Teachers’ pedagogical decisions in the writing classroom: A case study at a Hong Kong university
Research Question

- What are the factors that influence teachers’ pedagogical choices with regard to the teaching of academic writing?
Site of Investigation

- The Language Centre of a Hong Kong university
Participants

- Instructors at the Language Centre

- Alexandra and Beatrice, HK Chinese, each has been teaching English for about 14 years

- David, an American (12 years)

- Candy, a HK Chinese who emigrated to Canada at the age of eleven (5 years)
Sources of Data

- semi-structured interviews
- class observations
- student assignments
Previous Studies regarding Decision-making

- Harlen (1992, p. 1) notes that “teachers teach the way they were taught, and their beliefs about teaching and learning are evident in how they teach.”
Woods (1996)

- external and internal factors

- External – related to the specific events/situation at hand, such as explicit curriculum and objectives, teachers’ consideration of what the task involves and their perception of students
Internal factors

- those related to the internal relationships among decisions in the process. That is, an earlier decision made may affect a decision made later.
Woods (1996)

- no single isolatable factor
- the factors operate more like weights which are applied in favour of or against various possibilities and alternatives
Tsui (2003)

- knowledge of the subject matter
- knowledge of the students and the educational context(s)
Tsui (2007)

- Teachers are required to conform to a set pedagogy, and this may result in constraints on an individual teacher’s capacity to make professional decisions.
Major points derived from the above studies

Three major dimensions

- teachers’ content knowledge and their knowledge of the context, their practical knowledge, and their personal experiences

- no single deciding factor (an integration of several factors, and at any particular time one may override all others)

- theories of language teaching and learning seem to be the least frequently nominated
Factors identified in this inquiry

1. Pedagogical theories
   (theories of language teaching and learning)
For example, first-year students have to write argumentative essays. I don’t just give out the writing task. Instead, I’ll discuss the issues. I’ll use newspaper cuttings or other activities so that students will have some ideas. Then students will start writing. During the writing, I’ll give them some guidelines on structure. For example, in comparison, whether it’s whole by whole or point by point.
So after pursuing my MA, ‘cause I had a chance to look into the problems and issues that really happen to Chinese learners of English ... I think my MA really helped me to look into the roots of their problems, why they made those errors; not just at the surface level but because of their thinking like they usually translate from their Chinese thinking into a piece of English writing.
Candy

- communicative approach in almost all her lessons
2. Institutional Influence

- syllabus for the curriculum
- institutional expectations
- students’ interests and motivation
- culture of informal sharing
- opportunities for professional development
In the past, I was an obedient, good student; now I’m a good teacher, good in the sense that I’ll carefully study the syllabus and course material first before I prepare for individual lessons. I will not deviate from the syllabus.
Alexandra

- Teachers were expected to deliver interactive lessons, and she thought that grammar instruction did not align with this expectation.
When I learned English, I was not given explicit guidelines. Things were never made explicit. Teachers didn’t give specific guidelines ... Students today have a limited exposure to English. They don’t know what to do.

Very often, when I understand something, I’ll be able to do it, but students are different. They need things to be crystal clear, to be concrete ... Sometimes, in the classroom, I ask students to do very simple tasks such as writing a few sentences. I then comment on their sentences. In this way, learning takes place. This is beyond receiving information; this is learning through practice.
For example, if you want to teach students how to write an essay and your method did not work, for the next class, you may break up the writing task to give students a chance to do something simple first.
Beatrice

- informal talks about teaching conducive to her professional development
- improved her instruction and became more aware of the pedagogical choices available
Professional Development

- informal sharing among colleagues
- staff development sessions
I can remember back some of these language-type sessions, me sitting down at one of these workshops. God! What am I doing here? You know, somebody’s there to talk about the determiner, *the*. I just want to put a nail through my head.
Summary of Factors

- Pedagogical Theories
- Institutional Influence
- Experiential and Personal Factors
Implications for teacher education and professional development

- knowledge in practice
- an “expert” from outside to make presentations – useful?
- draw upon the wealth of experiences which teachers bring to their practice
Thank You