# Native English teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching oral communication: A multiple case study in China

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**ABSTRACT**
Although previous studies in the education field have investigated how teachers' beliefs and practices converge or diverge, native English teachers' (NETs) beliefs and practices remain underrepresented and underexplored, particularly with respect to university-level English speaking instruction in the Chinese context. This qualitative study used interviews and classroom observations over one semester to examine the pedagogical beliefs and actual classroom practices of three NETs instructing a course in oral communication with English as a foreign language (EFL). Based on the data analysis, this multiple case study found that the three native EFL teachers' practices converged with their beliefs related to language, teaching, and teachers' roles. However, divergences existed in terms of teaching and student learning. Teachers' personal, learner-related, and contextual factors modified teachers' practices and affected their decisions in putting their beliefs into practice. The results imply that it is essential for NETs to engage in critical reflection and enhance their professional agency, which helps them make appropriate classroom decisions to achieve resonance between their beliefs and practices. University administrators in the Chinese context may consider creating a more conducive environment for teacher training, increasing NETs' sense of belonging, and further facilitating teachers' professional development.

**Keywords:** Critical thinking; Reflection; Teacher agency; Teacher beliefs and practices; Teaching oral communication

## INTRODUCTION
In recent years, language teachers' beliefs have received considerable attention because of the rise of scholarship in cognitive psychology (Farrell, 2019). Teachers' beliefs represent an intricate and interconnected system of personal and professional knowledge that provides tacit principles and cognitive guides for lived experiences. To date, much research has conceptualized the construct of teacher beliefs (Farrell, 2019), explored the factors that affect teacher beliefs (Gorter & Arocena, 2020; Lorenz et al., 2021), and how these beliefs might impede or mediate engagement with educational reform policy (Gholami, 2022). Nevertheless, relatively little attention has been paid to the relationship between the beliefs and practices of native English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher at the university level, particularly with regard to their teaching of L2 speaking in a Chinese context.

In order to develop China through science and education and strengthen international cooperation, the Ministry of Education (2010) has laid emphasis on recruiting more outstanding foreign teachers and scholars to engage in teaching and research

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practices. Consequently, there has been a significant increase in the number of native English teachers (NETs) in schools of different levels in China and currently there are over 15,000 NETs working in Chinese institutions (Ma, 2017). Considering the phenomenon that most communication-focused English classes at universities are delivered by NETs, it is essential to understand the NETs' beliefs and practices about teaching. How NETs modify or change their prior beliefs and practices for the context in which they teach deserves concern. The paucity of this body of research may be explained by the fact that teaching L2 speaking is a largely neglected skill in second-language education (Nation & Newton, 2020). Another reason may be that NETs are generally believed to be competent in teaching oral communication (Bai & Yuan, 2019). Thus, little attention has been paid to NETs in EFL contexts. Nevertheless, NETs in mainland China work within a novel context comprised of different cultures and educational systems, and they usually experience culture shock and psychological stress as a result. The stress of being constantly surrounded by different thinking patterns and values may confuse them and affect their beliefs about learning and teaching (Kim, 2011). At the same time, a less supportive and less productive working environment may reduce their motivation to adjust their teaching and engage in more educational reforms (Ma, 2017). Therefore, this unique group of EFL teachers merits scholarly attention in terms of how they perceive language teaching and conceptualize their work at universities.

Although convergent and divergent studies exist concerning NETs' instruction in EFL reading and grammar (Kim, 2011; Wang & Liang, 2016), their speaking instruction remains under-researched. And, many studies on language teachers' beliefs relied on a quantitative approach (Nemati et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020). Little is known about NETs' belief-practice congruity from a qualitative approach, which may offer more insights into teacher beliefs and contextual factors in depth. The examination of NETs' beliefs and practices provides guidance for NETs and teacher educators (Chin, 2002). How NETs interact in the EFL context is particularly important since they exhibit classroom beliefs and practices based on their previous learning and teaching experiences (Lee & Jang, 2023). Thus, this case study aims to explore the beliefs and classroom practices of three native EFL teachers who are instructing L2 speaking courses in universities in mainland China. How NETs regularly evaluate their espoused beliefs and classroom practices through active reflections is examined. In the following section, we review the pertinent literature on conceptions of teacher beliefs, the links between beliefs and practices, and teacher beliefs in context to frame our study.

## Conceptions of Teacher Beliefs

Calderhead (1996) proposed that teacher beliefs generally refer to teachers' "suppositions, commitments, and ideologies" (p. 715). Kagan (1992) stated that teacher beliefs are "tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught" (p. 65). In this study, pedagogical beliefs refer to the opinions and propositions that teachers hold and advocate, respectively, during the process of instruction. For example, a teacher holds the belief that a conducive classroom context should be cultivated to reduce learning anxiety. The concept of teacher beliefs is often used to represent the cognitive structures that teachers apply in making classroom decisions (Meirink et al., 2009). Whether a belief is held consciously or unconsciously, it is deemed true by the individual, and it guides thought and behavior (Borg, 2006). In other words, beliefs imply what teachers choose to believe or are willing to believe.

Sometimes beliefs are referred to as knowledge (Wang & Lam, 2020). However, there are specific differences between teacher beliefs and knowledge: the former refers to notions or attitudes based on the subjective understanding and judgment of knowledge, while the latter is generally perceived as more objective (Elbaz, 2018).

To further define teacher beliefs, various scholars have sought to specify different sub-categories, such as traditional and progressive beliefs (Vale et al., 2020), personal and professional beliefs (Saiful, 2020), or core and peripheral beliefs (Brinkmann, 2019). Farrell (2019) suggested that teacher beliefs can be differentiated into beliefs about different aspects, such as teachers' roles, teaching, and students' roles. The purpose of developing belief sets is to ensure that teachers can rely on distinct, transparent, and transferrable cognitive frameworks and develop their beliefs through training and personal experience.

## Links Between Beliefs and Practices

A large number of researchers have delved into the relationship between teacher beliefs and practices and examined whether and why they converge or diverge under the situated educational context. Convergences exist between teacher beliefs and practices. Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) noted that language-related teacher beliefs can guide understanding, decision-making processes, and actions. Classroom decision-making typically arises when the teaching routine does not proceed as planned. Teachers' beliefs can also accurately predict or explain teachers' practices (Liu & Ren, 2021).

Notably, some researchers have reported discrepancies within the belief-practice praxis (Bai & Yuan, 2019; Gholami, 2022; Nugroho & Mutiaraningrum, 2020). For example, some teachers

may hold the belief of reducing language learning anxiety, but they may scold some students when they did not spell the words correctly in the actual classroom (Bai & Yuan, 2019). The examined belief/practice discrepancies also have justifications. A few researchers (Mansour, 2013; Wang et al., 2020) have claimed that discrepancies are essential drivers of the development of teacher beliefs. Mansour (2013) suggested that an in-depth examination of the aspects of consistency and inconsistency would enable teachers to reflect upon and resolve challenges in their teaching practice. At the same time, teacher training programs may include customized activities that identify the belief-practice relationship.

Various reasons are identified for this belief-practice discrepancy. The first is the complexity of teacher beliefs (Fang, 1996). Teachers may hold contradictory beliefs about language teaching, and they are often caught in the dilemma of which belief to follow. For example, some teachers are unsure whether content or language should be emphasized (Liu & Jin, 2012). The second reason concerns teachers' and students' personal traits. Teachers' attitudes toward professional development (Kirsch & Aleksić, 2018; Kirsch et al., 2020), critical reflection (Zhang et al., 2020), commitment (Zheng et al., 2021), and professional agency (Hull & Uematsu, 2020) have been considered variables in making classroom decisions. Student motivation (Wang & Lam, 2020), learner autonomy (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019), language proficiency (Haim & Tannenbaum, 2022), and critical competency (Yulian, 2021) are also factors that are frequently identified as causing a change in teachers' beliefs and classroom decisions. The third reason is the complexity of the educational context, which constrains teachers' beliefs and teachers' ability to take action that corresponds to their beliefs (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2019). Teachers' beliefs are embedded in context (Barcelos & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018), and Pajares (1992) noted the importance of understanding how dissonance between beliefs and structural or cultural contexts shapes practice. EFL teachers are both enabled and constrained by the classroom and societal contexts, such as the classroom facilities and the school policy. As reflective practitioners, it is therefore essential for EFL teachers to meditate on their practices by incorporating creativity, artistry, as well as context-sensitivity into their classroom tasks.

The educational context was also highlighted in Borg's framework (2006, p. 333) concerning the relationship among teachers' cognition, teachers' learning, and classroom practices (see Figure 1). In this framework, teacher beliefs are one salient component in the domain of teacher cognition.

**Figure 1**
*Model of teacher cognition research (Borg, 2006, p. 333)*
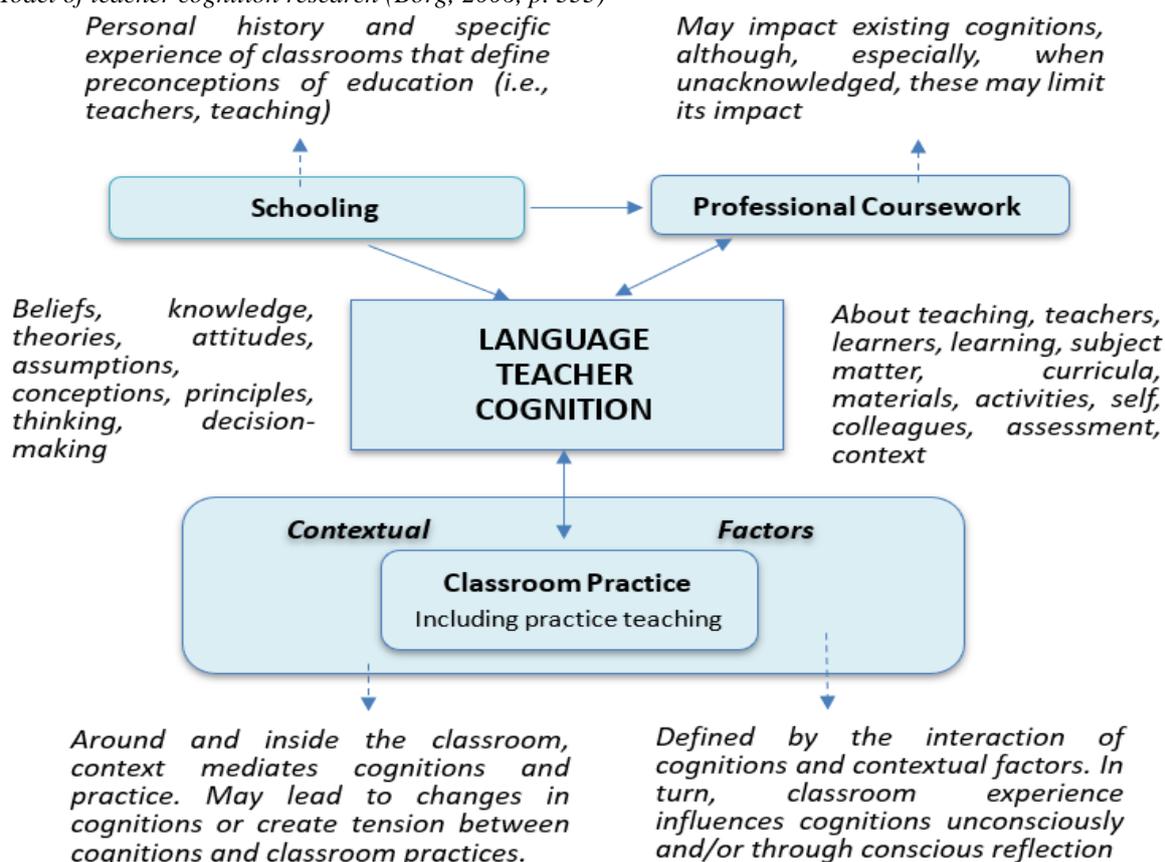
It can be seen from Borg's framework that the factors influencing teacher beliefs fall into three categories: schooling, professional coursework, and contextual factors. Classroom practice was categorized into contextual factors that reflect the mediating role of context between teacher cognition and classroom practice. As a salient aspect, contextual factors mediate teacher beliefs, influence teacher understanding, modify representations, and lead to their adjustments in practice.

Drawing reference from Borg's framework, we examine whether there are significant divergences between teachers' stated beliefs and their classroom practices and what contextual factors may explain the possible divergences within a belief-practice praxis under the interplay of these multiple factors. The primary goal of examining NETs' beliefs and practices is not to identify the best practice or method but to understand how and why these beliefs and practices enact change in teachers' current instructional practices over time.

**The Framework of this Study**

Having reviewed the links among teacher beliefs, practices, and the context, the researchers draw on Borg's proposal of model of teacher cognition research (2006) and propose a framework for this study. In this framework (see Figure 2 below), a plethora of potential factors may influence the formation of and change in teachers' beliefs, which then mediate their classroom practices. The underlying teaching behaviors are "complex cognitive processes, and planning and interactive decision-making are central aspects of teacher

cognition" (Borko & Shalveson, 1990, p. 311). Teachers' beliefs are said to determine day-by-day decision-making about when to take appropriate action and how to implement activities in ever-changing educational contexts.

EFL teachers in China are constrained by administrative policies, and their classroom practices are to a large extent influenced by their notions and beliefs related to the university context. University administrative expectation and students' exam performance determines teachers' self-perception and their relations with students (Ma, 2017). Teachers' beliefs are also influenced by feedback from students. Accordingly, by actively reflecting on their classroom practices, EFL instructors can monitor the suitability and effectiveness of their practices. These practices, in turn, influence their beliefs and allow teachers to enhance their knowledge and competence and, ultimately, to modify their beliefs (Kang & Cheng, 2014). To better understand NETs' classroom decision-making processes, this qualitative study examines the convergences and divergences between three NETs' beliefs and practices.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study.
1. What are the beliefs of three native English-speaking instructors about teaching L2 English oral communication?
2. What are the convergences and divergences between the three native English-speaking instructors' beliefs and practices in the situated classroom context?

**Figure 2**
*A framework of EFL teachers' beliefs and practices in this study*
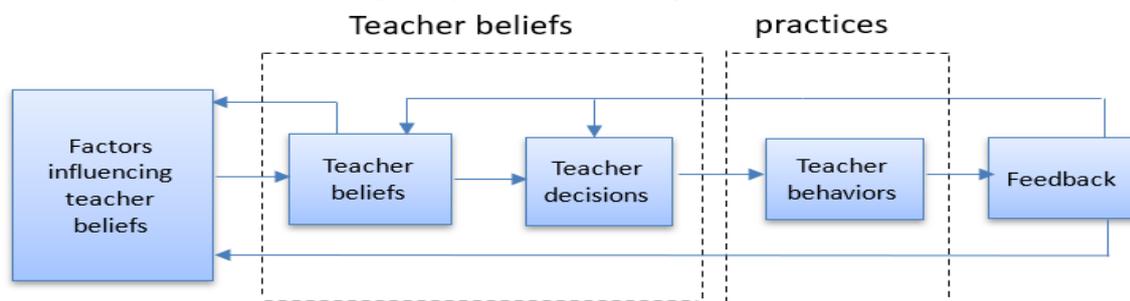


**METHOD**

A multiple case study was used to examine the beliefs and practices of three EFL teachers in relation to their teaching of oral communication. As Creswell and Guetterman (2019) explained, a qualitative case study approach could enable researchers to gain a deep understanding of the involved situation and meaning by a full illustration of the details of a phenomenon as well as context. This approach fitted the aim of the present study, which sought to explore three NETs' beliefs and

practices. Each case study included a thorough exploration of the participant's teaching trajectory, life story, reflections, and class observations. Studying multiple cases enhances the transferability of the outcomes across different cases (Duff, 2014), and helps to develop explicate descriptions and more efficacious interpretations.

**Context**

The multiple case study was conducted in three tier-2 universities in the northern part of mainland

China. The three educational institutions are all universities of science and engineering, and they implement the same structure and length of course instruction.

The students were second-year university students. They took the Oral Communication course once a week for a total of 16 weeks within one semester to enhance their oral language proficiency. As a credit-bearing course, Oral Communication focuses on everyday spoken interactions, and it is part of the interpersonal communication module of the Chinese university curriculum. It is designated as a compulsory course for English majors and an optional course for non-English majors.

The first author has been working as a university English teacher in the northern part of China for over 15 years and thus established rapport with many fellow teachers in different universities. The university background and teaching experience assisted the first author in better understanding the educational practices and the contexts in which the participants worked.

**Participants**

Purposeful sampling was chosen during the selection of participants. One criterion used in choosing participants and sites was whether they were information-rich (Miles et. al., 2020). The three participants were recommended by their department head, and they demonstrated diverse characteristics concerning the courses they were instructing. Darleen (a pseudonym) was an American teacher in her early fifties with 12 years of teaching oral communication. Adam (a pseudonym) was a British teacher in his early thirties with 5 years of teaching experience. Victor (a pseudonym) was a Canadian teacher in his mid-thirties with 4 years of teaching experience. They all demonstrated a strong interest in participating in the current study. The study provided them with an opportunity to take a more in-depth perspective on their beliefs and practices with respect to teaching oral communication in the Chinese educational context. The participants' demographic information is listed in Table 1.

**Table 1**
*Basic information about the participants*

| Name of teacher (pseudonym) | Gender | Years of teaching experience in mainland China | Educational background | Target students |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Darleen | Female | 12 | Master's degree in ESL | Second-year English majors |
| Adam | Male | 5 | Master's degree in International Relations | Second-year non-English majors |
| Victor | Male | 4 | Master's degree in ESL | Second-year non-English majors |

**Data Collection**

Classroom observations were conducted for a total of 18 hours over a semester. The purpose of the observations was to examine whether the three NETs' practices conformed to their stated beliefs by observing their classroom manifestations of language use, instructional strategies, and teachers' roles as well as learners' attributes and students' learning. All three teacher participants signed informed consent statements before the interview and classroom observation. Formal teacher interviews were conducted in English for

approximately 6 hours, and student interviews were conducted in English for 2 hours. Two students were chosen randomly from each class to be the participants. Teaching plans were collected for further analysis after all class observations. Due to the limitations and differences in the teachers' available time, willingness, location, and context, there were variations in the collected data from each participant (see Table 2 below). The recordings were transcribed and the videos were analyzed to examine the relations between the teachers' stated beliefs and actual classroom practices.

**Table 2**
*Overview of data collection*

| Teacher | Classroom observations | Formal interviews | Documents | Student interviews |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Darleen | Six sessions (6 hours) | Three times (122 minutes) | Teaching plans | Two students (42 minutes) |
| Adam | Six sessions (6 hours) | Three times (136 minutes) | Teaching plans | Three students (30 minutes) |
| Victor | Six sessions (6 hours) | Three times (95 minutes) | Teaching plans | Two students (20 minutes) |

**Data Analysis**

The two research questions guided the data analysis. There were five steps involved in the process of data analysis: creating texts for analysis; setting up

categories for coding; differentiating themes and tendencies presented in the data; interpreting the themes; and illustrating the themes in great detail (Miles et al., 2020).

After the interviews, the first author transcribed the three teacher participants' beliefs and practices regarding the teaching of speaking to create texts for analysis. Data triangulation, including classroom observations and documents, was used as a strategy to increase the validity of the research findings from the interviews. Concerning the classroom observations, the first author made observation notes, transcribed videotaped teaching excerpts, and added transcriptions to the memos.

In coding the data, descriptive open coding and attribute coding were used. Attribute coding provides an essential reference and context for analysis and interpretation (Miles et al., 2020). For instance, statements such as "teaching speaking should be fun," "teaching should build up students' confidence," or "use real-life scenarios" were coded as Darleen's beliefs about teaching orientation.

In differentiating and interpreting the themes, a cross-case comparative technique (Miles et al., 2020) was applied to ascertain the characteristics of the three teachers' beliefs in relation to their practices. The data analysis focused on how the categories related to and affected each other. The first author took references from the action paradigm model defined by Corbin and Strauss (2014). These researchers used different notions to explain teachers' actions, including contexts, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. Following Corbin's and Strauss's model, our analysis led to a classification of four dominant belief categories concerning teaching oral communication: beliefs about language, teaching, student learning, and teacher roles. These four categories are the units of analysis for the data sets in this study. Member checking was also utilized to elicit feedback from the teacher participants. After all the data were manually analyzed by the first author, the second author verified the data to ensure reliability.

## FINDINGS

Based on the analysis of the three individual cases and the cross-case analysis, we found that three themes emerged, including NETs' stated beliefs, the convergences, and discrepancies between NETs' beliefs and practices.

### The Three NETs' Stated Beliefs

The three NETs' stated beliefs were classified into four categories, which are summarized in Table 3. The content regarding beliefs was extracted from the interview transcripts and their teaching plans.

**Table 3**
*Three NETs' stated beliefs*

| Pedagogical beliefs | Darleen | Adam | Victor |
|---|---|---|---|
| **language** | language should be related to life skills and future career | language is for expressing ideas and thoughts | language is for everyday communication * |
| | pronunciation is important* | there is no need to speak like a queen | no need to worry about making mistakes |
| **teaching** | teaching should be fun | there is no comfortable speaking | helping students with vocabulary and grammar |
| | building up students' confidence and critical thinking | encouraging students' comprehension and critical thinking | boosting students' interest and motivation in speaking * |
| | using real-life scenarios * | highlighting presentation skills | incorporating TED talks as scaffolds |
| | students as the priority | students as the priority * | students as the priority |
| **student learning** | should demonstrate learning by initiative and critical thinking * | should demonstrate critical thinking and presentation skills * | should have learner autonomy and motivation* |
| **teacher roles** | facilitator | thinking trainer | motivator |

(Note: *belief-practice discrepancies exist)

The first category concerned the three NETs' beliefs about language. Only Darleen regarded pronunciation as critical for students because "students need to support the rest of their career with their major." The other two NETs deemed it natural to make mistakes and believed that "making mistakes is a natural part of English pronunciation learning" and that "there is no need to speak like a queen." In particular, Darleen thought that "language should be related to life skills and students' future career," Adam noted that "language is used for expressing ideas and thoughts," and Victor believed that "language is used for everyday communications."

The second category exhibited the three NETs' beliefs about teaching. All of them sought to build a student-centered class. Although Adam believed that there was no comfortable speaking in class and that students need to "think very hard in order to express their ideas critically," the other two NETs endeavored to "boost students' interests and confidence in speaking" and made strenuous efforts to establish a relaxing environment for learning, including "using real-life scenarios (Darleen)" or

"incorporating TED talks as scaffolds (Victor)." For these two NETs, "teaching should be fun (Darleen)"," and "vocabulary learning is important for organizing sentences (Victor)."

The third category showed the three NETs' beliefs about students' learning. Darleen and Adam believed that students should demonstrate their critical thinking skills, but Victor did not highlight this aspect because he believed that "language is for daily communication." On the other hand, contrary to Adam's emphasis on students' progress of presentation skills, Darleen hoped that students would "exhibit learner motivation," and Victor highlighted "taking initiative in learning to speak."

The fourth category demonstrated the three NETs' beliefs about teacher roles. All three NETs advocated their supporting roles in addition to being instructors. These roles included being "facilitators (Darleen)," "thinking trainers (Adam)," or "motivators (Victor)."

**Convergences Between the Three NETs' Stated Beliefs and Their Actual Classroom Practices**
The following section presents convergences based on the analysis of the three teachers' beliefs as well as six sessions of classroom observations.

*Darleen's Case*
According to Darleen, language should be related to students' future work and life skills. During the six classroom sessions, various life skills were introduced, including "how to interact with foreigners," "prioritizing on a three-day hike," and "conflict management." Students actively expressed their viewpoints concerning these issues. Each topic entailed students' cross-cultural awareness.

**Excerpt 1:**
*Darleen: Chinese people are always asking questions like what is your name, what is your age, where do you live, what is your WeChat, what is your salary…Is that appropriate?*
*Student A: No, these questions are all private questions.*
*Darleen: Yes, that is completely wrong. You need to give information first if you want to start a conversation with foreigners. Remember to connect to the speakers, and do not shift to another question. When you meet a person from Thailand, how can you establish a relationship between the speakers?*
*Student B: Hi, have you ever been to the Pattaya Beach? I once went there, and it was marvelous.*
(Darleen-Observation-1)

In excerpt 1, Darleen claimed that in order to keep the conversational flow, speakers needed to be focused and demonstrate their attention and politeness. Only when students realized this aspect,

could the teaching objective of imparting the life skill of communicating effectively with foreigners be achieved.

**Excerpt 2:**
*Darleen: If there was a three-day hike, and one girl unfortunately broke her leg on the way. Then how to get everyone to safety?*
*Student A: They would go together to the village…*
*Darleen: How about the girl with a broken leg?*
*Student B: They could carry her…*
*Darleen: It is almost impossible. It is over forty kilometers. Can you just carry me to the elevator? It is not realistic…*
*…*
*Darleen: Is the trip a success?*
*Students: No. Almost everyone is sick. The girl broke her leg…*
*Darleen: What is the basis for success? Life is not at all smooth. We learn through making mistakes. I seldom say you are wrong, but I would say you are wrong because you are going to have many problems in life. Does that mean you are a failure?*
(Darleen-Observation-2)

In excerpt 2, Darleen consciously led the students to see the concept of failure differently. As a thought-provoking topic, this life dilemma instilled the life skill of crisis management and inspired students to think from other perspectives.

A salient characteristic of Darleen's teaching was the use of hands-on demonstrations, which signified her teaching notion of "learning by doing" (Darleen-teaching plan). Darleen once made sweets in class with the students in order to introduce the American measurement system. She concluded that American measurements were more precise by underlining the differences between American and Chinese measurements after showing the students an electric cooker and diverse measuring tools (Darleen-Observation-3).

Darleen boosted the students' confidence by cultivating a fun-filled classroom atmosphere and constantly adjusting her teaching based on the students' needs. She cared about the students; in her mind, "students are the priority." In turn, students generally showed respect for Darleen, and they gave her the highest teacher evaluations of all the language instructors. Throughout the six class sessions, Darleen worked as a facilitator, providing a supportive environment for students to voice their ideas. She always smiled during the lesson and used questions such as, "What do you think of it?" "What else would you like to say?" and "Any more ideas?" to encourage students to organize and express their viewpoints.

***Adam's case***

Adam adopted many methods to motivate students to "use language to express their ideas," as observed throughout the six class sessions. At the beginning of each class, Adam required students to do weekly oral presentations that lasted approximately 10 minutes. Students were assigned diverse roles for the delivery of the presentation after choosing their favorite topics (Adam-teaching plan). During the process, Adam consistently reminded students to have eye contact with the audience, raise their voices, and communicate with the audience. As a thinking trainer, he consciously trained students' logical thinking by fighting stereotypes (Adam-teaching plan). The following is an excerpt from a class discussion about why Shanxi people excelled in conducting business.

**Excerpt 3:**
*Adam: Why do people believe Shanxi people are outstanding in doing business?*
*Student A: Because Shanxi people have coal…*
*Adam: What else?*
*Student B: They are rich…*
*Adam: You cannot tell me more about the reasons. You hold stereotypes about various issues. Do you know China's first bank in Shanxi?...* (Adam-Observation-3)
To stimulate deeper reflections and enable the students to know both "what" and "why" of an issue, Adam endeavored to lead them to ponder about the economic situation hundreds of years ago.

**Excerpt 4:**
*Adam: How do you think of Jewish people?*
*Students: They are so smart.*
*Adam: Some people in the world do not think so.*
*Students: Einstein is Jewish, and he is so bright. Jews score high in math.*
*Adam: How about the Jews in the video? … The girl student was quite discontented...*
*Student A: Even some of them do something inappropriate, the Jews' wisdom cannot be erased.*
*Adam: What will you do if you are in her case?*
*Student B: We need to show tolerance towards others…* (Adam-Observation-2)

By playing a video about Jews, Adam tried to arouse students' different understanding of Jewish people by guiding students to ponder the discussion phenomenon critically.

Moreover, Adam engaged students in the process of reasoning by proposing yes-no questions to train their thinking. For instance, with regard to the notion that "celebrities should/not have privacy," Adam intentionally trained the students to reach a conclusion by following a logical thinking process

naturally (Adam-Observation-2). Through this process, the students gradually established a connection between claims and evidence. The students understood that "the moment celebrities choose to step in front of the public, they have already given their right to privacy to the public." In the same way, students also observed that "it is unfair for celebrities to lose their right to privacy" with another set of logic chains, such as "every individual shares the same rights."

***Victor's Case***

According to Victor, "language is for communication, and there is no need to worry about making mistakes." He created a relaxing classroom context and called on all the students in class one by one to express their ideas concerning different topics. Intending to protect students' self-esteem and confidence, he seldom criticized the students in class and always said "ok" or "great" to encourage them (Victor-Observation-2&3).

Victor deemed TED talks as "offering rich resources" to help students deepen their understanding on how to make oral presentations in class and how to perceive issues from different perspectives (Victor-teaching plan). He integrated TED talks in the class, such as the significance of the U.S. moon landing and Kennedy's talks about making choices (Victor-Observation-3&4). He also paid attention to facilitating students' vocabulary and grammar acquisition through speaking instruction.

**Excerpt 5:**
*Victor: Among the four words, practical, feasible, vital, viable, which one is different?*
*Student A: What does "viable" mean?*
*Victor: "Practical," it means something makes sense to be used or done. It could happen in everyday life. "Feasible," yes, something is easily possible. And "vital" means very important. "Viable" means capable of being used successfully... used a lot in terms of biology...*
*Student B: Then, vital is different.*
*Victor: Ok, now, in the following sentence, which word among the four is best? We soon discovered that there are many kinds of cancer, and it is only in the last 10 years effective,_____ therapies have come to seem real.*
*Student C: feasible, practical, viable, all seems ok.*
*Victor: Just now, we mentioned viable is used a lot in terms of biology. "Viable" is the best.* (Victor-Observation-2)

Victor frequently required the students to identify one different word from a group of four words or asked them to fill in the blanks of

sentences to help them "have deeper understanding of the vocabulary and grammar." By guiding students to identify and use the correct words, he facilitated students' comprehension. As a motivator, he also initiated different topics to "boost students' interests and motivation in speaking," including discussions on technological breakthroughs in the 20th century that solved enormous problems and whether society is going in the right direction in terms of technological advancement (Victor-Observation-1).

### Discrepancies Between the Three NETs' Stated Beliefs and Their Actual Classroom Practices

Discrepancies were also observed between the teachers' stated beliefs and practices, especially in terms of teaching and student learning.

### Darleen's Case

Although Darleen claimed that language was important, on many occasions, she did not correct students' pronunciation (Darleen-Observation-1&4). Darleen claimed that teaching should be based on real-life scenarios so that it was relatable to students. However, she often did not create virtual situations (Darleen-Observation-2&5). Darleen mentioned that Chinese students were hardworking. However, the observed circumstances were that many students laughed and chatted in class; although they followed their teacher's instructions most of the time, they did not appear to devote much effort to learning and seemed only to fulfill the tasks in a light-hearted manner (Darleen-Observation-5&6). Furthermore, some students told the first author that they did not put much effort into practicing speaking in their spare time (Student interview). Most importantly, Darleen expected to enhance Chinese students' critical thinking skills, which turned out to be very challenging. For instance, she was compelled to devote more time to the instruction about poster design rather than highlighting the spiritual aspect, as she had originally planned (Darleen-Observation-1). In addition, Darleen had to shift her teaching focus from "crisis management" to "success criteria" when teaching the "three-day hike" topic. Discerning that a majority of the students made the assumption that "the hike was a failure" based merely on the fact that "one girl broke her leg," Darleen switched to imparting specific life wisdom to the students, for example, "It is successful as long as you can learn something." (Darleen-Observation-2)

### Adam's Case

Adam acknowledged that teachers should base their teaching on students' needs. However, on many occasions, he focused more on the content than on the students. When students showed confusion about using the Toulmin model for making persuasive rebuttals, Adam continued teaching without paying due attention (Adam-Observation-3). Adam wanted to build a student-centered class. Nevertheless, a slightly oppressive environment was fostered. He criticized the students for their inability to make effective arguments. When students did not behave properly in class, including using Baidu app to translate something or doing mathematic assignments, Adam became furious with the students and even shouted at them (Adam-Observation-1). Adam considered himself as possessing sufficient charisma in teaching and thought Chinese students were passive learners. However, many students claimed that they merely felt shy in class, and in their eyes, Adam was dominant and unapproachable (Student interview). Furthermore, Adam expected to encourage the students' critical thinking skills (Adam-teaching plan). However, he observed that many Chinese students had quite limited vision and frequently struggled with stereotypes. For instance, after observing some students' inability to apply the Toulmin model and engage in the reasoning process, Adam changed the task design to engage in comprehension exercises, which targeted more language rather than thinking (Adam-Observation-3). Additionally, Adam expected to enhance the students' oral presentation skills. The reality was that many students still spoke too softly, merely read from the scripts, or made no eye contact with the audience (Adam-Observation-1&2).

### Victors' Case

Victor said that he expected Chinese students to "demonstrate learner autonomy and motivation in speaking." Nevertheless, in certain observed classes, some students did not concentrate in class and were occupied with their own business or did not participate in class discussions. Instead of seeking other strategies to motivate the students, Victor tolerated the students' slothfulness and undisciplined behavior in class (Victor-Observation-2&3). One student commented that he thought that vocabulary was far removed from their everyday lives, and the teacher occasionally turned a blind eye to the students' underperformance (Student interview).

## DISCUSSION

The findings showed that in general, there were convergences between the teachers' beliefs and practices, which aligns with the results of Borg and Alshumaimeri's study (2019). The convergences demonstrated that the teachers had already formed valid teaching beliefs to guide their practice. Nevertheless, not all the teachers' beliefs were materialized in practice. From the NETs' viewpoints, there were personal, learner-related, and contextual factors that influenced teachers' ability to put their beliefs and frameworks for action into

practice. The following section will examine these aspects.

## Personal Factors

NETs' teaching experiences and educational backgrounds are important factors that influence their classroom practice. This verifies Borg's proposition that teacher schooling, teacher learning, and classroom practices are closely related to teacher cognition (Borg, 2018). Both Darleen and Victor held a master's degree in ESL, and they aligned their teaching with second language acquisition theories of reducing students' anxiety in learning EFL-speaking and sought to provide them with a safer context to voice their opinions. The observed circumstances were that the students in Darleen's and Victor's classes were more active and relaxed, although stricter monitoring of student performance was also expected. However, Adam did not possess an education-related degree and did not receive ELT training, which may partially explain why he occasionally ignored some students' demands and frequently reprimanded the students. He admitted in the interview that he intended to pursue a higher degree to gain more knowledge related to education. Among the three NETs, Darleen had the most years of teaching experience in China, and she had a more sufficient understanding of Chinese students' characteristics and ways of thinking. Although Victor had only four years of teaching experience, he demonstrated a strong willingness to listen to Chinese students' thinking.

The NETs' professional agency also differed. Corresponding to a published study, teacher professional agency is one variable in making classroom decisions (Hull & Uematsu, 2020). Professional agentic teachers "not only fulfill complicated tasks but also have the skills and will to strengthen their own … capabilities for life-long learning and sustained professional growth" (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011, p. 812). Darleen exhibited a high level of teacher agency as she engaged in a variety of effective instructional practices and classroom management tactics when discerning problems in teaching. This high level of agency, in turn, helped her foster an increased commitment to teaching and enabled her to remain in the profession for a longer time. She demonstrated an agentic personality by being caring and persevering. However, on some occasions, the students did not truly work hard. Darleen could consider implementing stricter monitoring of students' learning.

Victor also exhibited a high level of professional agency by motivating students to learn to speak. He introduced TED talks to engage the students' interest and adjusted his instruction to cater to Chinese students' demands in passing IELTS speaking tests. In addition, he incorporated vocabulary and grammar learning into classroom instruction when he found that many Chinese students harbored the conception that vocabulary was the building block of conversation. Victor exhibited an agentic personality by being considerate and tolerant. However, some vocabulary was rather complicated and not commonly used. Victor could consider tailoring the exercises and discussion topics in order to focus on lexis the students could apply in their daily lives. He could also consider adding passion or rigor to the class to better motivate the students.

The case was different for Adam. Discerning a lack of critical competency among some Chinese students, Adam adjusted the curriculum and intentionally incorporated thinking training to guide the students to fight against stereotypes. However, his classroom instructional decisions were occasionally proven to be ineffective due to his lack of familiarity with Chinese culture and student characteristics as well as his unclear explanations and overly strict classroom regulations. Generally, Adam demonstrated a lower level of teacher agency in terms of adjusting his instruction to meet students' demands and bridging his belief-practice divide. Adam demonstrated an agentic personality by being ambitious and dominant.

## Learner-Related Factors

The findings suggest that the delimiting factors were multifarious. Among the learner-related factors that constrained belief-practice consistency, the students' lack of critical thinking competence was frequently mentioned. Working with students who have low levels of critical thinking competence leads to huge changes in teachers' beliefs and classroom practices (Yulian, 2021). Both Darleen and Adam made pedagogical changes when they discerned that some students' lack of critical competency hindered the instructional flow. Because Victor did not list this aspect as a teaching objective, the lack of critical thinking was not highlighted by him.

With English long deemed merely a tool for communication, many language learners do not cultivate the habits of analyzing and problem-solving with critical thinking; thus, they lack both the inclinations and sufficient skills for critical thinking (Zhang et al., 2020). Many Chinese students are incapable of reaching the intellectual standards for speaking, nor do they have sufficient reasoning skills. In addition, the students' lack of critical thinking hindered their independent thinking, leading to incompetence in reasoning and a reduced level of clarity and persuasiveness in their argumentation (Qu, 2015). These results can be attributed to three causes: 1) China's deeply rooted traditional culture, in which students should obey teachers or authorities rather than develop independent thinking skills; 2) students' minimal competency in analysis; and 3) inappropriate

learning methods, such as rote learning (Liu & Jin, 2012).

On many occasions, students lack the ability to think critically, which frustrated the instructors, impeded the classroom activity flow, and compelled the instructors to change their plans. Other learner-related factors, particularly lack of motivation, lack of learner autonomy, a low language proficiency level, and misconceptions about learning methods, were also frequently mentioned by the three NETs, all of which partially hindered the actualization of teaching plans.

**Contextual Factors**

In addition to teachers' personal factors and learner-related factors, contextual factors, including the university context and the classroom context, posed constraints on the teachers' beliefs and affected their classroom practice. This echoes the conclusion made by Priestley et al. (2022) that contextual factors forge and regulate teachers' beliefs. The university context sometimes interfered with the teachers' classroom implementation. Darleen believed the university seldom monitored teaching quality with its "hands-off" approach. The "unfair" teacher evaluations merely made by the students compelled her to "entertain the students to keep her job" rather than engaging in more worthwhile tasks. Occasionally, the fun elements were over-emphasized in Darleen's class, and language learning did not occur. The teacher evaluation system exerted a negative impact on her instruction approach and led to discrepancies between her beliefs and practices.

The case was remarkably different for Adam, whose original and ambitious aim was to change the Chinese students' mindset with Western-style education. However, during the years he stayed in China, he deepened his understanding of the different political context and lowered his expectations regarding both the university and the students. After reflection, Adam attempted to highlight critical thinking in his teaching. Moreover, Adam initially aspired to "climb up" in the university ranks, but he subsequently found that he "had been marginalized without many opportunities for moving upward," which frustrated him in making more lesson modifications.

Regarding Victor, the exam-oriented university culture influenced his approaches to communicative instruction. The university expected NETs to "train more students to enter for IELTS test," and he therefore devoted a large proportion of time to presenting different IETLS speaking topics and imparting knowledge about vocabulary acquisition, even when some words were not commonly used and proved tedious for students in class.

The classroom constraints also included a lack of time, resources, and equipment, as well as oversized classes. Teachers constantly modify their beliefs in diversified classroom contexts (Kiss & Mizusawa, 2018). For instance, insufficient class time gave Darleen little opportunity to use real-life scenarios for life-skill topics or to correct students' pronunciation problems. The banning of access to Google websites and services in the classroom deprived Adam of the chance to share pre-arranged materials related to Bitcoin (a decentralized digital currency); he also had to shift to a comprehension exercise because there was no projector. For Victor, the large class size deterred him from adopting communicative tasks because of the difficulty in monitoring students' performance in speaking.

Based on the above analysis, a summary of the factors that mediated the three native-speaking instructors' beliefs and practices is provided in Figure 3. EFL teachers' personal factors, learner-related factors, and contextual factors influence their classroom practices, which in turn impacts their belief-practice alignment.

**Figure 3**
*Factors mediating NETs' beliefs and practices*
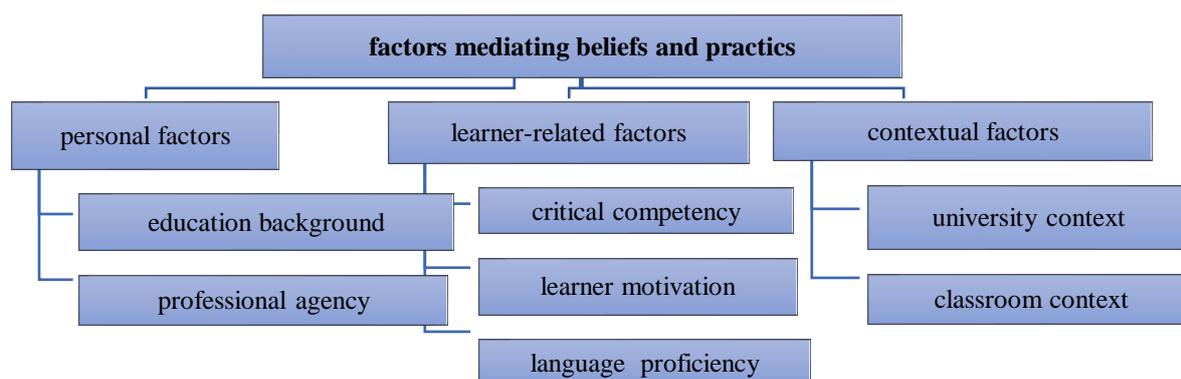
**Implications for teaching**

The above findings and discussion indicate that a plethora of internal and external factors influenced the three NETs' beliefs and practices. First, NETs need to modify their beliefs based on students' performance and learning processes in actual classrooms. Conducting in-depth critical self-reflection on teaching experiences and then refining one's beliefs and practices have been demonstrated to be effective in teacher professionalism (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019; Ilmi et al., 2022). Thus, teachers can accumulate their practical knowledge to make on-the-spot classroom decisions based on the immediate context. Second, it is advisable for NETs to understand Chinese culture and the characteristics of Chinese students and to deliver teaching tailored to them. They must also enhance their professional agency to make better classroom decisions. Third, training students' critical competency was considered by the NETs to be a challenging task. More culturally appropriate topics and discussion-based techniques could be implemented in class, such as initiating a debate concerning whether the use of mobile phones should be banned in class. Students' progress in their reasoning and problem-solving capabilities was facilitated by their participation in discussion (Liu & Jin, 2012). Additionally, the NETs were aware that they should adapt the pace of their instruction to their students' needs or use more content explanations to make their teaching explicit because some Chinese students may find taking courses in English as a medium of instruction taxing.

Contextual factors, which include the university administration, teacher evaluations, classroom size, and available resources, were also highlighted in the above discussion. Over time, these constraints, or the teachers' responses or strategies with respect to them, may transform into a system of beliefs that the NETs progressively integrate into their personal teaching philosophy. Teachers' agency is influenced by contextual factors (e.g., university culture and social values) that determine their classroom decisions (Osman & Warner, 2020). We need to pay attention to all of these factors, particularly those that are most salient, and cultivate a positive educational context to foster NETs' beliefs. First, the university's "hands-off" approach to NETs' instruction needs to be changed. University administrators and program designers should not focus only on teachers' subject knowledge but should also consider the different types of motivation and commitments individuals bring to teaching (Zheng et al., 2021). They may contemplate how to support an array of career goals in which NETs might be interested, including being an administrator. Promotion prospects may be created for NETs to have career advancement. Second, more support, both financial and administrative, should be provided for instructors to undergo the transformation of teacher roles. NETs are likely to encounter enormous challenges in adapting to the Chinese context under current organizational contexts, which leads to a reflection on how teachers reexamine their roles and respond to obstacles in terms of teacher education reform within the university setting. Furthermore, NETs should be given greater opportunities to communicate with local Chinese teachers and students, and receive professional training, such as joining a community of practice and attending academic seminars or training programs. Only in this way can NETs foster a stronger sense of belonging in the Chinese context and overcome the feeling of academic isolation or the belief that their position is only ad hoc.

**CONCLUSION**

This qualitative study has sought to make a theoretical contribution by exploring the links between NETs' stated beliefs and actual instructional practices in teaching oral communication in the Chinese classroom context. The study presents a core belief system comprising beliefs related to language, teaching, student learning, and teacher roles. Generally, there were convergences between beliefs and practices, and the three NETs' instructional decisions were shaped by the interaction between their teaching and learning experiences. Teachers' personal factors, learner-related factors, and contextual factors acted as mediating forces between their beliefs and practices. The reasons for the inconsistencies in the NETs' beliefs and practices were analyzed so that they were able to form renewed teacher beliefs and improve their classroom practices. As NETs' beliefs become more entrenched with their increasing experience, they need to integrate their practical knowledge with timely reflection on the immediate context.

The scope of this study did not allow for a comprehensive discussion of all influencing factors that lead to the belief-practice divide. Nevertheless, this research has achieved its purpose by emphasizing the importance of NETs regularly and systematically self-evaluating their own beliefs and speaking classroom routines through a critical reflective lens. A limitation of this study lies in its small sample size. Nevertheless, the findings provide insights by increasing NETs' awareness of reflective teaching. Future research could investigate the belief-practice divide by involving more NETs as key informants within an extended timeframe or conducting studies on the interface between teacher beliefs and student learning outcomes.

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