

Content and Strategy : EFL Teachers' Professional Development in China

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Abstract: For Teachers, either as individual or group, it is important to pursue professional development. Nowadays, teachers' professional development is a heated topic and a popular trend in teachers' education research nationally as well as internationally. Scholars agree with the general knowledge structures of teachers being professionals. Is language teaching a profession? Compared with other professions acknowledged, we redefined the criteria of language teaching profession. In a world wide scale, there are affluent outcomes on ESL (English as Second Language) research. Thanks to the language function, social position, and culture of mother language, English education, in china, is different from other ESL in the world. EFL teachers' profession has its own characteristics. Hence, the EFL teacher professional development has a particular and specific content and strategy. The author points out, as a long-career profession development, EFL teachers professional development should focus on teachers' scientific language teaching theory understanding, their knowledge structure widening and self-perfecting teaching awareness arousing. The strategies of undertaking English teachers professional development are put forward at last, besides the traditional approaches for teacher professional development, in China, EFL teacher should take reflective teaching professional development by taking advantage of teachers self as resource, that is to say, teachers should focus their teaching awareness and action before, during and after class, thinking about what happens in classroom lessons and alternatives means of achieve teaching foals and aims. Specifically, EFL teachers should pursue professional development by taking class journal-based observation and take action research combined with school-based curriculum.

Keywords: EFL, teachers' profession, professional development, strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers' professional development is an important and popular tendency in the international teachers' education reform as well as a main topic of teachers' education practice. With the rapid social, economic and cultural development, China also steps up to keep its pace with the development of international teachers' education and begin to make new experimental research on teachers' education development. The National New Curriculum Reform started from 2001 puts a noticeable emphasis on cultivating students' comprehensive ability as a foundation for their future study and all-around development.

English learning has been attracting the attention of the public and researchers because of English teaching position in current school curricular system, for English curriculum is one of the longest curriculums carried in the school education. Under the background of international and national teachers' professional development, English teaching and teachers' development also becomes a heated topic in the new curriculum reform. In order to ensure the successful carrying out of the New English Curriculum Standard and the teachers' own development, it is necessary to reflect the content as well as the approach of English teachers' professional development. New principles and ideas are proposed in the New English Curriculum Standard (NECS, 2001), the teaching emphasis should be centered on such goals obtaining as students free character development, language learning capability and individual sustainable lifelong development. The NECS specially points out that English learning goals should include language knowledge, English communication skills, cross-cultural communication strategies, and culture understanding awareness. To some extent, all of these principles and requirements can be fulfilled with English teachers' creative teaching practice.

As the key promoters and participants of the new curriculum reform campaign in China, teachers play an important role in the curriculum implementation and their qualifications are decisive to the success of the reform. It is impossible for teachers to carry out modern teaching practice without modern teaching ideas any way. Hence, the education reform requirements promote the teacher to rethink about their ways of teaching, which embodies the instructional and theoretical importance of teachers' professional development.

It is more practical and valuable to pay much attention to teachers' professional development from the individual teacher's perspective as well as group, for every individual teacher, out of the professional instinct, is eager to have a better understanding of his or her own teaching and then adjust his or her teaching practice accordingly to be a good teacher respected by students, which is also the ways for teachers' self-esteem realization. As for why we bother with professional development, Edge (1993: 1) put in this way:

Because teaching can take up a lot of our lives in one way or another, an increasing number of us want to find out more about ourselves, our teaching and the relationship between the two. Then we ask ourselves, how can we use what we discover to guide our future development? In individual terms, how can I become the best teacher I can be for my students? Such attempts to realize the self-esteem are a vital force for teachers to pursue their professional development.

2. AN OVERVIEW OF TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“What is a profession, and what is meant by professionalism?” According to the Collins Cobuild Dictionary (1995, 1, 33), “a profession is a type of job that requires advanced

education and training.” The Newbury House Dictionary defines professionalism as “the qualities of competence and integrity demonstrated by the best people in the field,” (1996: 685) (as cited in Bailey, 1998: 546) A field whether or not can be legitimately regarded as a profession, Bailey (2004: 13) implied we should take four criteria into account:

- (1) *The existence of advanced education and training ;*
- (2) *The establishment of standards of practice and certification ;*
- (3) *An acknowledged theoretical and empirical base ; and ,*
- (4) *The work of people within the field who act as advocates for the profession.*

Compared with the characteristics of profession, we find the following features of the teaching occupation. Firstly, in most countries of the world, pre-service teachers and in-service teachers are required to receive higher education and training in teachers’ college or normal university. Secondly, there are institutional accreditation to the required teaching qualifications and standard. Thirdly, a licensed teacher s always has a background of general teaching theories combined with sufficient practice and experiences. The last but not the least, more and more countries have a local teachers association, which act as advocate for teaching. So, teaching is definitely a profession.

With an overview of teachers’ education history, it can be easily found that in many a country, teachers are defined as professionals and teachers’ education as professional education. In China, in 1933, for the first time the professional position of teachers is legally acknowledged. In 1995, China makes a further step to build up the teachers’ professional certification system.

Scholars (Lin Chongde, 1999: 28) are inclined to dividing the teachers’ knowledge into the following categories: subject-matter knowledge, cultural knowledge, and practice knowledge. Subject-matter knowledge refers to the particular subject knowledge the teacher is specialized in, and cultural knowledge contains more affluent science and humanity knowledge. Practice knowledge reflects the teacher’s teaching experience as well as his or her teaching wisdom acquired through such experience. Giving pedagogical explanation on a particular subject is a teacher’s central work. So, a teacher must internalize particular subject knowledge to make it easier understood by students.

According to the teaching researchers in China, teachers’ practice is characterized by its “bi-professionalism”, which is the basis of teachers’ professionalization. Teaching is a kind of professional work. Generally speaking, its peculiarity demands that the teacher be both an expert in a particular specialty and one in the subject education (Wang Jianpan, 2001: 1). That is, the teachers’ specialty should include major and education, namely the “bi-professionalism”. In other words, in order to carry out effective teaching, teachers should

not only have their own specialized subject knowledge but also such knowledge and skills as to help their students acquire such knowledge.

The essence of teachers' professional development or professionalism, from the perspective of the teachers' professional development history, is the specialization of the teachers' profession and teachers' preparation. Nowadays, all researchers engaged in education field arrive at such an agreement that teacher professional development is a term used in the literature to describe a process of continual intellectual, experiential, and attitudinal growth of teachers, teachers continue to evolve in the use, adaptation, and application of their art and crafts. (Lange, 1990)

3. THE PARTICULARITY OF EFL TEACHERS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

There are three main stages in language teachers' preparation history, i.e., teacher training, and teacher education and teacher professional development. In a teacher-training program, teachers are taken as the media for realizing education aims and goals, and teacher preparation is to familiarize student teachers with teaching techniques and skills to be applied in classroom. While in a teacher-education program, the student teachers are not only taught the specific teaching techniques and skills, they also take such courses as general linguistics, applied linguistics, language examination and evaluation, and research methods. To sum up, the former aims at teachers teaching crafts training, while the latter strengthening teachers comprehensive professional qualifications. Based on teachers' teaching qualification education, the teacher-professional development encourages the teachers to reflect on their own teaching practice, observe their own class activities and evaluate their own teaching effects and advocates active action research to testify colleagues' teaching discovery, then they can form their own teaching belief.

Once at regional, national, or international teachers meetings, when participants talk about the words *profession*, *professional* and *professionalism*, many scholars asked such a question: "Is language teaching a profession?" Language teaching has some specific features different from the other subjects teaching. Language teachers are not accorded? the respect given to other professionals, such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects and even other subjects teaching. The skeptical voices only focus on the disciplinary base of language teaching. More often scholars deem that the theoretical and empirical basis of a field separates professions from trades and crafts.

As Lee Shulman (1998: 5) says that what distinguishes disciplinary from one another is how "they formulate their questions, how they define the content of their domains and organize that content conceptually, and the principles of discovery and verification that constitute the ground rules for creating and testing knowledge in their fields" as in language

education history shows, language teaching, which is influenced by linguistics (both theoretical and applied), psycholinguistics, literature, sociolinguistics, cognitive science, and numerous other disciplines, hence possess a varied sources of background knowledge but lack of a unified disciplinary base.

Language teaching is whether a profession or not, Nunan (1999) answers in this way,

It is possible to find language teaching institutions around the world that fit none of the four criteria. However, it is also possible to find institutions and associations that are actively committed to advancing education and training, to developing standards and certification, to supporting the development of theory and research so that a disciplinary base can be established, and to working as advocates to influence broader communities in ways that are positive for language teaching as a profession to identify and promote practices that are consistent with this goal.

It seems that all of this language teaching profession understanding can be applied in ESL (English as Second Language), but take all into consideration, the nature of English teaching in China is EFL (English as Foreign Language). In his *Fundamental Concept of Language Teaching*, Stern (1999: 27) writes, the SL (the Second Language), which in this specific paper refers to the English language, should occupy the official position and an acknowledged social function. This follows that the second language is learnt for the participation in political, cultural and social activities, and with the support of sufficient language environment, learners can usually acquire the language in a natural way.

Obviously, English learning in China falls short of these standards. Mr. Zhang Zhengdong (2003) made an analysis on English study in China and pointed out that English is actually taught and learnt as a foreign language (FL) instead of a second language, the difference between them can be illustrated from the following six aspects.

Different learners. SL learners aim at cultural communication through learning the target language (TL) in local community, while FL learners just take a foreign language course in classroom with consciousness of protecting their native culture.

Different learning aims. SL learners learn for survival in the community or region; FL learners, for a useful tool to communicate with foreigners.

Different learning objects. SL learners pick up encyclopedia language in real life. It is not necessarily the same case with FL learners.

Different orders of mind and TL development. SL learners' minds grow in the same pace with language; but for FL learners, the development of mind is prior to that of language.

Different learning manners. SL learners adopt immersion way of learning, so they can touch TL quite a lot both in and out of class and can acquire the TL almost

spontaneously. FL learners, however, can just learn the language from their course books, most of which are not natural or even standard language.

Different language environments. SL is taught by English native speakers and acquired in authentic language environment.

Therefore, in China, EFL teachers' professional development is different from any other ESL teaching professional development, which surely has its unique content and strategy.

4. THE CONTENT OF EFL TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

4.1. Scientific Language Teaching Theory

From the viewpoint of language nature, English as a foreign language is regarded as a tool for cross-cultural communication, owing to language is the carrier for culture. Besides, English teaching should be aimed at cultivating students' cognitive consciousness as other art course learning. Therefore, English teaching has bi-functions in China, and EFL teaching is assumed to achieve many objects or purposes. The New English Curriculum Standard for National Basic Education (NECSNBE, 2001) puts forward that English teaching and learning should ensure more basic ground for better development of students, more choices for personality requirements of students, better capability for more self-dependence of students, and more effective communication skills with different race. These ideas lay the emphasis on bettering students' individuality, cultivating their potential capability and perfecting their personality, all of which can serve as a basis for students' sustainable development. Accordingly, English teachers, from the viewpoint of professional development, should make clear about the modern English teaching function, and, specially, select or recreate the EFL teaching theory, but not transplant the ESL teaching theory. Then we can carry out modern EFL teaching practice with aid of scientific language teaching theory with Chinese characteristics.

4.2. Wider and Deeper Knowledge Structure

A teacher's knowledge structure has a direct effect on his or her teaching practice. Modern English teaching requires English teachers to be all-around talents to some degree. According to the new curriculum standard, modern English teachers should not only have a full knowledge of the basic contents of the particular subject, but that of its structure, development history and the subject principle as well. Besides, they should also be quite fluent in the English language and have a good mastery over its function so that they can set practical and valuable learning examples for the students. Therefore, the knowledge of English teachers, in width, should include English language and culture, English pedagogy and cross-cultural knowledge; and in depth, it should include knowledge concerning some individual teaching methods combined with concrete teaching practice.

From a psychological perspective, English teachers knowledge include two types, one is declarative knowledge, and the other is procedure knowledge. The former includes all of the things we know and can articulate about the English language, i.e., language competence; the latter can be subdivided into discipline-specific and general knowledge. Discipline-specific procedure knowledge refers to skills that are unique to English language teaching (e.g., how to introduce new grammatical items such as gerunds and infinitives). General procedure knowledge refers to skills that all teachers should possess regardless of the subject they teach. Such skills include how to manage group work, how to deal with discipline problems, and how to improve the motivation of students.

4.3. Self-Perfecting Teaching Awareness

From instructional psychology, it is teachers themselves who have great interest in knowing what teachers do in classrooms. All teachers want to know what kind of teachers they are and how well they are doing. That is to say, in actual teaching practice, only through teachers' self-knowledge and consciousness can they understand their own teaching practice better and make adjustment and improvement accordingly. All their knowledge and new teaching methods are acquired from their teaching practice experiencing and their observation and reflection on their practice. Every teacher has a desire for self-fulfillment to be a good and qualified teacher. When he or she reflect on such an ideal constantly in teaching practice and try to improve his or her own teaching views, the teacher is actually carrying out his or her professional development. So, we should encourage such awareness of teaching.

5. STRATEGIES ON EFL TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Besides the traditional venues for teacher professional development, such as conferences, workshops, and formal courses of study, Bailey (2004) considers five professional development procedures that can be practiced by individual teachers (though some can be collaboratively conducted too), keeping teaching journals, using case studies, language learning, videotaping and action research. Essentially, as Nanan (2004) indicated, no one else can make a teacher develop, ultimately, just as language students must do the learning for themselves, so, if we are to develop professionally, we teachers have to do the developing for ourselves. Actually, teachers' professional deployment is a career-long thing as well as the responsibility of individual language teachers, rather than the schools, programs, or university or which they work. Especially, for EFL teachers in China, from levels of developmental strategy, we should take reflective teaching professional development by taking advantage of teachers self as resource, i.e., teachers should focus on their teaching awareness and action before, during and after class, thinking about what happens in classroom lessons and alternatives means of achieve teaching foals and aims.

5.1. Class Journal-Based Teaching Observation

Self-awareness and self-observation are the cornerstones of all teacher professional development. They are essential ingredients, even prerequisites, to practicing reflective teaching. According to Freeman (1998: 33) “*awareness is the capacity to recognize and monitor the attention one is giving or has given to something. Thus, one acts on or responds to the aspects of a situation of which one is aware,*” and the main approach enforcing self-awareness is to make a close and regular observation of their teaching practice, especially the teachers own class activities. In EFL teaching, the self-observation refers to the teacher making a record of a lesson, either in the form of a written account or an audio or video recording of a lesson. By gathering such information, teacher will obtain a class teaching journal, such as a diary, a story, a short note, a class teaching case, a teaching profile, and so on, which will be the origin source of feedback on teacher’s actual teaching practice. As without careful plan, such self class observation and observation of other colleagues show the immediate observation and thought made by teacher, which actually display the teaching idea, methods, hobby and model in a subconscious and hidden way, which will be helpful for teachers to reflect their teaching attitudes, ideas. Especially the reflection about the unexpected outcomes of teaching because teaching, even under the best conditions, always involves unintended as well as intended outcomes, eventually, this reflection will better their teaching practice and promote their teachers professional development.

5.2. Action Research Combined with the School-Based Curriculum

As professionals, in particular, teachers need to be able to conceptualize their practice in theoretical terms and also need to have skills in data collection and analysis, which will be critical to their self-observation and reflection. The most important is that these skills can be developed through action research projects wherein professional development programs can feed into a constant cycle of intervention, monitoring, and modification to classroom practice. Kemmis and McTAGart (1988,5) make such a statement about the concept of action research:

The linking of terms ‘action’ and ‘research’ highlights the essential feature of the method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and school, and better articulation and justification of educational rationale of what goes on. Action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice into the one whole: idea-in-action.

Because of the nature of language learning, English teaching in China is different from the ESL in western countries. If we transplant L2 (Second Language) theory into our English teaching, teaching will be less effective. As for the various teaching conditions in China, the action research, if combined with the specific school-based curriculum, will make up for the

disadvantage of the language teaching environment, and it gives teachers full confidence in bettering their teaching while making efforts in teacher professional development. Action research is situational, context-based, participatory, collaborative and self-evaluative. Besides the language environment, the teaching facility and faculty are various greatly in different parts of China, so the centralized English curriculum was unable to accommodate the diversity of learning needs. Making full use of the localized or school-based curriculum, which is based on a learner-centered philosophy, teachers can become the principal agents of curriculum development and EFL teaching, to some extent, future, and teacher can diagnose and cater for learners needs. Thus, on one hand, teachers themselves become researchers themselves, and on the other hand, the problems tackled by teachers are the teaching dilemma lying in their daily teaching context.

English teachers' professional development requires that teachers have strong awareness of self-development and be good at observation of their teaching practice, willing to reflect and research their practice. Thus they can improve their professional theory levels as well as capability in practice.

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