Chinese English major students and the apprenticeship of observation

The influence of previous student experiences on current beliefs about English language teaching

Kinesiska engelskstudierande universitetsstudenter och observationens lärlingskap
Tidigare eleverfarenheters påverkan på nuvarande åsikter om engelskundervisning

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Abstract

“The apprenticeship of observation” is a person’s previous experiences as a student and it can greatly affect a person’s beliefs about teaching. This paper aimed to study the effect that previous student experiences had on English major students at a university in China. A questionnaire was designed in order to collect data. The questionnaire was distributed to 117 undergraduate English majors. The results showed that the English majors considered their previous experiences as students to have greatly affected their current beliefs about English language teaching. The results further showed that the effects had mainly been positive and that the English major students considered “methods for English teaching”, “content”, and “lesson planning” to be the areas that had been affected most. These results were in accordance with most previous studies on the topic.

Keywords: the apprenticeship of observation, previous student experiences, beliefs about teaching, prospective teacher’s beliefs

Sammanfattning på svenska


Nyckelord: observationens lärlingskap, tidigare eleverfarenheter, åsikter om undervisning, blivande lärarens uppfattningar
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1. Introduction and aims

The time spent in compulsory school and upper-secondary school is a very influential time in people’s lives. It is the time when many people are shaped into who they are and when opinions about a number of topics are formed. One of those topics is teaching. People form opinions about what they think is good teaching i.e., about how teachers should and should not teach. This can later have an impact on teacher students and educators in teacher training programs. It is therefore useful to investigate to what extent and in what ways students’ previous experiences in school affect their beliefs about English language teaching.

Some studies on the effect of previous student experiences on current beliefs about teaching have already been done. However, not a great number of studies have been carried out, and most have been done in English-speaking countries. Doing a study in a non-English speaking country would therefore further expand research on previous student experiences. Some studies have been done in Hong Kong, for example Urmston (2003), but to my knowledge, no studies have been done on the topic in mainland China.

The aim of this paper is to examine the effect that previous student experiences have had on English major students at a highly-ranked university in mainland China. Accordingly, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. Do English major students at the university consider their own schooling to have affected their beliefs about English language teaching in any way?
2. Do English major students at the university consider their own schooling to be the main reason for their current beliefs when it comes to English language teaching?
3. If their own schooling has had an effect, has it been mainly positive or mainly negative?
4. Which areas of the teaching profession do the English major students consider to be the areas where their beliefs have been affected most by their own schooling?

A questionnaire was used to collect data which were subsequently analyzed in order to answer the research questions.
2. Background

Section 2.1 will introduce the key term: the *apprenticeship of observation*. The idea behind the term will be explained as well as its uses and limitations when it comes to the beliefs of a prospective teacher. Section 2.2 is a survey of previous studies on the influence of the apprenticeship of observation on the beliefs of prospective teachers. Finally, section 2.3 will look at the implications that it can have for teacher educators, according to previous research.

2.1 The apprenticeship of observation

There are a number of different factors that can influence the beliefs of a prospective teacher. One of these factors is the prospective teacher’s previous experiences as a learner (S. Borg 2006: 52). In 1975, Lortie coined a term for this phenomenon. He called it “the apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie 2002: 61). In his book, Lortie discusses the occupational effect that previous schooling has on prospective teachers. He notes that the occupational group that American teenagers see most of by far is teachers. An estimate shows that roughly 13,000 hours has been spent in direct contact with teachers by the time the average student finishes high school (Lortie 2002: 61). In contrast to other professions, this is quite unique. Novices who are studying for other professions, such as prospective lawyers or doctors, do not have the same opportunity to observe and evaluate professionals at work that prospective teachers have (M. Borg 2004: 274). Already in 1975, Lortie also claimed that the time spent by students in direct contact with a classroom teacher is not simply spent in passive observation. The teacher and the student establish a form of relationship where the student’s different actions have consequences. Whether it is in order to simply survive school or to excel, the students need to be aware of the reactions that different actions will elicit. In order to anticipate these reactions to student behavior, they need to be able to put themselves in the teacher’s position. The students need to learn to take on the role of the teacher (Lortie 2002: 61-62). This emotionally charged interaction in combination with the sheer amount of time spent in contact with teachers make the apprenticeship of observation very influential when it comes to prospective teachers’ beliefs.

However, this apprenticeship of observation also has limits, according to Lortie (2002:62). One of the limits that he points out is the vantage point from which the students are observing the teacher. They only ever see the teacher as an audience would see an actor when watching a play. When the students only see the teacher from that vantage point, they cannot experience
the teacher’s private thoughts and reflections about different classroom events. The reason behind the teacher’s choice of pedagogical strategy is another aspect that they are unaware of when they cannot observe the teacher from behind the scenes. This limited student vantage point leads to the students assessing the teacher on a more student-oriented and personal basis than on a more teacher-oriented basis (Lortie 2002: 62). This means that students form opinions about teaching despite not being able to comprehend all of its aspects, and these opinions can remain with them even as they start their own teacher training. A study called “Five Towns” that Lortie carried out in 1964 showed that many teacher students’ expectations regarding teaching differed from the reality that they later faced as teachers. Based on this study, Lortie claims that due to their limited vantage point, many prospective teachers believed teaching to be easier than it later turned out to be. Teaching demanded more time and energy than they had expected and there were more clerical tasks than they had anticipated (Lortie 2002: 65). However, it is important to note that this study was carried out in 1964 and the results should therefore be approached with caution today.

It is also important to note that there are other factors that influence teachers’ beliefs and how they teach. A teacher’s general life experience is one factor that can be a strong influence. Furthermore, when the prospective teacher has started practice teaching, those teaching experiences can become another factor that affects the teacher’s beliefs about teaching and learning. Although the apprenticeship of observation provides a powerful, intuitive understanding of teaching, it is important to remember that it is not the only influence (M. Borg 2004: 275).

To summarize, the apprenticeship of observation is the prospective teacher’s earlier experiences as a learner. It strongly influences the beliefs of prospective teachers because of the often emotionally charged relationship between the student and the teacher and because of the great deal of time spent in this apprenticeship. However, it has limitations, mainly because of the vantage point, which leads students to sometimes develop beliefs about the teaching profession that differ from reality. Furthermore, it is not the only influence on teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning. It can, therefore, be very influential but at the same time have shortcomings.
2.2 Previous studies

Four previous studies on the influence of the apprenticeship of observation on the beliefs of prospective teachers will be presented in this section.

2.2.1 Bailey et al. (1996)

Together with seven language teacher students, Bailey et al. (1996) documented and discussed a study where they examined the apprenticeship of observation. It started as an autobiography assignment in their seminar, which all students participated in, but developed into a research project that Professor Bailey and seven of her teacher students co-authored. Part of the assignment consisted of writing a prose summary of the history of their language learning. The students had to answer three questions that dealt with their language learning experiences, whether they were successful or not and how to judge success, as well as effective and ineffective teaching. The last question also asked the students to reflect on how their language learning experiences had influenced them. These autobiographies together with journal entries written by both the professor and the teacher students about this process make up the database for this research project (Bailey et al. 1996: 12-13).

The results from this study showed that the participants’ previous learning experiences had influenced their present criteria for successful and unsuccessful language learning. The autobiographies showed that both “good” and “bad” teaching had influenced the teacher students’ beliefs and they also drew attention to the fact that the students’ description of a good teacher varied. Furthermore, it became clear that the teacher students had internalized particular behaviors as either good or bad. In the discussion of the results, the authors point to the impact this can have on future teachers, especially in the beginning of their careers. The behavior of the teachers that students come across during their apprenticeship of observation becomes so ingrained that it also becomes a kind of default behavior. During stressful and problematic times, which are frequent in the beginning of a new teacher’s career, it is easier for the new teacher to revert to this default behavior than to access the later professional training that they have received. However, the authors also note that if teacher students are aware of this and critically analyze their apprenticeship of observation it will instead contribute to their professional development. By examining it, teachers will be able to predict how the different behaviors they have encountered will affect them and will therefore also be able to develop their teaching philosophies based on choice instead of by default (Bailey et al. 1996: 14-16).
This study shows that the apprenticeship of observation influences teachers’ beliefs greatly. During that time, prospective teachers develop their criteria for successful and unsuccessful teaching. Moreover, they internalize behaviors as good or bad teaching, which stays with them even as teachers in their own right. By being aware of this influence, prospective teachers can further their professional development by basing their teaching philosophies on informed choices.

2.2.2 Gutiérrez Almarza (1996)

Between 1990 and 1991, Gutiérrez Almarza carried out a study on the process of learning to teach a foreign language. The aim of the study was to examine the content and origin of teacher students’ knowledge, how it changes during their education and how it relates to the way in which they actually teach. Four teacher students studying to become foreign language teachers were the focus of the study. In order to gain information on the teacher students’ knowledge when it comes to foreign language teaching, Gutiérrez Almarza performed semi-structured interviews, stimulated recall procedures and classroom observations as well as analyzed journals (Gutiérrez Almarza 1996: 50-53).

The results with respect to the influence of the apprenticeship of observation were the following. All four teacher students had based their initial beliefs about the teaching profession on their previous experiences as learners. Both formal and informal learning experiences, and the way in which they were taught, were important. The apprenticeship of observation equipped the teacher students both with general ideas about teaching and learning as well as with subject-specific ideas and knowledge. However, it was not only the teacher’s behavior that influenced them. Their beliefs about teaching were also influenced by the way in which other students, and even other people they interacted with, behaved. The study also showed that the influence from the apprenticeship of observation is accompanied by influence from more informal situations, in particular, when it comes to forming beliefs about foreign language learning. Beliefs about the subject matter of a foreign language, i.e. the content, are often formed outside of school. This means that one would be ignoring a large part of the source of the prospective teacher’s ideas and knowledge if one did not include their language learning experiences outside of formal schooling as well (Gutiérrez Almarza 1996: 56-58).
In conclusion, this study shows that the apprenticeship of observation greatly influences the beliefs of a prospective teacher. Subject-specific beliefs as well as general ideas about teaching and learning are formed during this time. However, the study also points to the fact that other, more informal, factors outside the classroom influence the beliefs of a prospective teacher, especially when it comes to foreign languages.

2.2.3 Urmston (2003)

Urmston carried out a study with teacher students in Hong Kong who were studying to become English teachers in Hong Kong secondary schools. The aim of the study was to examine to what extent the teacher students’ knowledge and beliefs changed from the time they left secondary school to the time they became teachers (Urmston 2003: 112). In order to determine these attitudes, beliefs and practices, Urmston had 30 teacher students fill out one questionnaire when they started their teacher training course and another, almost identical one, three years later when they had finished their course (Urmston 2003: 117-118).

In the presentation of his study, Urmston (2003: 116) notes that there is a tendency among prospective teachers to have an already internalized view of teaching and learning because of their apprenticeship of observation. He further points out that it can be difficult for teacher educators to introduce new and innovative teaching philosophies because of these firmly established beliefs. The findings of the study support this. The study found that as the students progressed through the course they realized that there was a conflict between what they knew and believed based on their experiences as learners and what the teachers of the teacher training course were trying to teach them. However, this did not mean that they changed their beliefs in favor of what they learned during the course. In fact, the changes in beliefs were relatively few when it came to some of the most crucial parts of teaching. This supports the notion that Urmston (2003:113) comments on, that there is a resistance in prospective teachers to change their beliefs. The teacher students have been part of an apprenticeship of observation for many years, which has had a great impact on them, and that makes it unlikely for a three-year teaching course to change their beliefs in a drastic way (Urmston 2003: 122).

The results of this study further strengthen the argument that the apprenticeship of observation has a great impact on prospective teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning. It also calls attention to the fact that this can cause problems for both teacher educators and the prospective teachers themselves. On the one hand, it can make it difficult for teacher educators to introduce
new teaching philosophies while on the other, the prospective teachers may experience a culture shock when they start working as teachers and realize that their beliefs do not correspond to reality. Either way, it is an important influence on prospective teachers’ beliefs.

2.2.4 Moodie (2016)

Moodie performed a study in order to explore the impact that the apprenticeship of observation had had on non-native English-speaking teachers. The aim was to identify their prior learning experiences and the influence that those experiences had had. Moodie did this by collecting and analyzing the reflective writing of 18 Korean English teachers as well as by analyzing in-depth interviews with four of them (Moodie 2016: 31).

The study found that the so-called “anti-apprenticeship of observation” had influenced the teachers strongly. The anti-apprenticeship of observation refers to experiences in previous schooling that create models for prospective teachers of how not to teach (Moodie 2016: 29). Almost all the participants in the study described their apprenticeship of observation in second language learning as having had a negative impact in the sense that it made them want to be different from the teachers they themselves had encountered (Moodie 2016: 34). These negative experiences created intentions among the prospective teachers to be different, which in turn cemented their beliefs about teaching and learning. These beliefs and practices then became influential throughout their careers (Moodie 2016: 36-37).

In short, this study also supports the claims that the apprenticeship of observation is an important influence on teachers’ beliefs. However, it also raises awareness of the different influences that it can have. It does not only equip prospective teachers with models of how teaching and learning should be done but can also equip them with strong models of how not to teach. This anti-apprenticeship of observation creates an urge in the prospective teachers to be different from what they have experienced as learners, which in turn strengthens their beliefs about teaching. This study therefore points out that it can influence a prospective teacher’s beliefs both in terms of how to teach and how not to teach.

2.3 Implications for teacher educators

As noted previously, in for example the account of Urmston’s study, the apprenticeship of observation has implications for teacher educators. Urmston pointed out that prospective teachers tend to be reluctant to change the beliefs about teaching that they acquired during that
time and that teacher educators therefore can find it difficult to introduce new teaching philosophies (Urmston 2003: 116). Wright (2010) supports this view in his review of recent research and practices in second language teacher training programs. Wright (2010: 268-269) discusses the view that the beliefs formed during the apprenticeship of observation pose a challenge for teacher educators. He notes that the evidence points to the fact that the impact of formal teacher training courses on prospective teachers’ pre-existing beliefs is relatively small. Studies on both general teacher education and second language teacher education show this resistance to change in prospective teachers’ beliefs. However, Wright (2010: 269) also mentions that this relative failure of teacher training programs might not be because of a failure to change prospective teachers’ beliefs per se, but rather have more to do with the structure of the initial teacher training programs. A change might instead be necessary to close the gap between theory learning and practice. The focus of the reform in initial teacher training programs should be on the previous learning experiences of prospective teachers (Wright 2010: 269).

To summarize, the apprenticeship of observation can affect prospective teachers so strongly that it becomes difficult for educators in teacher training programs to change their firmly established beliefs. In order to come to terms with this issue, as mentioned above, Wright suggested that it might be necessary to reform initial teacher training programs to focus more on teacher students’ previous learning experiences and to make a stronger connection between theory and practice.

3. Methods

Section 3.1 will give a description of the participants who took part in the study and section 3.2 will explain the questionnaire used to collect the data. The procedure used to carry out the study will be detailed in section 3.3 and ethical considerations will be dealt with in section 3.4. Finally, section 3.5 will comment on the limitations of the study.

3.1 Participants

The participants in the study consisted of 117 students at a highly-ranked university in mainland China. The students were all Chinese native speakers. All 117 students were undergraduate English major students and three different years were represented: freshmen, sophomores and
juniors. Out of the 117 students, 48 were freshmen, 38 were sophomores and 31 were juniors. At the university, there is no separate teaching program for students who are aiming to be teachers. For this reason, it was not possible to separate the students who planned to become English teachers and carry out the study solely with these students. However, all students at the university who intend to be English teachers have to be English majors. This means that although not all of the participants wanted to become English teachers, all freshmen, sophomores and juniors at the university who are aiming to be English teachers were among the participants.

The age range of the students varied from 17 years old to 22 years old, with a mean age of 19.1. The gender distribution among the students was as follows: 94 of the 117 students were female while 23 were male. This means that 80 percent of the participants were female while only 20 percent were male. The reason for this uneven gender distribution has to do with the nature of the major. The majority of English major students at the university are female. In most classes, there are only a few male students and in some classes, there are none. Because of this female dominance, it was impossible to obtain a more balanced gender distribution among the English major students at the university.

### 3.2 Questionnaire

The tool used to collect the data for the present study was a questionnaire (see Appendix). The decision to use a questionnaire was made for reasons of both generalizability and for the convenience of the participants. By using a questionnaire, it was possible to collect answers from a large number of participants. Interviews would have provided a deeper understanding of the participants’ answers but given the study’s available time frame, they would also have limited the number of participants. With a larger number of participants, the generalizability of the study is increased. Furthermore, after a discussion with postgraduate English major students, a questionnaire was deemed more appropriate for the participants since, being undergraduate students, they might feel insecure about their oral English abilities and consequently become uncomfortable in an interview situation. A questionnaire would, on the other hand, give them a more comfortable way of expressing their feelings without having to worry about their English proficiency.
The questionnaire consisted of a total of 21 questions, and was divided into five parts. In addition, there was an initial part dealing with background information. All questions were closed questions. Parts 1 and 5 contained rank order questions while the questions in parts 2, 3 and 4 used a Likert scale. According to Wen (2001: 128), the format of the questionnaire should be taken into special consideration. She notes that dividing the questions into different sections can lead to an increased response rate. Placing the questions about background information first is another good strategy. Furthermore, numbering the questions and giving the participants a convenient way of writing the responses to the questions is also important (Wen 2001: 128). With this in mind, all the questions in the questionnaire were numbered and adequate room was provided for the participants to write, circle or check their answers. The background information part was placed first and in accordance with Wen’s previously mentioned suggestion, the questionnaire was also designed to consist of five parts. Each part aimed to answer one of the four research questions, except parts 3 and 4, which together helped answer one of the research questions. Part 1 aimed to answer research question 2 “Do English major students at the university consider their own schooling to be the main reason for their current beliefs when it comes to English language teaching?” and Part 2 aimed to answer research question 1 “Do English major students at the university consider their own schooling to have affected their beliefs about English language teaching in any way?” Parts 3 and 4 were designed to answer research question 3 “If their own schooling has had an effect, has it been mainly positive or mainly negative?” and finally, Part 5 aimed to answer research question 4 “Which areas of the teaching profession do the English major students consider to be the areas where their beliefs have been affected most by their own schooling?”

The reason why Part 1 was designed to answer research question 2 instead of research question 1 had to do with avoiding undesired influence. According to Wen (2001: 128), it is better to place general questions before specific ones in order to avoid the specific questions influencing the general ones. Part 1 of the questionnaire asks the participant to rank the order of different factors that have affected their beliefs about English language teaching and “previous experiences as a student” is only one of those factors. The remaining four parts of the study all deal with the participants’ beliefs in relation to their previous experiences as students. Rank ordering of the different factors was presented in Part 1 in order to prevent the rest of the questions from influencing the answer. The students might have answered differently if they knew before they answered the rank order question that the aim of the study was to investigate beliefs about English language teaching in relation to their previous experiences as students.
In order to avoid confusing the participants by having them switch between different types of questions, i.e., rank order and Likert scale, it might have been prudent to place the two rank order questions together instead of beginning with one and ending with one. However, as previously explained, the rank order question about the different factors needed to be placed first in order to avoid bias. Furthermore, there is a reason as to why the other rank order question was best suited in the last part of the questionnaire. The second rank order question asked the participants to rank the areas of the teacher profession where they considered their beliefs to have been affected most by their previous experiences as students. Parts 2, 3 and 4 deal with the many different aspects of teaching that previous student experiences can affect. While answering those questions, the participants should become more aware of how their beliefs have been affected by their previous experiences as students. This, in turn, makes it easier for them to decide what has been affected most. For that reason, the second rank order question was best suited as the last question in the questionnaire.

### 3.3 Procedure

According to Wen (2001: 128-129), a pilot study should be carried out before the formal study in order to overcome potential problems. She further notes that the participants in the pilot study should be similar to those in the actual study. In accordance with this, a pilot study was carried out in a postgraduate English major class. The participants in the pilot study answered the questionnaire and also gave their personal opinions on its design. Based on this, some small changes to the design were made. After that, the formal data collection for the study was begun.

How the questionnaire is administered is also an important consideration. Wen (2001: 141-143) notes that it is important to approach the participants in a professional way and to administer the questionnaire in person, as well as to have good timing and to keep the environment in mind. The questionnaire was distributed in person by visiting the different groups during their regular English classes. An introduction and explanations as to what the data would be used for were given and the participants were also instructed that the questionnaire only dealt with their own personal opinions. All groups answered the questionnaire during regular class time, which means that they did not need to stay to do it during their break. All groups also answered the questionnaire in a quiet classroom setting with their teacher present and with no time limit.
helped ensure the validity and reliability. When the participants were finished, they were thanked for their participation and all the questionnaires were collected.

When the six groups had completed their questionnaires, all the data were compiled. The data from each question were first compiled based on the participant’s year of study. This was done in order to create a structure for the compilation so that the results could easily be doublechecked and mistakes could therefore be prevented. The results for each of the five parts of the questionnaire were then compiled, and were divided into the three different years of study. After that, the compiled data from the three different years of study were combined. The total results of the study were then converted into percentages in order to make them easier for the reader to understand. After each part of the data compilation was completed, it was again carefully examined in order to check for mistakes. The results will be presented in section 4.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were taken into account in the collection of data for the study. Before the questionnaire was distributed to the students, they were all informed orally that their participation in the study was not mandatory and that they could choose not to participate. They were also informed orally that the questionnaire was completely anonymous and that the data would only be used for research. The very first paragraph of the questionnaire also explained this to the students. When the completed questionnaires were collected from the students, they were not looked at but were directly placed into a pile to be examined at a later time. This was done in order to further ensure that the students felt that their anonymity was respected.

3.5 Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. The uneven gender distribution is one of these limitations. Since only 20% of the participants in the study were male while 80% were female, it renders the results less generalizable to a larger population. Another limitation is the number of English major students who participated in the study but who do not directly aim to be English teachers. It might have been more difficult for these participants to take a definite position on the different statements about whether they would use the same content and methods as their previous English teachers. This would help explain why “No opinion” was selected in a total of 20% of the cases for the statements about whether the participants would want to use the same content and methods as their previous teachers. Carrying out the study on all English
major students and not only the ones who aim to become English teachers gives it a broader population and makes it more generalizable. However, as mentioned above, it also runs the risk that the participants will be less sure of their opinions. Finally, another limitation is language. The language of the questionnaire was English but it might have been better if the questionnaire had been in Chinese. The participants in the study were Chinese native speakers who were studying English at the undergraduate level. As a result of this, difficulties in understanding the questions and statements may have occurred. Since it would undoubtedly have been easier for the participants to complete the questionnaire in their native language, it might therefore have been better to have had the questionnaire translated into Chinese.

4. Results and analysis

The following sections will present the results of the study. The findings will be presented in connection with each research question. Section 4.1 will present the findings for research question 1 and section 4.2 will give an account of the findings for research question 2. Finally, section 4.3 will describe the findings for research question 3 while section 4.4 will deal with those for research question 4.

4.1 Has previous schooling had any effect on beliefs?

The first research question “Do English major students at the university consider their own schooling to have affected their beliefs about English language teaching in any way?” was investigated in Part 2 of the questionnaire. Part 2 asked the participants to say whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, agreed, strongly agreed or had no opinion on four statements. Each statement started with “My experiences as a student have affected my opinions about…” and then ended with either teacher behavior, teacher talk, teaching methods or teaching content. In total, for all four questions and for all participants, “Strongly disagree” was selected 4 times and “Disagree” was selected 42 times while “Agree” was selected 248 times and “Strongly agree” 98 times. The option “No opinion” was selected 71 times. Thus, only 1% of the answers were “Strongly disagree” and only 9% were “Disagree”. 54% of the answers were “Agree” and 21% were “Strongly agree”. Finally, 15% of the answers were “No opinion” (see Figure 1).
This means that in only 10% of the cases did the participants not consider their previous experiences as a student to have had an effect on their current beliefs about English language teaching. In contrast, the participants considered their previous experiences to have had an effect on their current beliefs about English teaching in 75% of the cases. Based on these results, the answer to the first research question is therefore ‘yes’. The majority of the participants consider their own schooling to have affected their beliefs about English language teaching in some way. Another important point to note is the fact that only one of the participants selected “Strongly disagree”, “Disagree” or “No opinion” on all four questions in Part 2. This means that all the other participants considered their previous experiences as students to have affected their current beliefs about English language teaching in at least some way. The majority of the students who selected “Strongly disagree”, “Disagree” or “No opinion” on three out of the four statements, selected “Agree” or “Strongly agree” for the following statement: “My experiences as a student have affected my opinions about how a teacher should behave when teaching English.” The way in which their previous English teachers behaved therefore seems to have made a stronger impression on these participants than the content the teacher taught, the methods the teacher used to teach English or the way the teacher talked.

To summarize, in 75% of the cases the participants considered their previous experiences as students to have affected their current beliefs about English language teaching. In only 10% of the cases did they consider it not to have affected them. Only one of the participants did not
consider previous experiences to have affected their current beliefs at all while all the other participants considered them to have affected their beliefs in some way. In conclusion, the answer to the first research question is ‘yes’, i.e. they consider their own schooling to have affected their beliefs about English language teaching.

4.2 Is previous schooling the main reason for current beliefs?

The second research question “Do English major students at the university consider their own schooling to be the main reason for their current beliefs when it comes to English language teaching?” was investigated in Part 1 of the questionnaire. The participants were asked to rank order different factors that can affect a person’s beliefs about English language teaching. However, for this part, 12 participants did not follow the instructions for the question. Therefore, the answers of only 105 of the participants could be considered as valid and be used to calculate the results. The results of Part 1 of the questionnaire are as follows. Out of the 105 participants, 8 considered “The opinions of my family and friends” to be the factor that had affected their current beliefs about English language teaching most. 58 of the participants selected “My experiences as a student” as the most influential while 18 participants selected “Academic articles about language teaching and learning.” Another 17 participants selected “The media” as the most influential factor. Lastly, 4 participants selected the optional item “Other” as being most influential and then specified what they meant. Two of them cited their own interest in English as the reason. One wrote that it was communication with foreigners when traveling that was the most influential factor and finally, one student explained that policy affected her beliefs most. When the above-mentioned results are converted into percentages, we see that 55% of the participants considered their experiences as students to have affected their current beliefs about language teaching most while 17% considered it to be academic articles about language teaching and learning. 16% considered the most influential factor to be the media while 8% considered it to be the opinions of their family and friends. Finally, 4% considered it to be something other than the previously mentioned factors (see Figure 2).
Based on these results it can be concluded that the majority of the participants believed their own schooling to be the main reason behind their current beliefs about English language teaching. The answer to the second research question would therefore be ‘yes’. Though the majority of the participants considered their own schooling to be the most influential factor, it is, however, also interesting to note that it was not a vast majority. Despite the fact that 55% considered their previous schooling to be the most influential factor, it is important to remember that there was a total of 45% of the participants who considered the most important factor to be something other than their previous schooling. This means that almost half of the participants did not believe that their own schooling was the main reason behind their current beliefs about language teaching. This will be further commented on in the discussion.

4.3 Has the effect been mainly positive or negative?

The third research question “If their own schooling has had an effect, has it been mainly positive or mainly negative?” was investigated in parts 3 and 4 of the questionnaire. Part 3 consisted of six statements with the format “If I were a teacher, I would want to teach the same content about … as my English teachers.”. Each question was on specific aspects of English teaching, such as writing, speaking, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, grammar and cultural aspects. The participants were asked to select on a Likert scale whether they strongly disagreed,
disagreed, agreed, strongly agreed or had no opinion about the statement. Part 4 had the same design as Part 3 but focused on methods rather than on content.

The results for all six statements in Part 3 show that the participants strongly disagreed with the statements 29 times and disagreed with them 170 times. By contrast, the participants agreed with the statements 306 times and strongly agreed with them 72 times. In 129 cases, they did not have an opinion. If this is converted into percentages, it shows that the participants selected “Strongly disagree” in 4% of the cases and “Disagree” in 24% of the cases. The option “Agree” was selected in 44% of the cases and “Strongly agree” in 10% of the cases. In 18% of the cases, the participants had no opinion (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3. Total results, in percentages, for Part 3 of the questionnaire.](image)

These results show that the participants would want to teach the same content as their English teachers in 54% of the cases. Moreover, the results show that the participants would not want to teach the same content as their English teachers in 28% of the cases. This means that when it comes to content, the effect of the participants’ previous experiences as students has been mainly positive.

The results for all the participants on all nine statements in Part 4 are as follows. The participants strongly disagreed with the statements 32 times and disagreed with them 250 times. By contrast,
the participants agreed with the statements 467 times and strongly agreed 77 times. They had no opinion about the statements 220 times. In percentages, this means that the participants selected “Strongly disagree” in 3% of the cases, “Disagree” in 24% of the cases, “Agree” in 45% of the cases” and “Strongly agree” in 7% of the cases. In 21% of the cases, the participants had no opinion (see Figure 4).

![Pie chart showing the distribution of responses to the statement: “I WOULD WANT TO USE THE SAME METHODS FOR … AS MY ENGLISH TEACHERS”](image)

**Figure 4.** Total results, in percentages, for Part 4 of the questionnaire.

The results from Part 4 of the questionnaire show that the participants would want to use the same methods as their English teachers in a total of 52% of the cases. The results further show that they would not want to use the same methods as their English teachers in 27% of the cases. As with content, when it comes to methods, the effect of the participants’ previous experiences as students has been mainly positive.

If the results for Part 3 and Part 4 are combined in order to see what the total effect of previous experiences as students has had on the participants’ beliefs about both content and methods, the results are as follows. The participants strongly disagreed in 3% of the cases and disagreed in 24% of the cases while they agreed in 44% of the cases and strongly agreed in 9% of the cases. In 20% of the cases, they had no opinion. Based on these results the answer to the third research question is ‘positive’. In 53% of the cases the participants would want to teach the same content and/or use the same methods as their English teachers. This is in contrast to 27% of the cases...
where the participants would not want to teach the same content and/or use the same methods as their English teachers (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Total results, in percentages, for Part 3 and Part 4 of the questionnaire combined.

To conclude, the participants would want to both teach the same content and use the same methods as their English teachers in a majority of the cases. The answer to the third research question is therefore that the effect has been mainly positive.

### 4.4 Which areas have been affected most?

The fourth research question “In which areas of the teaching profession do the English major students consider their beliefs to have been affected most by their own schooling?”, was further investigated in Part 5 of the questionnaire. The participants were asked to rank order different areas of the teaching profession according to where their previous experiences as students had affected their beliefs most. The participants had seven different aspects to rank order, including the optional “Other”. The aspects that they had chosen as their top three were taken into consideration when determining the three areas that the participants considered to be the areas where their beliefs had been affected most. This was done instead of only basing the results on the aspect that they had ranked as “1” in order to not skew the results.
The results from Part 5 of the questionnaire show that “Lesson planning” occurred among the top three areas 54 times, “Content” occurred 75 times and “Methods for English teaching” 93 times. “Classroom management” occurred among the top three 28 times, “Classroom interaction” 44 times and “Assessment” 22 times. The optional “Other” was ranked among the top three areas 7 times. Converted into percentages, this means that “Methods for English teaching” ranked among the top three aspects 28% of the time, “Content” 23% of the time and “Lesson planning” 17% of the time. Further, “Classroom interaction” appeared among the top three areas 14% of the time, “Classroom management” 9% of the time and “Assessment” 7% of the time. Finally, the participants placed “Other” among the top three 2% of the time (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6.** Areas placed among the top three areas of the teacher profession to have been affected by previous experiences as a student, in percentages.

Based on these results it can be concluded that the participants considered the aspects “Methods for English teaching”, “Content” and “Lesson planning” to be the areas where their beliefs had been affected most by their previous experiences as students. “Methods for English teaching” was most frequently placed in the top three, followed by “Content” and then “Lesson planning”.

In conclusion, the answer to the fourth research question “Which areas of the teaching profession do the English major students consider to be the areas where their beliefs have been affected most by their own schooling?” is therefore that English major students at the university
consider methods for teaching English, content and lesson planning to be the areas that have been affected most by their own schooling.

5. Discussion

The results of this study are in line with the results of most previous research accounted for in section 2. All four previously mentioned studies, Bailey et al. (1996), Gutiérrez Almarza (1996), Urmston (2003), and Moodie (2016), came to the conclusion that previous experiences as a student can greatly affect a person’s beliefs about teaching. The results of this study provide further support for this. Bailey et al.’s study also showed that both good and bad teaching influenced the teacher students’ beliefs. As previously mentioned, the results of the present study showed that 53% of the English major students at the university would want to teach the same content and/or use the same methods as their previous English teachers, while 27% would not. This therefore gives further support to the notion that both good and bad teaching influences a person’s beliefs about teaching.

Moreover, in Gutiérrez Almarza’s study, the findings showed that the apprenticeship of observation was influential in the development of subject-specific ideas and knowledge. This can also be observed in the present study. Many of the English major students at the university had clear ideas about whether they would want to teach the same content and use the same methods of teaching in the many different areas of English teaching. However, as previously mentioned, Gutiérrez Almarza’s study also showed that previous experiences as a student are not the only influence on current beliefs about language teaching. The findings showed that beliefs about the subject matter of a foreign language, such as English, are often formed outside of school. The present study lends further support to this claim by showing that 45% of the English major students considered a factor other than previous experiences as a student to have influenced their current beliefs about English language teaching the most. Although 75% of the students considered previous experiences to have affected their beliefs in at least some way, 45% did not consider it to be the factor that had influenced their beliefs the most.

However, the present study also includes findings that are contrary to the findings from one of the previously mentioned studies. Moodie’s study showed that most of the participants in the study had experienced an anti-apprenticeship of observation. Almost all of them stated that their
apprenticeship of observation had had a negative impact on them because they wanted to be different from the teachers they themselves had met. This is different from the results of the present study. The present study found that the apprenticeship of observation had mainly had a positive effect on the English major students at the university. In a majority of the cases, they would want to teach the same content and use the same methods as the English teachers they themselves had met. This therefore adds to a notion that the apprenticeship of observation can have both a positive and a negative effect: it can be either an apprenticeship of observation or an anti-apprenticeship of observation.

One surprising aspect of the findings is the areas that the English major students considered to have been affected most by their previous experiences as students. The three areas that they considered to have been affected most were “methods for English teaching”, “content” and “lesson planning”. What is especially interesting about this is the fact that they chose lesson planning as one of the top three. Methods for English teaching and content can both be observed by the students in class, during the lesson. Lesson planning, however, is not an area of the teaching profession that the students are able to directly observe. As Lortie (2002: 62) pointed out, the students only ever see the teacher as an audience would see an actor when watching a play and are not able to observe the teacher from behind the scenes. That the participants chose lesson planning, which happens “behind the scenes”, is therefore quite fascinating. One possible explanation could be that they feel as though they experience lesson planning through the realization of it, i.e. by experiencing the teacher’s actual lesson in the classroom. If time had permitted, it would have been interesting to interview the students who chose lesson planning as one of the top three areas, in order to get a deeper understanding as to why they chose that aspect as one of the top three.

Another surprising aspect of the findings is that as many as 17% of the participants chose “Academic articles about language teaching and learning” as the main factor behind their current beliefs about English language teaching. This is quite surprising since they were all undergraduate students, which makes it unlikely for them to have come into contact with a large number of academic articles about language teaching and learning. One possible explanation could be that it was mainly the juniors that chose academic articles as the main factor. However, the results of the study show that the participants who chose academic articles as the main factor were quite evenly spread out among the freshmen, sophomores and juniors. Another explanation could therefore be that they chose it out of a desire to appear well-informed or well-
read. It is also possible that the participants simply misunderstood what was meant by “academic articles” and interpreted it to mean their course books or something similar. If a misunderstanding was behind these surprising results it might have been prevented if the questionnaire had been translated into Chinese. It would be more difficult though, to establish if the students chose it because they wanted to appear well-read or if they in fact read a lot of academic articles about language teaching and learning in their spare time.

The results of this study also provide further support for Wright’s (2010) argument, which was that the influence of the apprenticeship of observation might pose a challenge for teacher educators. The findings of the present study show that many of the English majors at the university already have a clear view as to whether they would want to teach the same content and use the same methods as their previous English teachers. These already entrenched beliefs might be difficult for future teacher educators to change. However, this interpretation of the findings should be approached cautiously since it is impossible at present to know whether these English major students would change their beliefs after they have gone through a teacher education program or not. With this in mind, however, the fact that many of them already have a clear view of their beliefs can give an indication.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to study the effect that previous student experiences had had on English major students at a highly-ranked university in mainland China. In order to do that, four research questions were formulated and data were collected using a questionnaire. The results showed that the majority of English major students at the university consider their previous student experiences to have greatly affected their current beliefs about English language teaching. The results also showed that previous student experiences had affected the English major students at the university in a mainly positive way. Finally, the results showed that the majority of the English major students at the university considered their previous student experiences to have affected their beliefs about methods for English teaching, content and lesson planning most. Moreover, most of the results were in accordance with the results of previous studies on the topic, though some of the results were contrary to results in Moodie’s (2016) study.
Future studies on this topic could aim at finding a more gender balanced group of participants. Future studies could also be carried out solely with participants who intend to be English teachers, in order to avoid high percentages of answers where the participants have no opinion. Finally, future studies could collect the data for the study using the participants’ native language in order to avoid misunderstandings.
References


Appendix

A Study about the Opinions of English Major Students

Thank you for taking the time to be a part of this study. This questionnaire is designed in order to study the opinions that English major students have about English teaching. The questionnaire is completely anonymous and the data collected will only be used for the research. Please read through each question carefully. There is no right or wrong answer, the purpose is only to find out your opinions, so please answer all the questions honestly.

Background information

Gender: ___ Male                         ___ Female
Age: __________________
Year: ________________

Part 1

1. What has influenced your current opinions about how English should be taught?
Please rank order the following items according to their influence, where 1 is most influential and 5 is least influential.
___ The opinions of my family and friends.
___ My experiences as a student.
___ Academic articles about language teaching and learning.
___ The media (e.g. newspapers, movies, tv-shows, the internet).
___ Other (optional) Please specify:______________________________________________
Part 2

1. My experiences as a student have affected my opinions about how a teacher should behave when teaching English.
(Example: if a teacher should behave in a more formal or more casual way, how a teacher should manage a class, how a teacher should handle conflicts, etc.)

| Strongly disagree | Disagree | No opinion | Agree | Strongly agree |

2. My experiences as a student have affected my opinions about how a teacher should talk when teaching English.
(Example: how a teacher should talk to students, if the teacher should speak in English or in Chinese etc.)

| Strongly disagree | Disagree | No opinion | Agree | Strongly agree |

3. My experiences as a student have affected my opinions about what content an English teacher should teach.
(Example: which type of grammar to teach, for example independent and dependent clauses or what to teach about literature, for example different literary theories etc.)

| Strongly disagree | Disagree | No opinion | Agree | Strongly agree |

4. My experiences as a student have affected my opinions about what methods a teacher should use to teach English.
(Example: teaching speaking by, for example, having the students hold a lot of presentations in front of the class or teaching reading by having the students read a lot of short stories etc.)

| Strongly disagree | Disagree | No opinion | Agree | Strongly agree |
Part 3

1. If I were a teacher, I would want to teach the same content about writing as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

2. If I were a teacher, I would want to teach the same content about speaking as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3. If I were a teacher, I would want to teach the same content about reading comprehension as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4. If I were a teacher, I would want to teach the same content about listening comprehension as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

5. If I were a teacher, I would want to teach the same content about grammar as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

6. If I were a teacher, I would want to teach the same content about cultural aspects as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Part 4

1. If I were a teacher, I would want to use the same methods to teach writing as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

2. If I were a teacher, I would want to use the same methods to teach speaking as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3. If I were a teacher, I would want to use the same methods to teach reading comprehension as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4. If I were a teacher, I would want to use the same methods to teach listening comprehension as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

5. If I were a teacher, I would want to use the same methods to teach grammar as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

6. If I were a teacher, I would want to use the same methods to teach cultural aspects as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

7. If I were a teacher, I would want to use the same methods of classroom management as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
8. If I were a teacher, I would want to use the same methods of classroom interaction as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

9. If I were a teacher, I would want to use the same methods of assessing students as my English teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Part 5

1. Which areas do you consider to be the areas where your beliefs have been affected most by your previous experiences as student?

Please rank order the following items based on what you consider to have been affected most by your own experiences as a student. It can be either in a positive way (things you would do if you were a teacher) or in a negative way (things you would not do if you were a teacher). Rank the items where 1 has been affected most by your own experiences as a student and 7 has been affected least by your own experiences as a student.

___ Lesson planning
___ Content (what to teach)
___ Methods for English teaching (how to teach)
___ Classroom management
___ Classroom interaction
___ Assessment
___ Other (optional) Please specify:______________________________________________

END

Thank you!