

English Language Teachers' Professional Development in Web-based Community

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In the past decade, memorization and teacher-centered instruction were typically valued and practiced in Chinese English language teaching (ELT). Regarding the professional development training, the workshops are usually not only provided in single or half-day sessions lectured by an expert or experienced teachers, but also often lacking in focus and do not provide enough depth in any one particular area of teaching disciplines. Yet, teachers' professional growth requires long-term training and a series of processes and activities, so the teachers might, in turn, improve students' learning achievements. Concomitantly, along with taking advantage of increased Internet access, many institutions use technological tool, such as information and communication technologies (ICTs), to develop and create accessible professional learning and training activities for teachers. Faced with rapid change in ICTs and demands calling for highly qualified teachers, educators must be involved in continuous learning through and with ICTs and e-learning professional development. New Web-based professional development can support developmental and innovative approaches to English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL) professional practice which helps English language instructors build and apply their knowledge, collaborate with fellow EFL/ESL teachers, and to reflect on classroom practices. The paper presents a model for English language instructors and teacher education instructors regarding the possibilities of using Web-based professional development opportunities.

Keywords: English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL), teachers' professional development, Web-based environment, online community

Introduction

Teacher quality has a great impact on students' academic achievement (Pratt, Lai, & Munro, 2001; Li, Wang, & Yao, 2008). In order to improve the quality of teachers, professional development plays a key role in ensuring they are better able to enhance teaching efficiency and inspire students' learning through motivation (Mann, 2005).

In many Asian countries, professional development has been incorporated into the formal structure of teacher education programs for licensure, promotion, and certification. Traditionally, professional development incorporates formal training activities provided in single or half-day workshop sessions led by an expert or experienced teacher who introduces teachers to new teaching techniques and strategies (Ng & Cheung, 2007; Wang, 2009; Yang & Liu, 2004). Much of the training is delivered in lecture format which is not directly

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connected to the course design, teaching methods, or pedagogical content knowledge and course materials (Hill, 2009; Kamthi-Stein, 2000; Trewern & Lai, 2001; Yang & Liu, 2004).

The shortcomings of this traditional method of delivery include the time and money required to travel to the site (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Galanouli et al., 2003), the artificiality of professional development conducted outside of the classroom (Johnson & Golombek, 2003; Trewern & Lai, 2001), and the difficulty of trying to keep teacher training current in disciplines like language teaching, where knowledge and practice evolve rapidly (Wang, 2009; Yang & Liu, 2004). Furthermore, these professional development activities are lacking in focus and do not provide enough depth in any one particular area of teaching.

The Internet, in particular, the World Wide Web, provides teachers with a rich and varied learning environment. Along with a vast increase in Internet access, many institutions use information and communication technologies (ICTs) to develop and create accessible professional learning and training activities for teachers. With the advance of ICTs and the growth of interest in e-learning, many institutions are currently offering various online courses that utilize a range of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools (Kamthi-Stein, 2000; Trewern & Lai, 2001; Yang & Liu, 2004). Web-based professional development provides opportunities for innovative professional development. These online professional development courses not only offer teachers great flexibility in training times and places (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Johnson & Golombek, 2003), but also build up a learning community with the addition of each participant (Abdullah & Jacobs, 2004; Kamthi-Stein, 2000; Yang & Liu, 2004).

Learning communities have been used effectively to promote thoughtful educational practice by allowing teachers to engage in discourse with teacher educators and other teachers in a non-threatening manner (Allan & Miller, 1990; Trewern & Lai, 2001). Such communities help to develop norms of collegiality and cooperative problem-solving and promote the growth of reflective discourse (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Mann, 2005).

Novice teachers in a community can collaborate with experienced teachers; work with experts and online resources; and share, explore, and learn as part of a social apprenticeship network. Network-mediated professional development activities include modeling, coaching, scaffolding, articulation, reflection, and exploration (Allan & Miller, 1990; Mann, 2005; Pratt et al., 2001). Therefore, in the Web-based community, all the participants, inexperienced teachers, experienced teachers, and experts engage in reflective and critical thinking about teaching and learning.

This paper explores the importance of professional development for teachers of English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL), the growing popularity of ICTs and CMC, concluding with a discussion of a model for an online professional development course for EFL/ESL educators.

Literature Review

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teacher Professional Development

The goal of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) teacher education is to develop a forum where peers can collaborate and share their knowledge and understanding of the field (Kamthi-Stein, 2000). Teacher learning is understood as socially negotiated and contingent on knowledge of self, students, subject matter, curricula, and setting (Kamthi-Stein, 2000; Johnson & Golombek, 2003).

TESOL teacher professional development programs are attracting more attention and recognition than ever before. According to Mann (2005), the core feature of teacher knowledge, reflection, and collaboration in language teacher development is not only a continuing process of becoming that can never be finished, but also

includes personal, moral, and value dimensions to language teaching and learning. Continuing professional development has the function of giving guidance to possible pedagogic choices, teaching strategies, second language (L2) methods, course design, and teaching materials for both novice and experienced teachers (Mann, 2005; Ng & Cheung, 2007; Yang & Liu, 2004). The aim of any professional development program is to increase a teacher's ability to apply new teaching techniques and strategies and to adjust lesson plans to reflect the reality of actual contexts of teachings.

English language practices need be altered to change the focus from linguistic competence to emphasizing the practical use of English in real contexts. However, knowledge about language is not simply transferred from educators and trainees to teachers or from experienced teachers to novices. Knowledge is at least partly constructed through engagement with experience, reflection, and collaboration (Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Johnson & Golombek, 2003; Suthers, 2001).

One of the problems for on-campus professional development activities is that teachers are separated from their teaching context. Ng and Cheung (2007) claimed several advantages of distance styles of teacher education. As well as lower costs, it is more likely that the teacher will have opportunities to share expertise, try out new ideas, reflect on practices, develop new curricular ideas, and develop an online learning/teaching community. Therefore, EFL instructional practices have been greatly influenced by rapid and pervasive social and technological changes, resulting in an increased emphasis on Web-based professional teaching communities in teacher education (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Wang, 2009).

The Importance of Collaboration and Cooperation in ICTs

There have been a number of research studies documenting the increasing use of ICTs for collaborative and cooperative teacher development across distance. Maley (1989) interviewed Dr. N. S. Prabhu talk about "*The Teacher Trainer*" in which Dr. Prabhu claimed that a teacher's sense of plausibility is developed through ongoing engagement with the experience of teaching and also through interaction with other teachers' versions of plausibility. Mann (2005) saw one of the main aims of teacher development as an increased awareness that is made possible through collaboration. Edge (2002) provided an update on "cooperative development" and showed how a set of agreed discourse moves can facilitate reflection and development in pairs or small group work. The discourse moves encourage exploration, articulation to discovery, and action. Numerous researchers have found that cooperative learning involves principles and techniques for helping learners work together more effectively (Abdullah & Jacobs, 2004; Allan & Miller, 1990; Johnson & Golombek, 2003; Suthers, 2001). As these studies indicate the Internet provides both synchronous and asynchronous possibilities for reflection, exploration, and articulation, there is a greater appreciation of the ways in which distance communities of practice are different from face-to-face alternatives (Hill, 2009; Ng & Cheung, 2007; Suthers, 2001).

Boon (2005) explored the role of the Internet in establishing communities of practice. The building and sustaining of online communities has made a major contribution to providing possibilities for language teachers to connect with other teachers.

In teacher education and professional development, ICTs connect more effectively with both the specific contents of the curriculum and the various stages and elements of the learning process (Galanouli et al., 2003; Richards, 2005; Roschelle & Pea, 1999). In other words, ICTs are the tools and resources that language teachers use to cycle through the stages of the learning process from initial skills or information acquisition to application and reflective understanding, to knowledge and innovation between teachers.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

With the advance of ICTs and the growth of interest in e-learning environment, many institutions are currently offering various online courses that utilize a range of CMC tools that attract learners who need the flexibility of time and place (Galanouli et al., 2003; Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Li et al., 2008; Trewern & Lai, 2001). Communication in the traditional classroom is constrained by factors, such as location, time, audience, and interactivity. In contrast, CMC allows the creation of learning environments where communication can occur in the same geographical and physical places at different times, in different geographical and physical places at the same time, or in different geographical and physical places at different times (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Li et al., 2008; Wang, 2009).

CMC tools have become increasingly popular in the L2 classroom. Research suggested that the use of CMC tools in the L2 classroom improves student involvement (Kamthi-Stein, 2000; Warschauer, 1999) and cross-cultural understanding (Kern, 2006; Li et al., 2008), and promotes reflection on and awareness of how to use language in social discourse (Warschauer, 1998). Moreover, CMC can be synchronous (Web-based chats) or asynchronous (e-mail and online discussion board interactions). Research indicates that when preservice teachers are completing a practicum experience the integration of CMC tools into the practicum promotes collaboration among teachers-in-preparation and reduces the isolation felt by novice teachers (Hoven, 2006). The Internet opens up opportunities not only for situated and collaborative learning, but also for building online learning communities that provide teachers opportunities to share ideas innovative teaching techniques and strategies, and to reflect on classroom practices.

Future Research Design

Using technology for learning and teaching presents a great opportunity in education. This manuscript does not argue that online teaching and learning does or should replace face-to-face teaching and learning. Instead, online teaching and learning can work as a supplement and complement what occurs in face-to-face settings (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Hill, 2009). There is a need to explore how networking enables new forms of support for interaction in learning. Educators should not just compose together the available electronic sources, or just “deliver” conventional, but ineffective pedagogical approaches through the Internet. For instance, e-learning environments for distance learning are traditionally delivered via standard Internet media and tools. These include Web-pages, chat rooms, and discussion boards which are often employed without thought for interaction and coordination within disciplinary forms of representation (Suthers, 2001; Yang & Liu, 2004). Some of the most important processes in collaboration, like the creation of shared beliefs and values, are hard to address in the Web environment. Moreover, participants often comment when people are learning together face-to-face that they are engaged interactively with a mentor or teacher, there is a rich interchange of graphical and verbal representations. Gestures, pointing, and linguistic reference to aspects of these representations are fundamental parts of the process of interpretation and the making of meaning. The Internet does not allow these rich forms of communication. The problems cited above and below were noted by teachers in the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) ICT training as reasons they failed to complete professional development learning activities:

- (a) Lack of time;
- (b) Technical and organizational difficulties;
- (c) Poor support from trainers or mentors;

(d) Poor match of training materials to needs;

(e) The requirements to complete exercises or compile portfolios were unrelated to current work.

Their common complaints about trainers included the trainers under- or over- estimated teachers' existing knowledge, that there were frequent personnel changes which did not allow trainers to establish an effective working relationship with teachers, and that trainers failed to respond to communications. There was also a lack of differentiation in the training programs to extend the highly competent ICT users, and at the same time, meet the needs of those teachers with lower levels of confidence (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Galanouli et al., 2003).

Professional development via Internet will be more effective and more efficient if we pay attention to specific weaknesses and common deficiencies that are highlighted in previous studies (Hewett & Ehmann, 2004; Galanouli et al., 2003; Hill, 2009; Suthers, 2001; Yang & Liu, 2004). Rather than replacing one form of professional development with another, we would wise to design the activities and make them better. We are looking for the activities that would connect live trainers with teachers to engage them in active teaching and learning online. Limited research has been conducted on the use of CMC in the TESOL teacher education and on its curriculum and the role of technology in the learning experience with regards to the preparation of EFL teachers. Therefore, this new research paradigm is going to present a model for online professional development course for EFL teachers.

A New Research Paradigm

The professional development course should begin with an open-ended questionnaire about what kinds of challenges, difficulties, and needs English teachers have faced in the classroom. Participants complete the questionnaire before this course begins. The instructor collects the responses and develops the outline for the course modules to match participants' needs.

The setting for this professional development activity is an online course which is supported by Blackboard Collaborate™ that provides an interactive online teaching and learning environment for everyone. The title of this course is *Current Issues in EFL Teaching and Learning*. It will engage 15 English teachers in Taiwan.

The purpose of this course is to provide an online community for English teachers to share experience, knowledge, teaching techniques, methods, and skills that lead to develop learning opportunities for each other. The modules will be designed to address current EFL teaching methods, techniques, strategies, global issues, and individual needs. It will be held once a week, for 60 minutes, over 12 weeks.

Four online activities will be required of each participant:

1. English teachers participate in synchronous, virtual meeting, by Blackboard Collaborate™ to promote reflection and discussion regarding English teaching techniques, strategies, and global issues. To begin, the instructor and the participants will discuss the topic for each module and schedule each participant for a microteaching demonstration. The modules will consist of sample interactive activities and tasks. Each participant is responsible for 40 minutes microteaching. The remaining 20 minutes will debrief, assess, and discuss their microteaching demonstration. The teacher participants are required to express opinions, reflections, and experience, or bring up a question to discuss with fellow online participants.

2. Participants engage in microteaching demonstration. The microteaching demonstration is designed to implement the techniques and strategies demonstrated the previous week. Participants are required to upload the demonstration to the online teaching Website and conduct a self-assessment including strengths,

weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement before each session. Every participant has to provide feedback, discuss problems, and post it under each demonstration among the online community and they do not have to reveal their names. This assures anonymity and will avoid embarrassment and “loss of face.”

3. Participants will be required to post at least one challenge or difficulty regarding teaching English in an asynchronous Web-based discussion room and respond to at least three peer postings biweekly.

4. The participants will keep a written journal over 12 weeks. This journal empowers each participant to re-conceptualize and re-contextualize what he/she thought he/she has already known about English language teaching. Then, participants begin restructuring English language teaching in a new way and regaining his/her professional expertise and ability in teaching English.

Conclusions

Professional development for teachers always occurs with practical experience or contact with other teachers. Individuals seek the support and mentorship of their colleagues and peers when they take on new teaching and learning endeavors (Creese, 2005; Hewett & Ehmann, 2004). This course aims to build an online community for EFL teachers where social context occurs through both one-to-one and group interaction whether via Blackboard Collaborate™, instant messaging, synchronous group chats, or e-mail. Web-based communication tools enable these EFL teachers to talk about their work challenges and to seek assistance from more experienced teachers when a problem occurs. This online professional development course will have introduced new ways of learning and opened up an avenue that has vast potential for EFL teachers and their professional improvement and development. It is anticipated that EFL teachers who engage in this course will not only develop a better understanding of their teaching pedagogies, enrich their capacity for language teaching techniques, help each other to become lifelong learners, but also contribute to school improvement.

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