

Vocabulary Learning and Teaching Beliefs of Pre-service and In-service Teachers in Hong Kong and Mainland China

Language learners and teachers' cognition in respect of learning and teaching play a critical role in mediating their actual behaviour and decisions in the process. This study investigates the vocabulary learning and teaching beliefs held by pre-service and in-service teachers in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland so that teacher education programmes can better equip teachers with appropriate knowledge concerning the vital task of vocabulary teaching. A mixed approach was adopted in inquiring into the nature of vocabulary learning and teaching beliefs held by these participants. Statistical tests (factor analysis, multivariate analysis, Chi-square test) were employed in conjunction with qualitative analysis of the data collected. The analyses revealed variations in the beliefs held by the participants in the two contexts. The identified variations in the beliefs held by pre-service and in-service participants both in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland were less significant than those that emerged when comparing Hong Kong participants' beliefs with those of their mainland Chinese counterparts. The findings are indicative of profound contextual mediation on the participants' vocabulary teaching and learning beliefs. They also confirm the importance of raising and strengthening language teachers' strategy and language awareness in teacher development programmes.

Key words: beliefs, teacher education, vocabulary learning and teaching, contextual mediation, strategy awareness, language awareness

Introduction

Researchers in language learning and teaching have become increasingly aware of the critical role that language learners and teachers' cognition plays in mediating their actual behaviour and decisions in the learning and teaching process (e.g. Andrews, 2006, 2007; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003; Bernat, 2007; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Borg, 2003, 2006; Johnson, 2009; Kalaja, 1995). As both language learners and teachers are encouraged to take control of their learning and teaching these days (Benson, 2007), their beliefs in language learning and teaching are given ever greater emphasis in language education research. Research on beliefs held by language learners and teachers serves as a solid knowledge base for teacher educators to develop language teaching professionals who can reflect on and adjust their own beliefs as well as foster the development of language learners' beliefs towards better

learning (Andrews, 2007; Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Borg, 2006; Johnson, 2009). In particular, inquiries into the beliefs of learners and teachers help identify the mismatches in those held by learners and teachers so that the latter can be equipped with appropriate professional knowledge and beliefs to support the former's learning efforts (Bernat, 2007; Brown, 2009; Kern, 1995; Peacock, 1998; Polat, 2009). Research into language teachers' thinking helps reveal the mental foundations that underlie their professional behaviour and practices, engendering their reflexive engagement with practices devoted to professional development (Borg, 2003, 2006; Horwitz, 1999; Peacock, 2001). However, such research has often been done in parallel with limited efforts to connect individuals' beliefs about language learning and their beliefs about language teaching (except for Peacock, 2001). There is also a need to explore the connections between the beliefs held by pre-service teachers (often in similar situations to those of language learners) and in-service teachers together since such findings will inform the development of teacher education programmes that shall enhance the professional competence of pre-service and in-service teachers.

In this paper, we report on a study on vocabulary learning and teaching beliefs held by pre-service and in-service teachers in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland. We took a developmental approach and in the study included pre-service and in-service teachers, all of whom were at different stages of their language learning/teaching careers and sharing the goal of being English language teachers. We also examined the contextual mediation on vocabulary learning/teaching beliefs held by the participants since they have grown up and learnt (taught) English in two different educational contexts, even though they are of the same Chinese ethnicity. In the following sections, we shall discuss the nature of beliefs in relation to the task of

vocabulary learning/teaching. Following this, we shall describe the study in detail before presenting the findings emerging from the inquiry.

The Nature of Beliefs and the Task of Vocabulary Learning/Teaching

The inquiry has been informed by recent research on language learning and teaching beliefs; these research findings suggest that beliefs, traditionally considered static and enduring features of individual learners and teachers, are dynamic, shifting and context-situated (Barcelos, 2003; Johnson, 2009; Kalaja, 1995; Sakui & Gaies, 2003). Barcelos (2003) identifies three approaches to the investigation of beliefs, including the normative approach, the metacognitive approach and the contextual approach. Drawing on these approaches, researchers have explored beliefs held by language learners and teachers using different definitions of beliefs and methodology. Researchers endorsing the normative approach tend to see learning beliefs as learners' 'preconceived notions, myths or misconceptions' (Barcelos, 2003, p. 11) and examine these beliefs through questionnaires (such as *Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory* by Horwitz, 1985). Those who take on the metacognitive approach in research conceptualize beliefs as learners' metacognitive knowledge of language learning (Wenden, 1999). Likewise, individuals' teaching beliefs may 'consist of a set of personally-defined practically-oriented understandings of teaching and learning which exert a significant influence on instructional decisions' (Borg, 1999, p.22). In the metacognitive approach, beliefs are often studied by collecting individuals' self-reports and verbal statements.

Both the normative and metacognitive approaches conceive beliefs as a relatively stable, fixed mental trait (Horwitz, 1985; Wenden, 1999). By contrast, researchers who advance the contextual approach to the investigation of beliefs contend that beliefs should be considered part of 'part of the culture of learning and

representations of language learning in a given society' (Barcelos, 2003, p. 26). Within such alternative perspectives, individuals' learning and teaching beliefs are considered to be their 'conceptions, representations or theories' of language learning and teaching arising from their 'interactions with others' and individual life experiences (Kalaja, 1995, p. 191) or 'participating in the social practices of learning and teaching in specific classroom and school situations' (Johnson, 2009, p. 13). As a result, individuals' beliefs need to be explored and interpreted within their context-specific life experiences. The socio-culturally constructed nature of beliefs also **means** that individuals' beliefs about language learning and teaching are dynamic and vary across different contexts or even within the same context. Consequently, it has become necessary to examine how contextual conditions and processes mediated the development of individuals' language learning and teaching beliefs, especially those related to vocabulary learning and teaching.

Vocabulary learning is widely regarded as a crucial task for second language learners in their attempts to improve their linguistic competence (Fan, 2003; Gu, 2003, 2005). The task of vocabulary teaching is also a challenging one as teachers need to equip students with multiple forms, meanings, collocations and usage of a word in order to develop their receptive and productive vocabulary skills (Nation, 1990, 2001; see Read, 2004 for a recent view on vocabulary teaching). Moreover, recent research has also associated language learners' success with their strategy use in learning languages and identified the development of strategic language learners as possible pedagogical objective (Fan, 2003; Gu, 2003; Nykios & Fan, 2007). However, it has been a controversial issue as to whether or not 'teachers would be better off spending time on teaching the language rather than wasting time on strategy instruction' (Macaro & Erler, 2008, p. 91). Rees-Miller (1993) recommends that

language teachers be cautious in incorporating learner training in classroom teaching. Barcroft (2009) made a number of suggestions to language teachers as to what strategies to instruct and how this strategy instruction could be integrated into one's overall teaching approach to help students develop their L2 vocabulary. Nevertheless, given the size of English vocabulary, most English words are not taught in class and have to be learnt by learners in their own ways. As a result, vocabulary learning and teaching beliefs held by pre- and in-service teachers would have an even greater impact on language learners' efforts to acquire vocabulary autonomously as well as on their development as strategic learners. Yet little research has been conducted on teachers' cognition of vocabulary teaching (Borg, 2006).

The Study

In the inquiry, beliefs were operationalized as 'statements [the participants] make about their ideas, thoughts and knowledge that are expressed as evaluations of "what should be done", "should be the case" and "is preferable"' (Basturkmen et al., 2004, p.244). Though we operationalized the definition of beliefs as such, we conceptualized beliefs as 'contextual, dynamic and social' (Barcelos, 2003, p. 20). For this reason, we examined and interpreted the differences and similarities in beliefs held by the pre-service and in-service participants on the Chinese mainland and in Hong Kong in the inquiry. We also adopted a mixed-method approach, involving the use of a Likert-scale questionnaire, open-ended questions and in-depth narrative interviews, to tap into the vocabulary learning/teaching beliefs held by the pre-service and in-service teacher participants, with a view to answering the following research questions:

- (1) How are vocabulary learning/teaching beliefs held by pre-service participants different from or similar to those of their in-service counterparts?

- (2) How are vocabulary learning/teaching beliefs held by mainland Chinese pre-service and in-service teachers different from or similar to those of their counterparts in Hong Kong?
- (3) How can these differences (similarities) be explained?

The participants

The study involved a total of 250 participants (see Table 1). In the inquiry, the pre-service participants were enrolled in one of the following programmes: Bachelor of Education, Postgraduate Diploma in English Studies, and Master of Arts in Teaching English as an International Language, at a leading teacher education institution in Hong Kong (referred to as ‘the Institute’). As can be seen in Table 1, the pre-service participants happened to be a mixed group as 44 of them were from the Chinese mainland and 89 were local Chinese. This mixture was due to the fact that tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, including the Institute, have recently attracted many mainland Chinese students (Gao & Trent, 2009). The in-service participants also came from a variety of backgrounds. 37 were local in-service teachers taking part in professional development courses at the Institute to further their English knowledge and acquire the relevant pedagogy. Some of the mainland Chinese in-service participants were also taking short courses at the Institute while the majority were working on the Chinese mainland at the time of study. All the mainland Chinese in-service teachers taught English in secondary schools while their Hong Kong counterparts were a mixture of kindergarten, primary and secondary school teachers.

Table 1: The participants

	Hong Kong		The Chinese mainland	
Type	In-service	Pre-service	In-service	Pre-service
Number	37	89	80	44

The analysis of questionnaire data

In the inquiry, a questionnaire with both Likert-scale (6-point) and open-ended questions was administered to all the participants. Apart from questions on the

participants' biodata, the questionnaire has 17 Likert-scale questions concerning vocabulary learning beliefs (see Table 2 for these items). We adapted the questionnaire items from Gu's (2005) vocabulary learning questionnaire, which was developed as a survey instrument to examine different aspects of Chinese learners' learning of English vocabulary, including both their beliefs and learning strategies. For this reason, the 17 items on vocabulary learning beliefs from the questionnaire were considered appropriate for the Chinese participants in this inquiry. In order to capture the participants' beliefs in vocabulary teaching, the questionnaire also has two open-ended questions, including: 'What are the most important things to do in teaching vocabulary?' and 'How should vocabulary be taught in class?' Given that the teaching of vocabulary covers a spectrum of phonological, morphological and semantic knowledge and vocabulary learning strategies (Nation, 1990; Nyikos & Fan, 2007), we used the two questions to explore what knowledge and strategies the participants would like to emphasize as well as how they would deliver this knowledge and these strategies in their teaching. Though the pre-service participants had no real teaching experience, these open-ended questions still served as a means to elicit pre-service teachers' expectations as to how vocabulary should be taught to language learners, if they chose to answer them.

The Likert-scale data were entered into SPSS to run a factor analysis to identify the grouping of the items to be further analyzed. This analysis helped generate four factors in the questionnaire data, namely *contextual acquisition and use of vocabulary* (contextual use), *words have fixed meaning* (fixed meaning), *words should be learned with lists* (list learning) and *words should be memorized repeatedly* (repetition) (see Table 2). Each factor represents a sub-group of vocabulary learning beliefs with the loading of each item in each factor larger than .4. Multivariate

analysis was then performed to see whether there were any significant differences between different groups of participants, including in-service and pre-service participants in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland.

Table 2: Four sub-groups of vocabulary learning beliefs (their reliability and factor loading)

<i>Factors</i>	<i>1 Belief Items</i>	<i>Factor Loading</i>	<i>Reliability (Cronbach's alpha)</i>
<i>1. Contextual Use</i>	[U2]* One can expand one's vocabulary simply through reading a lot.	.775	.858
	[U1] The meanings of a considerable number of words can be picked up through reading.	.741	
	[U6] Words studied should be put to use before they are finally learned.	.731	
	[U5] One should pay attention to set phrases and collocations that go with a word.	.666	
	[U3] Guessing words in context is one of the best ways to learn vocabulary.	.658	
	[U4] When you come across a word several times in different contexts, you will know what it means.	.636	
	[U8] At least a learner should know a word's form, its meaning, and its basic usage.	.634	
	[U7] Using the language (listening, speaking, reading and writing) is more important than memorizing words.	.620	
	[U9] Words are learned after you use them.	.560	
<i>2. Fixed Meaning</i>	[F1] English words have fixed meanings.	.782	.748
	[F2] It is only necessary to remember one dictionary definition for each word.	.780	
<i>3. List Learning</i>	[L2] The best way to remember words is to memorize word lists or dictionaries.	.757	.681
	[L1] Once the English equivalents of all Chinese words have been remembered, English is learned	.687	
	[L3] Remembering the meaning of a word is an end in itself.	.557	
<i>4. Repetition</i>	[R2] Repetition is the best way to remember words.	.821	.603
	[R3] You can only acquire a large vocabulary by memorizing individual words.	.678	
	[R1] A good memory is all you need to learn a foreign language well.	.583	

* Note: A code is given for each item in the brackets.

The analysis of open-ended question answers and interview data

The comments given by the participants to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire were coded for content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the coding process, we constantly compared and contrasted different participants' answers as guided by the open-ended questions. In the process, we also noticed that the participants made references to the goals and objectives of their pedagogical efforts and the resources they needed to realize their pedagogical goals in teaching vocabulary. As a result, the participants' vocabulary teaching beliefs were classified into four major categories, namely, *teaching content*, *teaching approach*, *teaching aims* and *teaching resources*. Beliefs in *teaching content* refer to what content the participants believe should be taught when teaching vocabulary. Beliefs in *teaching content* were further divided into beliefs pertaining to *lexical knowledge* (e.g. pronunciation, meaning and spelling) and those concerned with *learning strategy* (i.e. strategies helping learners to learn vocabulary). Beliefs in *teaching approach* reflect the views that the participants had about how to teach vocabulary and the related belief statements were subdivided into the participants' beliefs in the importance of *presentation* and *practice* methods when teaching vocabulary. Beliefs in *teaching aims* are related to the participants' beliefs in what students should be able to do as a result of their pedagogical efforts and these statements can be further divided into those emphasizing the importance of learners' *application* of acquired lexical knowledge and those focusing on learners' enhanced *motivation* for learning vocabulary. Finally, a small number of statements were classified as beliefs in *teaching resources*, i.e. beliefs in what pedagogical resources can be utilized when teaching vocabulary. These coding schemes were operationalized in the analysis, as is illustrated by our interpretation of the following statement from a participant:

[It is important] to teach the student how to expand his/her vocabulary, to learn more and more new words by himself/herself. (MC12)

The above statement was a response from a mainland Chinese pre-service teacher to the first open-ended question. We regarded it as a statement of the particular student's belief in what should be taught in class (*teaching content*). After careful reading, we further categorized this belief statement as a statement reflecting the importance of teaching strategies to learn vocabulary (*learning strategy*) in vocabulary teaching. By contrast, a Hong Kong in-service teacher wrote that it was important for students to 'know how to pronounce the words as well' (AM05) when teaching vocabulary. This particular participant's statement was coded as a belief statement on the importance of teaching lexical knowledge (*teaching content*) to students when teaching vocabulary. Only one count was taken when coding and analyzing the participants' qualitative comments even if a participant made several references to one particular category or sub-category of belief.

Based on the results from the above-mentioned analysis, we decided to follow up the identified issues (see below) with select participants through in-depth narrative interviews so as to understand why and how these participants had developed particular beliefs. Seven Hong Kong and eight mainland Chinese participants were involved in the semi-structured interviews in which they were asked about their experiences of language learning, in particular vocabulary learning (for a list of questions used in the interviews, please refer to Appendix 1). All the interview participants were pre-service teachers as the mediation of contextual conditions was identified as a major issue in the preliminary analysis. In the interviews, we directed questions concerning how vocabulary is taught in school to the pre-service participants so that we could obtain some understanding of pedagogical practices commonly used in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland. As a result, the

interviews helped us situate our interpretations of the participants' beliefs in their narrated experiences (Borg, 2006; Johnson, 2009; Kalaja, 1995). In the interviews, these participants were also shown the preliminary findings and were asked about their general impressions of these findings. The interview data were analyzed paradigmatically to 'produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.5). The analysis of interview narratives has been guided by the question as to how the differences in these participants' vocabulary learning and teaching beliefs can be explained. In particular, the analysis focused on how they learnt English vocabulary and how they were taught vocabulary in their prior educational experiences.

Findings

Both statistical analysis and content analysis of the questionnaire data revealed variations in the beliefs held by the participants in the two contexts. The identified variations between the beliefs held by pre-service and in-service participants both in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland were less significant than those when comparing Hong Kong participants' beliefs with those of their mainland Chinese counterparts. The similarities and differences in the participants' beliefs will be interpreted in the coming sections together with the findings emerging from the analysis of the selected participants' language learning, in particular, their vocabulary learning narratives.

The Likert-scale questions

The general trend, as can be seen from Table 3, is that participants have higher means (4.53 – 5.06) for *contextual use* than those (1.51-3.10) for the other three sub-groups of beliefs related to the learning and memorization of vocabulary (i.e. *list learning*, *fixed meaning* and *repetition*). A closer look at the mean of the four types of

participants for each factor shows that the means tend to be similar within the same location group, irrespective of whether the participants are pre-service or in-service teachers. Noticeable differences were found to exist between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese participants in their beliefs. More specifically, the former have higher means in *list learning*, *fixed meaning* and *repetition* and lower means in *contextual use*. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was also conducted to test the significance of these differences and similarities. The results provided confirmation that overall the two groups of participants differed significantly in terms of the four sub-groups of vocabulary learning beliefs, whereas within each group the differences were largely negligible.

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation of each sub-group of vocabulary learning beliefs for the four types of participants

	<i>Group</i>	<i>Mean</i> (<i>Max = 6</i>)	<i>Standard</i> <i>Deviation</i>
<i>List Learning</i>	<i>HK_In-service (N=37)</i>	2.79	.85
	<i>HK_Pre-service (N= 89)</i>	2.69	.87
	<i>M_In-service (N=80)</i>	2.00	.83
	<i>M_Pre-service (N=44)</i>	1.95	.65
<i>Fixed Meaning</i>	<i>HK_In-service (N=37)</i>	2.00	.88
	<i>HK_Pre-service (N= 89)</i>	1.90	.87
	<i>M_In-service (N=80)</i>	1.48	.90
	<i>M_Pre-service (N=44)</i>	1.51	.93
<i>Repetition</i>	<i>HK_In-service (N=37)</i>	3.10	.92
	<i>HK_Pre-service (N= 89)</i>	3.26	.95
	<i>M_In-service (N=80)</i>	2.32	.72
	<i>M_Pre-service (N=44)</i>	2.66	1.04
<i>Contextual Use</i>	<i>HK_In-service (N=37)</i>	4.53	.74
	<i>HK_Pre-service (N= 89)</i>	4.56	.76
	<i>M_In-service (N=80)</i>	5.08	.84
	<i>M_Pre-service (N=44)</i>	5.06	.51

The results from the quantitative analysis tentatively led to two conclusions which we will further explore and elaborate on in the subsequent qualitative analysis:

(1) within each location group, whether the participants are from Hong Kong or the mainland, in-service and pre-service teachers hold very similar views regarding vocabulary learning beliefs; (2) across different location groups, Hong Kong and mainland participants demonstrate noticeable differences in that the former tend to value *memorization* related beliefs more than the latter who, on the other hand, tend to appreciate *contextual use* more regarding vocabulary learning beliefs.

Open-ended questions in the questionnaire

The content analysis of the participants’ answers to the open-ended questions regarding vocabulary teaching beliefs revealed a complex picture of differences and similarities in beliefs held by different groups of participants (see Table 4).

Table 4: Beliefs in Vocabulary Teaching

<i>Participants</i>		<i>Hong Kong</i>				<i>Mainland China</i>			
		<i>Pre-service</i> <i>N=89</i>		<i>In-service</i> <i>N=37</i>		<i>Pre-service</i> <i>N=44</i>		<i>In-service</i> <i>N=80</i>	
<i>Beliefs</i>									
<i>Teaching content</i>	<i>learning strategy</i>	8	9%	6	16%	17	39%	15	19%
	<i>lexical knowledge</i>	49	55%	13	35%	17	39%	39	49%
<i>Teaching approach</i>	<i>presentation</i>	24	27%	9	24%	10	23%	13	16%
	<i>practice</i>	26	29%	5	16%	11	25%	22	26%
<i>Teaching aims</i>	<i>application</i>	1	1%	7	19%	21	47%	34	43%
	<i>motivation</i>	8	9%	5	14%	5	11%	4	5%
<i>Teaching resources</i>		0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	3	4%

Both the raw counts and percentages seem to indicate that there are differences in the seven identified categories regarding vocabulary teaching across the four groups of participants. The differences have been confirmed by a Chi-square test across the four types of participants [$\chi^2(18, N = 372) = 61.95, p < 0.01$]. That is, generally speaking, the distribution patterns of the seven categories are quite different between Hong Kong and mainland Chinese participants. Within each group, however, the differences among mainland Chinese participants seem to be less noticeable than those among

Hong Kong participants (see Figure 1 on the pattern distribution of the four types of participants for the seven identified categories).

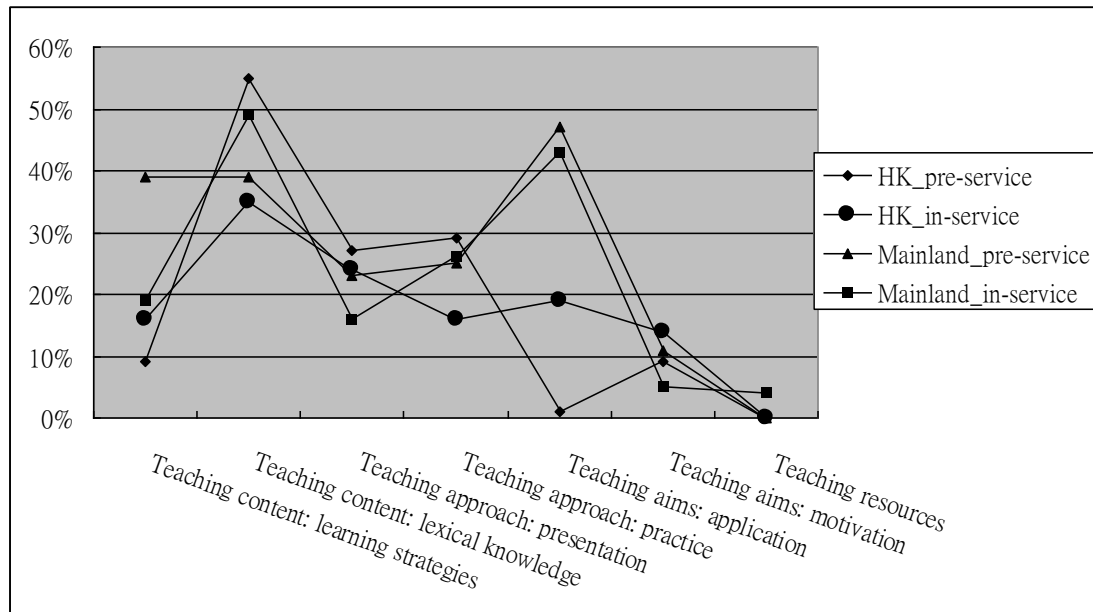


Figure 1: Distribution patterns of the seven identified categories of vocabulary teaching beliefs.

Two separate chi-square tests were performed to examine these within group differences, one for Hong Kong participants and the other for Chinese mainland participants. The test results confirmed that mainland Chinese participants, being pre-service or in-service teachers, generally have similar views towards vocabulary teaching [$\chi^2(6, N = 211) = 8.1, p > 0.05$]. By contrast, the pre-service Hong Kong and in-service participants hold different views [$\chi^2(5, N = 161) = 20, p < 0.01$]; the differences are more prominent in *lexical knowledge* (55% vs. 35%), *practice* (29% vs. 16%) and *application* (1% vs. 19%). On the other hand, the differences in these categories between the mainland participants are almost negligible (39% vs. 49%, 25% vs. 26%, 47% vs. 43%). Thus, regarding beliefs in vocabulary teaching, mainland Chinese in-service and pre-service participants tend to have similar views while the Hong Kong participants have different views. Since all mainland in-service

teachers were teaching in secondary schools and the majority of mainland pre-service teachers were fresh secondary school graduates, it is not surprising that they share similar views. By contrast, the Hong Kong in-service teachers were working in schools of different levels, including kindergarten, primary and secondary schools. This might explain why they held different views from the Hong Kong pre-service teachers, most of whom were also fresh secondary school graduates.

These findings will be illustrated with selected answers from the participants to capture the differences and similarities between the two groups. As can be seen in Table 4 and Figure 1, the general trend is that both Hong Kong and mainland participants valued the importance of teaching *lexical knowledge*, including ‘word formation’, ‘usage’, ‘spelling’, and ‘meaning’, when teaching vocabulary:

Teaching the meaning and pronunciation is important and the way how to spell the word are really challenging these days [for my students] (Hong Kong in-service, AM 25)

[Teach] how to read and speak the words and [...] the general meaning and basic usage of the words (Hong Kong Pre-service APP13)

[Teach] its form, meaning and usage (Mainland Pre-service, MC 32)

[Teach] students to learn about derivatives (prefixes and suffixes). (Mainland in-service, AM 15)

Regarding the teaching of vocabulary learning strategies, more mainland Chinese participants tended to believe it to be of greater importance than their counterparts in Hong Kong. 39% of mainland Chinese pre-service participants deemed it important for language teachers to teach learners strategies to learn vocabulary and 19% of mainland Chinese in-service teachers shared the same belief. These mainland Chinese participants largely related vocabulary learning strategies to the memorization of words, as can be seen from the following:

It is important to teach learners ways to memorize new words. For example, they should be taught to use phonetic symbols, antonyms and synonyms to memorize words (Mainland in-service, AM 15)

[Learners need to be taught] strategies to guess new words’ meanings within the textual context (Mainland in-service BM 09)

Teach students the right way to memorize words instead of looking at the vocabulary list again and again. (Mainland pre-service, AB 24)

On the other hand, fewer Hong Kong pre-service participants (only 9%) and in-service teachers (16%) in the study placed such emphasis on the importance of teaching vocabulary learning strategies to learners.

As for vocabulary teaching approaches, 29% of Hong Kong pre-service participants believed that it was important to encourage language learners to learn more vocabulary through *practice*. These respondents asserted, in their answers to the open-ended questions, that, when vocabulary is taught, language learners should be encouraged to:

Use the new words as frequently as the learners can (MB 27)
[Read] and [use] those new vocabularies when [learners] communicate with others (MB 38)

Likewise, 25% of mainland Chinese pre-service participants also shared such beliefs. So did 25% of mainland in-service teachers. By contrast, slightly fewer Hong Kong in-service teachers, 16%, appeared to have been concerned with helping learners learn vocabulary through practice. As for the belief in the importance of presentation of new vocabulary to language learners, both Hong Kong and mainland participants share similar views except that slightly fewer mainland Chinese in-service teachers (16% as opposed to 27%, 24% and 23% for the other three groups) believe in the importance of doing so.

Regarding the *aims* of vocabulary teaching, many more mainland Chinese participants put greater emphasis on equipping learners with the capacity or ‘habit’ of using the vocabulary taught to them. 47% of the mainland Chinese pre-service participants and 43% of in-service teachers mentioned that their pedagogical efforts should help students use English words ‘freely’ (pre-service, MC 02) and ‘properly’ (in-service, BM 11). In sharp contrast to this, their Hong Kong counterparts seem to

have been much less concerned with such application of learned lexical knowledge (only 1% for pre-service and 19% for in-service teachers).

A small number (4%) of mainland Chinese in-service teachers in the inquiry mentioned the importance of material conditions for the learning and teaching of vocabulary. They believed that it was important for learners and teachers to have facilitative learning environments and supportive pedagogical resources, such as ‘resources of different types, [including] articles, newspapers, famous novels, etc’ (MC 11). None of the Hong Kong participants referred to the issue of teaching resources in their answers. This finding is probably not surprising as Hong Kong schools in many ways are well-resourced in comparison with most schools on the Chinese mainland.

Interview results

One of the major differences in the participants’ vocabulary learning beliefs was related to the importance of list learning, fixed meaning and repetition (see Table 3). The Hong Kong participants, including pre-service and in-service teachers, had a higher rating on these issues than their counterparts on the Chinese mainland although, in general, both groups considered these memory strategy-related items less important. Meanwhile, the mainland Chinese participants attached more importance to the learning of vocabulary through contextual use than their counterparts in Hong Kong. The findings from the analysis of the open-ended questions regarding vocabulary teaching beliefs reveal a more complex picture. The mainland Chinese participants were much more inclined to rate highly the teaching of vocabulary learning strategies, particularly memorization techniques, than their Hong Kong counterparts. On the other hand, the former tended to value much more than the latter the importance for learners to be able to apply the lexical knowledge taught (e.g.

‘using the word in our daily life’); this is consistent with what was found from the Likert-scale questions.

To explore these findings further, we confronted the selected participants (seven Hong Kong and eight mainland Chinese students) with the findings of the Likert-scale questions in the in-depth narrative interviews, which allowed us to have extended interactions with these participants. The interviews also helped us further situate our interpretation and appreciation of the participants’ stated vocabulary learning and teaching beliefs within the learning contexts and their educational experiences in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland.

The analysis of the participants’ prior educational experiences in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland did reveal many similarities and differences in their language learning experiences and pedagogical practices. For instance, in both Hong Kong and mainland Chinese schools, memorization of vocabulary was greatly emphasized as part of teachers’ pedagogical efforts and learners’ learning endeavours. Larry, a local pre-service participant, had the following learning experiences when he was young:

Er... I thin.. er... every day... [...] [the teacher] wrote a [...] and then asked us to copy-copy for twenty times. (Larry, all names here are pseudonyms)

For most of the Hong Kong participants, such copying was closely related to dictation exercises, a crucial task in their educational experiences, especially in their primary schools:

And in Primary 6, er... the teacher ask us to recite a lot of vocabulary...[for dictation]. [...] He...he gave us a list... a long list of [...] a lot of vocabulary.
(Ann)

Like pupils in Hong Kong, the mainland Chinese participants also had to memorize English words frequently throughout their academic studies in schools and even in universities. These participants also ‘read the [vocabulary list at the end of the English

textbooks] several times' (Dudu) or would 'copy a word five or six times' (Bee) to memorize English words. However, there were also noticeable differences in the ways that Hong Kong and mainland Chinese participants experienced the learning and teaching of vocabulary.

First of all, Hong Kong participants appeared to have had very varied educational experiences in learning English in comparison with their mainland Chinese counterparts. While vocabulary consistently remained an important task for all participants in the inquiry throughout their educational careers, the mainland Chinese interviewees did report much more concentrated effort on memorizing vocabulary than their Hong Kong counterparts. For instance, they frequently reported putting intensive effort into memorizing vocabulary and grammatical items in preparation for high-stakes examinations. Teachers on the Chinese mainland, whether in regular or tutorial classes, approached the teaching of vocabulary as a central task of language teaching, as experienced by Shaomei in a tutorial school:

[the teacher] reviewed all the vocabulary I had learnt in the first and second years of junior middle school. He wanted me to review all the vocabulary. He was not following the progress chart in the textbooks. He just gave me questions, his questions [for me to review the vocabulary]. [...] I did well in the exams in the end. (Shaomei)

In contrast, many Hong Kong participants had other learning activities in addition to their efforts that aimed to enhance their vocabulary knowledge. For instance, Chu noticed, after she finished her primary school, that her teachers in secondary school began to 'shift [the focus] to oral skills'. Other participants even had opportunities to participate in extra-curricular learning activities that were designed to enhance their interest in learning English. As an example, Kathy joined a 'Scrabble competition' with a group of Singaporean students who were on an exchange visit programme in her school, which '[increased her] chance to really speak in English'.

Another noticeable difference was related to the ways that English was taught in the two educational contexts. It was found in the interviews that phonetic symbols were taught to learners in mainland Chinese schools, which were later used by some mainland Chinese participants as an aid to memorize vocabulary:

In Junior Middle school, I memorized vocabulary in my own ways because I learnt phonetic symbols really well. For instance, the word ‘take’, [...] I remember ‘a’ has the same sound as [ei]. I can use the sounds to work out the spelling of a word. (Viv)

Some mainland Chinese participants might have also acquired morphological knowledge to help them memorize vocabulary. Phoebe recalled her experiences in senior high school as follows:

The teacher asked us to memorize prefixes, suffixes. I do not remember exactly. He would say, here is a noun, and then he would tell us what its antonyms were. We used to have classes to learn vocabulary alone. (Phoebe)

The most important difference in the learning and teaching of vocabulary in the two contexts is probably related to the availability of opportunities to use English. In the interviews, all the participants stressed that Hong Kong as a language learning site had richer learning resources and more opportunities to use English. For this reason, the majority of the participants (including mainland Chinese participants themselves) held the view that mainland Chinese participants’ heavy emphasis on the learning of English was due to their perceived lack of opportunities to use English on the Chinese mainland.

[Teachers on the Chinese mainland] would emphasize the importance of learning vocabulary through use. You use them then you will remember them. Maybe students in Hong Kong have more opportunities to use the language than we did. [...] [In contrast, we] spent too much time memorizing and therefore we do not think memorization is a good way to learn vocabulary. We thought some statements in the questionnaire better ways to learn vocabulary. (Tian)

Tian’s reflections could probably explain why mainland Chinese participants rated low on the learning of vocabulary through memorization as they could be generally

dissatisfied with the fact that they memorize a lot of words without utilizing sufficiently their acquired lexical knowledge. Meanwhile, they still believed it is very important to teach these memorization related strategies to learners, perhaps reflecting what they had experienced in reality. Their Hong Kong counterparts' attitudes towards the learning of vocabulary through memorization or use could be explained by the incisive comment made by a Hong Kong interviewee:

[People] would think what they didn't do [enough] would be the better way.
(Leung)

This observation probably reflects the emerging nature of beliefs from the participants' ongoing reflections on their experiences and pedagogical practices in the two contexts. As these participants constantly reflected on the ways that they had been learning and taught English with a particular focus on the learning and teaching of vocabulary, their statements in the inquiry were their beliefs about what should have been done and what they would do. In other words, these belief statements are not only language learners' reflections on their prior experiences but they are also forward-looking in terms of learners' future endeavours, which may be different from what these learners have actually experienced and undertaken.

Discussion

We set out to investigate the vocabulary learning and teaching beliefs held by pre-service and in-service teachers in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland so that teacher education programmes could better equip teachers with appropriate knowledge concerning the vital task of vocabulary teaching. So far we have identified significant differences in the beliefs held by Hong Kong and mainland Chinese participants, indicative of the contextual nature of the participants' beliefs (Barcelos, 2003; Johnson, 2009; Kalaja, 1995; Peacock, 2001). In particular, the quantitative

analysis revealed that Hong Kong participants placed more emphasis on the learning of vocabulary through memorization than their mainland Chinese counterparts while the mainland Chinese participants emphasized more the learning of vocabulary through use. Most of the participants in the interviews interpreted this finding as the participants' responses to the perceived lack or availability of linguistic resources and language use opportunities in their respective learning contexts, a view with which we would concur.

The content analysis of the participants' teaching belief statements also revealed some important differences in the beliefs held by the pre-service and in-service participants, which deserve further attention from teacher educators. For instance, the pre-service participants in Hong Kong wanted more lexical knowledge to be taught though their in-service counterparts appeared to have been concerned with the teaching of vocabulary learning strategies, learners' application of taught vocabulary and their motivational levels. Although the in-service participants were found to have shared the same concern with developing learners' vocabulary learning strategies, the mainland Chinese pre-service participants apparently had a much stronger demand for strategy development. By contrast, Hong Kong pre-service participants had little awareness of the need to develop vocabulary learning strategies.

The analysis of the interview data allowed us to see how contextual conditions have mediated the participants' beliefs as well as how the participants' situated experiences have engendered their reflections and new beliefs (Barcelos, 2003; Peacock, 2001). For instance, the emphasis of Hong Kong pre-service participants on the importance of lexical knowledge in vocabulary learning may be associated with the fact that their prior vocabulary learning experiences had been dominated by repeated 'dictation' exercises. Local pre-service interviewees were dissatisfied with

their dictation exercises, to which they devoted much time and effort, almost the sole memorable vocabulary learning activity, and from which they had gained so little lexical knowledge. Their dissatisfaction also helped explain why they were more concerned with the teacher's vocabulary teaching approach. Having worked so hard to learn vocabulary on the Chinese mainland, the mainland Chinese pre-service participants were most unhappy with the lack of opportunities to practise and use their learnt vocabulary meaningfully. Consequently, they demanded better strategies supporting their vocabulary learning efforts. In fact, they themselves were often in search of better methods to learn vocabulary. For instance, Margaret, when learning English in mainland China, developed her way of copying new words from the dictionary after she was instructed by her teacher to copy every new word five times:

[...] later it evolved into copying words from the dictionary in my senior high school. [...] I found a new word mentioned by my teacher particularly interesting. I would then look it up in the dictionary. I read the meaning entries under this word. I might have already known this word but I did not know this word had all these meanings. I would then copy those interesting meanings. [...] I also copied sample sentences. (Margaret)

In other words, both participants in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland appeared to have reflected on their own experience and to have been intent on finding out their own ways to learn or teach vocabulary better. Apparently, as language teacher educators, we cannot neglect such a demand for improved vocabulary pedagogy that empowers language learners with strategies and motivation to deal with the vital task of vocabulary learning.

Conclusion

So far, we have examined the differences in vocabulary learning and teaching beliefs held by pre-service and in-service teachers in Hong Kong and on the Chinese mainland. The findings suggest that the participants' vocabulary learning and teaching

beliefs have been mediated by their individual educational experiences and contextual conditions (Barcelos, 2003; Johnson, 2009; Kalaja, 1995; Peacock, 2001). The study also lent support to the use of a mixed method approach in undertaking research on beliefs of language learners and teachers since the questionnaire (with both Likert-scale and open-ended questions) was instrumental in generating a general picture of the participants' beliefs and in-depth narrative interviews effective in capturing their experiences and voices. The survey instrument in the inquiry allowed us to investigate beliefs with a relatively large number of participants, who were also encouraged by the open-ended questions to voice what they valued most in vocabulary teaching. In addition, the quantitative findings concerning the participants' beliefs were also examined and interpreted within their prior educational experiences. Though only a small number of participants were interviewed, the narrative data helped reveal why and how they had come to adopt particular beliefs in learning and teaching English vocabulary. Therefore, a clear understanding of learners' or teachers' beliefs may be obtained through interpreting these different sources of information concerning their beliefs, revealing their dynamic and context-situated nature.

In the light of the widespread dissatisfaction with their prior vocabulary learning experiences, both pre-service and in-service language teachers need to work out better ways to help their students learn vocabulary more effectively in class. The popular association of the task with 'dictation' in Hong Kong and 'memorization' on the Chinese mainland suggests that language teachers in both contexts need to diversify their pedagogical activities in helping empower their students with better capacity and knowledge for the vocabulary learning task. One possible solution, in response to some of the pre-service participants' demands identified in the study,

involves efforts to enhance their use of vocabulary learning strategies and regulation of vocabulary learning efforts.

Although strategy training has been a controversial issue in research (see Rees-Miller, 1993), recent language learning strategy research has generated strong evidence for an integrated pedagogical approach to develop language learners' strategic learning capacity, through which strategy development efforts are more organically incorporated into regular teaching (for a recent example see Macaro & Erler, 2008). In the interviews, we also noticed that a few mainland Chinese participants recalled how they used their knowledge of phonetic and morphological knowledge to develop better ways to learn vocabulary. As Hong Kong pre-service participants appeared to have had little awareness of strategy use in the study in comparison with their mainland Chinese participants, integration of vocabulary learning strategies may help not only improve their vocabulary learning but also enhance their learning motivation when they discover the learning of English vocabulary is more than 'dictation'. Moreover, language teachers in both contexts need to encourage their learners to be more reflexive so that they can relate previously acquired knowledge of the language to their language learning efforts and strategy use. Probably what matters for teachers in vocabulary teaching is their learners' awareness that the learning of other aspects of the language (i.e. morphology) could be transformed into foundations for them to exert their efforts in learning vocabulary or acquiring new linguistic knowledge.

In short, our findings confirm the importance of raising and strengthening language teachers' strategy and language awareness in teacher development programmes, which help them make better use of pedagogic opportunities to

empower their learners with the capacity and knowledge for taking control of their learning (Benson, 2007).

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Appendix 1: Semi-structured Interview Schedule

1. When did you start to learn English?
2. How did you learn English?
3. How did you learn English vocabulary (in kindergarten, primary schools, and secondary schools)?
4. What were your favourite ways to learn English vocabulary?
5. How was English taught in kindergarten (also primary and secondary schools)?
6. What were taught when teacher(s) were explaining vocabulary to you in kindergarten (also primary 1 and secondary schools)?
7. What kind of support did you receive when learning English (in particular, English vocabulary)?
8. Who provided this support to you in the learning process?