A Study of Ethnic Mongolian University EFL Teachers’ Beliefs and Decision Making

YANG Lihua
Inner Mongolian University for the Nationalities

Abstract

Employed both the qualitative (interviews and observations) and the quantitative (questionnaire) research methodology, the present study selects 3 participants from 90 ethnic Mongolian university EFL teachers to uncover their beliefs about language teaching and learning under their particular cultural background, and how these beliefs affect their classroom decisions. The quantitative study shows: 1) the participants’ beliefs are characterized as the blend of traditional and popular trends in foreign language pedagogy, and some of their beliefs deserve our careful examination; 2) their classroom decisions are influenced by an interwoven convergence of their learning experiences, on-the-job teaching experiences, teacher training experiences and personal experiences; and the qualitative study reveals: 1) participants’ claimed beliefs are generally consistent with their classroom decisions; 2) there is a discrepancy between their “espoused theories” and “theories-in-use”; 3) the relation between culture and language is a recurring theme in their claimed beliefs. In conclusion, the study suggests that ethnic Mongolian university EFL teachers’ beliefs are interwoven with their particular ethnic culture, which has profound influence on their classroom decisions.

Key words: ethnic Mongolian university EFL teachers; teachers’ beliefs; decision making; ethnic culture

1. Introduction

Wallerstein (1953) states that language, as a reflection of culture, is a principal source of group identity and the transmission of that identity to the students. Ethnic groups, in particular, maintain their language and have strong loyalty to their original language. As for
LIU Yanfen & ZHAO Yuqin

ethnic Mongolian university EFL teachers, they speak Mongolian language as their mother tongue, Chinese as second language and English as foreign language. They don’t get enough exposure to English until in middle schools or at college. With their different cultural and trilingual background, they have to cope with more difficulties in language transfer and use language in an idiosyncratic manner (Moran, 2001). They tend to teach English in Chinese or in little English and prefer to teach ethnic Mongolian English learners for the sake of their identity and social group. In this sense, ethnic Mongolian university EFL teachers, influenced by their own culture and language, bring to the classroom particular norms and expectations concerning appropriate teacher and learner roles and the teaching-learning practices they believe to be conducive to language teaching and learning.

Being a very important area of teacher cognition studies, ethnic teachers’ beliefs about language teaching and learning have not received sufficient attention as they should have in our EFL circles. With very few exceptions (e.g. Zhao, 2003; Zhou, 2003), Chinese scholars seem to have taken little or no interest in ethnic teachers’ beliefs under their particular cultural background. Instead, they have inclined to study the beliefs and theories of teachers in general (Xia, 2002; Hu, 2004; Mu, 2004; Wang, 2004; Zhou, 2005; Lou & Liao, 2005) and those of effective teachers in particular (Zhang, 2004; Wu, 2005).

The present study is the first tentative attempt in this academic area. On the one hand, the study aims to uncover ethnic Mongolian university EFL teachers’ beliefs about language teaching and learning through a questionnaire and focuses on how their belief systems under their cultural background shape their understandings of teaching and learning. On the other hand, the study will explore the relationships between teachers’ beliefs and classroom decision making based on the data analysis of observations and interviews. It attempts to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. What are ethnic Mongolian university EFL teachers’ beliefs about language teaching and learning under their particular cultural background?
2. How is their decision making influenced by individually held beliefs about language teaching and learning?
3. Are their classroom decisions consistent with their claimed beliefs?

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical background of the studies on teachers’ beliefs
According to Williams and Burden (1997: 56), “beliefs tend to be culturally bound, to be formed early in life and to be resistant to change”. Teachers are generally concerned with more than simply fulfilling issues of curriculum content. When they teach, they also make efforts to implement a personal philosophy of teaching which reflects their individual understanding and beliefs about what good teaching is and how it is achieved.

Pajares (1992) indicates that beliefs are created through a process of enculturation and social construction. Therefore, the critical role of experiences in schools and contacts with teachers and on-going classroom teaching experience have been widely acknowledged as powerful factors in shaping the beliefs of teachers (Marland, 1987; Almarza, 1996). It’s
also asserted that most of teachers’ beliefs are developed through on-the-job experience (Sanders & McCutcheon, 1986).

Studies of the sources of teachers’ beliefs indicate that many different life experiences contribute to the formation of teachers’ strong and enduring beliefs about teaching and learning (Richardson, 1996; Ulichny, 1996). Few will argue that beliefs teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgments, which, in turn, affect their decisions in the classroom, or that understanding the belief systems of teachers is essential to improving their teaching practices (Munby, 1982; Brindley, 1984; Nespor, 1987; Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Williams & Burden, 1997; Allen, 2002).

Osterman & Kottkamp (1993) make a distinction between espoused theories and theories-in-use. Espoused theories are easily acquired and claimed by the teachers, but, they will alter easily when influenced by external new information, and have no direct impacts on teaching activities. In contrast, theories-in-use are so covert that they can hardly be aware of or influenced by new information. However, they are more influenced by culture and habits, and have direct effects on teaching activities (See Figure 1, as cited in Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993: 10).

![Figure 1. The relationship of espoused theories and theories-in-use](image)

### 2.2 Theoretical background of the studies on decision making

Ellis (1996: 213) defines the roles of English language teachers as “teacher and model of the language; representative and interpreter of his or her culture; learning facilitator; friend and counselor”. All of these roles have cultural dimensions. While sharing the same cultural and educational background, using the same textbooks and doing the same exercises in the classrooms, teachers play different roles and appear to be basically different in what is “really” going on in their classrooms.

In their teaching, teachers are always confronted with a number of different options and are required to select from among these options the one they think are best suitable to a particular purpose. In this sense, language teaching involves a lot of individual decision making, which has been viewed as a central component of teacher thinking. Richards (1998) points out that there are three kinds of decisions: planning decisions, interactive decisions and evaluative decisions. Previous studies mainly focus on decisions made by ESL teachers before and during the lesson (Johnson, 1992; Nunan, 1992; Ulichny, 1996).

Though decision making is neither the only, nor the most prevalent, research construct at present for examining teacher thinking and learning, it is crucial to acknowledge the useful and productive nature of researches in teachers’ decision making and what it has, and can,
bring to understanding language teaching and learning (Freeman, 1996). Researchers who have wandered into the investigation of teachers’ beliefs have found exploring the nature of beliefs a rewarding enterprise, and their findings suggest a close relationship between teachers’ educational beliefs and their planning, and instructional decisions.

### 2.3 Limitations of previous studies and the significance of the present study

Previous studies on teachers’ beliefs and classroom decisions have been made both abroad and at home. On the one hand, teachers’ beliefs and how these beliefs inform their classroom decisions have been carried out in ESL contexts and mainly involved pre-service or experienced teachers at a secondary or tertiary level (Lortie, 1975; Parker, 1984; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Woods, 1991; Johnson, 1992; Smith, 1996). However, culture is often neglected in ESL teaching and learning, or introduced as no more than a supplementary diversion to language instruction. Language simultaneously reflects culture, and is influenced and shaped by it. It is also the symbolic representation of a people, since it comprises their cultural backgrounds (Jiang, 2000). Therefore, culture should be highlighted as an important element in language classrooms.

On the other hand, empirical studies on teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices have been recently carried out in local and key universities in China (Xia, 2002; Hu, 2004; Mu, 2004; Wang, 2004; Zhang, 2004; Lou & Liao, 2005; Quan & Li, 2007). Little empirical work, however, has been done concerning ethnic teachers’ classroom practices except that Zhou (2003) conducted a survey of the qualities of ethnic Mongolian English teachers in middle schools. Research on ethnic teachers’ beliefs under their cultural background is an area yet to be explored. Besides, there is no empirical evidence to show how ethnic teachers’ beliefs about language teaching influence their classroom decision making.

Thus, the intention of the present study is not to test the effectiveness of a particular theory or to evaluate the planning and implementation practices of the teachers involved. Rather, it adopts a research paradigm based on a qualitative and interpretative approach to understand teaching from the inside, and examine the pedagogical decisions made by ethnic Mongolian university EFL teachers and the role their beliefs play in their decision making process under their particular cultural background. It is hoped that the findings of the study will shed new light on teacher development and provide food for thoughts to teacher trainers in ethnic teachers’ professional training.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

Ninety ethnic Mongolian university EFL teachers coming from six universities in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region filled out the questionnaire. Then three respondents are selected as the participant teachers for in-depth study through classroom observations and interviews so that their beliefs and how these beliefs affect their decision making can be explored for comparison. They are from the same university with the criteria set by
the researcher, including a minimum of three years’ experience of teaching EFL college learners, prior teaching experiences in the present university, and willingness to be interviewed and observed. They have relatively homogeneous cultural and educational background in terms of current working conditions and previous language learning experiences. Through the confirmation of their teaching experiences, they are labeled respectively as an expert teacher, an experienced teacher and a novice teacher (Tsui, 2003).

Table 3.1 The demographic information of the three participant teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years of teaching</th>
<th>Academic qualification</th>
<th>Professional title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Questionnaire
To combine the method of case studies with a questionnaire will lead to “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 1998: 27), which is believed to be more appropriate for the goal of this study.

The study starts with a self-designed questionnaire to collect data on teachers’ beliefs about language teaching and learning, which serves as the basis for the following classroom observations and interviews. The questionnaire (See Appendix 1) is composed of two parts: the biographical information of the participants, and the main aspects of teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning including beliefs about the nature of English language, the nature of language teaching, the nature of language learning, teaching strategies and learning strategies (See Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Five dimensions of the questionnaire and their item numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Item Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The nature of English language</td>
<td>2, 6, 11, 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nature of language teaching</td>
<td>1, 7, 10, 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nature of language learning</td>
<td>4, 13, 16, 19, 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching strategies</td>
<td>3, 9, 14, 18, 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning strategies</td>
<td>5, 8, 12, 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twenty-two items are designed based on beliefs, principles, methods and strategies of language teaching and learning (Johnson 1992; Chen & Liu, 2004; Mu, 2004). The questionnaire employs Likert Scale in five choices: “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neither agree nor disagree”, “disagree”, or “strongly disagree” to be represented by 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 respectively.
3.2.2 Initial meeting and the pre-observation interview
Before classroom observations, an initial meeting was held at the participants’ university. Firstly, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the planned sequence of classroom observations and follow-up interviews in which the teachers and the researcher would be involved. Secondly, a 30-minute semi-structured interview was carried out individually with the participant teachers to elicit their perceptions of their teaching practice. While interviewing, the researcher followed the participants’ responses and let the relevant questions flow out instead of just following what was listed on the interview scheme. Finally, the researcher made sure that most of the questions on the interview scheme were covered. The interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes, which was recorded in Chinese and later transcribed into English.

3.2.3 Classroom observations
Classroom observation was employed to develop a deeper understanding of the different ways teachers approach their lessons. In this study, 12-hour classroom observations of the participants were recorded over a period of three weeks. The researcher obtained a detailed account of decision making through qualitative field notes, video recordings and stimulated recall. As an observer of the classes, the researcher prepared an observation scheme before each session. While observing, the researcher focused on the interactive decisions (decisions teachers make while teaching) and tried to observe as many emerging events as possible, such as the tasks designed by the teachers and the students’ responses in various activities. All the classes were audio-video-taped and compacted into PC for the post-observation interview. Table 3.3 summarizes the general information about the classes observed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Type of Students</th>
<th>Teaching Materials</th>
<th>Type of Lesson</th>
<th>Student Level</th>
<th>Class Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>English majors</td>
<td>Advanced English Book1</td>
<td>Intensive Reading</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>Mongolian English majors</td>
<td>Xu Guozhang English Book1</td>
<td>Intensive Reading</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Mongolian English majors</td>
<td>New Concept English Book3</td>
<td>Intensive Reading</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.4 The post-observation conference and interview
At the videotaped post-observation conferences, the participants watched the videos of their lessons (stimulated recall technique) with the researcher and were encouraged to comment on what happened during the lessons, and how pre-active decisions (decisions made prior to teaching) and interactive decisions were conceptualized, designed, and implemented from their perspective. These comments revealed their beliefs about teaching and learning and the role that beliefs and theoretical knowledge played in their pedagogical decisions.
After the conference, each participant was interviewed about 30 minutes to allow for a comparative analysis of the data. However, some secondary questions were stimulated during the discussion which led to lengthy elaborations of particular points. These enabled the researcher to probe for more in-depth information and to clarify certain points that had been noted in the observational and conference data. The structured interviews were recorded and transcribed, and all the transcripts were returned to the participants to check for accuracy or elaborate on issues discussed during the interviews.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Reliability Analysis
Of the returned 85 questionnaires, 78 were valid and could be used for the analysis. Based on the data collected by SPSS 13.0, this study analyzes the internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire (See Table 4.1). The testing result (Alpha=.636) enables the questionnaire to be used in the research.

Table 4.1 Item-Total Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Label</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Valid N</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The nature of English language</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>.558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nature of language teaching</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>.624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nature of language learning</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>.611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching strategies</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>.523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning strategies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>.583</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reliability Coefficients Alpha=.636

4.2 Results and discussions of the quantitative data
The data of the questionnaire, which are expected to address the first research question, reveal that ethnic Mongolian university EFL teachers tend to hold eclectic beliefs exhibiting the features of both traditional and popular trends in foreign language pedagogy. On the one hand, they have a strong belief that four skills are most important (Mean=4.45). They also strongly believe in the role of motivation, and memorizing good texts in English teaching and learning. Seen from Table 4.2, they put greater emphasis on pronunciation (Mean=3.89) than on vocabulary (Mean=3.58). In addition, they believe that translation is the best way to improve students’ English proficiency. And based on Std Dev (1.11), their beliefs in translation are diversified. The above mentioned beliefs represent the mainstream teaching practices in many high schools or at colleges where ethnic Mongolian teachers received English education (See Table 4.2).

On the other hand, consistent with the popular trends in foreign language pedagogy, they don’t believe in grammar teaching (Mean=2.73) and error correction (Mean=2.97). Instead, they strongly believe that communicative approaches should play a dominant role in English teaching (Mean=4.17). They are well aware of the importance of listening and
speaking activities in class, which further reinforces their belief that classrooms should be student-centered and students’ autonomy should be emphasized. Seen from Table 4.3, they strongly believe in the role of language use in English class (Mean=4.38). Their beliefs testify to the role of modern pedagogical theories, as more than 80 percent of them (N=60) have attended certain forms of teacher training programs from 2001 to 2005. After taking some in-service teacher education programs or reading some pedagogical theories, teachers draw on their understanding of teaching and learning principles in psychology, linguistics, second language acquisition, or education and try to apply them in the classrooms.

Table 4.2 The descriptive analysis of their traditional beliefs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Label</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Valid N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four skills are most important.</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English can be acquired through lots of pattern drills.</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation is most important.</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation determines the success of English learning.</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorizing good texts is very important.</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary learning is most important.</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ English competence can be best reflected in translation.</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 The descriptive analysis of popular beliefs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Label</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Valid N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom should be student-centered.</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative approaches are best to improve students’ speaking and listening competence.</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ errors should be corrected immediately.</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of English is most important.</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The most effective teaching method is to help students solve grammar problems.</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom activities should center on speaking and listening.</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers should instruct the lessons completely in English.</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture plays a vital role in English learning.</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ decisions should be based on students’ responses.</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, some of their beliefs about language teaching and learning need our careful examination. Firstly, they strongly believe that classroom activities should center on listening and speaking, and communicative approaches are most effective in improving students’ listening and speaking proficiency, but, according to Std Dev (.67), these diversified beliefs prove that some are still unsure as to whether these methods are applicable in real classes. Secondly, they have strong beliefs in the role of culture (Mean=4.08) and classroom decision making (Mean=4.33), which, unavoidably, arouses
the researcher’s interest in exploring whether these beliefs are consistent with their classroom practices. Thirdly, a discrepancy has been found in their beliefs about the use of English language. They agree or strongly agree that English use is of great importance (Mean=4.38), however, as to whether teachers should instruct the lessons completely in English, their belief is not that strong (Mean=3.27).

The above mentioned beliefs indicate that though, in many cases, teachers’ beliefs about language teaching and learning are covert and implicit in what they perform in class, it is these deeply-rooted beliefs rather than a particular way of teaching they have adopted that will determine their classroom practices. Besides, the data of the questionnaire reveal that about 50 percent of the participants have less than five years of teaching experiences. Their lack of on-the-job teaching experiences may lead to the confusion about the roles of both traditional and popular trends in foreign language teaching pedagogy, which will consequently affect their classroom practices.

4.3 Results and discussions of the qualitative data

4.3.1 Teachers’ individual beliefs

The findings of the qualitative data collected through observations and interviews are discussed, and Research Questions Two and Three are hopefully to be addressed in this part.

The data reveal that the participant teachers’ classroom decisions are profoundly influenced by the sources of their individual beliefs. Firstly, influenced by their own language learning experiences, Jack tends to implant culture knowledge into students in intensive reading class. Bob’s emphasis on pronunciation and memorizing English words is derived from the way his teacher of Mongolian nationality instructed Mongolian English beginners. Jane, due to her success in passing TEM-4, strongly believes in the effectiveness of motivating students to devote to English learning.

Secondly, their classroom decisions are influenced by their professional training experiences. These experiences introduce them to communicative approaches and develop in them beliefs in student-centeredness that are powerful enough to outweigh beliefs about the value of explicit grammar work. Borg (1998) in his study finds the powerful impact of the training program on teachers’ belief systems. This finding is also applicable in this study. The participant teachers have attended a certain form of teaching-related training program between the years of 2001 and 2005, and they, especially Bob and Jane admit the profound effect of this experience on their teaching.

Thirdly, in accordance with Marland (1987) and Almarza (1996), their classroom decisions are powerfully influenced by their on-the-job teaching experiences. For example, due to students’ lack of culture knowledge and their difficulty in understanding the text, Jack highlights the role of cultural background knowledge as well as some interesting episodes about the author and the text. Bob emphasizes the comparison between English and Mongolian pronunciation in class because ethnic Mongolian English beginners often confuse one with the other. Unlike Jack and Bob, Jane believes in the role of English immersion in teaching process. Therefore, she instructs the class in English and attaches
much importance to listening and speaking activities in class.

Apart from these, their personal experiences also have great influence on their decision making. According to Richardson (1996), personal experience plays a role in the formation of their beliefs, and therefore leads to the differences in their beliefs in teaching strategies and techniques. In this study, Jack is always strict with his students, due to his belief that class should be teacher-dominated as he received English education in the army. Bob’s emphasis on culture comparison is due to the great impact of his mother tongue on the target language which he had already realized when he was a student. Jane passed TEM-4 with great efforts, and thus she believes in the decisive role of hard work in her teaching.

The participant teachers’ decision makings are influenced by their individually held beliefs derived from their learning experiences, teacher training experiences, on-the-job teaching experiences and their personal experiences. Individuals generally grow comfortable with their existing beliefs, until they become part of their “self”, so that individuals seem to be identified and understood by the very nature of their beliefs and the habits they possess (Pajares, 1992). Their belief systems lead to the development of some principles, which are viewed as the sources of how they understand their responsibilities in class and implement their plans and make classroom decisions.

4.3.2 Teachers’ decision making process in the classroom
Consistent with the findings of Nunan (1992), Johnson (1992) and Ulichny (1996), the data of this study reveal that prior planning decisions provide a framework for the participant teachers’ interactive decisions which aim to promote students’ motivation and involvement. It is at the lesson level that student factors were of primary concern for them. Jack, Bob and Jane teach respectively senior English majors, Mongolian English beginners and intermediate Mongolian English majors, whose English proficiencies determine different task designs. Besides, they claim that student reactions to teachers in class, instead of students’ expectation of teaching approaches, have much influence on their classroom decision making. It indicates that they do not differ significantly in classroom instruction format or decision making process, though they show some differences in their emphasis on English teaching.

What’s more, their beliefs in English teaching and learning are based on the different roles they play in tasks. In this study, Jack acts as a transmitter of knowledge in class since he strongly believes that culture knowledge is effective in English teaching. Consistent with his beliefs in the importance of culture comparison, Bob serves as a guide or an organizer to describe tasks and organize whole-class activities. Differently, Jane plays a facilitative or monitoring role to motivate students to be actively involved in English activities that she views as the best learning style and strategy.

In summary, all of these roles have cultural dimensions, and are to some extent defined by the expectations of language teachers and students (Ellis, 1996). Their beliefs in instructional patterns, students’ reactions and teachers’ role are the major factors to affect their decision making process. This confirms that teachers are the final decision-makers and executors in the classroom. They bring their plans, goals, decisions and expectations
4.3.3 The relationship between teachers’ beliefs and decision making

In this study, the participant teachers’ beliefs claimed in the interviews are generally consistent with their classroom decisions. Although there are differences in how each of them approaches the lesson tasks, such differences in their beliefs are so slight that they can’t overshadow the holistic picture of their common beliefs. Their individual practices relate not only to claimed beliefs about teaching but also to accumulated (successful) experiences in using particular techniques and strategies in the classroom. This finding lends support to the views of researchers, such as Clandinin (1986), who argues that experiential knowledge and beliefs are central to the types of classroom decisions that teachers have made.

The central role that their beliefs play is evident not only in how the participant teachers organize classes and design lesson tasks, but most significantly in their approaches to instruction. Jack and Bob (the expert and experienced teachers) who consider culture and pronunciation to be a priority in instruction adopt a rule-based approach for their task design, whereas Jane (the novice teacher) is less concerned with grammar and vocabulary. Instead, she lays more stress on English use for communicative purposes. These findings suggest that they first select from a range of theoretical ideas which are correlated with their personal beliefs, and use the techniques they have found to be effective from experiences to meet their practical needs. In this sense, their theoretical ideas inform decision making rather than prescribe a particular approach or way of thinking.

Moreover, this study shows that there is a discrepancy between the participant teachers’ “espoused theories” (their expressed beliefs in the questionnaire) and “theories-in-use” (their justifications for their classroom decisions). On the one hand, their own reflection underlying their learning and teaching experiences can help them realize the discrepancy; on the other hand, espoused theories can be converted into theories-in-use and influence their decisions through involving them in the studies of language teaching and learning. However, almost all teacher training programs have ignored the differences of ethnic groups and their cultural root. Though the participant teachers receive teacher education and are exposed to popular pedagogical theories, they fail to convert these theories into real classrooms (like Jack and Bob). Therefore, to make professional training accessible to ethnic teachers, combining new ideas and perspectives with their culture and identity should be the first step in making changes in their classroom situations (Zhao, 2003).

5. Conclusions

5.1 The conclusive remarks

While a focus on the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and their classroom practices is not new in applied linguistics, the research on ethnic teachers’ beliefs and how these beliefs
affect their decision making is a new attempt. Instead of investigating teachers’ beliefs and their decision making from the qualitative perspective in traditional research, a different research paradigm is adopted in the present study, which is based on a quantitative (a questionnaire) and a qualitative (observations and interviews) approach and seeks to uncover the beliefs of a particular group—ethnic Mongolian EFL university teachers.

The researcher has found that ethnic Mongolian university EFL teachers stick to the well-established traditional theories and also show a strong concern in popular trends in foreign language pedagogy. Their classroom decisions are powerfully influenced by their individual beliefs derived from the sources of their learning experiences, teacher training experiences, on-the-job teaching experiences, and personal experiences. In addition, their claimed beliefs are generally consistent with their decision making in class, but there is a discrepancy between their “espoused theories” and “theories-in-use”.

The prominent feature of the study is that culture is a recurring theme in the participant teachers’ claims and justifications. It suggests that ethnic teachers have stronger awareness of both target language culture and their own culture since they are teaching and learning under particular cultural background. Thus, the present study tries to present an account of the pedagogical beliefs and decision making employed by ethnic Mongolian EFL university teachers, with the hope that teacher educators reassess their current concern from training in-service teachers in general to facilitating the development of ethnic teachers.

5.2 Implications of the study
Compared with early researches, the present study is a big step forward in the language teacher cognition field, for this study not only explores the relationship between ethnic teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices, but also deals with the implications of the research for the professional preparation and development of ethnic language teachers.

In particular, the study suggests that there is a pressing need for more empirical as well as a theoretical base for ethnic teacher development. Although the present research has nowhere exhausted the topic at issue, it does add an important dimension to our understanding of ethnic teacher education, which enables the educators to recognize that ethnic teachers’ beliefs are embodied in people and permeated with cultural concerns.

However, the limitations in this research area can’t be ignored. To better understand how ethnic teachers’ beliefs shape under their particular cultural background, longitudinal studies with a larger number of participants and a well-designed questionnaire are needed to depict a more holistic picture of their beliefs and classroom decisions.

References
A Study of Ethnic Mongolian University EFL Teachers’ Beliefs and Decision Making

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Appendix 1

蒙古族大学英语教师英语教学与学习理念问卷调查

各位老师:

本调查问卷的目的在于了解蒙古族大学英语教师的教学、学习理念与需求，为进一步搞好大学英语教师特别是少数民族大学英语教师的教育及发展提供实证研究的基础。感谢您的支持与合作！
A Study of Ethnic Mongolian University EFL Teachers’ Beliefs and Decision Making

第一部分：您的个人信息（请根据您的真实情况做出选择）

1. 年龄：
   A. 25岁以下  B. 26-40岁  C. 41-55岁  D. 55岁以上
2. 性别：
   A. 男  B. 女
3. 现任职称：
   A. 教授  B. 副教授  C. 讲师  D. 助教  E. 其它
4. 最后学历：
   A. 博士  B. 硕士  C. 学士  D. 专科
5. 在校所学专业属于：
   A. 师范类  B. 非师范类  C. 其它
6. 所教班级的人数为：
   A. 20-40人  B. 41-60人  C. 61-80人  D. 80人以上
7. 从事外语教学已有_年：
   A. 不足5年  B. 6-10年  C. 11-20年  D. 20年以上
8. 最后一次参加与教学有关的培训是：

第二部分：英语教学与学习理念

本部分的问题以句子形式表述，每个句子后面有五个数字代表了您对这个问题同意或不同意的程度：5=非常同意；4=同意；3=不清楚；2=不同意；1=非常不同意。请您根据自己的真实想法做出选择，并在相应的数字上画圈，谢谢！

5 4 3 2 1

1. 英语教学中最重要的是教会学生听说读写的技能
2. 对于学习者来说，英语是一门容易掌握语法结构的语言
3. 课堂教学应以听说练习为主
4. 语音在英语学习中最重要
5. 能有机会使用英语是最重要的
6. 作为一种交流工具，英语可以在社会环境中自然习得
7. 英语课堂应该以学生为中心，教师只是个组织者
8. 分组练习是课堂上最有效的口语练习方法
9. 课堂上应让学生自己选择话题，并用英语讨论
10. 学生使用英语出现错误时，教师应立即纠正
11. 英语可以通过大量的句型操练习得
12. 背诵英语课文对学好英语很重要
13. 决定英语学习成功的最重要因素是学习动机
14. 英语课堂上最有效的教学方法是帮助学生解决语法问题
15. 教师要根据课堂上学生的反应采取相应的对策
16. 英语学习中词汇学习是最重要的
17. 文化在英语学习过程中起着至关重要的作用
18. 在英语教学中，教师应完全使用英语授课
19. 翻译能力最能反映学生的英语水平
20. 掌握单词词义的最好办法是记住它的中文意思
21. 交际法最能培养学生的听说能力
22. 英语学习者所犯的大多数错误都是由于母语干扰造成的
（改编自Johnson 1992; Chen & Liu, 2004; Mu, 2004）

Appendix 2

The pre-observation interview scheme

1. Can you recall your English learning experiences at school? Do they have any impact on your own view of teaching?
2. What do you think are the effective ways of English learning? Why do you think so?
3. What are your major considerations in your teaching plan? What do you normally do?
4. Could you please explain what you normally do in your lesson? What are the major factors that influence your decisions?
5. Can you practice what you believe in the classroom? Why or why not?
(Extracted from Zhang, 2004)

Appendix 3

The post-observation interview scheme

1. Have you accomplished your teaching plan?
2. During the class, you said that..., what did you mean by...?
3. Why did you choose to do this?
4. Is that what you have planned to do?
5. How would you explain this?
6. Is there anything in class that you feel you could improve later?
(Extracted from Zhang, 2004)