question for the first time, there was usually no response from her students. She always looked around or looked at one student or another to indicate her expectation. Moreover, she usually repeated her question two or three times or simplified her *what/how* questions to *yes/no* questions. In addition to asking questions, Lynne also used pause and eye contact to mediate the teacher–student interaction. If there was still no response, she either nominated a student to answer or just answered the question herself.

Lynne sometimes used Chinese to explain things that were difficult for the students to understand. For instance, when Lynne explained non-standard use of English, she used Chinese to explain the grammatical rules because she knew that the grammatical terms were difficult for her students to understand. Therefore, Chinese was used as a tool to improve student understanding.

The data then indicates that Lynne used several linguistic tools to assist her teaching, namely, simplified English, different kinds of instructional questions, IRE discourse, explanations in Chinese and also silence and eye contact. She took agentive action in making flexible use of different language artefacts (both verbal and body language). The data suggests that these artefacts evolved in the course of her interaction with the students. However, the students remained largely unresponsive, and one reason for this was that the language artefacts she used still placed Lynne in the dominant position, and as a result she could not engage her students in the classroom conversation. The main problem associated with the use of instructional questions will be discussed in the section *Division of Labour*.

PowerPoint, Blackboard and Chalk Lynne usually wrote difficult words, sentence structures and grammatical points on the blackboard. In addition to this technique, she also made good use of multimedia technology when teaching. As mentioned in the discussion on the university context, there were not enough multimedia classrooms with a projector and Internet connection for all teachers. Therefore, the Department had an unwritten rule that only older teachers or teachers with seniority could have access to the multimedia classrooms. Lynne, as an Associate Professor, was able to use the classroom with the projector and Internet connection once a week. She used PowerPoint to introduce the background information and to illustrate the structure and organisation of the text. She mentioned in the interview:

Excerpt 6.21
Multimedia (technology) has a facilitating role for teaching.
    I do not necessarily use it every class, but would feel uncomfortable without it. You cannot draw DNA on the blackboard.
    (Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

Lynne was agentive in creating different language artefacts and in making use of material tools to facilitate her teaching. Thus, Lynne demonstrated instrumental agency to make use of different resources that supported her instruction and accomplished her teaching goals. Besides, her research also empowers her agency to respond to the reform.

6.1.3.5   Lynne's Research on the Test Reform

As mentioned in the analysis of Lynne's beliefs and knowledge, Lynne's theoretical knowledge of EFL reading instruction came about as a result of her Master's degree research project on the CET test reform. Therefore, the research she conducted was yet another cultural tool which mediated and assisted her teaching. Her research on reading instruction helped her acquire knowledge of different theories of reading and encouraged her to connect theories with teaching practices. She developed her own teaching methods and used theories to guide and support her teaching practice. She knew how to apply the top-down approach to reading instruction and created tools to support this teaching approach.

During the interview Lynne expressed her desire to conduct more research and complained that the workload took up the time she would like to spend on research:

Excerpt 6.22

I was elected as the *Research Backbone* last year. [I] have to do well as the backbone. I have to finish two projects and three articles. There is pressure, but motivating too. I didn't write anything in previous years because the university did not require it.

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

When Lynne was asked whether her knowledge of the recent test reforms was as a result of her research or due to information provided to her by her university leaders, she replied:

Excerpt 6.23

Definitely [researched on this]! Since I teach this course, surely I will keep an eye on its development. I had already got to know [this] even before it started!

My research area is the reform of College English. Definitely I will pay attention!

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

The excerpts above suggest that Lynne had a strong sense of responsibility to ensure that her teaching was of a high standard and she was therefore prepared to take the initiative in conducting research in this area. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) argue that agency 'entails the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events' (p. 143) as well as an awareness of the responsibility for one's own actions and of the context. Lynne also wanted to use her research as a tool to push the university to be better aligned with the new test reforms. She indicated that she was currently researching the latest reform, comprising Internet tests for the CET, which had been implemented in 80 universities by 2008 and which had now grown to 2,000 universities as of 2010. She was excited and agreed with the Internet testing system because she believed it assessed a more comprehensive range of abilities. She declared that she would also use her research project to inform the university that they should update their equipment so as to be better prepared for the Internet test. Lynne's research practice indicates that she is trying to use her research as a tool to create a new environment in the university.

On the basis of these findings, it can be concluded that Lynne's research strengthened her agency in relation to her response to the reform mandates. In addition, unlike the other teachers, who were waiting for the university to inform them about the reforms, Lynne's research equipped her with the knowledge she required to urge the university to take action. In addition, reflection is enhanced when teachers engage in research (Yost 2006; Yost, Sentner, and Forlenza-Bailey 2000), and Lynne's research and reflection on teaching strengthened her problem-solving skills.

Summing up, Lynne made use of and created different kinds of tools to achieve her objectives. Although she was required to follow the textbook in her teaching programme, she made the necessary adjustments and designed additional activities in accordance with her beliefs and goals. As previously stated, Lynne possessed both

theoretical knowledge and practical experience of reading instruction. In addition, she had a well-articulated belief system which was shaped by her life experiences and was consistent with her theoretical knowledge and practice. Equally important, Lynne consciously used simplified language and instructional questions as language tools to mediate students' classroom learning and participation. Furthermore, access to multimedia technology also strengthened her teaching. Hence, her research and reflection empowered her to create and make use of available resources, both material and conceptual, and to develop her teaching. The data reflected Lynne's sense of responsibility for her own pedagogical practices and for the community around her. Lynne's relation with the community will be discussed in the next section.

6.1.4   The Community of Lynne's Activity System

As human activity is socially and contextually bound, an activity system is best described in the context of the community in which it operates. This section indicates that Lynne exhibited her agency in seek support from the community at both university and classroom levels to make transformation in her teaching as well as in the communities.

The Community at the Department Level Lynne thought that the whole university was supportive of teaching and expressed her attitude towards the university environment as follows:

Excerpt 6.24
The university is developing. As a teacher, you have to force yourself to catch up with the development. You cannot always use the old things, and not adopt new things. For example, some old teachers cannot use multimedia equipment. It should not be like that. [I] have to put effort to adjust [myself].
   (Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

Lynne's efforts to improve herself were reflected in her active participation in the university's activities. She commented that during the weekly *Teaching and Research Meeting,* the staff would usually discuss any problems relevant to teaching or to the students, such as how to explain a difficult word or how to better teach the text using a particular method. In addition to her participation in the weekly meeting, Lynne also acted as an assessor for the Teaching Demonstration and Competition. She regarded the teaching competition as a motivating process as well as an opportunity for learning.

Excerpt 6.25
When you see other teachers teach so well, it is virtually a kind of pressure. I am comparatively old. Young teachers have better pronunciation. It is hard to change [my pronunciation]. Young teachers have more creative activities. I was thinking whether I can learn from them.
   (Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

The excerpt above indicates that Lynne also had self-awareness about the limitations of her English language proficiency (pronunciation). In contrast to Jenny, she did not feel frustrated nor did she exhibit any signs of 'a spirit of conformity or even defeatism' (Rajagopalan 2005, p. 293). Rather, she took this as a motivational challenge to learn from young teachers. As Andrews (2007) indicates, expert teachers are characterised by their self-awareness and willingness to engage in reflection about their teaching as part of their pedagogical practice. Besides the teaching competition mentioned earlier, the university had policies and rules regarding teacher management including the requirement that teachers observe each other's classes and participate in midterm checking of teaching. Lynne thought that these regulations helped to motivate rather than constrain teachers.

Lynne did complain, however, that there were not enough resources to support effective teaching at the university. She expected to have access to more database and online library resources and also wished that there were more multimedia classrooms. Nonetheless, she also realised that:

Excerpt 6.26
That means more investment. The university may invest a little on each aspect. You cannot just wait for the university [to do this].

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

The words 'cannot just wait for the university' reflect her agency in seeking assistance, initially from peer teachers as well as from other resources. The data suggests that Lynne had the capacity to 'recognise and use the support of others in order to transform the object'—relational agency as defined by Edwards and D'Arcy (2004, p. 149). Lynne's relational agency can also be inferred from her ambition to use her research project to urge the university to update its equipment in accordance with the latest test reform, as well as her desire to participate in a number of teaching and research activities. Lynne's research and her participation in different research activities indicate her sense of mission for the community, which encourages and builds teacher loyalty, commitment and confidence (Hargreaves 1994; Pyhältö et al. 2011).

The Community at the Classroom Level   As mentioned in the case studies of Sunny and Jenny, students play an important role in mediating teaching and decision-making activity. The students in Lynne's class were computer major students. The interview with the six students in Lynne's class revealed that most of the students' learning objectives aligned with Lynne's teaching objectives. During the focus group interview, five students indicated that their objective in studying the course was to learn reading strategies that would enable them in the future to read articles written in English related to their major. In addition, they indicated that they hoped to improve their skills in English language expression and to increase their knowledge of English. Only one student mentioned that his goal was to pass the CET test.

In addition to their personal goals, the students' beliefs about reading were also closely aligned to Lynne's beliefs. The focus group students mentioned that they believed that the gist and structure of a text, as well as the author's purpose, were the most important elements for reading comprehension. One student mentioned that he

learned from Lynne that reading should first aim to achieve global understanding and then an understanding of the author's thoughts and emotions at the sentence level. Four students indicated that they preferred the top-down reading approach, with two other students indicating a preference for the bottom-up approach. One student emphasised that he learned how to appreciate the text from Lynne. In addition, two students indicated that they believed that reading the textbook was crucial, an attitude which they also learned from Lynne.

As for reading strategies, three students in the focus group thought that reading strategies were useful for achieving a global understanding of the text because the most frequently used strategies were skimming, scanning and looking for topic sentences. However, two students mentioned that they paid little attention to the use of reading strategies.

In general, the students in the focus group expressed their appreciation of Lynne and her teaching style, as well as the atmosphere of her classes:

Excerpt 6.27
S1: We are more active in her class. Her personality is very good and shares everything with us. We feel she is like our parent.
S5: She really cares for us.
(Focus group with Lynne's students, 31 May 2010)

When the students were asked about their beliefs and attitudes towards reading and reading strategies during the focus group, they used the expression 'our teacher told us' or 'we learned from our teacher'. Data such as this helps to support the conclusion that Lynne's teaching had mediated students' perceptions to the extent that they identified with their teacher's beliefs about reading. The quality of teacher–student interaction on the social plane had brought about growth and transformation in the students' intrapsychological plane. In addition, the data suggests that Lynne also affectively mediated her students' learning as they regarded her as having a parenting function. The good rapport that Lynne had with her students was therefore shown in students' support for her teaching.

In addition to the students' impact on the teaching dynamics, the physical environment of the classroom also shaped the teacher's decision-making. The layout in Lynne's classroom was the same as for Sunny's and Jenny's classrooms, where the teacher's desk and blackboard were at the front of the classroom and all of the students' seats were fixed on the ground in rows. However, it was observed that Lynne expanded her 'teaching zone' by walking around the classroom while teaching. In this way it is evident that Lynne deliberately tried to reduce the physical and relational distance between teacher and students.

The data therefore suggests that Lynne exhibited relational and instrumental agency in the community at both the university and classroom levels. She seized research activities as personal learning opportunities and made good use of available resources to develop her teaching. In the classroom, she demonstrated good communication with her students so that they accepted her thinking about reading and supported her teaching methods. All this was possible because Lynne took agentive action to make the community part of her teaching activity system.

6.1.5   The Rules of Lynne's Activity System

Compared with Sunny and Jenny, Lynne is less constrained by the rules in the community of the Department. In Lynne's classroom teaching, both textbook and curriculum coverage were established as the Department rules. Teachers were required to finish eight units and had to teach Section A in every unit. The final exam was designed to cover the eight units required in the curriculum programme. Lynne made sure that she followed the curriculum programme because she did not want her students to underachieve in the final exam. Thus, the final exam also functioned as a dominant regulation for teaching. Moreover, Lynne mentioned that there were no rules for teaching certain language points or for what kind of exercises or content must be taught. When compared to Sunny and Jenny, who were also teaching the same course in the same department, it is evident that Lynne felt her teaching was subjected to relatively fewer rules. One possible explanation for this was that Lynne's higher social status in the university excluded her from regulations set for young teachers.

As an assessor of the *Teaching Demonstration and Competition* at the university, Lynne commented that there were no definitive standards for good teaching, but that the elements of good teaching should include: clear teaching goals and points of focus, succinct PowerPoint presentations, organised procedures and a summary of each unit. What was evident from classroom observation records was that each of these mediational means was present in Lynne's classroom teaching practice. In addition, these mediational means also set the division of labour in Lynne's classroom, which will be discussed in the next subsection.

6.1.6   The Division of Labour in Lynne's Activity System

The division of labour in a classroom is enacted between the teacher and the students and through the different positions and histories they have negotiated in relation to English learning. In Lynne's class, her IRE discourse pattern caused students' reticence and constrained the effective interaction between teacher and students.

Teacher's Role and Students' Role in the Class   Lynne believed that she talked too much in the class, and she really expected greater participation from her students. She used the following metaphor to describe the students' role in the classroom:

Excerpt 6.28
I want to design more activities for students to be involved. But they are not so active because of their low language proficiency. Is it the problem of my design? Or because students are lazy, just wanting to be an audience instead of actors?
(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

She also expressed her desire that:

Excerpt 6.29

I hope they can participate more. But sometime I can see they do not want to participate. It is not good to force them.

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

On the other hand, in the focus group, Lynne's students all expressed a desire to have more interaction with their teacher. Interestingly, they also indicated that they knew the teacher offered them many opportunities for interaction but that they did not take them:

Excerpt 6.30

S5: Very often, she uses eye contact to encourage us to speak, but most students lower their heads, some even are sleeping and few stand up [to answer her questions].

S6: Sometimes, I do not know how to answer, so I just lower my head.

(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

Lynne's resolution was to keep asking the students questions and to keep simplifying her questions if there was no response (as shown in Excerpt 6.19). Her ideal pattern of interaction was to ask questions and to receive student responses or to design activities and to have the students participate. The results suggest that IRE was the main discourse pattern in Lynne's class. Lynne had the dominant role in her classroom as she expected students to respond to her questions and to follow her teaching instructions. The students' role was relatively passive and was restricted to being respondents to the teacher's questions.

On the basis of the classroom observation, it was evident that the students in Lynne's class were most likely to answer questions related to word meanings, and there was usually no response from the students to questions about the main ideas or content of the text (see Excerpt 6.19). However, the students demonstrated great enthusiasm for the News Report activity and were active with their research presentation on DNA in Unit 7.

Even though Lynne created different language tools to encourage student discussion, such as simplified questions and the IRE discourse pattern, there were still few student responses. The problem was that the reliance on the IRE pattern fostered a predominance of teacher talk and questions in the classroom (Wertsch 1998). In addition, the IRE pattern reflects the assumption that the individual has the knowledge and the task is to demonstrate this knowledge when the teacher asks a question. The purpose of IRE is to check students' ability to transmit the knowledge adequately (Wertsch 1998). Therefore, the students do not have the responses required because the instructional questions do not treat both the teacher and students as 'thinking devices' and do not offer the students an 'epistemic role' (Wertsch 1998, p. 123). In contrast, Lynne's students showed the greatest enthusiasm when reporting the news item they researched, and during the PowerPoint they researched and prepared because they had real epistemic roles in these activities. In addition, throughout this process, students' knowledge and information was constructed rather than transmitted. However, as Wertsch (1998) mentions, it is understandable that teachers have a heavy reliance on instructional questions in a context shaped by

standardised curricula and achievement testing. Teachers have the dual task of both maintaining an institutional order and fostering student learning. Therefore, Lynne was probably unaware of these issues with her classroom discourse and was most likely only able to think of how to simplify her instructional questions to obtain responses from her students. To resolve these issues, Lynne needs to employ more appropriate pedagogical speech genres.

Overall, the analyses of Lynne's activity system indicate that her teaching activity was strongly object oriented. Because of the mediation of her life experiences and research, Lynne formed teaching objectives which were not only consistent with the reform mandate but also beyond what the reform required. Classroom observation records revealed Lynne exercised her relational agency and instrumental agency to make use of available resources, materials, concepts or people to achieve her teaching objective. Although she had not attained her ideal form of teaching and some constraints had not been overcome, the data suggests that Lynne was highly agentive in transforming her teaching in ways consistent with, and even exceeding, the reform mandates. The next section discusses whether or not Lynne resolved these contradictions and, if she did, how the resolution was achieved.

6.2 Levels of Contradictions in Lynne's Teaching Activity

The analyses of Lynne's activity system revealed that there were conflicts between her ideal form of teaching and the reality of her teaching experience, as well as among each of the other elements. In order to explore whether the reform evoked the secondary contradictions in Lynne's activity system, this section analyses the different levels of contradiction categorised by Engeström (1987). That is primary-level, secondary-level and tertiary-level contradictions. The analysis indicates Lynne's effort to resolve the contradictions and to transform her teaching.

6.2.1 Primary-Level Contradictions

The gaps between Lynne's ideal way of teaching and the actual teaching activity system are explored in this section. In contrast to Sunny and Jenny, there were no significant gaps between Lynne's articulated ideal form of teaching and her actual teaching practice. In general, Lynne's classroom practices were consistent with her teaching objectives. Hence, there were no significant gaps between her ideal teaching goal and reality. However, gaps remained between her ideal and actual pedagogical division of labour.

Interview data revealed that Lynne's ideal form of division of labour in her class was that the students would actively respond to her questions and participate in the activities she had designed. In reality, however, Lynne's students often did not respond to her questions or only responded to the questions which checked for word meanings (as showed in Excerpt 6.19). Although Lynne tried to simplify and modify her questions, or to use wait time and eye contact to encourage students to talk, she still elicited little response from her students. Lynne believed that questions could push students to think, and she would have liked to have used more questions to address this issue. As documented in the classroom observation, however, Lynne's instructional questions were not an effective tool in solving this problem. It is claimed that resolution of primary contradictions leads to the emergence of secondary-level contradictions (Jóhannsdóttir 2010). Although in Lynne's case, the primary contradiction between her ideal and actual division of labour was not resolved, the instructional questions and the IRE pattern she used nevertheless led to secondary contradictions with her teaching objective.

6.2.2   Secondary-Level Contradictions

Secondary contradictions exist between the key components of an activity system. They become a force for change within an activity system when 'a strong novel factor' is infused into any component of an activity system (Engeström 1993, p. 72). This subsection indicates that Lynne has taken agentive actions in resolving these contradictions.

6.2.2.1   Contradiction Between Lynne's Deep-Level Objective and Her Tool (Textbook)

A fundamental contradiction remained between Lynne's teaching object and the textbook as a tool prescribed by the reform (see the elbow double arrow 2-1 in Fig. 6.1). Lynne criticised the test-focus of the textbook because its primary purpose was directed towards the CET test. As stated in the analysis of Lynne's objects of teaching, Lynne's deep-level objectives went beyond what the reform required, extending to cultivating students' thinking and expression ability as well as critical reading ability. Therefore, the textbook designed for the reform could not meet this objective. In contrast to Sunny and Jenny, who both gave up their objectives and followed the textbook, Lynne created para-textbook tools to achieve her objectives, namely: adaptation of the textbook for critical reading, the PowerPoint she made to

illustrate the text organisation and background information, instructional questions that encouraged students to have a global understanding of the text, the discourse she used to convince students to accept her beliefs about global understanding and critical reading. Throughout this process Lynne exhibited both instrumental agency in designing and adapting pedagogical tools and relational agency in convincing her students to accept her thinking about her teaching objectives.

Although Lynne did not explicitly tell her students about the importance of global understanding and critical reading during the observed lessons, the students in the focus group used words such as 'main idea', 'author's purpose', 'critical reading' and 'our teacher told us…' when describing their beliefs about reading. These words also appeared in Lynne's discussion of the objects of her teaching and her beliefs about reading. It can be concluded that Lynne used language as an artefact or tool to recruit her students to her beliefs and objects, and this social interaction brought about growth on the students' intrapsychological plane. This aligns with Wertsch's (1998) claim about the general genetic law of cultural development where the processes and structures that occur on the intermental plane are internalised as intramental functioning. Both Vygotsky (1978) and Burke (1966) emphasise the power of language as a cultural tool to empower human action and thinking. The activities and language artefacts Lynne created partly resolved the contradiction between her objectives and the textbook, even resulting in a transformation of the students' thinking. For example, some students in the focus group were convinced by Lynne and formed the same conscious beliefs about the top-down approach to reading and critical reading. However, Lynne's goals were not fully achieved because her students still remained silent when asked about the main ideas of the text. This highlights the constraints imposed by the language artefacts themselves, which is discussed in the next section on the second secondary-level object–tool contradiction.

6.2.2.2   Contradiction Between Lynne's Object (Cultivating Students' Expression) and the Tool (IRE Discourse Pattern)

One of Lynne's goals was to cultivate students' skill in expression, but they usually refrained from talking in her class. As mentioned previously, Lynne's resolution to the students' lack of response was to simplify her questions from what/how questions to yes/no questions in order to encourage her students to think and talk. However, the simplified questions could not adequately resolve this contradiction (see the elbow double arrow 2-2 in Fig. 6.1). As noted earlier, Lynne did not seem to realise that the IRE pattern confined the students to the role of response-only providers. As Gusfield (1989) claims, 'culture and language not only open doors to experiences, they also form a prison which constricts and narrows' (p. 12). The mediational means people employ have both constraint and affordance dimensions (Wertsch 1998). Therefore, the IRE pattern also imprisoned Lynne's classroom. In the IRE pattern, the teacher, who controls the topic and flow of discourse, has a position of authority, whereas the students are placed in a position that only requires

passive responses (Wertsch et al. 1993). In contrast, the students were enthusiastic participants when presenting the news items they found and the PowerPoint they designed because they had an epistemic role. During these activities they had more responsibility to participate in intermental functioning and they were also assuming cognitive authority to a certain extent (Wertsch et al. 1993). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Lynne's object–tool contradictions (refer to 2-2 in Fig. 6.1) could only be resolved if Lynne altered the discourse pattern in such a way as to give the students greater responsibility to participate in the interaction and to demonstrate more cognitive authority (Wertsch et al. 1993).

6.2.3   Tertiary-Level Contradictions

As mentioned in the analysis of Sunny's case, there was no tertiary-level contradiction between the reform and the activity system of classroom teaching because the Department leader did not have a full understanding of the educational reform mandates. Lynne's answers during the interview confirm this situation:

Excerpt 6.31
(I = Interviewer; L = Lynne)
I: Does the CET test reform influence the university's teaching policy and teaching resources?
L: The CET test reform, currently speaking, has no big influence. They have not realised the importance of Internet-based testing. Therefore, I chose this project this year, to persuade them that the teaching equipment should be updated.
I: Did the reform in 2006 have a big influence?
L: Eh, not really. No big change in the teaching requirements. The score on listening test increased. [The university] also 'shouted' about the importance of listening, without any specific policy for us. Only shouting. The Internet test is different. Equipment is a must. Students need training.
(Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

During the interview, Lynne used the word '喊 (*shout*)' twice, which means there were only expressed intentions without action, indicating that the reform in 2006 was just talk for the College English Department. As analysed in Chap. 3, there was no evidence of shared understanding between the Department and the reform. Therefore, the Department did not take action to change teaching practices at the Department level. As Engeström (1987) proposes, if the curriculum reform does not bring secondary contradictions or does not stimulate efforts to resolve them, the curriculum reform mandate remains a tertiary contradiction and becomes subordinated to the old form of the activity.

Lynne was an exceptional case, however, because she had conducted research on the test reform in 2006 and 2009. Her Master's degree thesis was titled: *Analysis of characteristics of reading comprehension in the CET-4 and strategies for examination taking*. In her thesis she analysed and compared the pre-2006 texts in the old

CET 4 reading section with the equivalent post-2006 tests in relation to length, genre and grammatical features. Following her comparative analysis, she recommended the required strategies teachers should use to prepare students for the new CET reading test. Moreover, her project at the time of data collection was 大学英语四、六级网考对英语教学与管理的启示 (*The Implications of the CET Internet-Based Test on English Pedagogy and Management*). Lynne was the principal investigator in a research project team of five teachers. During the interview Lynne revealed her knowledge of both the content and format of the test reform. She agreed with the content of the test reform, which included a greater focus on reading in depth and improving reading speed, because it allows for a more comprehensive assessment of the practical ability of the students. She also agreed with the format of the test reform, such as replacing the multiple choice questions with cloze passages, because she believed that the students had to understand the text to successfully complete the cloze passage rather than potentially just guessing their answers to multiple choice questions.

Lynne's research mediated her knowledge and beliefs about teaching. Therefore, there was common understanding between Lynne's activity system and the reform (see Fig. 6.2), which can also be seen from her teaching objectives. Further, her objectives can be interpreted as the internalisation of her beliefs and knowledge gained from her research and life experiences. Internalisation is not merely the reflection of the external, but rather the active transformation of the external, making something one's own (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). Lynne's deep-level objectives, which were beyond the reform mandates, can be seen as a sign of the internalisation of her research and reflection. Consequently, there was a contradiction between the reform-designed textbook and Lynne's objectives (see 2-1 in Fig. 6.1). In this context, Lynne created new tools to transform her teaching to achieve her objectives. These tool-mediated teaching activities also resulted in intrapsychological growth for a number of students (see 2-1 in Fig. 6.1). The conclusion that can be drawn from this data is that Lynne exercised her agency by not only responding to the
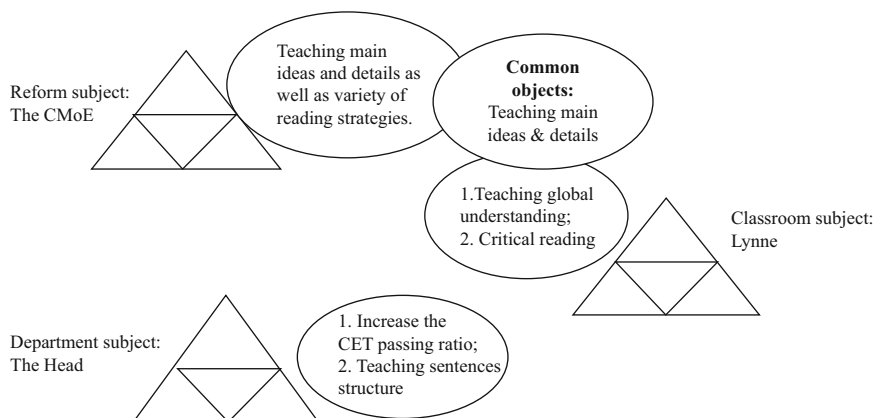

Fig. 6.2 The tertiary-level 'contradictions' in Lynne's teaching activity system

reform but also by achieving a greater level of transformation than the reform required.

The manner in which the products imposed by a dominant economic order are used reflects the power in a sociocultural setting; this in turn decides which cultural tools are to be used by people in that setting (Wertsch 1998). In this study, the Chinese Ministry of Education, who enacted the reforms, represents the dominant power in the relationship within the reform community. The products created by the Chinese Ministry of Education in the reform are the curriculum, the CET, textbook and other policies. The university Lynne belongs to is in the marginal group within the hierarchy of the university and reform activity system. However, Lynne has conducted research on and appropriated the curriculum and the CET and has used her research to set her own teaching objectives. X. Gao et al.'s (2011) study concludes that some Chinese teachers' research engagement just serves to confirm the reform initiated from above, instead of cultivating sustainable capacity for school-based curriculum development. Although Lynne's research also follows the national curriculum reform, she also tries to use her research to foster the local university curriculum development. As Wertsch (1998) suggests, the analysis of appropriation can reveal how the power and authority of various groups play a role in deciding which cultural tools may be used in particular settings and how the agents of the cultural tools stand in relationship to these groups. The central point here is that Lynne employed the cultural tools assigned by the Educational Ministry, namely, the national curriculum. She didn't adopt the Department's curriculum because her research on the CET reform related her to the higher power and culture elite of the reform enacted by the CMoE in China.

6.3   Lynne's Agency in Her ZPD

The unit of analysis for agency is an individual or individuals operating with mediational means (Wertsch et al. 1993). This section now uses the concept of the ZPD to analyse Lynne's potential capacities to generate specific forms of development and the mediational factors account for Lynne's agency, including her research and reflection on teaching, her attitude and her social status in the Department. Although constraints exist, Lynne has achieved some transformation and reached her zone of proximal development.

The analysis in the previous two sections revealed that Lynne's research has been a powerful mediational means impacting on her beliefs and knowledge about reading instruction. For example, her beliefs and knowledge of the top-down reading approach were influenced by her research on the test reform in her Master's degree thesis. It may be inferred from this that her research and reflection on teaching mediated her to set the teaching objectives. One basic factor in the formation of mediated agency is the process of taking on cognitive authority and responsibility for a task by actively appropriating other's mediational means (Wertsch et al. 1993). It may be argued that Lynne's sense of responsibility for conducting research on the subject

she was teaching motivated her to take agentive action to do research, form objectives for her teaching and create new tools to resolve the conflicts within her teaching community. Her interaction with peer teachers in the department community and students in the classroom-level community also encouraged her to take on cognitive authority in her learning and teaching. As a consequence, she continually reflected on how to create new tools to resolve problems and improve her teaching.

Because she had the ability to function independently and to take complete responsibility for carrying out the goal-directed task (Wertsch 1985), Lynne demonstrated self-regulation in her teaching practice. Such self-regulation is the end point of internalisation (Robbins 2003). Further, she transformed what was internalised from her research through a process of externalisation, and this in turn impacted on herself and her community (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). Such externalisation included her stated objectives and the tools she created to achieve these objectives. These objectives and tools resulted in the transformation of students' beliefs in the classroom community and reflected what Lynne had internalised from her research and growth as a teacher within her ZPD.

Lynne's attitude was another factor which impacted on her agency. In a way that was different to Sunny and Jenny, Lynne's attitude towards her environment was positive. She perceived situational pressure as a spur to action. On one occasion during the daily talk, she mentioned that:

Excerpt 6.32
I don't know why they [other teachers] have so many complaints. I do not have time to complain. I am busy with many things every day.
    (Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

Moreover, during the data collection, Lynne was preparing for an application to participate in a scholar exchange programme to the USA. The following excerpt exemplifies Lynne's perception of herself as a keen learner:

Excerpt 6.33
I am a person loving learning and willing to learn anything if there is opportunity.
    (Interview with Lynne, 27 May 2010)

Lynne's eagerness to learn and her willingness to self-reflect provided her with the knowledge to improve her teaching. In addition, her positive attitude also enabled her to exercise relational and instrumental agency in seeking help from others and making use of tools to assist her teaching. These processes account for the smaller gap between Lynne's ideal model of teaching and her experienced reality of teaching. In turn, the proximity of her ideal brings with it a greater sense of achievement and motivation to further improve her practice. Therefore, it can be concluded that Lynne's positive outlook, her sense of responsibility and her relational and instrumental agency all combined to expand her teaching potential within her ZPD.

As well as Lynne's positive attitude, her higher status in the Department also afforded her greater opportunities to take agentive action. For instance, as there were not enough multimedia classrooms for every teacher, only the senior or high-status teachers could access the multimedia classroom. Lynne used this

technology to introduce background information to the students and demonstrate text structure. This tool helped her to achieve her teaching objective. In addition, although Sunny and Lynne work in the same department, because Lynne was an Associate Professor, there were few pressures and rules placed upon her by the Head of the Department to teach certain language points and sentence structures. With fewer constraints on her teaching due to her status, she was able to take more agentive action to develop her teaching practice.

The analysis in this section has highlighted how Lynne's sense of responsibility encouraged her research and self-reflection. In addition, she internalised what she researched and transformed these internalisations by setting objectives consistent with, and sometimes even beyond, the reform mandate. Moreover, her positive attitude and higher social status in the Department strengthened her agency to create new tools to achieve her objectives. All of these factors together account for Lynne's strong agency in transforming her teaching.

6.4   Summary

The analysis of Lynne's activity system revealed that her teaching objectives were consistent with the reform mandates and, at times, even went beyond what the reform required of teachers. Moreover, Lynne's teaching was object-oriented because she consciously reflected upon her teaching and acted to design or redesign tools to achieve her objectives. Even though there were still constraints from the situational rules and division of labour, Lynne still exercised her relational and instrumental agency when interacting with the community. From the data it is evident that Lynne voluntarily enacted changes to improve her teaching, rather than merely complying with expectations imposed upon her by the reform or the Department. Analysis of activity system contradictions revealed that due to lack of awareness of the limitations of the IRE pattern, the instructional questions she employed could not resolve the issues relating to student classroom participation. On the other hand, Lynne's objectives and the tools she created resulted in a real transformation of her teaching and classroom community, even though not all contradictions were resolved. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Lynne internalised the research she conducted while other factors, such as her reflection, positive attitude and her high professional status enhanced her agency in transforming her teaching.

The data and analyses in this chapter lead to the conclusion that teachers' sense of responsibility and commitment to their job are key factors underpinning the agency necessary to improve their teaching. Further, teachers' action research and reflection equip them to develop improved goal setting and tool design. What is evident from Lynne's case is that clear teaching objectives and appropriate tools are more necessary for pedagogical transformation than resolved activity contradictions. Therefore, with regard to the implementation of the reform mandates, it is

essential to cultivate teachers' capabilities to effect voluntary change, which can drive them to achieve a greater level of improvement than even the reforms require.

Teacher education programmes should equip teachers with the theoretical knowledge and capacities to make use of all kinds of mediational means to facilitate their teaching. The additional task for teacher education is to acknowledge both the constraints and the affordances provided by particular mediational means. More importantly, a teacher's sense of pedagogical responsibility is a vital factor fostering teacher agency.

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Chapter 7
Discussion and Conclusion

The previous chapters have reported the three case studies on Chinese EFL teachers' responses in relation to the College English reform at tertiary level in China. Drawing on activity theory and the ZPD, the research explored the nature and extent of teacher agency in adapting their teaching with respect to teacher beliefs, knowledge and instructional practices. This final chapter will first summarise major findings from the above-mentioned three case studies in response to the research questions that guided the inquiry. It will then discuss the significance of these findings in relation to teacher roles in curriculum reform. It will also reflect on the limitations and identify issues for further research.

7.1 The Overall Findings

The findings of this study revealed that three participants took different agentive actions to respond to the reform. Sunny and Jenny were indifferent and resistant to the changes mandated by the reform. Only one teacher, Lynne, exercised her agency in responding to educational reform. The findings of these two young teachers' case studies are in accordance with the findings of some studies which also found that the intended curriculum is not always implemented by teachers (Kelly 2004; Olson 2009), exposing the gap between the intended curriculum innovation and the curriculum implementation (Kelly 2004). Since mediated agency is tied together with all the mediational means in the social context (Wertsch et al. 1993), this section analyses the three case study teachers in the wider context of the curriculum reform at three levels. At the highest level is the Chinese Ministry of Education, who enacted the 2007 College English reform. The College English Department where the case study teachers were selected is at the second level. The third level is teachers' classroom teaching (as shown in Fig. 7.1). This section discusses the activity system at each level and addresses the first research question of the study *What is*
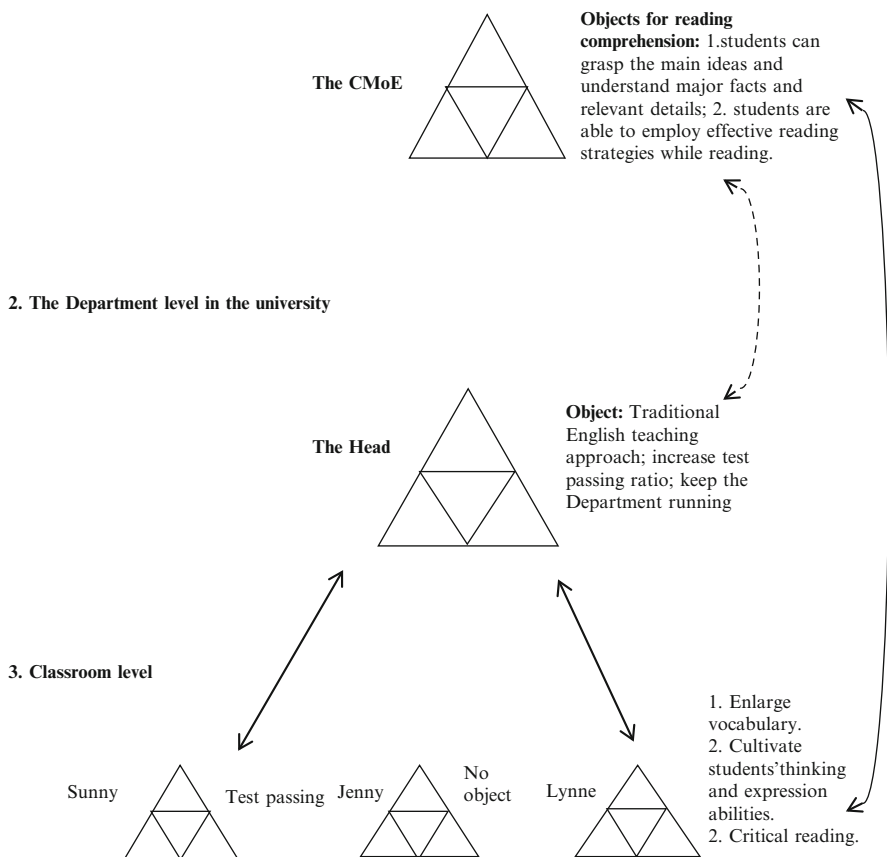
1.The Chinese Ministry of Education level

Fig. 7.1 The whole picture of the reform community

the nature and extent of teacher agency in relation to the demands of the new educational reform? and discusses some unexpected findings and implications.

As can be seen from the different objects of these five activity systems, this figure illustrates that there is slippage between the intentions of the curriculum reform and the intention of the Department's curriculum (shown as a dotted line in Fig. 7.1). In addition, there are also gaps between curriculum intentions and teachers' classroom practices. Among the three case teachers, the data reveals that Sunny and Jenny lack adequate knowledge about the reform intentions mainly because the Department did not inform teachers about the reform. Sunny formed a mutual object with the Department because she was influenced by the Head of the Department's objectives and beliefs about teaching, as shown in the straight full arrow line connecting the activity systems of Sunny's teaching and the Department in Fig. 7.1.

However Jenny had no particular object of teaching and was alienated from the Department goals. Therefore, there is no interaction between her teaching and the other advanced activity systems (hence, no line connecting her activity system with other activity systems in Fig. 7.1). Only Lynne, the oldest teacher among the three, engaged with the reform mandates (as shown in the full arrow line between the activity systems of her teaching and the CMoE in Fig. 7.1). Her objectives and classroom practices are consistent with and even extend the requirements of the new curriculum. Other research has reported similar findings to Sunny and Jenny's situations, where it is common to see implementation gaps between intended reforms and classroom teaching and learning (Cohen and Hill 2001; Fullan 1991; Fullan and Miles 1992). The next three subsections of this chapter discuss the problems at each level of the reform community, as well as the reasons for the gaps in the reform implementation, in terms of reform policy implementation, department management and teacher's classroom teaching.

7.1.1   Reform Implementation

The gap between the reform curriculum and the Department's curriculum may be characterised as a 'not buying into the innovation' attitude (Wang and Cheng 2008, p. 23) which reflects the hierarchical cultural characteristics of Chinese administration. Higher education in China still has a highly centralised educational system in which all policies or innovations are usually disseminated in a top-down manner (Wang and Cheng 2008). This top-down implementation poses several problems. Firstly, local institutions and teachers fail to see the benefits related to their own institutional development and professional development, so such a top-down policy tends not to be implemented in the way intended by the administration. There is therefore a danger that the pedagogical innovation will be watered down in its implementation throughout the system: from chief education officers to chancellors, from chancellors to the professional community and finally to the responsibility of a single teacher. This may decrease the potential for constructing a coherent, shared pedagogical theory, which is regarded as a central precondition for successful school reform (Fullan 2003). In such contexts, local institutions and teachers often acknowledge innovation without actually playing an active role in implementing it.

Secondly, the centralised system, with its top-down implementation, in turn, encourages policymakers to introduce changes without identifying the situational constraints and without trying to understand the values, ideas and experiences of those who are essential for implementing any changes (Fullan 1991). Policymakers do not consider the complexity of the institutional policy enactment environment. They simply assume that schools can and will respond to policy mandates quickly (Ball 2012). For instance, the Department in this study made their own curriculum, which imitated the national curriculum's discourse but had different objectives of teaching. This gap was because the national curriculum failed to consider the contextual needs of this department, where their students' English language proficiency

levels were lower than students in the top universities. This situation can also be inferred from Lynne's evaluation of the appointed textbook, which she regarded as designed particularly for students in good universities, but not suitable for students in the lower level universities.

Thirdly, as a country influenced by Confucianism, the education system in China is highly hierarchical (Qian and Verhoeven 2004). The top-down implementation and the hierarchical administration structure resulted in problems in teacher training, which also contributed to the gap between the reform and the local institute. As mentioned in Chap. 3, the CMoE organised several training workshops, research projects and demonstration sites for implementing the reform. However, only a small number of universities, particularly the elite ones, were involved in these activities. Most ordinary level universities and teachers remained on the periphery of professional development activities. Other studies have also pointed out similar problems of insufficient training in reform implementation in China (Shan 2002). Even for the teachers who receive training, studies have highlighted the problem that many teachers simply did not attend the training, which was divorced from classroom reality and failed to address their needs (Tao 2006). In addition, Yu (2003) argues that the guidance given to teachers in the training was often overbearing and undermined teachers' independence rather than fostering their development as professionals. Insufficient training in reform implementation hindered teachers from innovating their teaching according to the requirements of the reform. In addition, there is a lack of channels for teachers and institutions to report their difficulties or problems back to the policymakers at the top level who can adjust policies accordingly.

Fourthly, top-down implementation and the centralised educational system tend to put teachers in a compliant position, which diverts energies and attention away from developing local capacity to make improvements (Fullan 1991). However, there is a popular Chinese saying: 'Authorities have the policies; lay people have the strategies to resist' (*Shang you zheng ce, xia you dui ce, 上有政策, 下有对策*). It means that when facing the top-down policies, local people are active respondents, rather than passive recipients; they have strategies to deal with and even adapt these policies to their needs. For instance, the Department in this study formed their own teaching objectives and requirements, only superficially borrowing some similar discourses from the national curriculum. However, in the process of 'dealing with' the top-down policies, there is 'pseudo-compliance' (Davison 2008, p. 467) and slippages between the intended reform and the local practices. This may be one reason for the failure of reform.

Fullan (1991) argues that any significant innovation requires individuals to work out their own meaning of how their teaching should be transformed. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers be given more responsibilities for planning and organising curriculum integration (Hargreaves 1994), which in turn requires change in power relations around the curriculum. However, surprisingly, the same power relations and hierarchical structure were found to exist in the activity system of the Department as in the activity system of the CMoE in relation to the curriculum reform. This will be discussed further in the next subsection.

7.1.2 The Department

The culture of teaching in the Department had both strengths and limitations. On the positive side, there was a culture of close teacher collaboration. Although Hargreaves (1994) pointed out that individualism is one particular form of teaching culture, due to the Chinese collectivistic culture, the Head of the Department supported teacher collaboration, in particular, by demanding that young teachers observe experienced teachers' classes (Jenny was an exceptional case as she was newly assigned to work in this department and was isolated from other teachers in this department). Building cultures of teaching provides the community's collectively shared solutions for its new members and forms a framework for occupational learning (Hargreaves 1994). Therefore, the peer collaboration in the Department offers scaffolded learning to novice teachers without teacher education training, in the case of Sunny, who has learned how to teach partly from observing other teachers and partly from participating in regular staff meetings.

However, every coin has two sides. The collectivistic culture in Chinese schools results in teachers' subordination and obedience to their leaders without challenge, at least at a surface level (Walker and Dimmock 2000). Just like the problems existing in the reform implementation, there are similar hierarchical structure and power patterns of control–compliance in the Department. As stated in Chap. 3, the Chancellor emphasises the need for a high CET passing rate. The Head of the Department, in turn, requires all teachers to focus on teaching sentence structure and increasing the CET passing rate. As a result, the Head of the Department obeys the Chancellor, and teachers under the Head of the Department have to obey his or her orders, especially young teachers.

However, the imposition of single models of teaching and a narrow focus on particular techniques can cause inflexibility among teachers and hinder them from making discretionary judgements in their classroom. In addition, it can restrict teachers from acquiring and using a wider repertoire of teaching strategies that they can apply flexibly as the context requires (Hargreaves 1994). In addition, the hierarchical structure of this department allows only teachers with higher status to access teaching resources, such as classrooms with multiple media equipment, while excluding many young or novice teachers from using these teaching resources. This culture does not encourage novice teachers' development and innovation.

In addition, these features have influenced the culture of teaching in this department. A culture that promotes change should create release time for teachers to work together, assist them in collaborating in planning, encourage teachers to try new experiences, involve teachers in goal setting and create a culture of collaboration, risk taking and improvement (Hargreaves 1994). However, the findings in my study suggest that the culture of teaching in this department is constraining, which has reduced some teachers' practices to simple survival or coping strategies (Hargreaves 1994). This is in accordance with H. Qian and Walker's (2013) findings that local school-level leaders only focus on external changes, such as quality of curriculum and instruction, rather than the changes in teacher knowledge and

beliefs. For instance, both Sunny and Jenny chose the 'easy way' by following the way they had been taught or following the lesson plans they had prepared years ago, rather than innovating or redesigning new tools. In this case, school leaders' resistance to the curriculum reform seemed to be having a great influence on teachers' attitudes and behaviours. In regard to the discussion about the reform implementation, it can probably be inferred that the whole reform community does not give much space and support for developing teacher agency. The nature and extent of each teacher's agency is now discussed in the next subsection.

7.1.3   Teachers' Agency

The analysis in Chaps. 4, 5 and 6 indicates that the two young teachers, Sunny and Jenny, did not respond to the government's educational reform actively. They took agentive actions to remain with the old way of teaching and give up the attempts to make changes. However, Lynne, as an older teacher, has been agentive in innovating in her teaching practice, even exceeding the reform requirements by cultivating students' thinking ability and critical reading ability, which are not required by the reform. On the whole, the responses to the reform of all three teachers in this study are different from the findings of some research that suggests that young teachers are more open to accepting changes in language teaching and that more experienced teachers tend to hold on to their own beliefs and resist changes (Johnson 1992). The findings in this research also contradict Lasky and Sutherland's (2000) findings that teachers with ten or fewer years of teaching had less negative beliefs about the new reforms than teachers with ten or more years of teaching experience. This subsection discusses the reasons for this unexpected finding.

Without knowing about the reform, Sunny applied an interactive approach to reading and taught reading strategies in her class, which was consistent with the reform requirements. However, she remained unaware of the application of the approach she was applying, still holding different beliefs about teaching EFL reading. Wertsch (2002) claims that beliefs, as a psychological artefact, are constructed during practices. Sunny was not conscious of her beliefs about teaching and had not yet consistently internalised beliefs from her practices. Although she expressed her desire to improve her teaching, her agency was constrained by several factors: (1) the Department did not inform her about the content of the curriculum reform (as shown in Fig. 7.1, she does not have interaction with the reform activity system), (2) she was pressured to follow the Head of the Department's requirements of focusing on teaching sentence structure and test passing (as shown in Fig. 7.1, the arrow line means she has interaction with the activity systems of the Department), and (3) her personal need to pursue further study distracted her from reflecting on and redesigning teaching activities, so she just relied on her previous lesson plans. Hargreaves (1994) explains that teacher desire for change may be constrained by the sense of practicality which they need for coping with daily work. Under such pressure, Sunny became tired of teaching. This accords with Huberman's (as cited in Fullan

1991) explanation that classroom pressure makes teachers focus only on day-to-day effects, or short-term perspectives, and ultimately exhausts their energy; what's more, it limits their opportunities for reflection on their teaching.

Jenny, although possessing adequate theoretical knowledge about teaching, was still using grammar-translation methods in her class after a small failed innovation attempt. Jenny was not confident enough to apply what she learned from the TESOL programme in the USA in her teaching. She was also rather isolated from other teachers and did not know about the content of the reform either. Jenny's lack of active agency to change her teaching could be inferred from her apparent satisfaction with her present teaching because she thinks her teaching has been consistent with the reform mandates. Classroom pressure as well as her lack of a sense of belonging to the Department seems to have isolated Jenny from having meaningful interaction with her colleagues. This pressure also appears to have made her dependent on past experiential knowledge for day-to-day coping and led to her not applying knowledge outside her own classroom experiences. In addition, her isolation from the teaching community deprived her of opportunities of learning from other teachers.

However, Jenny's resistance to change could also be interpreted as an expression of agency (van Lier 2008). In particular, her resistance to change may be due to the failures she encountered when she tried to develop new practices. In addition, the fear that innovation is too risky made her resistant to change (Yamazumi 2007). Greenberg and Baron (2000) list the reasons for such teacher resistance. One is the failure to recognise the need for change. Another is habit, as it is easier to continue in the same way than to develop new skills. Both reasons account for Jenny's resistance. In addition, her difficulties in applying the theory she learned in the USA suggest that it is important to consider the impact of using some 'Western' approaches to instruction in Asian classrooms.

In contrast to Sunny and Jenny, Lynne exercised and presented more active agency in making innovations. Although the Department did not inform teachers about the reform, her own research on the CET reform informed her of the need to change (as demonstrated in Fig. 7.1, her activity system interacts with the activity systems of the reform and the Department). In addition, she has appropriated and internalised the knowledge she gained from research by developing her own beliefs about reading instruction (Robbins 2003) and also by externalising the knowledge through design activities to convince her students to accept her beliefs about reading (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). Lynne's case accords with the claim that successful change within the classroom can increase a teacher's pedagogical efficacy, which also increased her expectations for learning (Kaniuka 2012).

Overall, by viewing the reform community as a whole, it may be inferred that on the macro-level, the culture of reform and the culture of teaching in the Department tend to impose demands on teachers, rather than cultivate teachers' capability to innovate. In this reform context, analysis at the micro-level of the individual teacher's classroom teaching answers the first research question of this study *What is the nature and extent of teacher agency in relation to the demands of the new educational reform?* These findings indicate that Sunny's teaching practices followed the

reform mandates to some extent. However, she was unaware of the reform itself and did not internalise the beliefs about teaching in her practices. In addition, her agency in innovation was constrained by a lack of theoretical knowledge and energy. As for Jenny, she did not innovate in her teaching nor internalise her theoretical knowledge and beliefs about teaching. Her lack of awareness of and indifference to the reform constructed her agency as unresponsiveness or even resistance to the reform. In contrast, Lynne exercised agency to innovate in her teaching by researching the reform and internalising it within her own knowledge base.

The comparison among three case teachers seems to confirm Livingston and Borko's (1989) explanation about expert and novice teachers, that they have different ways to understand problems and choose different strategies to solve problems. Expert teachers are able to move through the agenda of a lesson in a flexible way. In contrast, novice teachers have less developed schemata (Livingston and Borko 1989). It also reinforces the claims of Andrews (2007) that compared with more experienced teachers, less experienced teachers' engagement with the language content of the lessons usually seems to be relatively superficial. Although all three case study teachers act in the same context, they vary significantly in both the nature and extent of their reform-related agency. The next section focuses on analysing the factors which may account for the different levels of agency of these three case teachers.

7.2 Factors Influencing Teacher Agency

Since mediated agency is defined as 'individual(s)-operating-with-mediational-means' (Wertsch et al. 1993, p. 341), this section analyses the mediational factors and the factors that account for the differences in the case study teachers' agency. This analysis answers the second research question: *What factors account for differences in teacher agency?* Table 7.1 below lists the factors impacting on these three teachers' agencies to innovate in their teaching. This section seeks to explore how these teachers' agencies were mediated.

Table 7.1 Factors accounting for three case teacher's pedagogical agencies

Mediational means	Sunny	Jenny	Lynne
1. Shared beliefs with reform	No	No	Yes
2. Research and reflection	No	No	Yes
3. Peer collaboration in the department community	Scaffolding but stressful	No	Motivating
4. Sense of responsibility and commitment	Negative	Negative	Positive
5. Interaction with students	Constraining	Not much	Reflecting and trying to improve
6. Time issues	Not enough	Not enough	Not enough

Each of these factors is discussed below:

1. Shared beliefs with the reform

The way teachers develop new practices is related to whether their beliefs match the assumptions of the new programme or methods (Anders and Evans 1994). As analysed in the previous subsection, one main reason Sunny and Jenny did not build shared beliefs with the curriculum objectives was because they were not informed about the reform. The Head of the Department did not know much about the reform because this university was on the periphery of the national reform training programme. This confirms the findings of H. Wang and Cheng (2008), who also point out that the fact that most teachers are unable to gain an understanding of the curriculum innovation or unable to receive prompt teacher in-service education results in unsuccessful implementation of reform. This was due to the policymakers who failed to recognise that teachers should have been required to take the initiative in carrying out the innovation to make the reform succeed. As a result, the reform was unlikely to be successfully implemented. The implication is that teachers should have been provided with adequate professional development programmes in understanding the curriculum innovation before and during its implementation (Curtis and Cheng 2001). Unfortunately, the 2007 College English curriculum reform did not provide such support to the teachers in this study.

2. Research and reflection

As discussed, Lynne has been an exceptional case within the Department as she has a shared understanding and beliefs about the reform. This is because she has taken her own initiative to do research on the test reform. Lynne also indicated that she had been reflecting on how to improve her teaching and how to resolve problems in her teaching. Such reflection helps her to link theoretical knowledge with personal practice. In contrast, Sunny and Jenny did not carry out any research on teaching nor reflect on their teaching. Although teaching experience does not necessarily equate with expertise (Andrews 2007), Lynne's willingness to reflect on her everyday pedagogical practice has strengthened her expertise in teaching and her agency to innovate in her teaching. Cole and Engeström (1993) suggest that people can overcome contradictions through 'reflective appropriation of advanced models and tools' (p. 40) and transform their activity system. Such reflection is essential for teachers in the course of curriculum reform (Kim 2011).

3. Teachers' peer collaboration in the department community

Studies of Western classrooms have shown that the most prevailing culture of teaching is one of classroom isolation (Lortie 1975). This is typical of primary and secondary teacher cultures, but it is even more serious in the tertiary education context because there is less curriculum control over students and teachers (Wang and Cheng 2008). In this study, Jenny's situation is a typical example of a culture of teacher isolation. To enhance teaching and learning, teachers need to have professional development opportunities to exchange instructional ideas and learn from each other (Cheng and Wang 2004). For instance, Sunny and Lynne both indicated

that they learned and improved from interaction and collaboration with peer teachers. Although achieving collaboration among teachers is challenging, a key goal of curriculum innovation should be collaboration and collegiality (Hargreaves 1994). Although there was some individual cooperation and collaboration among teachers in the College English Department in this study, it was not a widely adopted practice in the teaching culture of this department.

4. Sense of responsibility and commitment

Hargreaves (1994) argues that commitment and confidence in a school community is a powerful force for improvement. The data from Lynne's interview suggests that she has the commitment and the sense of responsibility needed to motivate her to do research and use that research to improve not only her own pedagogy but also the whole university's performance on the CET. In contrast, the two young teachers are so exhausted and frustrated about teaching that they complained to the researcher regularly in daily interactions that they even wanted to quit their job. A clear implication of this is that it is necessary for teacher education programmes and school leaders to enhance and cultivate teachers' sense of ownership and commitment to instructional practice.

5. Interaction with students

Teachers' commitment is heavily influenced by the response they get from students (Fullan 1991). Sunny and Jenny both had problems in effective communication with their students. The gaps between teachers and students caused negative feelings on both sides and became a major challenge for them to improve their teaching. As Tsui (1996) states, student resistance emerges as an influential factor in the failure to change teachers' implementation practices. Lynne was also bothered by the problems of student classroom participation, but she had been trying to design activities to involve them. The common problem existing in these three teachers' classes is the particular teacher-controlled IRE discourse pattern, which discouraged and constrained students' opportunities for participation in the classroom. The problem of IRE has been discussed in the individual case analysis chapters.

Tsui (1996) explains that Chinese students have been accustomed to a formal classroom atmosphere, where the teacher plays an authoritative, commanding and dominant role and discourages students from openly questioning or criticising. However, the interviews with students in these three teachers' classes reveal that most students wanted more autonomy in classroom teaching and learning. Nevertheless, there is a big gap between their desire for autonomy and their practice of autonomy in the classroom setting. Therefore, teachers need to develop capacity for working with students to expand the shared objectives of teaching and learning (Edwards and D'Arcy 2004).

6. Time issues

The findings of this study revealed that all three teachers complained that their heavy teaching load resulted in insufficient time for lesson preparation, especially

Jenny and Sunny, who had given up their previous teaching objectives because they did not have enough time to prepare lessons. Lynne also wanted to reduce some of her teaching load and spend more time on her research. This issue has been reported in other research where teachers require increased preparation time in order to bring significant benefits in terms of the quality of their work in general and their instruction in particular as well as reduced stress (Hargreaves 1994). Therefore, in order to increase teaching quality and reduce teachers' stress, the Department should consider supporting teachers by reducing their teaching load and increasing their preparation time, especially for novice teachers.

Overall, the analyses in this section suggest that various factors mediated teacher agency in responding to reform. Therefore, it is difficult to identify a simple answer to the question of how to support teachers in innovating their teaching (Pyhältö et al. 2011). However, the findings of this study might offer some suggestions for facilitating teacher agency in terms of educational reform. Like Fullan (1991), the findings of this study suggest educational change should aim to impact on two levels: teacher classroom practices and teacher pedagogical beliefs. It is important for teachers to have shared pedagogical beliefs consistent with the theory of teaching advocated by the reform. Reflection and research can help teachers to construct beliefs consistent with their practices. Besides, peer interaction in a collaborative culture of teaching and student support may strengthen teacher agency in innovating in their teaching. At the same time, teacher's increased sense of responsibility and commitment can underpin teacher innovation.

7.3   Key Factors in the Transformation

In this study, activity theory is used to analyse the system of the reform at different levels and teacher agency to resolve the contradictions. The ZPD is used to indicate the teachers' potential to transform their teaching and the internalisation of teacher learning. This subsection illustrated the issue of transformation indicated by these three teachers' ZPD (see Fig. 7.2) and by their agency to resolve contradictions.

Lantolf (2000) describes the ZPD as a metaphoric space where we can observe and understand how meditational means are appropriated and internalised. In one sense, the ZPD is an arena of potentiality, a space where the realisation of each teacher's inner potential and the process of internalisation can be observed. As for Sunny, without prior teacher education, she learned how to teach from observing other teachers' classes and from the feedback from her students. Interaction with students on the interpersonal plane developed in Sunny a tacit knowledge of top-down reading approaches in her intrapersonal plane. In addition, Sunny gained her knowledge of teaching reading strategies during her use of the textbook. In this case, the textbook mediated the teacher's learning on an intrapersonal plane and stimulated growth in knowledge higher than her actual level of development. Her tacit knowledge, however, was not fully internalised and not reflected in her beliefs system. Therefore, she is at her zone of proximal development but reaching the stage of externalising her knowledge in the interpsychological plane.
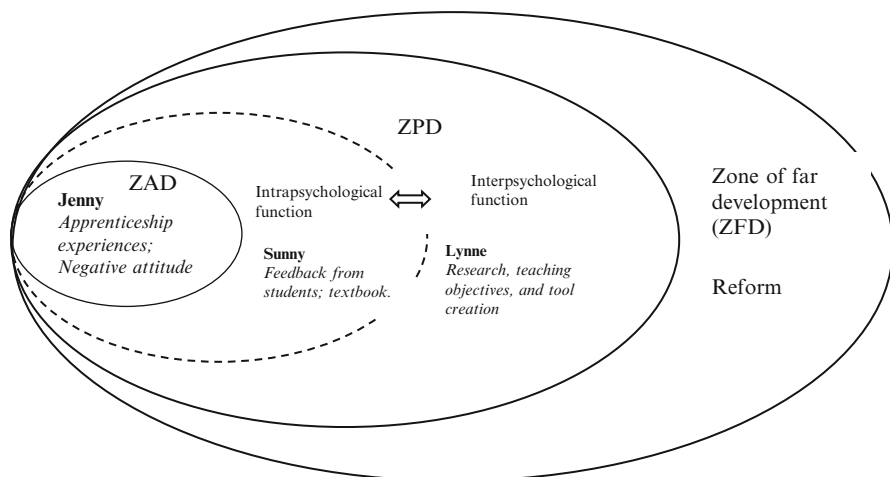
Fig. 7.2 Participant teachers' agency in the ZPD

In Jenny's case, Jenny's scientific concepts about reading instruction and reading strategies remained on an intrapsychological plane. She had not really internalised what she had learned as part of her Master's degree and just relied on her apprenticeship experience. As a result, her teaching practices remained within her ZAD. In addition, Jenny's negative attitude towards her teaching environment lead to passivity and hindered her pedagogical growth, or movement from her ZAD to her ZPD. Teachers need to have intention or take initiative to seek support for their learning. Jenny, however, did not realise that she needs support nor choose to seek it. This hinders her from moving up from her actual development zone to proximal development.

As for Lynne, she has a strong sense of responsibility for conducting research on the subject she was teaching, forming objectives for her teaching and creating new tools to resolve the conflicts within her teaching community. Lynne demonstrated self-regulation in her teaching practice and transformed what was internalised from her research through a process of externalisation, such as her objectives of teaching and the tools she created to achieve these objectives. These objectives and tools resulted in the transformation of students' beliefs in the classroom community and reflected what Lynne had internalised from her research and growth as a teacher within her ZPD.

Lynne's case indicates that self-reflection and research can help with interaction between everyday and scientific concepts. Teacher educators should recognise the outer limits of this metaphoric developmental zone and be strategic in offering teacher assistance (Johnson and Golombek 2011). The assistance should help develop teacher knowledge from implicit to explicit and focus more on the cognitive transformation than behaviour (Wertsch 1985).

Educational change seems to be an emotional sense-making experience for teachers (Zembylas and Barker 2007). In addition, emotion may also account for

people's agency. The case studies indicate that Sunny's and Jenny's negative attitudes hindered them from engaging students in their classes and learning from their students. The people who do not feel safe in their environment may not take risks; on the contrary, people may take the risk if they feel safe in their environment and believe they will benefit from changes (Lasky 2005). Teachers need both emotional and cognitive mediation throughout their teaching.

This study also used activity theory to analyse the system of the reform at different levels and reveal the interaction and contradictions among different stakeholders in the reform community. According to Engeström (1987), tertiary-level contradictions such as the one between the national reform and classroom teaching might cause secondary-level contradictions within the components in the teaching activity by imposing a novel factor, such as the one between the reform-assigned textbook and the teacher. Secondary-level contradictions have the potential to cause transformation of the activity system. However, the findings of Lynne's case study suggest that although there are no tertiary contradictions between the activity systems of the national reform and her classroom teaching, her teaching has been consistent with and even exceeded the requirements of the reform. The key findings are that Lynne agrees with the reform requirements and has set objectives which are consistent with and go beyond the reform objectives. Moreover, her research about the reform also brought transformation in her knowledge and beliefs about teaching. In addition, Lynne has been designing and redesigning activities and transforming her teaching in accordance with her own objectives. Even though the secondary-level contradictions in Lynne's teaching, such as those between her teaching objectives and the textbook, have not completely been resolved, her redesigning of activities and tools has improved her teaching and even transformed the thinking of some students in her class. In contrast, Sunny and Jenny usually resolved contradictions by avoidance or by choosing the easy option and as a result did not create new tools or activities. Even when the contradictions of the classroom activity were resolved, there was no transformation in their teaching practice and beliefs.

The analysis of the contradictions in the activity system of teachers' classroom teaching suggests that passively resolved contradictions do not result in development of new tools and cannot bring transformation, even though it is claimed that contradictions have the potential to cause transformation (Engeström 2001). The clear results of this study suggest that object and tool design are essential processes if instructional transformation is to take place, even when the contradictions are not completely resolved.

This analysis draws attention to the wider culture of teaching and its mediation on teacher agency. It is not enough to promote teacher agency in educational reform by fostering conceptual changes or skills (Pyhältö et al. 2011), because teacher agency is also a social process which is tied together with and depends on social, cultural and contextual factors (Wertsch et al. 1993). Therefore, enhancing teacher agency requires changes in the cultures of the teaching community. Teachers, educational leaders, students and other stakeholders therefore need to negotiate and construct shared conceptions of the reform and pay more attention to developing educational institutions as collaborative and active learning communities. Such

communities are characterised by a sense of mission that builds teacher loyalty, commitment and confidence (Hargreaves 1994; Pyhältö et al. 2011). Drawing on these understandings, in the final part of this chapter, the conclusions are summarised and implications for future study are put forward.

7.4   Limitations

One limitation of this study is its small scale, with only three case studies conducted at one university. As teacher agency is contextually bound, generalizations cannot be drawn from these three small case studies. Another limitation is that the research site was located in one province only – Henan. Given the diversity of China, it is impossible to paint a full picture of all teachers' roles in curriculum reform across the whole country. Nevertheless, the study has some implications for similar cultural and activity contexts. More research of this type should be conducted in different provinces and areas, so as to provide a more thorough understanding about curriculum reform implementation in China.

Another limitation relates to theoretical considerations. This present study used activity theory as an observational and analytical framework only. However, a key feature of activity theory is its use as an intervention tool to effect change (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). The findings of this study can be used for an intervention study in the future.

7.5   Conclusion

Drawing on the above discussions of the findings, this study has both theoretical and practical implications for teacher education and curriculum reform implementation. In order to empower teachers' agency in innovating their teaching, teacher education should help teachers to develop various cultural tools to mediate their thinking and practice and to contribute to the culture of teaching in the community. In addition, reform implementation should aim at strengthening teacher capacity and innovation at classroom level to achieve a shared understanding between the reform and teachers.

In relation to teacher agency and teacher education, this study supports Fullan's (1991) claim that an explicit belief system is important for innovation, but it takes time to construct and be negotiated in social practices. Accordingly, teacher professional development programs should ensure that teachers have a clear understanding about their pedagogical beliefs and help them develop cultural tools to mediate how they think about their teaching. Equally important, teacher education should train teachers to pay attention to students' beliefs and equip teachers with strategies to address students' responses in their teaching.

As reflected in the case study participants' experiences, teachers' exercise of agency is influenced by many individual and social factors. Teacher beliefs and knowledge, teacher practical experiences and reflections, teacher commitment, and

positive attitudes all contribute to the development of teacher agency. Besides these individual factors, teachers' collaboration, students' responsiveness, as well as the culture of teaching in the teacher community also impact on the mediated development of teacher pedagogical agency. This implies that support should be provided for both individual and social processes, especially in developing a productive culture of teaching which mediates the instructional agency of groups of teachers, rather than individuals alone. In addition, social, emotional, and cognitive support should be provided to help teachers cope with conflicting or fearful feelings about educational reform and take reasonable risks to innovate their teaching.

Therefore, teacher education should inform teachers about the importance of mediational means and offer them opportunities to explore all mediational means that might facilitate their teaching and develop their pedagogical agency. An additional task for teacher education is to inform teachers about both the constraints and affordances of such mediational means. Teacher education programmes should also help teachers consider how to relate their theoretical knowledge to their practical experiences within the contextual constraints of their community and their personal philosophy about teaching and learning. For teachers who received their teacher education in foreign countries, the university or school should provide guidance and support to help them overcome the cultural gaps and translate the Western teaching theory into the local teaching context. Although the three particular cases cannot lead to generalisation, the analysis of the factors influencing teacher agency may contribute to the literature of teacher education internationally.

Finally, the study of Lynne's case suggests that the teachers as active agents have the potential to innovate in their teaching in excess of reform requirements, even though the university she belongs to is on the periphery of the national reform training programme. Therefore, change initiated from within and below is more effective than reforming from outside and above, contrary to the hierarchical structure and the control–compliance pattern of the reform community in China. This study therefore argues that more power and space should be given to teachers in the area of reform implementation.

With regard to education reform implementation, the findings suggest that in order to have successful reform implementation, the policymakers should ensure there are concrete means and activities to involve school-level attention and participation. It has also become necessary to shift the implementation plan from a top-down control approach to a bottom-up capacity-building approach, to stimulate and force innovation into the systems at school and classroom levels. Furthermore, teachers should be encouraged and supported to take the initiative in order to innovate. Otherwise, reform remains rhetoric and cannot bring changes to teaching and learning, and schools will just give new names to old practices.

The findings also suggest that there are gaps between teacher beliefs about teaching and the implied theory of teaching advocated by the reform. It may be concluded that reform implementation should not only aim at equipping teachers with required skills but also at changing their thinking and beliefs, to achieve a shared understanding between the reform and teachers as practitioners; otherwise, the results are superficial changes. In addition, with the understanding of the reform mandates,

teachers can make decisions to accept, adapt or even resist the change advocated by the reform. The study identified the quality of teacher education programmes as another important factor in reform implementation. There should be enough education programmes provided for the new educational reform to allow teachers to become familiar with not only the new requirements of the reform but also its philosophical underpinnings, especially those which are more oriented towards Western pedagogy. Importantly, teachers need to be informed explicitly about the rationale for these changes, the expectations that the reform places on them and the kinds of challenges they might face, as well as solutions that are available to them.

As an important mediational artefact for teaching, textbooks should be designed in a way that can assist the teaching of novice teachers. Perhaps a more practical manual of how to use the textbook will help teachers make better use of such tools. Teachers should be trained how to adapt and supplement textbooks, instead of being bound by them. Furthermore, institutions which mediate between teachers and the government which enacts reform need to maintain a balance between stability and innovation. Therefore, a productive culture and community of teaching needs to be established to support teachers' daily teaching, organise teacher collaboration, build confidence and commitment and encourage teachers to innovate and to improve their teaching. In addition, university departments should also provide emotional support, teaching resources and opportunities for professional development for teachers, in particular novice teachers.

Since the 1970s, China has been undergoing a series of reforms in political, economic, and educational areas. However, reforms in China are implemented in a top-down approach due to the highly centralized political and educational system. Most people's attitudes towards reforms are resistant, indifferent, or passive. However, one participant in the study, Lynne, indicates that an ordinary teacher can take agentive actions in innovating her teaching even beyond what the reform requires. This indicates the potential and effectiveness of initiating changes from the bottom. The analytical framework and implications entailed in this study could be suitable for other centralized educational systems in some Asian countries where teacher classroom teaching is constrained by rigid curriculum requirements.

7.6 Future Research

The findings about teacher agency in this study could provide a basis for a future intervention study aiming at facilitating teacher pedagogical agency in educational reform. Another future area of research could well focus on how to support the mediated agency of a group of teachers within a collaborative culture of teaching.

In an era of globalization and change, educational reforms are increasing in many countries. To effect such reforms, teachers are expected to be committed, agentive, and capable of transforming their practice. Teacher-mediated pedagogical agency is central to such transformation in the process of the reform and hence needs to be fully understood and promoted.

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Postscript

After data collection, I still keep contact with the case study teachers. Their lives have undergone significant changes during the last 2 years.

Lynne has taken place of the Head of the Department and is currently in charge of the College English Department.

Jenny got married and became a mom. She was planning to resign the job and go abroad again for further study.

I have not heard from Sunny since last year. Hope she is doing well.

Appendices

Appendix A: The Interview Guide for Case Study Teachers

Section 1

I. Questions for information about the object and outcome of teaching

1. Which aspects of language do you think are most important to teach EFL reading?
2. What are your goals for teaching reading?
3. In your class, how did you set these goals and expectations?
4. What kinds of changes would you like to make in your teaching of reading?

II. Questions for information about the College English curriculum and test reform

1. Do you know about the recent reform of CET 4 and CET 6? If not, I can tell you about them.
2. Do you agree with these changes? Why or why not?
3. What kind of change do you think the reform will bring to EFL reading instruction (e.g. the goal and methods of reading instruction)? Are you willing to adapt your teaching to that change? And how?

III. Questions for information about the tools of their teaching

1. How do you prepare your lesson? Can you list the procedures and give rationale for each procedure?
2. Do you think your teaching methods are more 'bottom-up' or 'top-down'? What are the reasons for that? (Ask the teachers about the reasons politely if their answers of this question do not coincide with their classroom practice.)

3. According to your answer of Q22–Q24 in the previous questionnaire, what are your reasons for preferring certain kinds of text in your reading class?
4. What do you think of the role of the reading textbook in your teaching, facilitator or authority?
5. Which part of the New Horizon College English book do you think has reflected the previously mentioned reforms?
6. Which kind of tools do you prefer to use more in your teaching, blackboard or computer-based teaching? And why?
7. Do you often teach in English or Chinese? Which language is more effective for teaching reading?

IV. Questions for information about the rules and community of teaching

1. What are the formal standard reading instruction procedures proposed by the department?
2. What kinds of support the university or department has offered for teachers?

V. Questions for information about the division of labour in the class

1. What do you think of your students' roles in your class?
2. Do you think they cooperate in your class? If not, what do you think are the reasons for that?

VI. Questions for information about historical–cultural dimension

1. To what extent are your current beliefs about EFL reading instruction influenced by your past experiences of learning to read in EFL as a student?
2. To what extent are you current beliefs about EFL reading instruction influenced by your teaching experiences and teacher education? (adjust according to different teachers)
3. Can you give an example at a time that your teaching of reading was successful or unsuccessful? What do you think were the reasons for that?

Section 2

Dear teachers:
This is not a test. The following are cases of three EFL teachers (A, B, C). Facing specific situations in the foreign language classroom, they have different methods of teaching reading strategies. Please read the three cases and answer some questions.

I. Teacher A explicitly states which strategy is being taught and when it will be used. Then the teacher uses think-aloud protocol to reveal the reasoning in strategy use and his reading process step by step. After that, the teacher should guide learners to practise using the strategy.
II. At the initial stage, Teacher B explicitly models the process of using of reading strategies, explaining when, why and how to use these strategies. Then he

coaches learners to apply a strategy to a text. After the learners become acquainted with the strategies and the procedures, they take turns leading the group discussion and practise the strategies in other texts. Meanwhile, the teacher offers guidance and feedback according to their needs and gradually reduces the assistance until the students can apply the strategy.

III. Firstly, Teacher C explains and models effective strategies. Then the teacher coaches students to use strategies and teach them potential strategic choices. At the third stage, both teachers and students explain to one another how they use strategies to process text and have dialogue about text. Strategy instruction occurs throughout the school year.

Interview Questions

I. Questions for information about the tools of teaching

1. After reading the above narrations about teachers A, B and C, which one or ones do you identify with your classroom practice? What do you think the potential benefits (weaknesses) of these three teachers' methods?
2. To what extent is there a mismatch between your ideal way of teaching reading strategy and your classroom practice? What are the reasons for this gap?
3. What do you think of the design of the part 'Reading Skills' in the textbook?

II. Questions for information about objects of teaching

1. What are the motives for you to teach reading strategies and what outcomes do you expect?
2. According to your answers of Q9–Q16 in the previous questionnaire, which item(s) do you think you need to improve?
3. According to the recent reform of CET 4 and CET 6, what kind of reading strategies do you think will be more helpful for preparing students for these exams?

III. Questions for information about the division of labour in teaching

1. Please describe your role of an EFL reading teacher in the process of teaching reading strategies.
2. Please describe the role of your students in the process of teaching reading strategies.
3. What are your expectations of their roles?

IV. Questions for information about the rules and community of teaching

1. According to your answers of Q37–Q38 in the previous questionnaire, what kind of support would you like to get from the department for teaching reading strategies?

V. Questions for information about the historical–cultural dimension

1. According to Q2–Q4 in the previous questionnaire, to what extent are your current beliefs about teaching reading strategies influenced by your teaching experiences and teacher education?

2. Can you give an example at a time that your teaching of reading strategies was successful or unsuccessful? What do you think were the reasons for that?

Thank you for your time and cooperation!

Appendix B: The Interview Guide for the Head of the Department

1. What are the goals for the course *New Horizon College English* set by the Department?
2. What are the formal standard reading instruction procedures proposed by the school?
3. What are the defined standards of a good teacher in this department?
4. What are the measures or policies for teacher management in this department?
5. Do you know about the latest reform of CET 4 and CET 6?
6. How did this department implement the reform?
7. Do you know about the policies of the latest College English curriculum reform?
8. How did the department implement the new curriculum?

Appendix C: The Interview Guide for the Focus Group Interviews with Students

I. Questions for information about the object and outcome of the course

1. Tell me about what kind of goals do you want to achieve from EFL reading class. What might be the reasons for making this kind of goals?
2. Tell me about the difficulties, if any, you have in EFL reading.
3. What do you think of the usefulness of teaching reading strategies?
4. Do you feel you have successfully learned the reading strategies you have been taught? If not, what might be the problems?
5. Which aspect of your teacher's teaching in your reading class do you like? Which aspect of the teaching do you want your teacher change or improve?

II. Questions for information about the CET test reform

1. Do you know about the recent reform of CET 4 and CET 6? If not, I can tell you about them.
2. How do you feel these changes? And why?

3. What kind of adaptations do you want your teacher to make in reading class to prepare you for the reform of the exams?

III. Questions for information about the tools of the course

1. Tell me about your understanding of the role of the reading textbook in reading class.
2. What do you think of the New Horizon College English book and the part 'Reading Skills'?
3. Do you prefer to be taught by learning about vocabulary and grammar of the text first and then the general idea? Or do you like to learn about the general idea of the text first and then focus on vocabulary and grammar? And why?
4. Tell me what do you think of your teacher's method and frequency of teaching reading strategies.
5. Which language do you think is more effective for teaching and learning reading, English or Chinese? And why?

IV. Questions for information about the rules and community of the course

1. What do you think of the learning environment in your university?
2. What kinds of support do you want from the university or teachers?

V. Questions for information about the division of labour of the course

1. Please describe the role of an EFL reading teacher.
2. Please describe the role of students in the class.
3. Do you think you have enough opportunities to interact with the teacher and other students in the class? What kind of interactions do you prefer? And why?

VI. Questions for information about historical–cultural dimension

1. To what extent are your current beliefs about EFL reading instruction influenced by your past experiences of learning EFL reading or by other factors, if any?
2. To what extent are your current beliefs about EFL reading strategies influenced by your past learning experiences or by other factors, if any?
3. Tell me an example of a time when the EFL reading class was successful or unsuccessful. What do you think were the reasons for that?

Bibliography

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