Exploring an EFL Teacher's Beliefs and Practices in Teaching Topical Debates in Mainland China

Wang Lan [a, *], Ricky Lam [a]

[a] *Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong*

A B S T R A C T

Research on EFL teachers' beliefs and practices is significant for teaching effectiveness. This paper investigated and compared the convergences and discrepancies between an EFL teacher's stated beliefs and observed classroom practices related to teaching an L2 speaking-oriented Topical Debates course. In mainland China, Topical Debates is a credit-bearing course that focuses on addressing both sides of an issue, as well as the associated different views. It is a compulsory course for English majors and an optional course for non-English majors. A qualitative case study with interviews and classroom observations was applied over two months. The findings indicate that the teacher generally practiced what she believed in the classrooms. Although some discrepancies existed, the reasons are related to the context of the teaching as well as learner factors, including their lack of preparation and their language proficiency level. The findings also demonstrate that this teacher held many common educational beliefs, which are highly crucial for teaching Topical Debates, such as critical thinking and logical thinking. The results suggest that it is necessary for EFL teachers to regularly and systematically examine the relations between their beliefs and practices through reflective practices for a better monitoring of their daily teaching practicums.

Keywords: critical thinking; reflective practices; teacher beliefs; teacher practices; teaching topical debates

© Urmia University Press

* Corresponding author: Department of Education Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong
Email address: nancywang@life.hkbu.edu.hk

Introduction

EFL teachers' professional growth involves a dynamic process of learning in order to teach effectively. This process typically entails the progressive evolution of teachers' beliefs (Ding, 2015). Teachers' beliefs are primarily constructed and developed in a learning process through a range of learning activities, to illustrate, apprenticeship observations as language learners and as teachers, initial formal pre- and in-service teacher training/education, and real teaching practicums under specific contexts (Zhang, 2011). They are believed to serve as the frame of reference to guide and inform teachers' pedagogical practices, which, as teacher cognition research has shown, involve moment-to-moment classroom decision-making. The examination of teacher beliefs and practices represents the new direction of teacher education research. Teachers' actions and their observable effects will be directly guided by their thought processes and are under the influences of external constraints and opportunities.

Previous research has only minimally focused on university EFL teachers' beliefs and practices, not to mention their teaching of L2 speaking. One reason for such limited research may be that L2 speaking is often considered a neglected teaching skill in second language education (Nation & Newton, 2009). Notably, Mak (2011) found out that teachers' previous learning experiences and their beliefs have a direct influence on their future teacher judgments and decisions in actual teaching practices. Moreover, Farrell & Yang (2017) found out that a teacher's stated beliefs mostly are consistent with her practices when instructing an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course. Possible reasons for the observed divergences include the program expectations, the necessity of keeping the instructional flow of the class, and a novice teacher's lack of teaching experiences in the instruction of the specific course.

In the new *Curriculum Requirements* (MOE, 2004-1), the teaching objectives shifted to cultivating students' practical skills of learning, especially listening and speaking. Topical Debates is known as a course that involves discussions of different views and sides of issues. Debaters speak for or against a formal argument or discussion of a question. The purposes of debate include merely practicing debating for fun, analyzing the feasibility of a newly-proposed policy, and using debate as a way to find the truth (Tao, 2015). English debating course aims at improving students' abilities in expressing abstract thinking, analyzing the current social issues with rationality, and promoting critical thinking competence, which echoes the requirements of modern English educational reform in China. According to the *National Standards for Teaching Quality in Undergraduate Degree Programs in Colleges and Universities* issued in January 2018, Topical Debates has been incorporated into the core courses for English majors (MOE, 2018).

However, some scholars criticized the traditional teaching practices for speaking instruction as "having more monologue and lecturing than interaction and dialogue"(Li, 2018; Lin, 2019). Many EFL teachers usually provided students with some cliché topics for discussion, and the students talked passively with some broken English or even just kept reticent (Zhang, 2018). This mode has incurred many problems, which include laying more emphasis on mechanical drillings and ignoring the development of thinking; being eager for quick success and instant benefits; focusing on an exam-orientated education, and lacking in the inclusion of humanistic knowledge. Students complain that they learned nothing except some discrete language items.

In order to provide an optimal learning environment for language learners, teachers' beliefs and practices need to be continuously examined. Nevertheless, only a few studies have explored the belief-practice relationship in teaching a speaking course in a Chinese context. Thus, a case study was implemented as a means to fill in this gap in the literature. It specifically focused on the beliefs and classroom practices of an EFL teacher in Mainland China when teaching Topical Debates, an L2 speaking course, over two months. Data include teacher interviews, student interviews, classroom observations, and course syllabuses.

Definition of 'teacher beliefs'

'Beliefs' have been defined according to a range of psychological and philosophical perspectives (Abelson, 1979; Pajares, 1992; Farrell, 2008). Such definitions suggest that beliefs are propositions that individuals consider being true and which are often tacit, have an active evaluative and affective component, provide a basis for action, and are resistant to change. In the context of language teacher education, beliefs are regarded as a critical element in teacher learning and have become an essential focus in research. It has even been suggested that beliefs 'may be the clearest measure of a teacher's professional growth' (Kagan, 1992: 85).

It is firmly believed that teachers' beliefs are innate in people's concepts, similar to personal capacity or knowledge and that such beliefs may develop alongside the application of teaching practices. Notably, when Borg (2003) reviewed research concerning teacher beliefs, and he found that in teachers' individual cognitive world, it is highly challenging to distinguish between some specific concepts, to name a few, 'knowledge,' 'belief' and 'conceptions.' According to Borg (2003), terms like "teacher belief" and "teacher cognition" are often applied interchangeably, and they can both be used to describe teachers' conception, perception, and knowledge in the stages of teachers' professional development.

Different dimensions of teacher beliefs

Until the 1980s, teacher beliefs remained a missing paradigm in research (Shulman, 1986). Teacher cognition research has primarily focused on teachers' decisions (Borg, 2006). In consideration of the different classifications of teacher beliefs (Burns, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Richards & Lockhart, 2000; Williams & Burden, 2000; Wang, 2008), this paper proposes five categories of core beliefs for EFL teachers: English language beliefs, teaching beliefs, learning beliefs, beliefs regarding the roles of teachers and students, and profession beliefs (see Figure 1). It is mainly based on Burns' (1996) proposition of teachers' five core beliefs, namely, beliefs about language, teaching, learning, student roles, and teacher roles. For this paper, it combines student roles and teacher roles into one category of teacher-student roles. This paper also takes Wang's (2008) classification for reference and lists teachers' beliefs about the profession as one component. Thus, this study examines the relationship between an EFL teacher's stated beliefs and practices, one by one, based on the five categories of teacher beliefs.

Figure 1: The five categories of teachers' beliefs

Teacher Practices

Teacher practices, on the other hand, determine the success of teaching effectiveness and students' study progress. Compared with the teachers' implicit cognitive process, teachers' practices and consequent outcomes are more discernable (Clark & Peterson, 1986). With constant adjustments under the real teaching context, teacher practices will henceforth bring new teacher reflections and facilitate the maturity of teacher thinking.

Concerning practices in EFL tertiary-level speaking instruction, more emphasis has been attached to students' communicative competence in Mainland China in the twenty-first century. In addition to the traditional approach of rote learning and pattern drills, many EFL teachers tried more innovative approaches, such as a communicative approach and cooperative learning, to enhance students' learning. A variety of activities, which include dialogues, role play, public speaking, discussions, and debates have been organized. Many EFL teachers have an awareness to take on the roles of organizers and facilitators. Taking the learning context and teacher-student negotiation into consideration, they inspire students' initiative with a more student-centered approach.

Nevertheless, there are still many problems associated with teaching a speaking-oriented Topical Debates course. Topical Debates is an advanced speaking course that requires both teachers' and learners' high order abilities of thinking, analyzing, and reasoning. Overall speaking, college English teachers' oral proficiency and their teaching competency remain unsatisfactory (Yue & Li, 2012). Some universities focus more on the availability of the course rather than the quality of teaching Topical Debates. Within the limited class time, the students' initiative has not been given a full display. In the teaching process, many teachers primarily focus on introducing the debating system, like the British parliament or the American parliament system, or just imparting language points. The core contents, which involve logical reasoning or evaluations on each side's arguments, are not sufficiently touched upon. Sometimes when teachers attempt developing students' critical thinking capacities, they do so at a superficial level.

Reflecting on Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Several studies have explored the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices. The main issue has been whether the two (i.e., their beliefs and practices) can match. Most studies have determined that there are convergences between teachers' beliefs and their actual practices in classrooms (McCarty, Abbott-Shim & Lambert, 2001; Lou & Liao, 2005；Farrell & Yang, 2017). For instance, Borg (2001) pointed out that teachers' beliefs guide teachers' practices.

Moreover, Deford (1985, p. 352) contended that teachers' beliefs, when based on a component such as knowledge, could guide their understanding of teaching as well as their instructional practices. Kember & Kwan (2000) applied a qualitative research method and determined that teachers in one Hong Kong university demonstrated two kinds of teaching beliefs, i.e., beliefs about transmitting knowledge and beliefs about promoting learning. Sahin, Bullock & Stables (2002) investigated teachers' beliefs and practices in using questioning with the adoption of interviews and classroom observations. Based on the findings, teachers' beliefs can guide the convergence of teachers' practices. At the same time, these practices may have some elements that are not stated in the beliefs or some functions for which teachers are unaware of.

Some studies have shown that teachers' beliefs are not always wholly convergent with their stated beliefs (Lee, 2009; Tan, 2007; Farrell & Vos, 2018). As Fang (1996) explained, three circumstances can trigger this kind of inconsistency. The first circumstance is the complexity of classroom life and school context. This complexity constrains teachers' focus on their beliefs and restricts teachers' abilities to conduct practices related to their beliefs. The second circumstance is the diversity of teachers' beliefs. The third circumstance is the research method itself. There are some paradigms and terminologies that are unfamiliar to participants and ambiguity factors into the definitions of these paradigms. Lenski, Wham & Griffey (1998) and Gregoire (2003) argued that the inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and practices is the impetus for promoting the development of teachers' beliefs. The reason why teachers' practices are not consistent with their beliefs is partly due to teachers' conception that the previously held beliefs are not appropriate for

the new environment. In order to solve the problem at a critical moment, teachers must implement some new practices to facilitate their reflection. There are three consequences of revising reflections: 1) forming new beliefs to replace the old ones; 2) revising previous beliefs; 3) integrating new beliefs into the original teaching beliefs so that the various beliefs coexist.

The above literature review indicates that there may arise divergences and discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and practices. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes directly determine their intention of implementations, and those beliefs can stimulate and modify their practices as well. Teachers' perceived competence of action will influence the intensity of their beliefs. The stronger the beliefs are, the more likely teachers are going to take specific actions. Also, the stronger the teachers' executive abilities are, the firmer their beliefs are. Given the mutuality between teacher beliefs and practices, reflective teaching plays a mediated role in transforming beliefs into practices.

Farrell (2015) proposed a framework for reflecting on the practice which encompasses a holistic approach to the reflection that not only focuses on the intellectual, cognitive, and meta-cognitive aspects of practice but also the spiritual, moral, and emotional non-cognitive aspects of reflection that acknowledge the inner life of teachers. From his viewpoint, language teachers who engage in reflective practice must develop a tolerance for ambiguity and a reflective disposition of open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness (Farrell, 2019). Only by engaging in reflective practice can EFL teachers learn critical reflection and acquire the flexibility to face future confrontations and transitions in their professional development.

This study

We propose a theoretical framework for this study. The figure below (see Figure 2) shows that teachers' beliefs, or theories and principles, can serve as the guide for EFL teachers' practices. With their teaching pedagogies and teaching styles, EFL teachers may incorporate their unique teaching beliefs into their actual classroom practices with constant reflections. Teacher beliefs/principles/theories will influence teachers' designs and henceforth teacher practices. How teachers implement their beliefs will be influenced by external factors, i.e., school context, as well as internal factors, including teacher attitudes, emotions, and motivation.
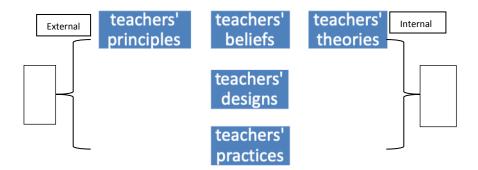

Figure 2: The proposed framework for this study

Despite great endeavors and commitment made by researchers from different fields in the past decades, teachers' beliefs had been described as a "messy construct" (Pajares, 1992) due to its conceptual and methodological problems. Thus, the purpose of this study is to describe the relationships between teacher beliefs and their actual practices when teaching the L2 speaking course, Topical Debates. In view of the existing problems mentioned previously, examining teachers' beliefs and practices so as to bridge the gap between them is of benefits to the enhancement of teaching effectiveness. It also serves as a vital first step to bring innovations to teaching practices.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are an EFL teacher's stated beliefs and actual classroom practices in teaching L2 speaking-oriented Topical Debates course?

2. What are the convergences and discrepancies between this EFL teacher's stated beliefs and her classroom practices?

Methodology

A case study was applied to examine an EFL teacher's beliefs and practices related to teaching speaking. Some detailed information, which may not be observable using other research techniques, could be collected by the case study method. As Merriam (1998: 19) explained, a qualitative case study approach allows for the thick description of a context and the particulars of a phenomenon in order to 'gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved.' This approach suited the purpose of the study, which seeks to explore an EFL teacher's beliefs and practices.

Context

The study took place in a class for junior students in a science and engineering university in Mainland China. The students were English majors, and they chose this course mainly based on their interests. They took this course once a week for a total of 16 weeks in one semester to enhance their language output competency when making topical debates.

Topical Debates is a course that focuses on how to present one's point of view in a clear, systematic, and persuasive way in public. It requires a high level of speaking competence, which demands students' ability to apply abstract thinking, critical thinking, and logical thinking about controversial problems in the present society. Topical Debates is in the form of discussion that involves sides of an issue and different views. The purposes of debate include merely practicing debate for fun, analyzing the feasibility of a newly proposed policy, and using debate as a way of finding the truth. It is a process of training students' reasoning and critical thinking as well as sharpening their speaking skills.

Participant

Purposeful sampling was applied when selecting the participant. The standard used in choosing participants and sites is whether they are "information-rich" (Patton, 1990, p.169). Its purpose is to help us understand our central phenomenon of exploring EFL teacher's beliefs and practices. Ms. Wei (a pseudonym) is the only teacher instructing the course Topical Debates in the university, and she had expressed her interest in participating in the current study. The first author

was able to provide Ms. Wei with such an opportunity by taking a deeper look into her beliefs and practices of teaching Topical Debates.

Ms. Wei is in her forties, and she earned her BA and MA degrees in English language and Literature in a key university in Mainland China. At the time of the study, she had over 20 years of teaching experience and now teaches in an average-ranking university in Beijing. After two years of teaching college English to non-English majors, she voluntarily transferred to the English department to teach English majors. She has been teaching the Topical Debates course for four consecutive years. Additionally, she has overseen the school debate group, which participates in various debate competitions, for over 12 years. She has won various awards for Excellent Performance in Teaching. Generally, she is an experienced and outstanding EFL teacher in the tertiary level course instruction of Topical Debates. More importantly, Ms. Wei is enthusiastic about teaching, and she is an interactive lecturer and does not refrain from sharing perspectives with others.

Data Collection

For the data collection, four interviews, that totally lasted two hours, were conducted. In addition, five sessions of classes were observed, with each session lasting for one hour and a half. The appendix (see attached) provides an example of a classroom observation record. The recordings were transcribed, and videos were analyzed to examine the relations between the teacher's stated beliefs and actual classroom practices.

The interviews were conducted in English. Questions included the following:

1. What is your understanding of the essence of language? (beliefs about language)

2. What is your ideal teaching?

   How did you come to teach in this way?

   How can you improve your teaching? (beliefs about teaching)

3. Do you think it is necessary to master the cultures of a foreign country? (beliefs about learning)

4. What do you think of the teacher and student roles? (beliefs about teacher-student roles)

5. Do you think teaching is an ordinary occupation or a demanding profession? Why? (beliefs about profession)

Data Analysis

The process of sorting out and analyzing collected data is a process with distinct features of being "mutual influencing, overlapping and synchronistic" (Chen, 2000, p.271). It follows five steps in the study: producing a text for analyzing; establishing appropriate categories based on coding; distinguishing themes and tendencies in the data; condensing the themes, and depicting the themes in depth (Carney, 1990).

In the study, the collected data were first marked with serial numbers for reference. For example, Wei-I-1-May 21, 2018 refers to the first interview of Ms. Wei on the date of May 21, 2018; Wei-O-1-June 8, 2018 refers to classroom observation about Ms. Wei's class for the first time; and Wei-S refers to Ms. Wei's teaching syllabus. Table 1 shows the frequency and length of the interviews and classroom observations in the study.

Table 1
Arrangements of Interviews and Observations in the Study

Teacher	Ms. Wei
Course titles	Topical Debates
Interviews	Teacher interviews for four times with around 30 minutes each time; student interviews with around 30 minutes
Classroom observations	Five sessions of classes (around 1.5 hours each session)

Then based on the collected data, the first author analyzed Ms. Wei's beliefs and practices in teaching speaking. The first author transcribed the recording and wrote memos of her reflections of the interview. Then, she carefully read the data and identified those data representing the characteristics of speaking instruction, then made primary coding. Meanwhile, she recorded the problems in the interviews in writing, then supplemented more data in the next interview and recategorized the original codes. When performing observations in the classrooms, the first author wrote down her doubts concerning their teaching and invited the instructor to further clarify them after class.

After the classroom observations, the first author sorted out the field notes, transcribed the videotaped teaching excerpts, and then added them to the memos. She then manually analyzed all the collected data, which were verified by the second author. Later on, the data were coded according to the five categories of teacher beliefs as illustrated in Figure 1, namely, beliefs about language, teaching, learning, teacher-student roles, and profession.

Findings

The following findings were obtained to answer the guiding research questions:

1.   What are the stated beliefs of an EFL teacher of the L2 speaking course, Topical Debates?

1.1 The function of language

From Ms. Wei's perspective, the function of language is to represent the cultures of different countries and human beings' thoughts.

According to Ms. Wei, 'You cannot just deem speaking as a skill. You know students in Western countries take speaking courses as well. They need to learn how to speak properly, how to persuade others, and how to convince others. *Language is the carrier of thoughts and culture*. Language is not just symbols' (Wei-I-1-25 May 2018).

Using language to make effective propositions and whips are equally important (Wei-S). In Ms. Wei's eyes, a *meaningful and logical debating* represents the effective deployment of L2, and it is the key to successful Topical Debates.

1.2 Language Teaching

Topical Debates is one way of practicing students' speaking skills. The ability to extemporize on a given subject to a group of audience necessitates a skill that needs to be learned and practiced.

Ms. Wei gave this explanation: 'I intentionally *choose some hot and controversial topics for nowadays*, and I try to *incorporate a cultural component* in the class. I need to *build students' confidence* and *train their critical thinking abilities* about various problems. For the teaching plan, I have *total autonomy* and can add or delete something based on the actual classroom progress. Students need to have *team spirit* in presenting their ideas as a debating group, just like in the British Parliament debating system. I pay more attention to their *fluency of expression* as this can maintain the language flow. Sometimes, I *correct students' language errors*, like pronunciations. But more frequently, I *point out students' inadequacy in refuting* the other side's viewpoints. Listening and note-taking ability is also very important in comprehending others' ideas. What I should do is to *provide a supportive environment* for them' (Wei-I-4-22 June 2018).

Moreover, Ms. Wei deliberately *provided enough opportunities*, including setting up a debating club and organizing debating activities regularly, for students to debate. She would like to increase students' awareness of their *presentation skills*, such as appropriate eye contact, the projection of voice, and the design of PowerPoint materials (Wei-S).

1.3 Learning

As far as learning is concerned, Ms. Wei viewed it as students' responsibility. As she stated, 'Students should be encouraged to express their ideas in a logical, coherent and critical way, which needs their preparation of *doing the relevant research* and organizing their ideas. As college students, they should *take their initiative to learn*. They need to *demonstrate their presentations skills* and *in-depth thinking*' (Wei-I-2-1 June 2018).

Through learning in Topical Debates, students' abilities should be improved in specific skills, including *critical thinking*, oral communication skills, work ethic, *teamwork, researching* and writing, listening and note-taking, worldview, competence, and confidence. Topical Debates is not contest-oriented, but education-oriented, and the foremost goal is to help students become an excellent public speaker and *thinker* (Wei-S).

1.4 Roles of teachers and students

Ms. Wei explained that teachers and students have different roles in a speaking class: 'In the Topical Debates classes, I do think students take a much more important role in the class. The teacher just works as a *facilitator or a helper* when students have some problems in learning' (Wei-I-3-8 June 2018).

1.5 Profession

Ms. Wei feels quite proud of working as an EFL teacher. As she explained, 'Working as an L2 teacher teaching *Topical Debates* is *very challenging*. It can be labeled as one of the most difficult courses for English learning. Teachers need to have *a high level of language proficiency*. Besides, you need to have *critical thinking*, and you need to organize your ideas in a logical way. You need to have sharp visions about students' debates and *accurately point out the strong and weak points* in students' refutations. If teachers' do not have *quick thinking*, you cannot do this job, or your work is just very superficial and not of much help to the students. Teachers need to influence students with their *patience and enthusiasm*' (Wei-I-4-22 June 2018).

These beliefs are summarised in Table 2. The belief contents were extracted from the interview transcriptions.

Table 2
Ms. Wei's Beliefs

Beliefs	Contents
Language	Language is the carrier of thought and culture.
	Meaningful/logical debating represents the effective deployment of L2.
Teaching	Select current and controversial topics.
	Incorporate a cultural component.
	Build up students' confidence.
	Train students' critical thinking abilities.
	Enjoy total autonomy.
	Pay more attention to students' fluency of expression.
	Correct students' language errors.
	Point out students' inadequacies when presenting or refuting.
	Provide students with a supportive environment.
Students' Learning	Demonstrate team spirit.
	Demonstrate presentation skills.
	Be prepared to conduct relevant research.
	Show an initiative to learn.
	Have in-depth thinking.
Role of teachers/students	They serve as a facilitator or a helper.
Profession	Teaching Topical Debates is very challenging.
	Teachers need to have strong language proficiency.
	They must apply critical thinking.
	They must accurately point out the strengths and weaknesses of students' debates.
	They must be able to apply quick thinking.
	Teachers need to demonstrate patience and enthusiasm.

2.   What are the EFL teacher's actual classroom practices?

Ms. Wei's actual classroom practices are listed in Table 3 for a straightforward examination.

Table 3
Ms. Wei's Classroom Practices

Observed practices	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5
D1: Wei-O-1-25 May 2018; D2: Wei-O-2-1 June 2018; D3: Wei-O-3-8 June 2018; D4: Wei-O-4-15 June 2018; D5: Wei-O-5-22 June 2018.					
Reviews previously learned skills for topical debates.	√	√	√	√	√
Organizes practices for students to debate either in teams/groups or individually.	√	√	√	√	√
Elicits students' reflections on specific topics.	√	√	√	√	√
Orally analyses the logic of students' debates in class.	√	×	√	√	√
Introduces some skills for Topical Debates.	×	√	×	√	×
Tries to motivate and encourage students with words or exciting topics.	√	√	√	√	√
Uses humor and/or enthusiasm through language.	√	√	√	√	√
Comments on students' performance, in terms of language, logic, and reasoning.	√	√	√	√	√
Uses PowerPoint.	×	√	×	√	×
Directly asks individual students to answer questions.	√	√	√	√	√
Modifies her weekly teaching plans.	√	×	√	×	√
Engages in random conversation before or after class time or during the break.	√	√	√	√	√
Includes a component that involves students' understanding of the cultures of different countries.	×	√	√	√	×
Helps with students' expressions during the class.	×	√	√	√	×

(√=what is observed on that day; ×=what is not observed on that day)

In the five sessions of classroom observations, Ms. Wei consistently reviewed previously learned skills for topical debates, including how to make refutations and how to distinguish the logical

fallacies. She organized students in either groups or pairs for debate activities that facilitated students' understanding of specific controversial topics. She enjoyed total autonomy regarding teaching plans and the syllabus. In almost every class, she asked individual students to answer questions. She did not use PowerPoint very often. As she said, 'This course aims [to provide] students with more occasions to practice their debating methods and language skills. Except for showing them some knowledge of debating procedures and strategies, I see no [reason to use] PowerPoint in the class, which actually confined students' thoughts and made them learn in a passive way' (Wei-I-3-8 June 2018).

Sometimes, the classroom was not active, and students felt frustrated by not being able to identify the problems in logical reasoning. The teacher always encouraged the students either with words or with facial expressions. The teacher showed great enthusiasm for teaching, but she did not employ much humor in the class. A joyous atmosphere was seldom found in the observed classes except for the time when some students were giving presentations.

Notably, the teacher had good and close relations with her students. In fact, she and the students often chatted freely either before or after the class. In one of the student interviews, a female student offered this statement: 'I love my teacher very much. I think [a] good speaking teacher must have patience, enthusiasm, and logic, and I think Ms. Wei is just this kind of teacher' (Wei's student-I-1 June 2018). These words demonstrated that Ms. Wei is an excellent teacher of the Topical Debates course.

3.   What are the convergences and discrepancies between an EFL teacher's stated beliefs and her actual classroom practices?

For an easier match between an EFL teacher's beliefs and practices, the following table (see Table 4) uses 'Y' and 'N' to denote the convergences and divergences, respectively.

Table 4
The Convergences and Divergences between Ms. Wei's Beliefs and Observed Classroom Practices

Beliefs		D1	D2	D3	D4	D5
Language	Language is the carrier of thought and culture.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Teaching	Select a current and controversial topic.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Incorporate a cultural component.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Build up students' confidence.	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Train their critical thinking abilities.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Enjoy total autonomy.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Pay more attention to their fluency of expression.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Correct students' language errors.	Y	N	N	N	Y
	Point out students' inadequacy in presenting or refuting.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Provide students with a supportive environment.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Demonstrate team spirit.	Y	N	N	N	Y
Students' Learning	Demonstrate presentation skills.	Y	N	N	N	N
	Conduct relevant research.	Y	N	N	N	Y

	Show an initiative to learn.	Y	N	N	N	Y
	Have in-depth thinking.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Role of teachers/students	They serve as a facilitator or a helper.	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Profession	Teaching Topical Debates is very challenging.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Teachers need to have strong language proficiency.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	They must apply critical thinking.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	They must be able to accurately point out the strengths and weaknesses of students' debates.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	They must be able to apply quick thinking.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
	Teachers need to demonstrate patience and enthusiasm.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

(D=Day; Y=Yes, observed; N=No, not observed)

According to Ms. Wei, the language should be the carrier of thought and culture. During the five sessions of classes, different topics, such as China's Hukou system, China's College Entrance Examination system, and capital punishment, were introduced for elaboration. Students actively voiced their opinions about these issues. Each topic represented certain cultures in a specific area. For example, the Hukou system is a unique phenomenon in China, and it was the requirement of society in the 1960s. At that time, China called for the stability of the population for better management, which was a distinctive culture. In addition, as another example, Ms. Wei asked the students to discuss this perspective: 'Wealthy parents should pass down all their wealth to their children after their death.' According to the pro side, it is a Chinese tradition for older generations to pass down their wealth to younger generations. According to the con side, it is the Western tradition for young people to become independent from their parents when they reach adulthood.

Throughout the five sessions of classes, Ms. Wei provided a rather supportive environment for students to express their ideas, and she always smiled during the classes and used specific phrases, i.e.,'Very good,' 'That makes sense,' and 'Go on,' to encourage students to organize and express their ideas.

Ms. Wei also told the first researcher that she enjoyed total autonomy in the designing of course syllabi and the delivering of course content.

As she stated, 'I designed the syllabus all by myself. That is why I like teaching English majors. I once taught non-English majors for two years, and I had been fed up with teaching the test-taking skills for CET4 (College English Test Band Four). The last day when I taught non-English majors, I told them that English should not be learned that way. English learning should be fun and enlightening. Things got much better when I started to teach English majors. I can offer the courses I like and be fully responsible for delivering this course' (Wei-I-4-22 June 2018).

Sometimes, when the class was running out of time, Ms. Wei continued with her teaching, and no students complained about that.

Ms. Wei paid more attention to students' fluency in expression. Thus, she seldom stopped students' expressions and only occasionally mentioned some language errors, including the pronunciation of certain words, such as 'criterion' and 'heritage' after students' presentations, which can be labeled as 'error checking afterward.' However, most language errors were not pointed out. She firmly believed that teachers' constant interruptions would ruin the purpose of the speaking activity.

More frequently, she pointed out students' logical fallacies and inappropriate refutations in their presentations. The following is an excerpt selected from the classroom observations.

Excerpt: (*Motion:* This house believes that romantic love as the main criterion for marriage in pop culture does more harm than good.)

Student (Con side): If you marry primarily for money, then in the future, when you encounter some difficulties, nobody will support you. …You will lead a …miserable life.

Ms. Wei: Marrying primarily for money is not in opposition to marrying for love. Marrying for money and marrying for love can coexist. There is a list of criteria for an ideal marriage. You could not be that absolute in thinking that the two just conflict with each other.

In this excerpt, Ms. Wei identified the overgeneralization in the student's presentation. In addition, Ms. Wei directed students' attention to the keywords 'in pop culture,' which the majority of the students simply ignored. Pop culture was the scope of the discussion.

Ms. Wei primarily worked as a facilitator, but during two sessions of classes, she worked as the tutor/lecturer and taught some of the main strategies in Topical Debates, such as 'Attack on the need,' 'attack on the plan' and 'need-plan wedge.' Students did not exhibit an initiative to learn during these two sessions of classes.

During the entire process of teaching, the need for specific requirements was demonstrated. Teaching such a course entails an EFL teacher's multiple competencies in language proficiency, analytical ability, critical thinking, logical expression, and classroom management. Being an EFL teacher of Topical Debates is not an easy teaching assignment in one's career.

Discussion

Overall, Ms. Wei's stated beliefs converged with her actual classroom practices. The convergences can be attributed to both internal and external factors.

The internal factors are her perceptions and beliefs about language teaching. When asked about the main objectives of cultivating students, Ms. Wei mentioned she would like to improve students' critical thinking and oral communication skills. Critical thinking is a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one's personal and civic life (Facione, 1990). Ms. Wei set critical thinking competency as one crucial objective in English teaching, which was further echoed in her teaching practices by regularly bringing forth some controversial issues which engaged students in thinking and reasoning.

Besides, Ms. Wei stuck to the whole-person education in hopes that her students can become responsible, capable, and thoughtful citizens. English education aims at enlightening human beings rather than leading them to dark alleys. Students' affective factors also need to be taken into account. Chinese students are generally intimidated in speaking and constrained in expressing their ideas in English. Ms. Wei tried to reduce their apprehension and encouraged them to express their ideas logically in public. Lowering the affective filter by offering encouraging remarks and establishing positive teacher-student rapport in the class helped in lowering students' anxiety level and boosting their confidence. From Ms. Wei's perspective, students of all language levels can choose to take Topical Debates as long as they harbor the intention of thinking and expressing. In

other words, Ms. Wei has total trust in students' abilities in speaking, provided that they are systematically trained.

This teaching belief or philosophy of whole-person education permeated through all her teachings, and she demonstrated the practice of this belief in the classrooms.

Ms. Wei's prior learning experiences also contributed to the convergences between her beliefs and practices. She mentioned that when she was a student, she was scared to speak in public. However, if the teachers were kind and lenient enough, she would have the courage to express herself. This psychological change made Ms. Wei aware of the significance of building a low-anxiety learning context.

In addition to the above internal factors, there are also some external factors, including peer influence and the impact of the working context. Ms. Wei attended workshops about *Teaching Topical Debates* organized by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in Beijing during almost every summer vacation. She benefited a lot from attending the lectures delivered by some scholars and experts. One female teacher coming from a university in Shanghai impressed her so much by demonstrating charisma with perfect language and intense passion. Ms. Wei increased her knowledge about debating instruction from the lecture and expected to learn from this female teacher.

The university context also exerted a positive influence on Ms. Wei's teaching by offering her support in launching this debating course and granting her full autonomy in making instructional decisions.

In addition to those observed convergences, discrepancies exist. For instance, Ms. Wei regarded a teacher's role as that of a facilitator or helper. In the observed classes, Ms. Wei worked as a tutor or lecturer most of the time. The role shift is partly due to the teaching context highly influenced by the traditional Confucian way of teaching and learning, and partly due to her teaching plans of transmitting knowledge related to debates. Occasionally, when some students were distracted from the class and played with their mobile phones, Ms. Wei would resort to the classroom discipline rules and correct students' misbehaviors as a controller.

The most substantial discrepancies concern the EFL teacher's beliefs about students' learning and the actual observed learning of the students (see Table 5). A large gap continues to exist between the teachers' beliefs and students' real learning efficiency. For example, Ms. Wei mentioned that students should take the initiative to learn by themselves because class time was too limited, but in the actual classes, students did not demonstrate the initiative. Concerning presentation skills and team spirit, which Ms. Wei regarded as highly significant, the observed circumstances were students reading their scripts from the beginning to the end rather than performing impromptu presenting and debating.

Moreover, there was a severe lack of communication between the presenter and the audience, which should be a requirement for a successful debate. Additionally, some contents in the students' illustrations of their side's point of view were overlapping, which demonstrated that task-division and full negotiations were still lacking among the students. Further, some students were unable to identify the wrong fallacies of the other side and could not develop a comprehensive summary of their own side. Some of the students also focused on their own individual work rather than contributing to their team. Ineffective refutations occurred occasionally, and team spirit was not exhibited. Although Ms. Wei mentioned these issues several times, the situations did not improve. Ms. Wei said it was not easy to solve these problems all at once, and she attributed it to the limit of students' language proficiency level and, more

importantly, to students' underdeveloped critical thinking ability, which called for improvement in the long run. Ms. Wei also occasionally changed the teaching syllabus due to students' comprehension of specific debate topics. She said she sometimes needed to devote more time to explaining the meaning of the motion; thus, she had to omit some other prearranged sections.

In all, the complicated teaching context and learner-related factors contributed to the discrepancies between Ms.Wei's teaching beliefs and practices.

Table 5
The Major Mismatches between Ms. Wei's Stated Beliefs and Practices

Major mismatches	
Correct students' language errors.	Sometimes no correction of the students' language errors. (Ms. Wei)
Students need to have team spirit.	Lacking task-division and full negotiations. (students)
Students need to demonstrate presentation skills.	Reading through the scripts and no communication with the audience. (students)
Students' should be able to conduct relevant research.	Some points of information are overlapping and not effective. (students)
Students should show an initiative to learn.	Seldom conducting debating exercises after class. (students)
Students need to have in-depth thinking.	Not being able to pinpoint the logical fallacies. (students)
Teachers serve as a facilitator or a helper.	Very often serve as a tutor or lecturer. (Ms. Wei)

Implications for teaching

The above findings and discussion indicate that there are many internal and external factors influencing Ms. Wei's beliefs. EFL teachers need to adjust their beliefs based on students' performance and learning outcomes in authentic classrooms. Conducting in-depth self-reflection in teaching experiences and thus modifying one's beliefs and practices are proved to be effective in the process of teacher professionalization.

Contextual factors, which include national and school policies, teacher evaluation, and motivation system, peer influence, available facilities, and course development, are also highlighted from the above discussion. We need to attach importance to all those aspects, especially the key ones, and try to cultivate a positive school context to help foster EFL teachers' beliefs more systematically.

Moreover, it usually takes years for EFL teachers to form and modify their beliefs and practices. Therefore, teacher educators and school administrators should provide more opportunities, like in-service training, immersion programs abroad, and rewarding excellent teachers, for EFL teachers to facilitate their professional development. In sum, teacher autonomy and motivation should be promoted among EFL teachers with a priority.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study investigated the stated beliefs and actual instructional practices of an EFL teacher in Topical Debates in Mainland China. Generally, there were convergences in the

belief-practice praxis, which demonstrate that the teacher has already formed clear and valid teaching beliefs that can guide her practice. In our paper, we found out that multiple factors, including teaching and learning experiences as well as the educational context, influence the EFL teacher's instructional decisions. There were still some instances of divergences, mainly in the domain of students' learning. The divergences could be attributed to the context of teaching as well as learner factors, such as students' lack of preparation and their language proficiency level. Thus, on the one hand, Ms. Wei should strengthen her learning and reflection of ELT methodologies, and primarily conduct conscious learning of some unfamiliar teaching approaches so as to better bridge the gap between teaching and students' learning. On the other hand, it is better for Ms. Wei to further develop her understanding and comprehension of beliefs about students' learning.

The findings also demonstrate that in addition to pedagogical beliefs, the teacher participant held many common educational beliefs, such as critical thinking and logical thinking, which are highly crucial for teaching Topical Debates. The results suggest that it is necessary for EFL teachers to regularly and systematically examine the belief-practice relationship through reflective practices.

The purpose of this case study is to articulate and meditate on a teacher's proposed beliefs and classroom practices rather than seek the best pedagogies. Although this single case study has one informant, the findings remain insightful by enriching university speaking teachers' understanding that reflective teaching is facilitative to mediate their beliefs and practices. Therefore, rather than providing "generalizations," this study generates "illustrative outcomes" with the rich particularity of one unique case.

References:

Abelson, R. P. (1979). Differences between beliefs and knowledge system. *Cognitive Science, 3,* 355-366.

Borg, M. (2001). Teachers' beliefs. *ELT Journal, 55*(2), 186-87.

Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe, and do. *Language Teachers, 36,* 81-109.

Borg, S. (2006). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice.* London: Continuum.

Burns, A. (1996). Starting all over again: From teaching adults to teaching beginners. In D. Freeman & J. Richards (Eds.), *Teacher learning in language teaching* (pp. 154-177). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Calderhead, J. (1996). Teachers: Beliefs and knowledge. In D. Berliner & R. Calfee (Eds.), *Handbook of Educational Psychology*. New York: Macmillan.

Carney, T. F. (1990). *Collaborative inquiry methodology*. Windsor: University ofWindsor, Division for Instructional Development.

Chen, X. M. (2000). *Qualitative research methods and social sciences studies*. Beijing: Educational Science Publishing House.

Clark, C. M. & Peterson, P. L. (1986). Teachers' thought processes. In M. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed.) (pp.255-296). New York: Macmillan.

Deford, D. (1985). Validating the construct of theoretical orientation in reading instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly, 20*(3), 351-367.

Ding, R. (2015). *College English teachers' belief system*. Beijing: China Book Press.

Facione, P. A. (1990). Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction. *Educational Resources Information Center* (No.: ED 315 423). Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED315423

Fang, Z. (1996). A review of research on teacher beliefs and practices. *Educational Research, 38*(1), 47-65.

Farrell, T. (2008). *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice*. London: Continuum Press.

Farrell, T. (2015). *Promoting teacher reflection in second language education: A framework for TESOL professionals*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Farrell, T. (2019). Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: Interpreting Reflective Practice in TESOL. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research 7*(3), 1-14.

Farrell, T. & Vos, R. (2018). Exploring the principles and practices of one teacher of L2 speaking: The importance of reflecting on practice. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research 6*(1), 1-15.

Farrell, T., & Yang, D. M. (2017). Exploring an EAP teacher's beliefs and practices in teaching L2 speaking: A case study. *RELC Journal, 9*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688217730144

Gregoire, M. (2003). Is it a challenge or a threat? A dual-process model of teachers' cognition and appraisal processes during conceptual change. *Educational Psychology Review, 15*(2), 147-179.

Kagan, D. M. (1992). Implications of research on teacher belief. *Educational Psychologist, 27*(1), 65-90.

Kember, D., & Kwan, K. (2000). Lecturers' approaches to teaching and their relationship to conceptions of good teaching. *Instructional Science, 28*(5-6), 469-490.

Lee, I. (2009). Ten mismatches between teachers' beliefs and written feedback practice. *ELT Journal, 63*(1), 13-22.

Lenski, S., Wham, M., & Griffey, D. (1998). Literacy orientation survey: A survey to clarify teachers' beliefs and practices. *Reading Research and Instruction, 37*(3), 217-236.

Li, L.H. (2018). Exploration and experiment of English topical debates in Chinese universities. *Overseas English, 7*, 81-82.

Lin, Y. (2019). Research on the effects of implementing a language template in the cultivation of students' critical thinking abilities in teaching Topical Debates. *Foreign Language Education, 40* (1), 66-71.

Lou, H., & Liao, F. (2005). The relationship between college English teacher beliefsand practices—Qualitative and quantitative research. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 37*(4), 271-275.

Mak, S. H. Y. (2011). Tensions between conflicting beliefs of an EFL teacher inteaching practice. *RELC Journal, 42*(1), 53–67.

McCarty, F., Abbott-Shim, M., & Lambert, R. (2001). The relationship betweenteacher beliefs and practices, and head start classroom quality. *Early Educationand Development, 12*(2), 225-238.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ministry of Education. (2004). College English curriculum requirements (Report No.:2004-1). Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.cn/s78/A08/moe_734/201001/t20100129_729.html

Ministry of Education. (2018). *National standards for teaching quality in undergraduate degree programs in colleges and universities*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.

Nation, I., & Newton, J. (2009). *Teaching ESL/EFL listening and speaking (ESL andapplied linguistics professional series)*. New York: Routledge.

Nunan, D. (2000). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury   Park, CA: Sage.

Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research, 62*(3), 307-332.

Richards, J., & Lockhart, C. (2000). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Beijing: People's Education Press.

Sahin, C., Bullock, K., & Stables, A. (2002). Teachers' beliefs and practices in relation to their beliefs about questioning at key stage 2. *Educational Studies, 28*(4), 371-384.

Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Research, 15*(2), 4-14.

Tan, C. Q. (2007). The relation between English teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. *Foreign Language Education, 28*(5), 40-44.

Tao, X. (2015). *Debating in English*. Beijing: Peking University Press.

Wang, H. X. (2008). Literature review of teacher beliefs in foreign countries. *Journal of Ningbo University, 30*(5), 61-65.

Williams, M., & Burden, R. (2000). *Psychology for language teachers*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Yue, C., & Li, S.Y. (2012). The present situations and teaching approaches in teaching oral English in universities. *China Science and Technology Information, 20,* 180-181.

Zhang, L. (2011). *Exploring EFL teachers' personal theories: A reconceptualization of language teacher education*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Zhang, X. Y. (2018). Application of topical debates in oral English training courses in Chinese universities. *Industrial and Science Tribune, 17*(19), 150-151.

Appendix

Classroom Observations of **Topical Debates**
Date: June 2018
Location: A university in China

Teaching procedures	Time	Comments
Review what has been learned	5 minutes	Presenting a method for systematic learning and teaching.
Whip summarise, how to summarise arguments from both sides	10 minutes	Pointing out some criteria (new arguments are strongly discouraged and summary of the disagreements is crucial) for summarizing ideas for both sides with examples.
Attacking logical fallacies	30 minutes	Illustrating different logical fallacies with examples and references. She also comments on students' ideas.
Propositional strategy: need/plan/advantage strategy Comparative advantage	15 minutes	Providing classifications for a propositional strategy.
Oppositional strategy: Classical negative Repairs negative	15 minutes	Drawing maps of how to make effective rebuttals.
Dos and don'ts in debates	13 minutes	Using prepared videos to demonstrate what should and should not be done in debates.
Setting an assignment of 'This house supports corporal punishment.'	2 minutes	Informing the students of the assignment but does not provide students with enough guidance.

Ricky Lam is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. His publications have appeared in *Assessing Writing*, *Language Testing*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *System*, and other international journals. He has recently published a volume in the New Portfolio Series (RELC) entitled '*Using Portfolios in Language Teaching*.'

Wang Lan is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Education Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. She has made oral presentations at several international conferences, including Asia TEFL. Her research interests lie in teacher professional development.