

## Original Paper

# Characterized Features of English Teachers' Curriculum Understanding in Senior High Schools

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### Abstract

*The in-depth promotion of the new curriculum reform and the requirement of the fundamental task of building morality and cultivating people have triggered more attention to the issue of "teachers' curriculum understanding" in curriculum field in China. Entering into the curriculum world of front-line English teachers in senior high schools, the researcher found that English teachers' curriculum understanding was often inconsistent at conceptual and practical levels, which aptly illustrated the complexity of English teachers' curriculum understanding in senior high schools. In this study, the practical behaviors of English teachers' curriculum understanding in senior high schools are sorted out and analyzed according to certain criteria, in an attempt to find a more reasonable curriculum understanding for English teachers.*

### Keywords

*characterized features, curriculum understanding, English teachers*

## 1. Introduction

Human existence is the existence of understanding, human life is the life of understanding, understanding is the condition of human existence, and "everyone must be understanding at the same time of self-understanding" (Jin, 2001). However, due to the fact that each person's understanding perspective, understanding ability, and understanding intention are not the same, behavioral activities generated by understanding will have various presentations in different subjects, therefore understanding has become "fickle and cunning," making it difficult for people to grasp. This is also true for the curriculum understanding of English teachers in senior high schools. Teachers at different stages of professional development, with different self-consciousness and "prejudice", "prepossession", "pregrasp", are at different stages of understanding English curriculum, and make more or less

differences in their understanding of English curriculum, which ultimately leads to vast distinctions in terms of what they understand, how they understand and what they understand among English teachers.

## 2. Subjectivity and Differences of English Teachers

A century ago, Dewey proposed that education is life and education is growth, meaning that the process of education is also the process of children's life and growth. If we take care of teachers from the same perspective, the process of education is also a process of caring for life and growth of teachers individually and collectively. "Whoever is endowed with sound judgment does not judge concrete things from an ordinary viewpoint" (Gadamer, 1999). Understanding produces a meaningful connection between a person and the world in which he exists, and understanding always unfolds in individual horizon, reflecting the subjectivity of life. English teachers' curriculum understanding in senior high schools is their proactive behaviors to ascribe realistic significance to English curriculum. Curriculum is an extremely complex system, full of numerous complicated curriculum affairs and relationship problems. English teachers rely on individual life world, realistic circumstances and cultural accumulation, through personalized interpretation, resolution, filtration and meaning construction of the curriculum. They express and interpret their own experiences and understandings in unique individual language, placing them in the current context and thus constituting English teachers' current understanding horizon. This process not only manifests the subjectivity of English teachers' curriculum understanding, but also reflects the differences of teachers' curriculum understanding.

Differences in teachers' individual factors determine variations in their "pre-understanding" of the curriculum, which is precisely the existence of individualized and heterogeneous teachers' curriculum understanding (Zhang, 2010). The lack of subjectivity in English teachers' curriculum understanding in senior high schools will inevitably lead to the homogenization of curriculum understanding, resulting in the phenomenon of "one lesson for different teachers being much of a muchness", which is also a response to the mechanical restoration of the curriculum. Each teacher's life background, professional competences, interests, and character traits are different, determining that teachers carry out and conduct the curriculum understanding from different perspectives, thus forming their different curriculum concepts, curriculum orientations, curriculum behaviors, and the final curriculum effects.

English teachers' curriculum understanding of senior high schools provides a communication foundation for exerting the subjectivity of individual teachers and narrowing the differences among teacher groups, as well as making joint efforts in the pursuit of ideal educational outcomes. Over the past decade of curriculum reform, English teachers from senior high schools have changed their previous understanding and concepts of curriculum, actively embraced new changes, gladly accepted new challenges, attempted to transform the role of English teachers in curriculum, and strived to be researchers and creators of the curriculum. However, there are still many teachers still passively coping or only mentally accepting the concepts advocated by the curriculum reform. In their curriculum practices, they neither actively explore the advantages of teachers as curriculum subjects or delve into

the potential innovations of curriculum instruction, nor reflect on and criticize the rationality of their personal curriculum practices and behaviors. The ideals of curriculum understanding of English teachers from senior high schools will directly affect their practical behavior in reality. English teachers should spare no effort to establish a close rapport between individuals and the curriculum. Understanding and participating in the curriculum is an important part of English teachers' work and life, furthermore, their understanding and implementation of the curriculum determine the realization of curriculum significance and value.

### **3. Presuppositional and Generative Nature of English Curriculum**

Everything stands beforehand, do not abandon beforehand. The rational expectation of English teachers' curriculum understanding originates from their previous curriculum practice, which is the accumulation and refinement of teachers' individual curriculum experience, and also the prerequisite norm for teachers' future curriculum practice, not only guiding and regulating teachers' curriculum practice, but also allowing teachers to constantly adjust and improve their curriculum understanding in the process of curriculum practice. The educational value embedded in English curriculum of senior high schools calls for teachers to carefully preset the curriculum, and English teachers judge, explain, arrange, plan and design the curriculum status and development under the assistance of the nature and laws of curriculum and teaching, so as to ensure that English curriculum of senior high schools changes from the surface to the depth, from revealing the descriptive or explanatory significance of language knowledge itself to presenting the cultural significance, human wisdom, and enlightening value behind knowledge. Language and culture are inextricably linked, and the absence of culture will greatly affect students' understanding and learning of language (Xu & Qu, 2019). While English teachers from senior high schools make a preconceived understanding of the curriculum, they should bear in mind that the hidden cultural value behind the language is the important foundation on which the subject educates students and cultivates their core competencies.

The presuppositional way of thinking is a prerequisite for English teachers to ensure the quality of curriculum implementation, and they carry out classroom teaching according to their prior design to ensure the schedule and efficiency of classroom teaching. However, the ideal and perfect English teachers' curriculum understanding in senior high schools should be the process of creating and developing the English curriculum. The implementation of the curriculum in full accordance with the preset will inevitably make classroom instructions fall into a mechanical, dull, patterned arena, in addition, the vitality of teachers' and students' subjectivity can not be fully exerted and manifested in the classroom. Therefore, English curriculum in senior high schools requires not only teachers' prior arrangements, but also teachers' generative thinking to ensure the vitality and fun of curriculum implementation so as to stimulate students' curiosity and interest in learning. The curriculum is an open system of teacher-student communication, positive interaction and mutual development, which is unnecessary to be confined to a fixed pattern of prior arrangements. Manabu Sato maintains that "the

curriculum conceived by the teacher also embodies the possibility of developing and practicing the individual experiences and abilities expressed in the curriculum. .... Moreover, the teacher's curriculum is a curriculum that changes and develops in the course of practice, a curriculum that is based on teacher's decisions in his or her daily practice, and a curriculum that encompasses the dynamics of interaction with the practice" (Manabu, 2003). Goodlad has pointed out that the transition from the contingent "rational curriculum" and "formal curriculum" to students' "experiential curriculum" necessarily involves teachers' understanding and implementation of the curriculum, as well as teachers' anticipation and reflection on students' experiential curriculum. This coincides with the new curriculum's call for teachers to have a high level of "flexible presupposition" and marvelous "dynamic generation" of the curriculum.

However, the presupposition and generation of curriculum is a contradiction unity, which complement each other and can not be ignored. The curriculum only presupposed without generation obliterates teachers' subject status, personality traits, initiative and creativity; while the curriculum only generated without presupposition will eventually become a randomly "loose and disorganized" classroom, making it deviate from being in accordance with purposes and regulations. This is vividly reflected in Michael Young's book *The Curriculum of the Future*. According to him, "the starting point of the curriculum as practice is not the structure of knowledge but how knowledge is produced by people who are working together, a view that has always been concerned with the classroom practices of teachers and students". From the perspective of "curriculum as practice", "knowledge is no longer seen as private property passed down from academic 'discoverers' for distribution and transmission by teachers. Knowledge becomes the product of the collaborative work of teachers and students" (Michael, 2003). That is to say, English teachers' preconceived design of the curriculum in senior high schools is their prospective preparation work in advance on the objectives, contents, processes, and strategies of curriculum instructions, presenting the explicit and outcome-oriented objectives. On the one hand, English teachers' generative understanding of the curriculum in senior high schools refers to the fact that during the implementation of the curriculum, different experiential backgrounds of teachers and students encounter and collide with each other, and that teachers are not in a position to plan and predict the immediate reactions arising during the curriculum; on the other hand, it refers to the generative nature of the curriculum. On the other hand, it refers that the generativity of the curriculum runs through the whole process of curriculum implementation. "Pre-class generation" is teachers' personalized interpretation of the curriculum text according to their own "prior understanding", reserving space for expansion and development in curriculum practice. "In-class generation" happens when the implementation of the curriculum exceeds or deviates from the teacher's original plan or program. "Post-class generation" refers to corrections and re-understandings of the curriculum after the teacher makes reflection on it.

#### 4. Contextual and Reflective Nature of Understanding

Understanding and context are closely intertwined, following each other like a shadow. Without context, understanding cannot happen; without context, understanding will fall into the situation of "whatever works" (Deng, 2009). Context is different from environment, as it refers more to "the 'cultural, spiritual, psychological, internal, and subjective' experience, atmosphere, and interpersonal interaction that the active subject possesses" (Xiao, 2000). Curriculum understanding of English teachers in senior high schools needs to take into account the life worlds of both teachers and students in order to be conducive to the generation of solidarity, collaboration, and intersubjective consistency, because "the teaching context is a reconstruction of the life world" (Chen, 1987). Due to the significant differences in life experiences between teachers and students as well as among students themselves, English teachers' curriculum understanding is particularly crucial to bridging the distance between the curriculum and the life worlds, and the connection between the textual worlds and students' specific real-world experiences, in order to coordinate the background experiences of teachers and students and among students as well as to smoothly facilitate the curriculum. English teachers' curriculum understanding in senior high schools, based on particular curriculum contents and students' growth and developmental needs, occurs and proceeds in specific contexts (time and field). English teachers also need to create different curriculum contexts so as to stimulate students' interest in learning, create a harmonious curriculum atmosphere, and enhance their understanding of English curriculum content. Only by achieving knowledge sharing and understanding sharing that is both diachronic and synchronic between teachers and students can true understanding be achieved.

English teachers' curriculum understanding in senior high schools points to their curriculum practice, and the reflective nature of understanding is as much about the curriculum itself as it is about the teacher's self. Just as Socrates said, "A life without reflection is a life not worth living", because "it is only through his conscious reflection and criticism that a man can discover the dilemmas and problems of life and achieve a more comprehensive understanding of real life" (Lu, 2007). English teachers should not simply consider the curriculum as materials or texts related to the curriculum content, but should dynamically understand the curriculum as the activities and processes of teachers and students to explore the meaning of life and enrich their individual spiritual world through reflective and creative practices. In this way, when conducting the real sense of reflection, teachers will produce a new cognition of the rationality of those self-evident "truths". If we want to obtain true knowledge, we must first "suspend" our prejudice and previous understanding, return to the subject consciousness itself, and regain it through the reflection of the subject. Teachers' curriculum understanding is the process of returning to their own empirical world. To quote Augustine, "Don't turn to outward, return to yourself; the truth resides in the human heart" (Husserl, 2000). Teachers' curriculum understanding consists of a fourfold act, with multiple progressions, "opening up to others, communicating with others, certain kind of self-reflection involving self-renewal, and re-communicating with others" (Alfred, 1991).

Reflection is the key link to understanding other behaviors, and the necessary path through which understanding can be recycled.

## 5. Conclusion

English teachers' curriculum understanding in senior high schools provides more possibilities and limitations for teachers' self-understanding and positive reflection. When English teachers have a clear understanding and standpoint of the curriculum, they not only regard curriculum practice as a means of livelihood, but also as a passionate endeavor to strive for excellence. At this point in time, English teachers attach importance to the role of curriculum understanding, and even under limited conditions and in the face of numerous pressure and difficulties, they are still able to discover the space for self-development, analyze and scope the curriculum from a personal perspective. Through a sustained and in-depth understanding of English curriculum, they reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of their previous curriculum behaviors, as well as grasping the basic direction for future curriculum practice and providing feasible strategies. There are significant differences in their curriculum behaviors of English teachers in senior high schools who pursue excellence and self-fulfillment in various curriculum contexts, but these behaviors are by no means haphazard and random choices of teachers. However, these behaviors are not random choices displayed by teachers, but rather flexible and diverse curriculum practice behaviors exhibited by teachers based on their systematic understanding and profound experience of the curriculum according to specific contexts.

Although there are significant differences in English teachers' curriculum understanding, there exists a common pursuit of diversified curriculum objectives, life-oriented teaching contents and interactive teaching methods. On this basis, the study further proposes that a reasonable curriculum understanding should base on student-centered approach that emphasizes the cultivation of critical thinking and creative abilities. It requires teachers not only to have solid subject knowledge, but also to have a broad international perspective, keen cultural sensitivity and flexible teaching design ability, and to be able to freely adjust their teaching strategies according to students' actual needs and interests, so as to realize the double transmission of knowledge and culture.

In summary, English teachers' curriculum understanding in senior high schools is a complex and diverse process, and its differences are both the driving force of teaching innovation and an important manifestation of teachers' professional growth. The study expects to provide English teachers with a more reasonable framework of curriculum understanding, to promote their continuous exploration and growth in teaching practice, and to lay a solid foundation for students' comprehensive development.

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