Exploring Planning Decisions and Interactive Decisions in EFL Teaching Practice

——*A Multi-case Study of 2 Chinese EFL Teachers and 2 Native English Teachers*

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Abstract

An empirical examination of two categories of teachers' planning decisions and interactive decisions was implemented to gain an overall understanding of the teachers' concerns with lesson plan, lesson framework and processing teaching tasks. And the investigation was intended to understand how these data affected their pedagogical decisions and the underlying factors affecting their planning and instructions. It can be identified that these interactive decisions all four teachers made were almost consistent with their planning decisions, though discrepancy between them may exist, and that a sound planning would positively boost teachers' soft power of decision making in their teaching practice.

Keywords: Planning decision, Interactive decisions, EFL teaching, Soft power

1. Introduction

"Decision making", as a term, first appeared in American management literature in the 1930s. According to Hastie (1994), human make judgments and decisions based on their wishes (utility, personal values, goals, results etc.) and beliefs (expectations, knowledge, tools etc.) in the processes of choosing actions. While in the field of education, there are different levels and areas of teachers' participating in decision making, in this study, the classroom level of teachers' decision-making is concerned. The content of teachers' decision making is related to several layers of items, including curriculum, teaching method, classroom management and evaluation of students. In the classroom teaching, teacher decision-making is regarded as some sort of "professional autonomy" and "self-specific performance" (Jiang, 2017), and the purposes for teachers' instructional decisions are basically to achieve the target of education, promote the development of students and teacher professional development.

Decision-making in language teaching has been identified as a framework to provide a cognitive map of the teacher's mental world, and a process to implement his/her teaching intentions in the teaching practice. As a conceptual framework, John and Richard (1979) divided teachers' decision making into two categories, i.e. non-instant decisions and instant decisions in terms of teachers' or observers' feeling of the time flow. While in the book *Teacher decision-making: successful teachers' teaching practice*, Marvin (1991) classified teachers' decision making into three types: planning decision, practicing decisions and class management decisions according to the teaching action in time arrangement. Similar to Marvin, Woods (1996) asserted that teachers' decision making should contain a complete and circular process, including planning decisions, decisions about implementation and evaluative decisions. And in the book *Dynamics of effective teaching,* Wilen (2000) stated that teachers' decision making consists of three parts: planning decisions, interactive decisions and evaluative decisions. As far as the research continuity and convenience is concerned, the classification of planning decisions, interactive decisions and evaluative decisions is adopted in this study. And different dimensions of planning and interactive instruction have been widely explored in the general literature from the perspective of curriculum and instruction as well in the field of ESL/EFL teaching context (Clark and Peterson 1986). While few studies have comparatively explored the

instructional decisions between non-native teachers and native teachers in EFL teaching context,. This study seeks to contribute further to our understanding of teacher decision making in the EFL classroom.

2. Research Questions

All teaches plan. No teacher enters the classroom without having an idea of what to present. And sound planning definitely contributes to good teaching and affects teacher's managements in the classroom teaching. Just as Nunan (1992) pointed out, the teachers' prior planning decisions provided a structure and framework for their interactive decisions, and the majority of the interactive decisions made by the teachers were connected with classroom management and organization. Shavelson and Stern (1981) also stated that analyzing the instructional decision-making and mechanism behind instructional plans, teaching processes and the explicit or implicit factors affecting teaching behavior would be basically conducive to the improvement of teacher development. Planning decisions generally provide a framework or structure for approaching a lesson and help the teacher go through the lesson in advance, and this framework will substantially facilitate teacher's response to students' understanding and participation, which will then help the teachers' redirecting the lesson. Planning decisions are the starting point of a teaching practice and structuring the class, but it can't determine what will happen in the actual classroom because of the dynamic nature of the teaching practice. In the teaching process, teachers are constantly confronted with making decisions in accordance with the specific situation of the ongoing class. That is what so called interactive decisions. In this case study, the researcher attempts to explore the relationship between teachers' planning decisions and interactive decisions, focusing on two categories of university EFL teachers and native English teachers, the article addresses the following questions:

• What are two groups of teachers' planning decisions and interactive decisions in terms of tasks and participation structure in their teaching?

• Is there any discrepancy between two categories of teachers' planning decisions and interactive decisions?

• What, if any, influential factors affect two categories of teachers' planning decisions and interactive decisions?

In exploring these phenomena among a sample of 2 Chinese EFL teachers and 2 native English teachers in two public research universities in China, we try to find out and analyze the similarities and differences between two categories of teachers' decision practice, and the implicit and explicit factors affecting their decision-making, which will surely give an insight into the mechanism of teachers' instructional decision making, and the discrepancy or continuity, if existed, between two categories of teachers' planning decisions and interactive decisions , and hope to provide some ideas for our teacher development.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

The case focuses on two Chinese EFL teachers and two native English teachers at two public research universities in China who taught the same level of students (second year students), which provided a paralleled basis for comparison in terms of students' variables within and across two institutions. For the analyses of four instructors' decision-making processes, we also use a concurrent mixed methods design that includes both interviews and classroom observations (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002).

3.2 Instruments

The design for the study is a qualitative case study, which is an intensive analysis of a single bounded unit (Yin, 2008). Teachers' pedagogic decisions are embedded in their thoughts, behavior or action, and the process of decision making is not always directly accessible to them. Teachers may find it hard to articulate what is really an instructional decision underlying their plans, idea or practice, therefore, data collection is based upon a sequence of observation, survey and particular information elicitation techniques. Data collection for this study occurred over four months. The sources of data included questionnaire-based survey, pre-observation interview, daily non-participant observation of these four Chinese and native English teachers' 30 classes, 23 after-class interviews, 8 scheduled interviews, audiotapes of 28 class sessions, and stimulated recall reports of these audiotapes. Each teacher was given an approximately one-hour pre-observation interview to establish a profile of his educational background, reasons for being a teacher, teaching experience and general views about FL teaching. All these interviews were conducted as a semi-structured conversation (Kvale, 1996) that focused on several particular themes without being rigidly structured. And four teachers' observation of teaching included four consecutive one-and-a-half-hour classes with complete lesson units which were part of regularly scheduled classes, as recommended by Van Lier (1998). And these pedagogic practice were presented with some "key instructional episodes"—classroom incidents that generated

questions about the rationale for the teacher's approach to the teaching (Borg, 1998). The kinds of planning and interactive decisions made by two categories of teachers were identified in terms of one dimension of teacher's decision making practice, i.e., tasks and participation structure. And these key instructional episodes in teachers' lesson tasks were approaching in terms of participation structure and language focus on task grids (see figure 1). Smith (1996) pointed out, in analyzing task implementation, participation structure and language focus (accuracy and fluency) were considered as two focal dimensions of the task grid emerged from the L2 literature. The task grid contains two dimensions of their lesson tasks: one is accuracy or fluency in terms of language learning orientation, the other is teacher-centered or student-centered in terms of organizational format.
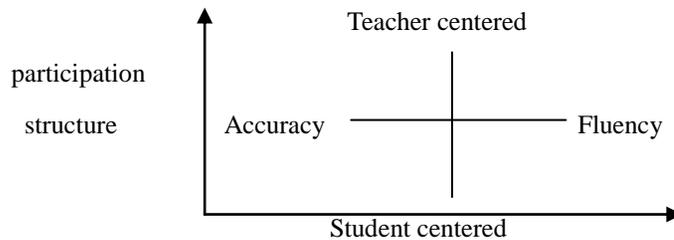

Figure 1. Task grid (from Smith, 1996)

4. Results and Findings

This empirical study was conducted in two categories of teachers, including two Chinese EFL teachers and two native English teachers in two institutions. Detailed descriptions of these teachers' perceptions in the way lesson was planed and implemented were developed on the basis of many observations and interviews in and out of the language classrooms.

We analyzed the data for this study in two stages. First, we analyzed the planning and instructional practices of four instructors to investigate the specific processing of instructional decisions in preparing for and implementing their instructional tasks, which is the core of teacher's decision-making soft power. Second, we analyzed all 30 interview transcripts to identify any underlying factors by which these pedagogical decisions influenced (or not) their teaching practices.

4.1 Native English Teacher's Planning Decisions and Interactive Decisions

Teachers' planning practice contains many dimensions and is shaped by many elements, teacher's planning decision is absolutely correlated with their corresponding teaching action in the classroom activities. And the nature of a plan differs widely from teacher to teacher. Teachers differ in the extent to which they use lesson plans and in the kinds of strategies they employ. Some teachers "develop macro-plans or overall goals for a course or a class" (Richards & Lockhart, 1996) so that they had a global sense of the whole term's work, which is mostly a curriculum-level decision. A mode of working with planning at the curriculum stage by native English teachers in the current teaching setting involved the interpretation of Chinese students, materials and the total Chinese cultural context. As native English teachers, English is their native language. They don't have any problem or frustration on language or expressing their ideas. While working in an EFL context, the most essential problems they are confronted with in their lesson planning and the first day's teaching, in particular, is how to interpret and assess the group of students who may not comprehend or understand their program or directions completely, just like what Dr. John (Note 1) met with in his teaching:

While, I had spent the entire break, the holiday, I mean the entire break to make a plan this semester for the second year student… The problem was I couldn't explain well to them how this whole situation was, because it is the language problem, the conceptual problem, and unfortunately the language, the metal-base of language I have is extremely conceptual, is many levels above theirs, and it just wasn't working, I have been back to say, oh, it wasn't working, they have to go a little more structured program, so it is my fault not to adequately evaluate their levels. I don't blame them at all. I should take the responsibility. (EI) (Note 2)

Even if Dr. John had designed a semester-long teaching plan for his students, while in his practice of teaching, he found that his program didn't work because of the inadequacy of the students' meta-language, and he had not adequately evaluated their levels and language proficiency, which could be confirmed in his lesson observed even the class was under his control after he modified his original teaching plan.

Episode 1

John: Questions, are you going to ask foreigners to find more about their culture? Yeah, you?

S1: How do you entertain the guests from the foreign countries?

J: How do you entertain the guests from the foreign countries? Ok, what would that tell you about culture?

S1: Maybe the answer is … en … (can't continue)

J: Ok, go ahead, think, think.

S1: Maybe will show the interesting places to show…(interrupted by John)

J: So, let me say by this, if you ask them how to entertain foreigners, they might tell you more about their own culture.

J: So, how about you?

S2: I think, … eating with them.

J: Eating with them.

S2: And go to their home.

J: Go to their home, and eating with them, right? And what would that tell you?

S2: I think chatting with them, chatting something at their home.

J: Ok, so, you are going to find out about how they eat, such thing is culture, eating. In New Mexico, we eat a kind of hamburger. That sounds disgusted, we really do. We have special bread in the world, or something. So that will tell you something about that part of their culture, I should give you a chance to talk formally with them, Ok, understand, understand, understand. (in a humorous way) what about you?…

S4: What do you think of general gap? (another student helps and says, "generation gap")

J: Generation gap. That is a very important question. So what would that tell you, if you ask somebody what do they think about generation gap or is there generation gap. (no answer, just whisper, for a few seconds) I'll help you. That tell you about social structure, and about younger people's position in society, and it is always one of the divisions in the culture or in society, young and old, male and female. That is it. Ok, Somebody else? (EO)

From this scenario, we could find the students could not completely comprehend the underlying meaning of John's questions, so John had to answer these questions by himself and explain the intended meaning which should have been figured out by the students. When he realized the dilemma and tried to find some way to reconcile it, he modified his planning and teaching approach slightly, the implementation contradiction between planning decisions and interactive decisions is widespread in language teaching classroom, and the way teacher coordinate these discrepancy is an evidence of teaching expertise that some experienced teachers adopt in decision making, which can only be acquired in teaching practice. Therefore, the native English teacher in Chinese teaching context wanted to incorporate teaching goals or instructional objectives into the teaching practice, the appropriate assessment of the student's language level was the first issue they should be concerned about. In addition, giving precise directions and making sense of the overall goal were also crucial in planning a lesson. The reason Dr. John added could further explain why his plan could not go through in his classroom practice:

The other is to the directions, and how to complete the task, they did not understand the overall goal, so they couldn't visualize the big picture. One or two, I mean, can figure out what I meant, but it just couldn't work, because it wasn't enough, … you know three or four out of six would understand the meaning forward, and then explained to others, they didn't understand completely. So that is not why it wouldn't go on, too. In addition, this kind of student-centered teaching is too far beyond the meta-language base of the students, so I have to change it. (EI)

Dr. John's perception of his planning implementation in classroom practice revealed vividly how a planning decision promoted a teacher's source of knowledge for decision making. Although he intended to utilize the overall goal to make the students visualize the holistic picture of the lesson organization and was concerned with the developmental progression of the course to meet his overall objective, the accomplishment of the task was not so easy. A significant amount of disruptive student behavior stemmed from students' not knowing how they proceeded or what they were to do in the task-orientation teaching. They needed help to complete their work, so John spontaneously switched his teaching plan and the way of teaching. Then a key step in planning a lesson at the curriculum stage was to make regular reference to the course goals or objectives to guide and organize lessons and provide clear directions for the activities in which students would be engaged.

Another teacher named David in this category who worked at "micro-level" planning without necessarily making regular reference to the instructional objectives or goals was observed to find out how planning decisions affected and correlated with his interactive decisions in classroom teaching. He tended to state objectives in terms of what the teacher would do and what language content was to be presented. David described his planning in the following way:

In my planning, one of the most important parts is preparing the material, that will give different information or some knowledge, and then from there they will apply the knowledge. When I have my material, I teach some kinds of concepts, for instance, one of the lessons I am working on is to teach management class, is on business ownership, different types of business ownership, so they will learn about sorts of ownership, the first is one owner; then they have to learn about partnership, which is two owners; they will also learn about incorporate company, while it is shared by the share holders, so we learn about three types of ownerships, then I do exercises in the class, so they get to recognize, … therefore, from this lesson, they will understand much better ideas of business reform, and also how their business are owned. That is well. So that is an example of what I want to teach, I've taken the concept, I teach the concept, and I have them applied the concept. (EI)

The following lesson observed was designed by David for the sophomore in the reading course of international business. The topic of the unit was about human resource management. The learners had previewed the materials before class.

Episode2

David firstly gives some warm-up questions and tries to make them relevant to the students' everyday life. Then he asks if there are any difficulties in the vocabulary list and give some explanations to some words raised by the students. And then he gives a detailed interpretation to the reading materials through diagram and pictures on the computer screen, meanwhile, a series of questions concerning the lesson content are posed to check the students' understanding. The next stage of the lesson switches from whole-class lecture to team work. For developing speaking ability and understanding the concept, he uses the process approach. The group activity presents the learners with a task of utilizing the knowledge and the conception in their reading, which becomes increasingly difficult, preparing them for a more challenging goal of using some tactics to solve some real-life problems at the end of the lesson. Each group is given a task and the ultimate success of the group work depends on the participation of each group. As an outcome of the group work they present their ideas individually, which makes the evaluation phase far easier and visible to the whole class. (EO)

David's approaching his teaching assignment has confirmed that he was more concerned with the content-focused planning and tried to promote a communicative language use (defined in this study as fluency-focused), he was much more likely to visualize lessons as clusters or sequences of activities or teaching routines, and he would blend content with activity and generally focused on doing things for given group of students rather than to meet particular objectives, that is, teacher's interactive decisions in classroom teaching were embedded in his teaching belief of learning by doing and practicing. Surely his prior planning decisions provided a structure and framework for the actual interactive decisions. In the classroom, he had well-developed mental representations of his EFL students, teaching tasks, expected problems and solutions.

From two native English teachers' classroom observation, it could be easily realized that native English teachers were different in the way they approached their classroom teaching, understood and represented problems, and in the strategies they chose to solve problem.

4.2 Chinese EFL Teachers' Planning Decisions and Interactive Decisions

Comparatively how do Chinese EFL teachers' planning decisions influence their interactive decisions in actual teaching practice is significant because Chinese EFL teachers face the added complication of interpreting the total culture of English and understanding the basic knowledge of foreign language instruction. Some instruments or techniques in lesson planning that had reliability and validity for native English teachers might not be assumed reliable and valid for non-native teachers. The finding of the research revealed that either at macro-plan level or micro-plan level, most teachers' planning for instruction was inclined to be bound to the prescribed teaching syllabus issued by the higher educational institutions or the guide to college English teaching by National Ministry of Education. For example, one teacher (T1) teaching literature described her approach to planning as follows:

First of all I have to make a careful study of the syllabus because it is a teaching guideline based on the values and needs of the society, adhering to state standards and district guides, and with a scope and sequence attuned to learner development. Within this framework, I try to integrate the course objective into the activities and visions of the class. You know, the syllabus and the guide determine the goals of education or the objectives of teaching, and influence the student developmental progress. (EI)

Basing lesson plan on the prescribed guideline typically is of features of Chinese EFL teachers in planning for instruction. This could be verified in another teacher's (T2) description of her lesson planning:

In my planning the teaching syllabus is inevitably an influential factor being concerned, because the evaluation of student outcome is largely determined by the standardized examinations in which every language student will take part in China. As we all know, the professional test Band Four or Eight is, to a large extent, a standardized examination adhering to the teaching syllabus and curriculum guideline. Whatever format I take to organize the lesson content in my preparing for teaching, I should firstly make a thorough study of the course guideline. (EI)

Chinese EFL teacher's lessons observed was mainly conducted in a whole-class model though some of them may offer a few seatwork activities to try to enhance the quality of learning time. However, methods of carrying out most of the group activities were routinely followed as a cookbook of behaviors. It seemed that the group discussion was processed for the sake of discussion, which didn't build up the natural logical relation with the lecture session of the class. Though all teachers in their planning were intended to make their classroom instruction lively and energetic, the learning climate in their classroom was relatively stuffy and tiring. Episode 3 below was a minor case.

Episode 3

After the teacher (T2) tells some information about exam, a warm-up question is asked and no one answers voluntarily, thus she appoints several students to share their opinion. Then two questions concerning Chinese food are posed on the blackboard to ask them to discuss in groups. And she emphasizes that if she hears anyone speak Chinese when discussing, he or she will be fined to give a long speech of food, this made all students smile. The group work maintains approximately 15 minutes. And then a representative in each group is chosen to report. Finally, she gives a brief comment on their presentations. The next stage of the lesson switches to whole-class lecture, and the teaching is mainly attached to the textbook, generally, when come to a paragraph, she firstly asks a student to read it and gives the main idea of the paragraph, then she will analyze it sentence by sentence, occasionally some students will be asked to make a sentence with the word she illustrates or answer some questions. The remaining session maintains the same teaching style. (EO)

Though the small-group activities were employed at the beginning of the lesson, it was hard to build a cohesion between the small-group activities and the latter lecture part. Within this framework the teacher monitored the whole classroom instruction and the students could hardly construct their own meanings except following the flow of instruction. However, the teacher had her own interpretation of the way she structured her lesson:

You know, all my students will attend Band Four exam this semester, which always puts me under pressure. It is certain that my teaching will be bound to the textbook and teaching program, because the exam is purposeful for the apprehension of vocabulary and grammar rules rather the communicative interaction though it is language study. Surely I will take the student's oral ability into account as far as possible, so I do some group discussion in my teaching. However, the urgent job at present is considering how to make the students pass the examination. (EI)

This extract vividly illustrates the fact that the teacher's approach to instruction is inevitably a compromise of "teacher's vision of teaching" (Johnson 1996) and various teaching contexts.

Another Chinese EFL teacher (T1) ever co-taught with a foreign teacher Jon in the literature class. Her way of structuring the lesson was quite different from Jon's, and they also had much controversy on many issues when co-teaching, even though they both agreed that their teaching benefited from each other and different teaching styles were definitely conducive to students' learning. Her (T1) opinion of the teacher-centered approach to teaching and perception of Jon's approach to literature provide an in-depth insight into the inner thought of her way of structuring the class:

I can't compare with Jon, because it is markedly less efficient when I employ the method of group discussion in my lesson. Yet he is not concerned about the efficiency. He doesn't care whether the content in the textbook is involved in his instruction, however, I am confined with the teaching guideline, you know, I have to adhere to the guideline. It is impossible for me to just obtain some complementary materials without taking pedagogic knowledge content into account. Right? I have to consider how much content I impart to them in each session, while he, occasionally can take a period to talk about a piece of poem when he is indulged in the artistic conception. (EI)

It was clear that some factors in planning were bound to affect Chinese EFL teacher' interactive decisions in classroom teaching, while teaching syllabus, teaching materials and examination would impose a certain structure and regularity on Chinese EFL teacher's planning for their instruction. A constant concern of the teaching syllabus and the examination-orientation at the preparation stage would, to a great extent, affect the approach to planning, the arrangement or organization of lesson content and classroom activities. As for non-native English teachers, the textbook

was hence the primary source of teaching ideas and materials in their planning and teaching. Additionally, the extent of English language teaching activities worldwide could hardly be sustained without the help of the present generation of textbooks, esp. in foreign language context. So it was not surprising that most Chinese EFL teachers capitalized on their availability of these textbooks in their planning. This teacher (T1) articulated his view of textbook use as follows:

Well, the textbook and the teacher's manual are surely my primary teaching resource in my lesson plan, you know, good textbooks can provide lively and interesting practice activities, a sensible progression of language items and a structured language program, and information about the language is also systematically organized. So a culturally appropriate textbook is really compatible with the curriculum and can provide the basis for a comprehensive language course. In addition, I can make a significant use of some supplementary materials and exercises that I prepare myself if the textbook is not appropriate. (EI)

Though this woman teacher (T2) had a little bit different point of view about the use of textbooks, she was also largely dependent on the role of textbook. She said:

I found it rather challenging to try and find a way to fit the textbook into my lesson plan. The book was indeed a timing-saving resource for it provided structure to a learning program and direction to lesson. Nonetheless, to make the book a potentially stimulating and interesting educational resource and not to have my students feel tiring and boring, I had to be creative and original in using these source materials. (EI)

The dominant role of textbooks within teachers' planning for instruction was reflected in the bureaucratic apparatus that had evolved in many situations to place and maintain textbooks in present language teaching settings. Thus, in foreign language context Chinese EFL teacher's interactive decisions in classroom teaching was largely constrained by the teacher's perception of the context, the teaching materials and their meta-language in planning.

Planning decisions and interactive decisions are certainly correlated, these interactive decisions all four teachers made were almost consistent with their planning decision, even if there existed some sort of discrepancy or in-continuity between two layers of decisive practices, so teachers would modify some procedures or details in the process of implementing teaching tasks and arrangements. Native English teachers and Chinese EFL teachers' knowledge systems, beliefs, attitudes, values, and experience shaped their understanding of teaching, and evolved into their planning and instructional decisions in the actual teaching practice, While these implicit beliefs and principles underlying in their decision making process may substantially result in differences in the nature of their teaching, and what influential factors may affect two categories to teachers' planning and instructional decisions deserves further exploration.

5. Discussions

In practice, the analysis of the data began after the first observation had been completed and continued throughout the period of fieldwork, with each successive stage of data collection being influenced by the analysis of the data already collected. This ongoing process enabled the researcher to check whether sufficient and appropriately focused information was being gathered before completion of the fieldwork. Based on these data, several in-depth factors affecting two categories of teachers' decisions could be highlighted here

5.1 The Role of Teacher Belief in Pedagogic Decisions

Teacher beliefs about language teaching and learning appear to be the critical factor influencing the types of decisions these teachers made. The central role that beliefs play was evident not only in how these teachers organized and planned their lessons, but more significantly in their approaches to classroom instruction. While teacher decisions were guided by a coherent set of personal beliefs, and these beliefs evolve into two categories of teachers' planning and instructional decisions. It can be identified that these teachers' application of teaching theory was eclectic. This theoretic selection was particularly evident when relating teachers' decision making to fluency- or accuracy-orientation in task implementation, and student- or teacher-centered instruction in participation structures, that is, individual teacher decisions did not wholly abide by one or the other, but in fact a combination of the two. Native English teachers who were more communication-orientated also adopted the whole-class instruction strategy in their classrooms, while some Chinese EFL teachers utilized the small-group activities as well, despite they considered the grammar and accuracy to be a priority in instructional goal. Yet the extent to which Chinese EFL teachers' employing small-group or pair activities was greatly different from that of native English teachers.

5.2 The Role of Contextual Factors in Decision Making

5.2.1 Administrative Factors

Both institutions provide explicit course guideline and prescribed teaching materials for Chinese EFL teachers, and they are always under the pressure of examination preparation. A very important assessment level for Chinese EFL teachers was to see the percentage of students' passing a series of standardized achievement tests. The constraints of institutions and exam-oriented teaching style surely established and maintained the teachers' roles and their relationship with students in terms of a certain degree of authority and distance, so their instruction centered on covering the assigned material efficiently and thoroughly. In the vast majority of the classes observed, the teachers dominated the classrooms, and their strong adherence to a prescribed lesson material helped them to ensure students' understanding, and to maintain rapport and control.

Within the same teaching context, native English teachers had a little bit more freedom to practice their teaching ideas and make instructional decisions, and, to some extent, relieved themselves from the pressure of having to think of the teaching syllabus issued by the Ministry of Education, curriculum by the high education institution and a variety of standardized proficiency tests. They worked in a relatively free setting and they could, to a great extent decide on their teaching materials and the way how to structure their classes. The different influence that the administrative factors exerted on native English teachers and Chinese EFL teachers may differ in how to approach their instruction and make pedagogic decisions.

5.2.2 Collegial Factors

A contextual factor that appears to be a significant setting difference was the traditional teaching culture in each institution. In most cases, the collegial collaboration between Chinese EFL teachers existed, which involved both informal conferencing about courses as well as sharing of course materials. In this case, the influence of other teachers was considerable, the experienced teachers, in particular, exerted influence on the other teachers to conform to the set routines and practices in an institution. Such factors "encourage a safe strategy of sticking close to prescribed materials and familiar teaching approaches. … teachers would naturally be led back toward a conservative teaching approach to align themselves with the characteristics of the existing teaching context" (Richard & Pennington 1998). As for native English teachers, they did not have to abide by these traditions, and there were little interaction between them and Chinese EFL teachers, so they were not so sensitive to the traditional teaching culture in Chinese educational system.

5.2.3 Student Characteristics

The underlying cultural reason why Chinese students are reluctant to participate in the small-group activities has been articulated in a series of works (Hsu 1981; Hudson-Ross &Dong 1990; Herbert 1988). With the Confucian tradition and the collectivism-orientated value system, all students in one class are expected to maintain the same level of achievement, they learn through cooperation, and they are reluctant to evaluate themselves above others. In this way, they place the good of the group above their own self-interest, and thus this collectivism-orientated value system makes them reluctant to present their ideas or opinion openly in the classroom or in the group activities. Student's inactive involvement was evidently a frustration for the teacher to try out their teaching ideas and carry out the classroom activities, which surely had an impact on two categories of interactive decisions.

5.3 The Role of Experience in Decision Making

Teachers' prior experience is no doubt another important factor which strongly affects teacher's decision making. As Lortie (1975) has demonstrated that the teacher's models of teaching are strongly affected by their own experience as students or teachers. This, in Chinese school system, generally means a heavy emphasis on textbooks, examination preparation, and an expectation of teacher control in the classroom teaching. Thus Chinese EFL teachers' pedagogical decisions would therefore be likely to be affected by their accumulated learning or teaching experience, which they had in common with other teachers.

Native teachers' vast experience as learners was established in their own culture. Their peculiar experiential knowledge immersed in their own culture evidently shaped what they did in the language classroom and was in turn shaped by their current teaching experience, they had internalized many of their own teachers' thoughts and behaviors, which certainly exerted a tremendous influence on their beliefs of how language should be learned and taught. Then their instructional decisions were largely different from those of Chinese EFL teachers', though they might modify some of their teaching beliefs in response to the teaching contexts in China.

5.4 The Role of Cultural Factors in Decision Making

Whatever decisions a person makes depend on his/her values, actually, the teaching practice is saturated with values, both explicitly and implicitly. Values are therefore deeply-held psychological constructs which affect these teachers' decisions and actions in the face of value conflicts. As far as native English teachers are concerned, their attitudes derived from their particular cultural backgrounds influence everything they do in their language teaching; their basic conceptions of instruction place a high value on individual success as well as collaborative spirit. So they would focus more on individual learner creativity and involvements in independent learning. While the responsibilities for their own learning were also advocated in their instruction. These differences in cultural assumptions about teaching and the role of teacher lead them to a certain degree of frustration of minds and practices, and therefore they would adopt a sort of teaching approach which accommodated students' needs and their own perception of EFL instruction.

As for Chinese EFL teachers, it may be proposed that any attempt at providing access to their inner thoughts and effecting a change in their corresponding attitudes and beliefs can be best brought about by examining and fine-tuning the values they subscribe to. Chinese EFL teachers were growing up within the Confucian tradition, and the processes of learning and teaching were greatly influenced by their home culture. This hierarchical relationship determines that the teacher must always act as an authoritative figure and be more dominant in making decisions about what is going on in the classroom. That is the reason why Chinese EFL teachers' pedagogic decisions were approximately similar, though some of them might plus some new teaching ideas and modify their instruction slightly.

6. Conclusions

The planning and instructional options a teacher employed reflected the teacher's beliefs and understanding about language teaching and learning, and were largely coherent with the teacher's philosophy of education in the classroom teaching. In exploring two categories of teachers' decisions of planning, the data indicated that native English teachers were more concerned with the total culture of English and the applicability of the language knowledge in their planning. They are more sensitive to the mutual understanding between Chinese students and themselves in carrying out their teaching plans, which has a tremendous impact on the promotion of their soft power in classroom teaching. Confronted with the additional complication of understanding the language itself, Chinese EFL teachers were more bound up with the teaching syllabus, curriculum and textbook in planning and instruction, they were always under the pressure of standardized examinations and the constraints of the administrative apparatus, therefore, a better understanding of these educational factors in planning and instructions would absolutely enhance their soft power of decision making in teaching. In sum, it can be identified that there may exist some conflict between teachers' planning decisions and interactive decisions, while the discrepancy in their practice seemed not to matter, and a sound planning would positively nourish teachers' soft power of decision making in their teaching practice. At other time we are very conscious of the limitations of this study, of our boldness in trying to compare only two Chinese EFL teachers and two western teachers respectively and their instruction in the EFL teaching context. We hope in the future to extend this work to a great variety of contexts and levels. However, we think the effort has been worthwhile, in that this paper provides us with a place to discover the action in which teachers can reflect and modify their practice, and more questions about classroom foreign language learning and teaching which need to be addressed in further in-depth studies.

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Notes

Note 1. Here we would like to present the native English teachers with their real names, for the completion of this paper is impossible without their participation, I am expressing my heartfelt thanks for their warmhearted help.

Note 2. Reference to data follow these conventions: S1, S2, SS, and so on refers to individual student and groups of students; T1, T2, TS, and so on refer to individual and groups of teachers; EO refers to the observation data; EI refers to interview data.