

Secondary teachers' conceptions of integrated writing skills: Are teachers' conceptions aligned with the curriculum objectives

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Abstract

Integrated writing skills that emphasize integrated use of language skills and multiple source materials have attracted increasing attention in language education globally and locally in Hong Kong. This study examines teachers' conceptions of integrated writing skills and interviewed twenty-five Chinese language teachers. Three conceptions emerged from the data, representing writing as a composite of disconnected parts (Category 1), a logical inquiry (Category 2), and a developmental process (Category 3). As the categories move up, the alignment between teachers' conceptions and the curriculum objectives increases accordingly, with the purpose of writing instruction ranging from fulfilling examination requirements, enhancing reasoning skills, to developing integrated use of language skills. The findings also reveal that although the development of integrated writing skills has been a critical component of the Chinese language curriculum since the first public examination in 2007, teachers' receptivity toward it still varied greatly. Insufficient professional training, the legitimacy of integrated writing as a curriculum component, and the fossilization of the public examination were the factors that accounted for the differing attitudes among the teachers. The discourse of integrated writing in the Hong Kong context has been centered around high-stakes testing. The unbalanced discourse resulted in an oversimplified view that conflated the teaching and learning of integrated writing with integrated writing assessment. The study contributes to the conversation between integrated writing curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Implications for teacher professional development are discussed.

Keywords: Teacher conception, Integrated writing, Practical knowledge, Curriculum objective, Chinese language

Introduction

In the era of knowledge economy, processing information from across multiple sources becomes a regular while highly demanding part of academic assignments and everyday life (Barzilai et al. 2018). Anchored in a holistic view of language learning (Plakans and Gebril 2012), integrated writing tasks that require synergistic use of different language skills and multiple sources have received considerable attention in the field of language education and assessment (Cumming et al. 2016; Plakans et al. 2019; Yang and Plakans 2012). Integrated writing, also known as source-based writing or writing from sources, has been regarded as one of the core competencies in higher education. Previous studies comparing the composing processes of integrated writing and writing-only tasks have indicated that integrated writing requires a more complex meaning-making process than does traditional impromptu writing (Cumming 2013; Plakans 2010; Plakans et al. 2019). Writers are presented with various source texts that posit different or even contradictory opinions about a topic under discussion and are required to select, organize, and connect the information to develop an integral argument into a written product (Grabe 2001; Plakans and Gebril 2012; Segev-Miller 2007). The ability to write from sources has also been included in language proficiency tests such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and Canadian Academic Language (CAEL), as a critical performance indicator of college readiness (Council of Chief State School Officers & National Governors Association (CCSSO/NGA) 2010). The growing popularity of integrated writing suggests that the traditional paradigm that divide language learning up into four individual trajectories (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) may not suffice to prepare students for the dynamic knowledge-based society which demands the ability to use different language skills simultaneously to deal with information from multiple sources for academic and professional purposes (Griffin et al. 2012; Kang et al. 2016). Integrated writing was officially incorporated into Hong Kong's secondary curriculum framework of Chinese language in 2005 with the first examination taking place in 2007 (Curriculum Development Council and Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2007). The curriculum change of integrated writing signifies a new direction for the Chinese language education that emphasizes integrated use of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills to facilitate holistic development of communication, reasoning, and problem-solving skills (Curriculum Development Council 2017). Despite the centrality of integrated writing in language education, studies that have tapped into practitioners' understanding or examined integrated writing instruction are surprisingly scant. Given that how teachers conceptualize and enact integrated writing directly influences the development of students' integrated writing skills, the present study aims to explore Chinese language teachers' conceptions of integrated writing skills through the lens of practical knowledge (Verloop et al. 2001), which enables us to uncover variation in teachers' understanding and instructional approaches to integrated writing as a curriculum change, and more importantly, to examine the alignment between the actual landscape of integrated writing instruction and the intended curricular objectives.

Literature review

Teachers' practical knowledge

Teachers face curriculum changes throughout their careers, and it is risky to take for granted that teachers can automatically embrace newly introduced changes and adapt their

instructional approaches effectively to achieve intended curricular goals (Deng 2018). The implementation of a system-wide change may provoke resistance among teachers, arising from inconsistency between the change and deeply entrenched values or existing pedagogical practices; more importantly, the resistance may also be a consequence of lack of knowledge that is essential for carrying out the change (Waugh and Punch 1987).

Underpinning pedagogical reasoning and actions, teachers' practical knowledge is a significant multifaceted construct; it is personal, tacit, contextual, and content related (Gholami and Husu 2010). Researchers have pointed out the bidirectional nature of practical knowledge; it is informed by teaching experience and at the same time, underlies future pedagogical decision making (Verloop et al. 2001; Woods and Çakır 2011). The notion of practical knowledge can serve as a critical lens through which the extent to which shared sense-making is achieved in a curriculum reform can be reflected (Pyhältö et al. 2018). Inconsistency between reform policy and teachers' practical knowledge has been documented in the literature (Harris and Brown 2009; Ireland et al. 2012; Leung 2004). These studies suggest that every educational change involves a transformational process in which teachers have to reconcile their teaching philosophy with various contextual demands. As Briggs et al. (2018) observed, teachers who found a curriculum reform compatible with their aspirations for teaching and learning exhibited greater buy-in to the reform; in contrast, teachers who had negative responses to the reform felt pressurized and less supported to enact it. Successful implementation of an educational change depends on not only cognitive and affective adaptation made by teachers but also social and institutional support they receive from the workplace and professional communities to facilitate professional development that enables teachers to respond positively to a reform (Li et al. 2018). Coburn (2001) found that collegial interaction is a significant factor affecting how teachers understand and enact a reform; the conversations that teachers were engaged with colleagues influenced their pedagogical decision making and in turn the messages that were brought into classrooms. To make schoolwide professional community productive places that engage teachers with reform initiatives, school leaders have an important role to play in shaping the discourse through framing reform agendas and structuring professional development and collaboration (Coburn 2001). It seems that the implementation of an education reform inevitably involves a reconstruction process at the school level, making the engagement of teachers in the reform discourse essential (Cuban 1998).

Teachers' practical knowledge in language education

Practical knowledge has been regarded as a key indicator of teacher quality in language education (Ballock et al. 2018; Bomer et al. 2019; Doubet and Southall 2018; König et al. 2016; Reutzel et al. 2011; Wang and Matsumura 2019). König et al. (2016) conceptualized language teaching as a triad of content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and general pedagogical knowledge and confirmed the interrelatedness between the variables. Meijer, Verloop, and Beijaard (1999) conceptualize language teachers' practical knowledge from six aspects, including (1) subject matter knowledge, (2) student knowledge (general), (3) knowledge of student learning and understanding (subject-specific), (4) knowledge of purposes, (5) knowledge of curriculum, and (6) knowledge of instructional techniques. Ballock et al. (2018) found that factors pertaining to subject matter, student, and instructional knowledge differentiated the quality of writing assessment implemented by pre-service teachers. Teacher candidates who demonstrated a better understanding of learners'

developmental progressions and the various aspects of written composition, attended to a broader range of writing features when responding to students' writing and were more responsive to learners' needs. In contrast, teacher candidates who had limited pedagogical and content knowledge tended to focus on mechanical errors and rarely suggested strategies to help students improve their writing. Focusing specifically on integrated writing instruction, Wang and Matsumura (2019) found the association between teachers' conception and their selection of writing tasks. Teachers who considered integrated writing as an application of reading skills favored explicit step-by-step directions and writing tasks that allowed low ambiguity in students' responses. On the other hand, teachers who saw integrated writing as an inquiry into text ideas preferred low-stakes tasks that encouraged analytical thinking and articulation of writers' opinions. Although integrated use of language skills has been promoted in literacy education, Doubet and Southall (2018) observed that the notion of integration was not well understood and implemented by the teachers they surveyed with many of them still holding a disconnected view of language skills and teaching reading and writing in isolation. In addition, the teachers found themselves lacking in the knowledge and skills to integrate reading and writing systematically. Researchers have also found that relatable learning experience in school as a student writer and in teacher education was found to be a critical factor that affects teachers' attitudes toward writing and their approaches to writing instruction (Bomer et al. 2019; Yigitoglu and Belcher 2014).

Previous studies have substantiated the multifaceted nature of practical knowledge and its pivotal role in language teachers' pedagogical decision making and practices. We argue that as a curriculum change, the notion of integrated writing can be challenging for teachers. Lack in practical knowledge might result in teachers interpreting and implementing integrated writing in letter rather than in spirit.

Integrated writing assessment in the Hong Kong context

Since its first examination in 2007, integrated writing assessment has been an integral part of the official tertiary entrance examination in Hong Kong. In the prevailing Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE), the integrated writing assessment (i.e., Chinese Language Paper 3: Listening and Integrated Skills) consists of a writing prompt, five source texts, and an audio recording (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2018). Students are required to synthesize information from the sources to build integral arguments and express personal opinions on a given topic in the form of practical writing, such as an open letter, self-recommendation letter, or speech script. Four criteria are used to assess students' written products, including (1) contextual awareness, (2) synthesis and elaboration, (3) opinion and argumentation, and (4) expression and organization.

Similar to most preceding curriculum reforms, integrated writing was introduced to the local Chinese language teachers in a top-down manner. Teachers have to deal with it regardless if they are professionally prepared or if they appreciate its educational values. In the initial stage of the curriculum change, Seto (2010) observed that teachers had vague and inconsistent ideas of why integrated writing is incorporated into the Chinese language curriculum. Teachers' responses varied significantly, ranging from being doubtful about the legitimacy of integrated writing assessment, focusing on the changes in the format of writing assessment, to recognizing integrated writing as a practical skill. Surveying 730 Form 4 (i.e., Grade 10) students from 11 secondary schools, Zhu and Wu (2013) found that integrated

writing was rated as the most difficult compared to the listening, speaking, reading, and independent writing tests. The students also emphasized their needs for instructional support with regard to synthesizing and elaborating information and justifying personal opinions. Students' needs in information integration and argumentation were also documented in Shum (2011). Cheong et al. (2018) further indicated that students' integrated writing performance was significantly correlated with their ability to elaborate and build an argument, and these skills are exactly the challenges that were documented previously (Shum 2011; Zhu and Wu 2013).

As a significant change to the Chinese language curriculum, integrated writing has led to high demand on teachers in terms of curriculum adaptation and implementation, especially, for those who are confronted with the change in the middle of their careers. Moreover, there has been a debate in society over the legitimate role of integrated writing in the Chinese language curriculum and whether the official integrated writing assessment should be terminated since its first examination in 2007 (Education Convergence 2008; Zhu et al. 2016).

Previous studies have indicated the challenges that teachers and students face amid the curriculum change of integrated writing; these studies have also pointed to a significant issue that the discourse of integrated writing in the local context is centered around high-stakes testing. Discussion from the perspectives of curriculum and instruction is scant. The unbalanced discourse might result in an oversimplified view, conflating the teaching and learning of integrated writing with integrated writing assessment. An investigation into teachers' conceptions is of great importance in that it provides an insider's perspective by engaging practitioners in the discourse to "unpack their practice" through pedagogical reasoning to unfold the often unseen underpinnings of their pedagogical decision making and practices (Loughran 2019). Examining the alignment between teachers' practical knowledge and the curriculum objectives also helps extend the discourse of integrated writing from language testing to curriculum and instruction (Cumming et al. 2018) to achieve a more balanced understanding of integrated writing particularly in the Hong Kong context in which teaching and learning are, to a large extent, bonded together to high-stakes testing (Brown et al. 2009). Findings from this exploration could enhance the conversation between integrated writing curriculum, instruction, and assessment and offer insights into teacher professional development. This exploratory research aims to explore Chinese language teachers' conceptions of integrated writing to address the following research questions:

- (1) What conceptions of integrated writing are held by Chinese language teachers?
- (2) How do the teachers' conceptions relate to the curriculum objectives?
- (3) What are the factors that contribute to variation in the teachers' conceptions?

Methods

This study adopted a phenomenographic approach to investigate how Chinese language teachers conceptualized and implemented integrated writing in classrooms. Phenomenography is a research specialization developed by Marton (1981) and colleagues (Marton and Booth 1997) during the early 1970s. As a qualitative approach, phenomenography has been applied to uncover people's conceptions of various educational issues (Harris and Brown 2009; Polat 2012; Tan 2011). The aim of a phenomenographic study is "to find and systematize forms of thought in terms of which people interpret aspects

of reality” (Marton 1981, p. 180), that is, using a ‘from-the-inside’ approach to see a phenomenon through participants’ eyes (Richardson 1999). It is assumed that participants’ conceptions of a phenomenon will be limited in number and can be organized hierarchically to manifest variations in terms of depth of understanding (Marton and Booth 1997).

This study involved 25 Chinese language teachers, including 16 females and 9 males, from 12 local secondary schools. The 12 schools participated a university–school partnership research project on integrated writing curriculum undertaken by the authors. The researchers sent out an interview invitation to the department heads or the teachers who were the liaisons to the project to recruit participants. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all 25 teachers. The teaching experience of the 25 teachers ranged from 4 to 30 years, with a mean of 16.64 years (SD = 7.79). Among the 25 teachers in the sample, only four of them (16%) had received relevant pre-service training, and only one of them had took the integrated writing assessment in high school. The majority of the teachers (i.e., 21 teachers, 84%) were confronted with the curriculum change in the middle of their careers. Under the old curriculum, the teachers needed to deal with two examination papers, namely reading and writing assessments.

The teachers participated in an individual face-to-face semi-structured interview lasting for approximately 40 min. Semi-structured interview was adopted because it allowed us to tap into teachers’ experience with integrated writing in detail at the individual and collective levels. The interviews were carried out at the schools and were conducted in Cantonese. They were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by two native Cantonese speaking research assistants and checked by the first author. Drawing on Meijer et al.’s (1999) conceptualization of practical knowledge, we designed an interview protocol that consisted of seven main parts: (1) teachers’ understanding of what integrated writing is and

(2) why it is incorporated in the Chinese language curriculum, (3) their pre-service and in-service training experience related to integrated writing, (4) their instructional practices and (5) student learning, (6) their opinions about whether the prevailing integrated writing assessment should be retained or terminated, and (7) professional support and changes to the prevailing curriculum or assessment frameworks they think necessary.

The interview transcripts were read iteratively before they were coded. Notes were taken in each data analysis phase to keep track of our thinking on the data and used to facilitate the generation and modification of analytical categories. To establish authenticity of the study, the research team met regularly in each phase of data analysis to discuss and ensure that our understandings and interpretations of the data were consistent. The discrepancies arising during the meetings were resolved through discussion. Preliminary findings of the study were shared and discussed with the teachers who had participated in the interviews and their peers at the regular meetings of the university–school partnership research project to help validate our interpretations of the data.

Pseudonyms were used throughout the process to avoid potential bias. All the supporting quotations were translated into English by a research assistant who majors

Table 1 Coding categories for teachers’ practical knowledge

Coding category	Description	Meijer et al. (1999)
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1. Knowledge of students' learning	What integrated writing is; the sources of teachers' knowledge	1. Subject matter knowledge
2. Knowledge of students' learning	Students' integrated writing performance and challenges	2. Student knowledge 3. Knowledge of student learning and understanding
3. Knowledge of the purposes of integrated writing in the curriculum	Why integrated writing is incorporated into the curriculum; attitudes toward the curriculum change	4. Knowledge of purposes 5. Knowledge of curriculum
4. Knowledge of integrated writing instruction	Pedagogical orientation and instructional focus	6. Knowledge of instructional techniques

Table 2 Teachers' conceptions of integrated writing

Category	Aspects of practical knowledge			
	Purpose of integrated writing	Nature of integrated writing	Pedagogical orientation	Instructional focus
Category 1	Fulfilling examination requirements	Writing as a composite of disconnected parts	Formulaic	The written product
Category 2	Enhancing reasoning skills	Writing as a logical inquiry	Inquiry-based	The process of writing
Category 3	Developing integrated language skills	Writing as a developmental process	Sequenced and flexible	The process of learning from the junior to senior secondary school level

in translation and then checked by the first author. Thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the interview data (Creswell 2013; Gibson and Brown 2009). In the first phase, we categorized the interview transcripts into different themes in accordance with the interview protocol. Before extracting an interview excerpt from its original transcript, we examined the excerpt in context to ensure that it could represent the gist of a teacher's response to a question and that the teacher's opinion was precisely represented. In the second phase, we used a coding scheme that was adapted from the six-category scheme developed by Meijer et al. (1999), to code the interview excerpts. Considering that this study had a specific focus on integrated writing, we merged the second and the third category to focus on students learning of integrated writing. In addition, a discussion of the overall Chinese language curriculum might go beyond the scope of the present study. Thus, we combined the fourth and the fifth category into knowledge of the purposes of integrated writing in the Chinese language curriculum. Table 1 displays the revised coding categories and the original categories in Meijer et al. (1999). The revised coding scheme comprised four categories: (1) knowledge of integrated writing, (2) knowledge of students' learning, (3) knowledge of the purposes of integrated writing in the Chinese language curriculum, and (4) knowledge of integrated writing instruction. Each category had several sub-categories.

Results

Table 2 shows three conceptions of integrated writing, each made up of four interrelated components of practical knowledge: the purpose of integrated writing, the nature of integrated writing, pedagogical orientation, and instructional focus. We selected quotations from the interview data to illustrate each category and used a subsection heading to highlight their salient features.

Category 1: Writing as a composite of disconnected parts

Category 1 denotes an examination-oriented view of integrated writing. There was a strong tendency among the teachers to conflate the notion of integrated writing with the official assessment. One-fifth of the teachers (Teacher 1, 8, 16, 20, and 21) coincidentally used the same metaphor “dispense medicine” to illustrate what integrated writing means to them, seeing writing as a composite of several disconnected parts, as Teacher 16 stated:

It (integrated writing) is really a very rigid test and I don’t think it can contribute to creative ability. You can totally deal with in a way of dispensing medicine. The students know that every time when doing a task, they just need to put certain medicines in the right places and then they will get points.

The official assessment framework was the primary source of teachers’ knowledge about integrated writing, making teachers focus greatly on the formulaic aspects of integrated writing and structure writing class in an atomistic manner. Teacher modeling in combination with a detailed writing outline was frequently adopted by the teachers to teach integrated writing. Teacher 2 explained that students are expected to write approximately ten paragraphs if they want to get higher marks in the official assessment, which can be quite challenging to most of her students. In each writing task, she will prepare a writing outline for her students by decomposing the whole essay into small segments in line with the official scoring rubrics to explicate to her students what to write in each paragraph. In her words, this atomistic approach offered the students “a simplified manual” with which they need not struggle what to write and how to organize their writing.

In fact, we have tried different ways to help them. What I think works is to provide a writing outline to the students, like a simplified manual. [the students would understand] “Oh, it turns out that I just need to follow the outline. The first paragraph, tick and move on to the second one.” Actually, this can give the students some directions. I think what we want this year is to help them to write with a solid structure.

Teacher 21 shared with us a mnemonic he came up with, which is “one two one two one” denoting one paragraph of introduction, two paragraphs of synthesis and elaboration of source texts, one transitional paragraph, two paragraphs of personal opinions and argumentation, and finally one paragraph of conclusion. Saying straightforwardly, Teacher 21 did not think students can figure out how to organize their writing; the mnemonic is the simplest and the most straight-forward way to save them from struggling.

I just think that they might not be able to figure it out. I would think about how to make them get it. In short, I hope the mnemonic I came up with is the simplest and most direct method, without having them think too hard. It is catchy.

The medicine-dispensing metaphor and the idea of offering students a simplified manual or mnemonic to deal with integrated writing assessment point to a formulaic view of integrated writing. A written product is divided into several atomistic parts. All students need to do is follow the prescription, namely, a writing outline prescribed by their teachers and then put right things in right places. This formulaic atomistic approach resulted in the practice of writing to the test and “writing without composing” (Kiuahara et al. 2009).

Instead of letting students to explore what and how to write, the teachers dominated the composing process with exceedingly explicit instructions which, to a large extent, restrained students from thinking and writing independently. Instead of teaching students how to deal with integrated writing, the teachers are doing the writing and thinking for their students.

Embedded in the formulaic and atomistic approach is teachers going to great lengths to prevent students from struggling and making mistakes in the official assessment. An obvious repercussion of this examination-oriented conception is that it constrains the development of integrated writing competence of students. Teacher 1 pointed out that transfer of writing competence between tasks is the primary challenge in her class. Providing students with a detailed writing outline might ensure satisfactory performance on a task at hand; however, it could not guarantee that students can deal with other tasks independently.

They can understand the topics, yes, but they cannot figure out what to write on their own. For example, I have guided them through this topic, from what perspectives or directions, increase what, enhance what, or affect what. They came up with some ideas, but next time they cannot make it on their own.

Category 2: Writing as a logical inquiry

Category 2 represents a process-oriented view of integrated writing. Teachers paid more attention to pre-writing activities to enhance students' reasoning skills that are entailed in the composing process. Teacher 4 understood integrated writing as a process of "collecting information from various language modalities and then synthesizing and organizing the information in a logical manner." He thought the ability to integrate information from multiple sources can benefit students' learning in college and their future career. He indicated that drilling past examination papers might ensure students' success in the official assessment; however, this examination-oriented approach is at the cost of students' opportunity to learn how to write. Based on his observations, most of his students know how to select and summarize information from various source materials; however, they might get stuck when asked to elaborate on the information.

We are not aiming for end products. Ideally, we want the students to master the skill. But what they have written now is, to a large extent, a result of drilling. When the writing topic changes a bit, they will get panic. This is exactly the problem.

Teacher 6 thought elaboration requires divergent thinking and emphasized the importance of prompting students to think from different perspectives in the pre-writing stage. For example, she had assigned a writing task that required her students to organize an event to promote environmental education and to explain the benefits of the event. Before writing, Teacher 6 spared some time to guide her students to analyze an event from two aspects: the different phases of an event and the participants in each phase.

With regard to the benefits to your classmates, class-mates can refer to those who organize, carry out or participate in the event. The students need your help to elicit these lines of reasoning to elaborate. When organizing an event, the timeline is another aspect you need to consider. What you are going to do before organizing the event? How about the process of the event and a continuation afterwards?

Apart from synthesizing and elaborating information from various sources, the prevailing integrated writing assessment also requires students to draw on personal experiences and articulate their opinions on a given topic. Teacher 3 observed that students' argumentation performance is affected by topic familiarity. Lack of sufficient prior knowledge would result in students jumping to the conclusion or using tired clichés that do not have concrete

meaning. For example, when it comes to the benefit of a cultural event, her students would list “building characters,” “developing cultural appreciation,” or “enhancing literacy” repeatedly. In Teacher 3’s word, the “bridge,” between the event and the expected outcomes is missing. Thus, news reading was incorporated into her writing classrooms to broaden students’ knowledge of various social and cultural issues. She believed that with a broader knowledge base, students can justify their arguments with concrete examples. In this category, the teachers demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of integrated writing. Apart from fulfilling the requirements of the official assessment, they thought integrated writing competence is beneficial to students’ success in college and future career. This category also represents an inquiry-based orientation toward integrated writing, which allows more space for teaching and learning. In addition to the final written product, the scope of integrated writing also included the pre-writing stage. The teachers were aware of and responsive to learners’ needs. More attention was paid to the thinking skills required in the composing process in terms of elaboration on source information and argumentation of personal opinions. The students were engaged in a logical inquiry in the pre-writing stage to explore what to write rather than following a rigid writing outline as illustrated in the first category.

Category 3: Writing as a developmental process

Category 3 is characterized by a developmental view of integrated writing that requires integrated use of various language skills for real communication purposes. Teacher 19 conceptualized integrated writing as a process of developing the ability to synthesize information in written language; such an ability is essential for life and work and can hardly be achieved through rote learning approaches. She thought the notion of integration involves an integration of language skills as well as integration of information from multiple sources, and that the development of holistic integrated skills requires sequenced curriculum planning.

It is about language expression, about integrated skills. I think in the workplace, we are exactly using these skills. I need to compile many things and then put them into words. In fact, that is what we are doing now. I don’t think you can learn it simply by reading, memorizing, and then expect you can produce things. You have to embed it [integrated writing] in every learning unit. (...) There should be a topic every time. Say, this time, I will focus on selection of information, then work on summarization of a long text, and next time I will ask the student to summarize the ideas of two texts. You need to teach step by step.

The developmental conception is evident in the early implementation of integrated writing instruction at the junior secondary level recommended by the teachers. In most cases, integrated writing is introduced to students in Form 4 (i.e., Grade 10) at the senior secondary level. Nevertheless, four teachers (Teacher 17, 19, 22, and 23) coincidentally highlighted the importance of implementing integrated writing earlier at the junior secondary level. They considered the junior secondary level as the foundation stage, aimed at familiarizing students with various textual formats, enhancing contextual awareness, and learning how to select and synthesize information from multiple sources. Moving to the senior secondary level, they will focus on articulation of personal opinions and preparing students for the official assessment. Teacher 23 indicated that the early implementation of integrated writing at the junior secondary level allows not only sequenced and focused learning for the students but also flexibility in instructional adaptation. As she observed, the sequenced learning trajectory can

contribute to a more solid understanding of the requirements of integrated writing of her students and an advancement of her instructional repertoire.

Previously, we would give them a detailed writing out-line with a lot of guidance on the side and then they were writing to fill in the blanks, but this approach did not work out. So we made some changes.

The whole department is working together to figure out how to do better and I also develop my teaching repertoire. I will analyze samples to let my students know how to synthesize information from sources and then assign them a similar task to work on. They will write better because they have an example to refer to.

Teacher 17 also agreed with the early implementation of integrated writing. She usually starts from Form 2 (i.e., Grade 8) in the form of continuous writing. She had asked students to finish a complaint letter by indicating possible consequences of a pre-identified problem. This activity was not aimed at preparing her students for the official assessment. Instead, it helped familiarize the students with writing in response to a source text. Teacher 17 emphasized that the development of integrated writing competence requires focused and sequenced learning opportunities to learn from various topics. She structured her writing class with a series of learning activities that are ability-based, such as how to associate source texts with a writing topic, how to select and summarize key information from a recording, and how to elaborate a topic sentence. She indicated that there is no shortcut to teaching integrated writing and that it is necessary to guide students to go through every step steadily. She also shared that these instructional strategies are evolving as she developed from a beginning teacher into an experienced one.

In terms of argumentation, I won't simply teach them, you know, topic sentence, example, argument, and conclusion. These are empty concepts to the students. I will let them know you need to anchor your argument with a clear theme, and then how to associate an argument with the source texts, (...) and then think about what the immediate and long-term effects are.

I will ask my students to highlight each component in their writing. (...) Sometimes I will ask them to do peer assessment in light of these components.

Teacher 19 highly valued the flexibility in instruction in the junior secondary stage. She explained that in the junior secondary stage, teachers need not worry too much about examination preparation and accountability and have more autonomy in course design, which gives more space for teaching and learning. Teacher 19 further indicated that the format of the prevailing official assessment is one of the many ways that teachers can use to evaluate integrated language competency; there are still other alternatives. Aside from composing a full-length essay, she will also implement diverse source-based writing activities in her writing class, such as summary writing, continuous writing, and project-based activities. She preferred these activities because they are low-stakes in nature and create authentic learning opportunities for students to employ different language skills simultaneously.

Because it allows more flexibility in instruction at the junior secondary level, you are not constrained by examinations. So you can be open to contingency and don't have to assess students all the time. The design of a class may cover all the elements of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. We can also use project-based approaches to train students in this way. We can evaluate their performance in terms of expression, content of the project, or logic. We can evaluate from different perspectives.

The most salient difference between Category 3 and the previous categories is that it depicts a developmental trajectory of integrated writing, showing the necessity and practicality of the early implementation of integrated writing instruction in the junior secondary stage. In

addition, the teachers demonstrated pedagogical orientations that are sequenced and flexible in nature. The scope of instruction includes not only integrated writing tasks but also low-stakes learning activities that are ability-based and connect writing with other language skills to promote integrated use of language skills in natural language environments.

Discussion

Three differing conceptions of integrated writing and the alignment with the curriculum objectives

This study explored Chinese language teachers' conceptions of integrated writing, a significant change to the secondary school curriculum of Chinese language in Hong Kong, that is aimed at promoting integrated use of language skills to facilitate development of communication and reasoning skills for college readiness (Curriculum Development Council 2017). In tune with previous studies (König et al. 2016; Verloop et al. 2001; Woods and Çakır 2011), this study suggests that teachers' practical knowledge served a critical lens that reflected variations in teachers' understanding and responses to the curriculum change. The differences in teachers' conceptions were manifested in four components of practical knowledge including the purpose and nature of integrated writing they perceived, which in turn influenced their pedagogical orientations and instructional foci. Among the components, the purpose of integrated writing was found to be a major determinant of teachers' receptivity toward integrated writing (Wang and Matsumura 2019) that led to three different categories.

The three categories, ranging from a composite of disconnected parts, a logical inquiry, to a developmental process, were ordered based on the depth of understanding and the degree of alignment with the intended curriculum objectives. The instructional focus of integrated writing defined by the teachers varied among the categories, implying differences in learning experience of students (Ballock et al. 2018). The teachers who saw integrated writing as a logical inquiry focused on not only the written product but also the writing process, particularly, the pre-writing stage that allows students to explore what to write and how to develop their ideas. The teachers who considered integrated writing as a developmental process demonstrated a holistic view of language use that connects writing with other language skills. They were also aware of the developmental progressions involved in integrated writing competence and the necessity of sequenced and diversified learning opportunities because there is no shortcut to the development.

As the categories move up, the alignment between teachers' conceptions and the curriculum objectives increases gradually. Integrated writing was incorporated into the curriculum with a view to promote integrated use of language skills to achieve holistic development of communication and problem-solving skills (Curriculum Development Council 2017). The developmental trajectory of integrated writing illustrated in Category 3 ties in well with the curriculum objectives. The early implementation of integrated writing at the junior secondary level creates more space for teaching and learning, allowing teachers to sequence the learning of such complex skills and to instill the integrated use of language skills in classrooms with various low-stakes learning activities. Viewing integrated writing from a developmental perspective, Category 3 also echoes the shifting discourse of language education that the development of language skills is supposed to be holistic rather than componential in nature (Plakans and Gebril 2012; Shanahan 2016).

However, it is worth noting that among the 25 teachers we interviewed, only four of them (i.e., Teacher 17, 19, 22, and 23) agreed with the developmental view of integrated writing. Most of the teachers demonstrated a task-oriented view of integrated writing, with the scope of integrated writing limited to assessment of writing (Category 1) and the process of a writing task (Category 2). The findings point to an important issue that although integrated writing has been incorporated into the Chinese language curriculum for more than a decade, teachers' understanding and pedagogical orientations still varied greatly as observed a decade ago by Seto (2010). Prior research has shown that the composing process involved in integrated writing is more cognitively demanding than is independent writing, thus requiring more pedagogical support for students (Cumming 2013; Plakans et al. 2019). Studies carried out in the local context also agreed with this argument (Shum 2011; Zhu and Wu 2013). Nevertheless, the present study found that the teachers' knowledge image of integrated writing is to a large extent constrained by the official assessment. The medicine-dispensing metaphor illustrated in Category 1 is a notable example that considers writing as a composite of disconnected parts.

Category 1 represents a large discrepancy between teachers' understanding and the curriculum objectives that are aimed at promoting integrated use of language skills and information literacy (Cumming et al. 2016; Kang et al. 2016). The teachers treated integrated writing more as an examination paper than as a curriculum component. The focus of integrated writing instruction was primarily on the formulaic aspects that they discerned from the past examination papers. The examination-oriented understanding narrowed the scope of teaching and learning by formulizing and simplifying the complex composing process with atomistic, writing-to-the-rubric procedures, even though the teachers were aware that the formulaic approaches were not effective in facilitating transfer of learning between writing tasks. The oversimplified view of integrated writing as a composite of disconnected parts led to teachers focusing on the final written product and relying on examination techniques. The oversimplified view is clearly against the core values of integrated writing that emphasize writing in concert with other language skills to deal with information from multiple sources for real communication purposes (Cumming et al. 2018; Plakans 2015). It also reveals the implementation of integrated writing instruction may not be an easy task for teachers. It requires professional development to facilitate teachers to adapt their prevailing paradigms of teaching language skills in isolation toward integrated use of language skills and information literacy (Doubet and Southall 2018).

Factors contributing to variation in the teachers' conceptions

In addition to the three conceptions of integrated writing, this study identified three interrelated factors that contributed to the variations in the teachers' conceptions.

Insufficient professional training and limited sources of knowledge

The implementation of a curriculum change requires teachers to adapt both conceptually and pedagogically, and teachers' interpretation of a change is associated with their professional learning experience (Bomer et al. 2019; Yigitoglu and Belcher 2014). As mentioned previously, most of the teachers in the sample had more than 10 years of teaching experience. Only four of them had learned about integrated writing in initial teacher education programs. When asked to recall their initial impressions of the curriculum change and the venues and resources for professional development that were available to them at that

time, five teachers coincidentally referred to their professional learning experiences as “cross the river by groping for stones,” meaning that they had to figure out what and how to adapt teaching and learning

Reasons for keeping the assessment	Frequency	Reasons for terminating the assessment	Frequency
1. Legitimacy	7	1. Legitimacy	10
2. Examination outcome	5	2. Rigidity	6
		3. Workload	5
Total	12	Total	21

as they went along without having a clear direction or strategy in mind. As Teacher 17 recalled, support for teacher training was not sufficient in the initial stage. She had to rely on the specimens and examination documents published by the examination authority and the teaching materials on the market.

When I first started teaching, I just crossed the river by groping for stones. In fact, the most important reference is following the public examination, which is a very important indicator. (...) During that time, do we have sufficient support? Not very much, really.

In fact, the education authorities have held a series of training workshops regarding the strategies for teaching and learning integrated writing as documented in the official website.¹ However, as Teacher 11 argued, it is unreasonable to expect teachers to fully grasp the notion of integrated writing and adapt teaching and learning effectively via a one-shot workshop. It is not only the quantity but also the quality of professional training that made many of the teachers felt unsupported or less supported when confronted with the curriculum change (Briggs et al. 2018).

What I found very difficult is, yes, I attended the work- shops. But how can you expect me to master all the things through a 3 or 6-hour long workshop? If so, then we don't need teachers with a major in Chinese to teach Chinese.

Legitimacy of integrated writing

In the interviews, we asked the teachers to express and explain their views on the long-standing controversy in the local context regarding terminating the official integrated writing assessment. There were nine teachers supporting the termination and six against it. Another six teachers gave neutral answers by indicating the advantages and disadvantages of the assessment and did not have a specific inclination toward termination/retention. Four teachers did not answer the question. The teachers' responses to the question added up to two differing attitudes toward integrated writing: (1) low receptivity toward integrated writing assessment and curriculum, and (2) low receptivity toward integrated writing assessment but high receptivity toward integrated writing curriculum. We examined further the reasons behind the differing attitudes.

As shown in Table 3, the legitimacy of integrated writing as a curriculum component is the most arguable issue among the teachers in the two camps. The numbers in Table 3 did not agree with the numbers of the participating teachers because a teacher might give more than one reason to justify his/her opinion. Legitimacy represents the educational value of integrated writing perceived by the teachers. Seven teachers valued integrated writing as essential professional skills that students need to master at the secondary school level as

illustrated in Category 2 and Category 3. In contrast, teachers who were inclined to terminate the assessment thought there is a large degree of overlap between the integrated writing assessment and the independent writing assessment. In addition, most of teachers in the sample (21 teachers, 84%) were confronted with the curriculum change in the middle of their careers. Under the old curriculum, there were only two examination papers, namely reading and writing assessments. Teacher 10 stated that he did not think the incorporation of integrated writing into the Chinese language curriculum is of great benefit to literacy development of the students, as the quotation below illustrated. Lack of relatable learning experiences seems to prevent the teachers from recognizing the significance of integrated writing competence in terms of college and career readiness and from accepting integrated writing as part of the curriculum.

Looking back to the earlier examination system that only tested independent writing, practical writing, and reading comprehension, does that mean over the last several decades, the students under the old curriculum are less competent? I don't think so. (...) If the Chinese language examination only tests independent writing and reading, I don't think that will cause a huge loss [in students' competence].

Fossilization of the standardized testing

The fossilization of the official assessment was found to be a critical factor that made the teachers question the legitimacy of integrated writing as a curriculum component. Even the teachers who valued integrated writing as essential life skills, raised concerns about the prevailing official assessment. Teacher 4 remarked that the prevailing assessment seems to be fossilized in terms of the test format and content. Teacher 17 also criticized the narrowing of the scope of the official assessment with event planning occurring repeatedly. Students are provided with three events to choose from rather than offering genuine opinions. The simplification of the test requirements may help reduce the intellectual challenges of integrated writing for students. However, it also diminishes its pedagogical values in promoting information literacy and reasoning skills of the students. Consequently, the match point in the official integrated writing assessment is neither students' information literacy nor argumentation skills, but their ability to write as much as they can within a time limit. Teacher 18 referred to this phenomenon with a very colloquial term “ceoi seoi” (brag), meaning a practice that encourages students to write longer at the cost of precision and conciseness. As Teacher 4 noted, the more patterns that teachers can discern from the past examinations, the more likely it is that they will focus on those patterns and adopt rote learning approaches. Improvement in the prevailing official assessment is obviously needed to change the entrenched formulaic view of integrated writing, which is indeed opposed to the curriculum objectives and the core values of integrated writing that emphasize a holistic view of literacy development through integrated use of language skills and source materials for real communication purposes (Cumming et al. 2018; Plakans 2015).

Conclusions

This study adopted a phenomenographic approach to Chinese language teachers' conceptions of integrated writing. Through the lens of practical knowledge, three increasingly sophisticated conceptions were identified. The categories suggest that even though integrated writing has been incorporated in the Chinese language curriculum for more than a decade, teachers' understanding and instructional practices still vary significantly. The teachers' understanding of integrated writing is, to a large extent, constrained by the official

assessment with a strong tendency to conflate the notion of integrated writing with the official assessment.

Several implications can be drawn from this study. The ultimate goal of an educational reform is not only to bring about instructional changes but also to sustain the changes. To this end, teacher professional development is essential. The local education bureau and school leaders should enhance teachers' engagement in the curriculum change through the provision of ample ongoing professional development opportunities within and outside of their schools to catalyze more constructive discussions among the practitioners (Coburn 2001; Cuban 1998), especially those who were confronted with the curriculum change of integrated writing in the middle of their careers.

External support from professional communities is also helpful in enhancing teachers' understanding of integrated writing skills and their receptivity toward it. Engagement in university–school partnership projects that facilitate teachers to experiment with a new pedagogy is helpful in stimulating teachers to reflect on their understanding and regular practices (Lee et al. 2019; Voon et al. 2019; Wallace and Priestley 2011). Viewing teaching as reflective practice is an essential catalyst for conceptual change and pedagogical adaptations in response to a curriculum change (Tsui 2009). Furthermore, it is expected that participation in externally initiated research projects could advance teachers' practical knowledge and empower them to play an active role in curriculum planning through school-based or classroom-based research in light of the culture and needs of individual schools.

Given that the legitimacy of integrated writing as a curriculum component was found to be the most arguable issue among the teachers, more effort is needed in curriculum planning and the design of the official assessment. A clearer curriculum framework that depicts the learning progressions for integrated writing competence is essential for advancing teachers' understanding of learners' literacy development and the association between integrated writing and students' literacy development. A review of the prevailing official assessment is also necessary considering considerable criticism from the teachers with regard to its tendency toward fossilization.

This study has a number of limitations. The sample was mostly made up of experienced language teachers, and most of them did not receive pre-service training related to integrated writing. This allowed us to understand the professional learning processes that the teachers had gone through in the wake of the curriculum change. However, we also acknowledge that teachers who have relevant training experiences in initial teacher education might conceive integrated writing differently. Future research may investigate teachers' conceptions of integrated writing with teachers in early career stages such as pre-service and novice teachers to examine the generalizability of the three categories identified in the study. It could also enrich the discussion of integrated writing skills by investigating how other stakeholders including students and curriculum developers conceptualize the notion of integrated writing to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the teaching, learning, and assessment of integrated writing.

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