

OPTIMIZING THE LIMITED RESOURCES FOR MORE EFFICIENCY IN TEACHER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN CHINA

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a research project on “ Models of Development for University Teachers of English in China ” funded by China Academy of Social Sciences . The project started with a nation -wide survey on teachers needs for professional development followed by a series of descriptive and exploratory studies on the existing teacher development programs in China ,namely a summer institute ,the Visiting -Scholar Program ,an MA course in teacher education and a case study for teachers growth in practice . Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in the study of these in service teacher development models . The survey has found a great demand for professional development from among university teachers of English with different background . However ,teachers vary greatly in their proclaimed needs ,with teaching methodology ,theories of linguistics and basic language skills as the most interested subjects and educational theories and research methods being the last on the list . The survey revealed a discrepancy between teachers perceived needs and their actual needs in teaching which projected a dilemma many teachers had to face nowadays between the professional needs and the promotion requirement . The difference between teachers claimed belief in learning centered teaching and their stated classroom activities showed a delay in teachers action after their theoretical acceptance to modern beliefs . It calls for more efforts in developing teachers pedagogical competence that may serve to help teachers translate their belief into classroom practice . Teachers were found to have different needs at various stage of their professional development . No single teacher education program could adequately address the needs of all teachers ,however comprehensive the curriculum may be . While experienced teachers were found to benefit more from the Visiting Scholar program ,young teachers seemed to stand a better chance for development in a supportive teaching community under the guidance of more experienced teachers . A project based teaching community proved to be conducive for teachers to develop positive interactions among themselves and with their students ,which turned out to be the driving force for teachers to keep improving themselves in action . A case study for formal training in modern educational concepts as a required MA course had confirmed the importance of beliefs as the foundation of teachers professional development . Since many teachers of English in China had hardly any access to such MA courses ,it was suggested that more theme based short term teacher development programs should be designed and provided to address the various needs of the teachers in the different stages of their development . The project has found that while existing programs under study have proven their legitimate roles in teacher development in China ,vigorous coordination and better differentiation are necessary to bring out each of its best for the need of different target groups . A tentative model has been proposed to promote efficiency in professional development for teachers of English in the Chinese context .

Key words

teachers need ;professional development ;theme based teacher development program

This paper presents findings from a research project funded by China Academy of Social Sciences and discusses the implications and relevant issues concerning the professional development of university teachers of English in China .

1 . Research Background

The project entitled “ A Study of the Models of Development of Chinese University Teachers of English (2001-2005)” was launched in response to the ongoing reform in English language teaching (ELT hereafter) among non -English major programs in China . At that time , many teachers found themselves at a loss when faced with the new curriculum , new teaching materials as well as the new technology . Many complained about the existing professional development programs for not helping much in coping with their problems in teaching . This led us to the idea of a study of the existing professional development programs in China to find out how they are doing in promoting professional development . Our research questions are : 1) What are the teachers needs for professional development ? 2) Can professional development models in China meet the needs of our teachers ? 3) What is the model that can best satisfy the needs of the teachers in the Chinese circumstances ?

This study adopts the Socio-cultural theory by Vygotsky (1967) as the theoretical framework in the design and implementation of the project . The Social Interactionist approach to language education by Williams and Burden (1997) has provided us with a lot of insights in our efforts to understand , evaluate and explore the professional development programs during the research process . The theory of learning and the community of practice by Lave and Wenger (1998) served as our guidance in the completion of our research model for professional development based on the research findings .

This project was completed as a result of a collective effort . Altogether there were at least 15 person-times from 9 different universities in China who had worked as researchers or research assistants over the five years and more than 1000 teachers from over 60 universities worked as participants or interviewees .

2 . The Research Design and Methodology

This project used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in its research design . A nation-wide survey among university teachers of English sets the projects off for a clear understanding of the actual conditions and needs for professional development in China . By stratified sampling , we collected 920 valid questionnaires out of 1200 mailed out (76 %) to 49 universities in six geographical regions in China . Based on this needs analysis , we ran a month-long program for the development of university teachers of English in the summer of 2001 (DUTE2001 hereafter) to find out what teachers needs were in practice . In this program , we provided as many as 78 different topics concerning professional development that might be of interest to the teachers . While emphasizing the importance of combining theory with practice , we tried to involve the teachers as much as possible in the teaching process . The 69 participants from all over the country made detailed course and program evaluations as the program moved along . The findings from this program in combination with the national survey provided us with a solid understanding of teachers professional development needs and the teachers way of knowing and learning in China's context .

In the following years , we conducted several case studies to look into the major programs in China for professional development , namely , the Visiting Scholar Program , an MA in TEFL program for formal education , and a study of how young teachers learned to develop their professional competence through teaching . Qualitative research methods were employed in these studies , using personal and group interviews , participant observations , and teaching journals as our major sources of data collection . And these studies were mostly descriptive , evaluative and exploratory in nature .

It is worth mentioning here that our understanding of the issue of teachers professional development in China actually developed along with the research process . At first , we thought if we could understand what the teachers needed , we would be able to provide proper professional development programs accordingly and then the problem would be over . However , the more we looked into the matter the more we realized that professional development for university teachers in China was not only a matter of give-and-take . Rather it involves a clear understanding of the relevant issues and a systematic institutional

effort to accomplish the task. As a result, the shift of our attention moved from teachers' needs to the social conditions that contributed to the perceived and actual needs and the teacher beliefs that determined, hindered or sustained teachers' professional development.

Based on the findings from the above-mentioned studies, we developed a clear understanding of the strength and weakness of the existing models and started to work on a new model in 2006 that would incorporate the new understanding of the conditions for professional development in China. And this model for effective professional development in China is now being tested and refined.

3. Research Findings

Due to the limited time, only the most important and relevant findings will be reported here.

3.1 The existing teacher development programs have not adequately met the increasing demands of the teachers

In the nation-wide survey, when we asked the teachers what they wanted to do most at work for the moment, 58% of the participants said they wanted to have professional development in contrast with that of 45% from our findings 12 years before when we did another national survey among English teachers. That showed that for the last 12 years, the demand for professional development by university teachers had not been relieved but was getting even more acute.

3.2 Teachers' needs for professional development varied greatly

When asked the question "Given an opportunity, what do you want to learn most?" the majority of the teachers (62%) listed their interest in a specific field such as "Translation Studies", "Literature" as what they wanted to learn most. They were followed by Methodology (39%), Linguistics theory (29%), Basic language skills (20%), Applied Linguistics (17%), Education (10%) and Research methods (9%). What deserves our attention was the contrast between what at the top and what at the bottom of the list which was education and research methods because they revealed teachers' belief in language teaching. It showed that when the majority of the teachers expressed their needs in knowledge-specific fields, they believed that language teaching was mostly knowledge-based rather than competence-based. And the lack of needs in educational theories and research methods revealed teachers' lack of awareness in the relationship between language teaching and education, and between teaching, research and professional development.

3.3 Great confusion exists among some important issues concerning ELT

Teachers' confusion in the understanding of research could also be seen from the divided opinion on the statement: "A good teacher does not have to know how to do research." to which 38% agreed, 49% disagreed and 13% remained neutral. Similar confusion was found among statements concerning national proficiency tests as well as need for ELT reform in China. When we asked the question: "What is the important condition for successful teaching?" The majority of the teachers believed that it was teachers' ability to involve students in class (66%), which was to be followed by "students are motivated" (41%) and "teachers are well prepared for the class" (24%). A comparison of the two lists, one about what teachers wanted to learn most and the other what was important for successful teaching, revealed a clear disparity between what teachers needed and what they believed good teaching needed. It was clear that teachers knew what would contribute to successful teaching, but that did not seem to be on the top of their priority needs. So there must be something behind that. The survey showed a general acceptance to learning-centered approach to ELT among teachers. However, when a correlation analysis was made between what teachers believed and what they actually did in the classroom, little correlation was found there. It showed a kind of gap between teachers' claimed belief and their classroom behavior. There might be a delay in action even when the learning-centered beliefs were generally accepted. It also showed that teachers needed to learn how to translate their beliefs into pedagogical competence in the classroom.

The survey has revealed two discrepancies among teachers, one of which is between what teachers actually needed and what they knew good teaching required, the other being a discrepancy between what they claimed to believe and what they actually did in the classroom practice.

3.4 The order of priority in teachers' needs

At the end of our summer institute, we listed all the 78 topics that had been covered over the month-long program and asked the participants to vote according to their order of importance. Table 1 showed the top 8 topics that were most popular by teachers' vote.

Table 1. Most popular topics for PD by teachers' votes

No.	Content	No. of Votes	Percentage
1	Educational concepts	67	.985
2	Communicative teaching	64	.941
3	Research methods	60	.882
4	Big class management	60	.882
5	Learner and learning process	59	.868
6	Task based teaching approach	58	.853
7	Action research in ELT	58	.853
8	How to teaching listening	57	.839

The popular votes covered the fields of educational concepts, research, class management and teaching methodology, which was a good presentation of what was actually needed for good language teaching. And teachers' votes were largely confirmed by teachers' response to the question on their most favorite topic, to which the highest scores went to "how to read the academic papers" to be followed by cooperative learning, how to motivate the students in class, learning styles, critical thinking and teaching listening, learners and learning process and also classroom discourse and classroom management. All these subjects were found to be pretty new to the teachers, because they had not been sufficiently dealt with in any of the traditional professional development programs. In fact, in the traditional teacher development programs, they tend to focus mostly on theories in linguistic studies and teaching methodology. As a result, many teachers complained in the interviews that what they learned in those programs did not seem to be most relevant to their teaching.

3.5 Teachers' way of learning and knowing

A better understanding about teachers' way of learning was acquired through this summer institute, which emphasized learners' active participation in the process of learning. When teachers spoke highly of those activities and the efforts we made to encourage teacher-learner interactions, it became clear to us that all learners accessed new things with their own beliefs, experiences and their own understanding that deserved equal attention from others. And they are very prepared to share with other participants their understanding and can learn more efficiently when their voices were heard and appreciated. It revealed to us teachers' way of learning and knowing.

4. The Visiting Scholar Program

The Visiting Scholars Program was studied through personal and group interviews with 25 participating teachers in two key universities in Beijing over a period of two years. The interviewees were asked to reflect on their experiences in the programs and discuss their benefits as well as problems in the programs. The Visiting Scholars Program was found to be very popular among the participants and all of the interviewees reported positively their experiences in the new learning environment and expressed their hope that more teachers could benefit from such rare opportunities. They said that the program did not only provide them with the space, time and resources to work independently but also offered a great opportunity for teachers to interact and network. And they had learned as much from the supervisor and teachers in the classes as from their peers through interactions after class. Many teachers believed that they had broadened their horizon by attending seminars, lectures and talks in the receiving institutions. They had clarified their goals in professional development or worked out their plans for further study. The differences they had noticed from their own institutions and the receiving institutions actually created the space for self-reflection and set them off on the road to work much harder than before for their own

Professional development .

The major problems mentioned by all these teachers were the lack of guidance from the supervisors . All the supervisors were so busy with their own work that they could hardly have time to supervise the visiting teachers . And on the other hand , the participants did not feel comfortable asking for appointments with the supervisors . It showed that there was a lack of institutional support and regulation to guarantee the academic supervision of the receiving universities on the participants . Consequently , some teachers made use of these valuable opportunities to engage in non-academically related activities for private benefit , thus bringing about tremendous loss for the limited resources .

5 . The Importance of a Positive Learning Community in Professional Development

The case study of how teachers developed themselves professionally through teaching practice and positive interactions among themselves has shown that teachers learned most efficiently in a project based teaching and learning community . And the most important contributing factors for such effective learning experiences were positive attitude towards teaching , various teaching experiences , a supportive community , and a good community leader . The six participating teachers learned to develop new teaching beliefs , teaching methods and new understanding of teacher student relationship through collective preparations , class observations and positive teacher interactions after class . After two full semesters engagement in teaching in this community , teachers found many changes in themselves in terms of teaching beliefs , teaching competence and their relationship with the students . When asked to reflect on what brought about the changes , they listed a strong commitment to teaching and good model teachers as the greatest inspirations for them to strive for excellence in teaching . In addition , it was the mutual support and equal relationship among teachers which made their efforts worthwhile . Besides , the students strong desire to learn had served as a great impetus for their professional development . The case study has proved that teachers learn most efficiently in a positive learning environment and their professional understanding and development is a socially constructed product drawing on the sources of their peers , their students , their readings as well as their model teachers .

6 . Laying an Educational Foundation for Professional Development

It has been proved that teachers commitment to excellence in teaching is the source of strong motivation in professional development . However , it takes years of experiences plus formal schooling before this commitment was to be formulated . As a result of our keen understanding of the great demand for teacher education and the importance of teacher belief and commitment in professional development , we at the centre decided to start an MA in TEFL program with educational concepts and issues in Language Education as a core course . In this course , important educational concepts such as critical thinking , moral education , humanistic education , rational thinking and the issues concerning language education have been brought up for discussion . The course is well received according to the evaluations in the past few years and all students agreed that the course had helped them develop a much deeper understanding of foreign language teaching and realize that they had a lot more to learn about the profession than the language teaching skill alone . It was clear that continuous professional development on the part of each individual teacher will not be possible unless they have developed a strong commitment to the profession based on a clear understanding of the significance of language education in the overall development of the learners .

7 . Targeting Each Program at a Special Audience

This descriptive , evaluative and exploratory study of the different professional development programs in China have been found to be important , useful and very necessary , because it has allowed us to have a general understanding about the conditions for professional development by the Chinese teachers of English . The research has shown that each model , be it short term or long term , in service or on service , was playing its own role in the Chinese context . However , as all these programs were designed for a general population of the teachers , they lack a focus , lack target group and , as a result , lack efficiency . The research has enabled us to see that teachers at different stages of their development have different needs . Hardly any program , however comprehensive it is intended to be , can meet the needs of all teachers . Therefore , it is more efficient to target different professional development

programs at teachers in different needs . For instance , teachers with many years of teaching experiences and in need of time for research are better able to make good use of the time and resources provided by the Visiting Scholar program whereas teachers with little experiences need to begin their professional development with the guidance of experienced teachers in a supportive learning community .

Based on this understanding , we started to design short term , theme based teacher development programs in 2006 based on the needs we found in the survey as well as more up to date information solicited from teachers in the field . In this kind of program in the form of a workshop , participants involvement and active interactions among learners , workshop leaders and administrators served as the key to its success . It also emphasizes the open possibility for adjustment in the program to accommodate the needs of the participants . What is more important is that teacher belief is dealt with at the onset of the workshop to pave the way for a successful cooperation between workshop leaders and participants in the following activities .

8 . Developing a New Model for Professional Development

The studies on the summer institute , the visiting scholars , and the young teachers development have all pointed to a fact that teachers at different professional developmental stages have different needs . Relevant literature at home and abroad have made different demarcations about the stages of development , but basically they are consisted of stages of survival , development and knowing . The present study has revealed that at the surviving stage , teachers need teaching related competence as their basic professional competence more than anything else . For developing stage , teachers need more exposure to theories and concepts in combination with their basic understanding of the profession and the general competence as teachers . At the knowing stage , teachers need to develop both their teaching and research competence . And the teaching competence at this stage is no longer only the ability to handle issues in class , but to conduct research based teaching and action research in the field .

Based on our findings , we would roughly categorize the progress made by conscientious teachers in an EFL context according to their characteristic changes that may appear in every three years , namely the surviving stage (years 1 - 3) , developing stage (years 4 - 6) and knowing stage (years 7 - 9) . That is to say it would normally take a young teacher ten years to grow from a green hand to an experienced mediator in an TEFL context . Let me incorporate this rough estimation and our understanding of professional development into a general model in China .

In this model , we can see that teachers at the surviving stage should first be exposed to a positive teaching and learning environment in which novelty teachers are provided with constant guidance from expert teachers on the weekly , if not daily , basis . It is clear that under the close observation and supervision of the experienced teachers , novelty teachers can expel their anxiety and learn more efficiently from their mentors without having to struggle themselves in the dark for many year .

When teachers enter the developing stage , they should be entitled to access to the professional development programs which would provide them with different courses relevant to their concerns in professional development . The workshops are offered to teachers on regular basis so that teachers could select for participation based on their interest . However , in order to help teachers acquire a well balanced knowledge structure as a language teacher , there should be some institutional requirement for teachers to earn credits for professional development in their promotion . The content of the core courses for a good language teacher include educational foundations ; language competence , and pedagogical content knowledge etc . In addition to a good understanding of these teaching related areas , a sophisticated and competent language teacher should also be exposed to other themes such as applied linguistics ; research methods ; cross cultural communication ; SLA theory and practice ; and curriculum and classroom management . These courses should lay a good foundation for the sustained professional development by the teachers at this stage . When teachers have taught for more than 6 years , they should have acquired enough experiences in teaching , and become more competent and knowing in the field , but they need at this stage more inspiration and motivation to improve themselves . They need to see the differences between themselves and expert teachers ; between what is taken for granted and what other possibilities are out there beyond their own world . Therefore , access to Visiting Scholar program to

Chinese institutions or that of overseas would be the most appropriate for further development for this group of teachers . Research findings have shown that teachers with years of teaching experiences and clear interest in their research field benefit much more from the Visiting Scholars program in China than teachers who are still at the surviving stage or even the developing stage . Consequently ,the limited resources we have for studying abroad and visiting scholar program should be used more economically for those who are ready for more independent research or professional development . Differences are the sources of reflection and action of changes . When teachers returned to their working community with the new understanding and competence acquired through reflection and effort ,they will be able to make

Table 2 . Model for professional development for in service teachers of English in China

greater contribution to the local culture and community. In this model, we would like to highlight the importance of learning environment for both the surviving teachers and the knowing teachers, because at the early stage of professional development, teachers need to have the support of the community all the time to learn and grow. And it is equally important for the teachers at the knowing stage, because they are not only very instrumental to the creation of such a community, and they have to draw on such a community for inspiration for continuous development, because teachers can not sustain their development without the support and stimulation of their colleagues and students.

As you can see from this model, professional development for university teachers of English in China is a systemic endeavor that requires united efforts from institutions at all levels. No single institute alone can accomplish the task because it takes a clear understanding of its importance by the department concerned at the Ministry of Education in China to coordinate among local administrative institutions for the implementation of a mechanism that promotes professional development among university teachers; it takes the educational administrators of the universities to formulate strategic policies that encourage faculty development and it takes university teachers to develop professional awareness and make continuous efforts for self-development. In short, it is a combined effort across the board requiring social, institutional and individual commitment to ensure sustained professional development for universities teachers of English in China.

9. Discussions and Implications

In developing this systemic model for professional development, we may run into several fundamental issues to be resolved before this model is to be put in operation. They are a mechanism to promote professional development, a strategic vision for the its importance in teaching, an understanding of the needs of the university teachers, the administrative support for professional development at the institutional level and the individual commitment to life long self-development on the part of teachers themselves, of which a mechanism that promotes professional development holds the key to all other issues. The mechanism is to be developed based on two principles: a) university teachers are institutionally required to develop themselves for the need and benefit of the students; b) the current promotion policy are to be reformed to enhance the educational standard of the country rather than promoting the academic standard of the individuals. It is understood that the general level of education today determines the potential strength and power of the country in the international community tomorrow. And the educational level of the country can be effectively enhanced by many professional educators with good pedagogical competence as well as academic accomplishment. While teachers at the elementary and intermediate levels are institutionally supported for professional development in China, the need for university teacher development remained unrecognized and institutionally overlooked over the years. As a result, most of the university teachers walk into classrooms without sufficient training, leaving students to become the objects of their years of experiences in trials and errors. To make the matter worse, the present promotion policy encourages publications rather than good teaching. It assumes that university teachers are eligible for promotion only when they can publish in academic journals while giving little account to their performances in the classroom. In this way we are catching up fast with the "publish or perish" policy abroad, throwing our teachers into a dilemma of being responsible for their own future or for the future of their students. Struggling between a split loyalty, teachers can not but to make a reluctant choice for more publications. As a result, teaching becomes a by-product service for teachers, while producing papers for journals and moonlighting occupy much of their attention. It brings about many problems in our teaching today, such as lack of commitment in teaching and tension between teacher student relationship, etc. The current promotion policy, therefore, should be reformed to encourage both teaching and research, allow teachers to develop as much as they can what they are best at and provide those with outstanding teaching performances equal access to professorship. Only in this way can we effectively enhance the level of language education at the university level and ensure learning among our students.

Good administrative vision is an important condition for professional development. With the expansion of enrollment over the last few years, teachers are faced with an increasing teaching load and fewer opportunities to engage in learning new ideas and new theories in teaching. An administrator with vision will put teachers professional development on the top of his/her agenda and overcome the

immediate pressure for manpower and create or grab opportunities for teachers to develop themselves. Meanwhile she/he will make an effort to cultivating a positive learning community in which teachers can draw strength from active teacher student and teacher teacher interactions. Nowadays with many teachers going to classes by shuttle buses, they have little time and opportunities to interact with the students or among colleagues, which is very detrimental to teachers professional development at the practical level.

At individual level, teachers awareness and motivation for professional development play an important role for their personal growth. Without a strong commitment to excellence in teaching, it is unlikely for teachers to be reflective at work or spare no efforts for development. Here a good understanding about teachers as individuals as well as a social group is helpful for a better understanding of this community. Compared with other social groups, teachers are more educated, more opinionated and more individualistic oriented people. As they tend to enjoy more social respect than administrative respect, they are, generally speaking, self confident people. Meanwhile, they are also suffering from tremendously high administrative pressure and social expectations, which tend to reduce teachers into a group of people who suffer from more anxiety and stress at work. In spite of their working affiliations, teachers tend to work individually in nature, so they are often found to be overwhelmed by their workload, life problems and other practical issues in life. So teachers are institutionalized loners who are often left in so much frustration in life without being understood and appreciated to the extent that they sometimes overlook or neglect their professional obligations. As a result university teachers can become very self abased and develop rather pathetic views about themselves. When CET4 and CET6 prevailed in the country, teachers regarded themselves as "tools of the tool", and now when publications came to power, teachers were reduced to slaves to publications. In a word, teachers are subject to the sway of time and had no priority of their own.

Teachers in China should be empowered. They should be able to draw strength from their community and colleagues, from a better understanding of their profession and from a strong sense of social responsibility. If university teachers understand their mission in this historic period and understand what they are doing in the classroom today will influence the future leaders of this country, they will see why there is the need for empowerment. In this sense, professional development is not a matter of individual choice, it is a social obligation.

Empowerment mostly comes from within rather than from without in China. In a country with thousand years of tradition in Centralism, hardly any authority in any government would see the need for empowerment for teachers. In a sense it is not in their interest to have the teachers empowered. But if teachers had a commitment to the profession and had an overall understanding about the importance of the character development, the importance of integrity and whole person development, teachers would see their significance at work and make strenuous efforts for personal development, self empowerment would be accomplished in the process of professional development. After all, to use a famous saying here: God helps those who help themselves, so empowerment comes from within the teachers in their own confidence, from the mutual support and understanding of the teachers within a community and from the unity between teachers and administrators for the educational ideal of turning our country's population burden into human resources. Let me end my presentation using a famous Chinese saying, "纲举目张 (Gang ju mu zhang)", in which teacher development holds the key link to enhancing the level of language education in China, once the key link is grasped, everything falls into its place. Once we teachers know who we are and what our social responsibility is, we will have the will, the drive and the power for our own professional development.

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