Lessons Learned from Summer Institute of Southwestern Georgia Writing Project (SWGWP): Implications for Professional Development of English Language Teachers in China

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Abstract

The Summer Institute (SI) of Southwestern Georgia Writing Project (SWGWP) held at Georgia Southwestern State University featured three characteristics: classroom-based research, writing, and teaching practices. The practices of the SI based on a teachers-teaching-teachers model emphasized on reflective, collaborative, and inquiry-based learning and teaching processes. The SWGWP was able to continue to sustain participants' engagement with the project during and after the completion of SI through inquiry-based in-class activities and out-of-class social networks activities. Hopefully, the lessons learned from SWGWP can be implied for designing a long-term, cultural context-specific, participant-centered as well as reflection-based and integrative professional development model for in-service English language teachers in China.

Keywords: Foreign language teachers, English language teachers, professional development, National Writing Project, Teachers-teaching-teachers, writing teachers

Introduction

English teachers are the front-line change agents in college English teaching reforms in China (Gu, 2007). With the deepening reform of college English teaching in China, the research field of professional development for English language teachers has attracted much attention. According to a survey of 10 key foreign languages academic journals in China , during the period of 1996-2001, there were 29 articles about education and professional development of foreign language teachers, which account for 1/4 of the total, and during the period of 2001-2007, there were 80 articles in this field ,which account for 3/4 of the total (Peng, Zhu, & Zhong, 2008). Research in this field ranges from teachers' beliefs, values and perceptions, teachers' qualities, education theories in western countries, teachers' knowledge to professional development models. In terms of professional development models, the top-down model is always widely employed in in-service training for English language teachers in China. These programs are usually designed and lectured by experts, aiming at imparting established theories and teaching methodologies to participants. Behind the model is the notion that teachers are theory implementers but not generators and that there is a "one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter approach that assumes a common clientele with common goals"(Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

With the shift of teachers' roles from theory-implementers to theory-generators, reflective teaching has been a renewed interest in the field of the professional development for language teachers around the world. Chinese researchers began to explore professional development models from new perspectives. As a result, Chinese researchers put some new approaches on their agendas, such as reflective teaching, action research, collaborative inquiry, critical friend group, narrative study and so on. Research interests shift from traditional, top-down, technique-centered training models to participant-centered, bottom-up, classroom-based practices (Peng, Zhu, & Zhong, 2008). Corresponding to the Chinese context, Xin (2006) proposed that in addition to institutional efforts, such as intensive training, course reductions, and pay raises, teachers should have the ability to pursue in-service self-development. Zhou (2005) advocated that teacher education should aim at improving comprehensive competence of language teachers with a special focus on self-development, creative thinking, and teaching. All the above research indicates that the focus of research in the field has shifted to the teachers themselves. However, most of the research pertaining to professional development models still mainly focuses on theoretical discussion.

One of the authors, as a participant of Southwest Georgia Writing Project (SWGWP), observed the activities in the Summer Institute (SI) and collected observational information. The present article based on the author's observations of SWGWP aims at building a link between theories and practice by proposing a professional development model for English language teachers in China. The analysis of the observed practices of SWGWP-SI would be based on the concepts of the postmethod condition presented by Kumaradivelu (2006), which was discussed in the following paragraph.

Theoretical Framework

The Postmethod Condition and Its Implications

Since the mid-1980s, educators' enthusiastic search for method for language teaching has given ways to the recognition that "no single perspective on language, no single explanation for learning, and no unitary view of the contributions of language learners will account for what they must grapple with on a daily basis" (Larsen-Freeman,1990, p. 269). Discontent with the concept of one-size-fit-all method has finally resulted in the emergence of the postmethod condition. Kumaradivelu (2006) defined the postmethod condition as

> "…a sustainable state of affairs that compels us to fundamentally restructure our view of language teaching and teacher education, urges us to review the character and content of classroom teaching in all its pedagogical and ideological perspectives. and drives us to streamline our teacher education by refiguring the reified relationship between theory and practice." (p. 170)

According to Kumaradivelu (2006), the postmethod condition denotes three interrelated attributes: an alternative to method rather than alternative method, teacher autonomy, and principled pragmatism. The above three attributes lay a foundation on which the fundamental parameters of a postmethod pedagogy can be conceived and constructed. According to Kumaradivelu (2006), the postmethod pedagogy is characterized as a three-dimensional system consisting of pedagogic parameters of particularity, practicality, and possibility. As for particularity, language teaching should be concerned with "a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu"(p.34). As for practicality, it entails a teacher-generated theory of practice, which signifies that the practicing teacher, given adequate tools for exploration, is best suited to produce such a practical theory by understanding and identifying problems, analyzing and assessing information, considering and evaluating alternatives, and then choosing the best available alternative that is subjected to further critical appraisal. As for possibility, it seeks to tap the sociopolitical consciousness that participants bring with them to the classroom so that it can also function as a catalyst for a continual quest for identity formation and social transformation.

Therefore, we would like to see professional development for writing teachers would make a shift from up-down, outside-to-inside, theoretically-based institutional programs to bottom-up, inside-to-outside, practice-oriented self-development networks. We would also like to see more research-based practices integrated into these professional development models for writing teachers, such as reflective teaching, action research, team teaching, self-monitoring, keeping a teaching journal, peer observation, teaching portfolios, analyzing critical incidents, case analysis, peer coaching and so on (Richards & Farrell, 2005). A number of classroom action researches had indicated how teachers were developing their skills through the observation and evaluation of various approaches, methods, and techniques used in the classroom, hence establishing a link between theory and practice.

Cultural contexts

In-service Professional Development Models in China

English language teachers in China have expressed a growing interest in their own professional development. Zhou (2005) surveyed the needs of the professional development of English language teachers from 49 universities and colleges in 2005. Forty-seven percent of teachers attributed the biggest obstacle in improving their teaching to the lack of the opportunities to pursue professional development. Fifty-eight percent of teachers identified their current desire as getting professional development opportunities (Zhou, 2005).   In-service training for English language teachers in China varied in length, scale, and frequency. Most training programs, such as workshops, seminars, symposia, and conferences, are organized either locally or nationally, and /or on a short-term basis.

Mentoring is the most common form of in-service training. Held by Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, the national symposium on College English Teaching is an example of a large-scale, short-term in-service training opportunity for College English Language teachers. During the period of 1999-2003, there were more than 60,000 English teachers participating in the summer symposia held by Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. Most of the sessions were designed and lectured by experts and demonstrated by excellent teachers. The current training model in China is effective in keeping participants updated with the latest development of teaching theories and research methods as well as teaching models for other teachers to follow. The notion behind the professional model in China is that evidently teachers are the recipients of the theories, but not the generators and problem-solvers. However, according to Kumaradivelu (2003), teacher education models that merely transmit a body of interested knowledge do not produce effective teaching professionals. In addition, most of these programs are designed on a short-term basis and there is a lack of follow-up activities to sustain participating teachers with their classroom practices. Therefore, the one-size-fits-all method cannot meet individual needs and ignores some features of teaching, such as contextuality and diversity.

Given the context of current training models in China, teachers themselves need to develop their own capabilities to seek lifelong professional development. The future training model of professional development for English Language teachers in China should be designed to meet their needs to pursue long-term professional development by equipping participants with the knowledge, skills and expertise to be reflective teachers. Only with the joint efforts from both institutions and individuals can in-service teachers prepare themselves to the changing educational settings.

An Overview of SWGWP in the US

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a nationwide network of educators working together to improve the teaching of writing in US schools and other settings. Founded in 1974 at the University of California, Berkeley, the NWP uses a core grant from the U.S. Department of Education and is supplemented by local, state, and private funds. The NWP today is a network of more than 200 university-based sites, working in partnership with surrounding districts to provide high quality professional development to teachers to improve writing and learning at all levels and across disciplines. It engages 130,000 educator-participants annually; and through those educators, it reaches 1.4 million students every year. The NWP establishes a "teachers-teaching-teachers" model of professional development, makes central the knowledge, leadership, and best practices of effective teachers, and promotes the sharing of that knowledge with other teachers.

Southwestern Georgia Writing Project (SWGWP) is one of the 200 network sites in the Nation. SWGWP Summer Institute (SI) was anchored at Georgia Southwestern State University and was co-directed by a local university faculty and a local school teacher. Under the National Writing Project (NWP) model of "teachers-teaching-teachers," the SWGWP organized activities for both the SI and the entire year. The practices employed by the SWGWP Summer Institute were based on the notion that teacher learning is a "cognitive process, personal construction, and reflection on action" (Richards, 2005, p. 7) and that teachers are not passive consumers of prepackaged knowledge, but problem-solvers and reflective practitioners.
Method

There were 15 teachers participated in the three-week invitational Summer Institute (SI) in 2010. Teachers were from different grade levels—ranging from kindergarten to college--and across disciplines, including chemistry, music, and writing. Information was gathered through participant observations. Content analysis was employed to describe and make inferences about characteristics of the SWGWP Summer Institute at Georgia Southwestern State University. We would like to explore these questions: 1) How did the SI improve participants' writing, teaching, and research competence through reflective teaching and participant-centered approach? 2) How did SWGWP-SI sustain participants' long-term professional development? 3) What can be learned from the practices of the SWGWP to improve professional development models for English language teachers in China?
Result and Discussion

How did the SI Improve Participants' Writing, Teaching, and Research Competence through Reflective Teaching and Participant-Centered Approach?

The workshop model of the SWGWP-SI had featured these characteristics: classroom-based research, writing, and teaching. All the activities run through the day demonstrated these three characteristics.

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The SI began with participants' reflection on their own teaching to identify the dilemmas they encounter in their classroom practices. With the feedback and suggestions from their own inquiry group, participants embarked on research journeys to find answers to their questions. During the process, participants were trained to use the facilities on campus, such as library and labs. They met once a day to report the progress of their projects, such as the resources they have found and the problems they encountered. They were also required to give a presentation concerning their research questions. For example, as a participant, my inquiry topic was "How to Integrate Culture into the Teaching of Writing for College Students" and my presentation is "Teaching Writing across Culture". First, I introduced Chinese holiday culture, and then I asked participants to go to lab to find American holidays which might have matched Chinese holidays in a certain way and to fill out a chart that I have prepared for them. The chart is about the comparison of American and Chinese holidays. There are categories such as origin, time, ways of celebration, purposes and so on. After group discussions, participants developed their ideas into an essay of comparison and contrast of American and Chinese holiday cultures. Finally, participants shared their writings with each other. Through the demonstration presentation, participants can learn not only writing expertise but also different cultures.

In this way, participants' reflective teaching capability, research capabilities, and writing abilities were conduced. The Figure 1 sums up the procedures of classroom-based research.

Figure 1. Classroom-Based Research
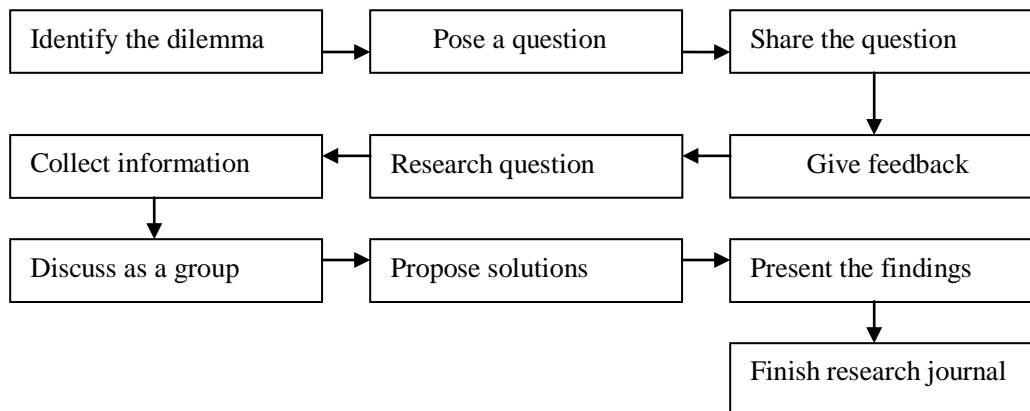
After each demonstration presentation, the teachers as a group were asked to discuss and evaluate their presentations through the following five aspects with thinking questions, which the facilitator called it "five lenses". These five aspects are 1) effects on teachers/learners; 2) best practices; 3) standards/learning outcomes; 4) adaptations; 5) questions arisen. Each aspect must be examined through critical thinking questions. For example:

Lens 1 : Effect on Teachers/Learners. "How did we react to this presentation as learners?" "Did the presenter respect us as learners?" "Did the presenter work to involve us in the learning?"

Lens 2: Best practices : "What aspects of this presentation did we think are effective, and why were they effective?" " What aspects of the presentation seemed less effective? Why?"
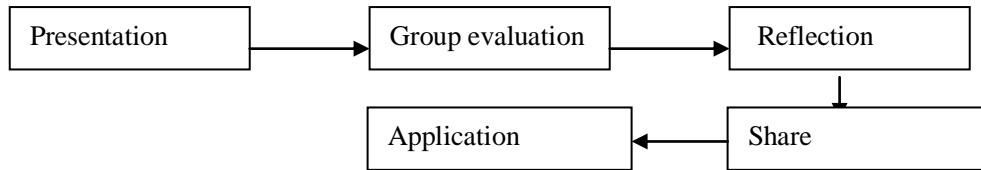
Lens 3: Standards/ Learning Outcomes: "What student learning outcomes or goals might be achieved with the presentation?" "In other words, how might we as learners benefit from this presentation?"

Lens 4: Adaptations: "How can this presentation be adapted to our teaching needs?"

Lens 5: Questions Arisen: "What questions do we have for the presenter? How might the presentation be improved?"

Figure 2 summarized how to use a reflection approach to teaching practices. The reflection occurred not only individually but also collaboratively.

Figure 2. Connecting Writing to Teaching Application

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┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
│ Presentation │ ───► │ Group evaluation │ ───► │  Reflection  │
└──────────────┘      └──────────────────┘      └──────────────┘
                                                        │
                      ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
                      │ Application   │◄─────│    Share     │
                      └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘
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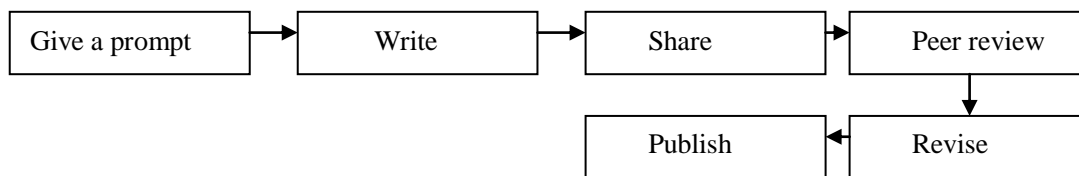
Writing is an important part of the activities in the SI. Participating teachers wrote, shared, revised, and published their work. All the activities in SWGPW-SI were based on the assumption that teachers learn from experience through focused reflection on the nature and meaning of teaching experiences (Schon, 1983; Wallace, 1991; Richards, & Lockhart, 1994) and those learners are the constructors of knowledge and the generators of teaching theories. Working collaboratively and individually to reflect on classroom practices and presentations offers a new perspective for the participants to pursue professional development.

Writing is a medium of connecting people, a means by which people express their opinions and views, and a tool by which people reflect on their lives and careers. The SI cultivated the climate in which participants wrote with their real voices. When we shared our writings, we were inspired and moved by each other. For example, with the prompt, "Where I Come From", my mind went back to the country where I come from, lingered on my hometown and family, strolled in my classroom and reflected on my lifetime career, teaching. From this writing exercise, I came to the realization that there are always deeply rooted memories to my hometown, love to my family, and commitment to my job and that what I need is to bring these feelings out in a proper way under proper context. And the SI is the right impetus to help me construct my knowledge.

During the SI, the participants proposed questions and sought answers by researching and discussing with their own group members. The director and co-director first gave presentations and writing prompts as models and each participant gave writing prompt, kept "a Day in Life" which recorded important activities in a day , gave a presentation, made group evaluation on every presentation and did peer review on the writings of the other group members. Figure 3 summarized the procedures of "how to write" from an inquiry question and from a reflective point of view to complete the writing processes. This writing process is participant-centered and is achieved through individual effort and group collaborations.

Figure 3. Inquiry-Based and Reflective Writing Process

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┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────┐    ┌──────────┐    ┌──────────────┐
│ Give a prompt│ ──►│  Write   │ ──►│  Share   │ ──►│ Peer review  │
└──────────────┘    └──────────┘    └──────────┘    └──────────────┘
                                                            │
                    ┌──────────┐    ┌──────────┐
                    │ Publish  │◄───│  Revise  │
                    └──────────┘    └──────────┘
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How did SWGWP-SI Sustain Participants' Long-term Professional Development?

The desired outcomes of professional development projects are not only focused on short-term effects that occur during or at the end of the writing project, but also on long-term effects that emerge after the completion of the project. Sustainability is defined as the lasting continuation of achieved benefits and effects of a project or initiative beyond its termination (Zehetmeier, 2010). Sustainable improvement requires investment in building long term capacity for improvement, such as the development of teachers' skills, which will stay with them forever, long after the project is gone.The inquiry-based activities and the cycle of teaching and learning in SWGWP can be regarded as a good example of sustainability. Taking an inquiry stance helps participating teachers reflect on their classroom teaching practice. If teachers teach with an inquiring mind, they will reflect and improve their practices on a long-term basis. During the SI, participants started their research with inquiry questions, for example, "How do I prepare myself and 8th grade students to be successful on writing test?" and "How do I build confidence in English Language Learners' writing?" The questions came from teachers' daily teaching practices. The SI is only the beginning of both collaborative and individual inquiry. After that, participants meet monthly either to discuss teaching or to write together. The writing retreat is a case in point.

The writing retreat was held at Providence Canyon in January; it was a great opportunity for teachers to write, share, and know each other better. The director of the project prepared a detailed plan outlining writing prompts and evaluation questions. During the retreat, participants visited Canyon with eyes and pens, and poems and reflective essays were composed after the trip. And participants worked together to provide feedback to each other.

In sum, SWGWP-SI is not only the site where teachers can pursue professional development, but also a long-term "homeland" in which teachers can exchange their views, support each other, and seek the sense of professional identity.

The SI fostered a learning community in which participating teachers exchanged their teaching skills, wrote with their own voices, and done classroom-based research. What's more, social activities, such as a potluck, parties and meetings, offered informal occasions for participants to share their perceptions on teaching, and thus such activities deepened their understanding to the roles of teachers. Finally, the published book, *Inquiring Minds Drafts 2010*, is a collection of writings produced by participating teachers in the SI. In this way, teachers were greatly encouraged to become confident writers and adapt what they have learned to classroom teaching.

Future Directions for SWGWP

The SWGWP Summer Institute at Georgia Southwestern State University has improved participants' writing competence, enhances their teaching expertise, and prompts their research capabilities. More importantly, participants were empowered to reflect on their teaching and research skills, and thus to pursue life-time professional development.

The following recommendations might yield additional positive results to the SWGWP Summer Institute, for example, (1) empowering participants with systematic research methods and knowledge to be reflective practitioners; (2) incorporating digital technology into teaching of writing; and (3) helping teachers set up support groups for long-term learning.

Empowering participants. In postmethod conditions, researchers and educators come to the agreement that there is no best method in teaching and that teachers should reflect on their teaching and generate their own methods which can meet their students' needs and fit into their particular school culture. In "reflective teaching", teachers should be equipped with systematic approaches and be empowered with the strong knowledge. For instance, there are a variety of approaches for teachers to do classroom-based research, such as reflective teaching, action research, keeping a teaching journal, peer observation, teaching portfolios, and peer coaching. The dimension of research approaches would greatly enhance participating teachers' capabilities to pursue long-term professional development. Keeping abreast of the current developments of theories in the teaching of writing is also a part for practitioners to gain a deeper understanding in teaching and to prepare themselves for classroom practices. As practitioners, we need to develop knowledge and skills necessary to self-observe, self-analyze, and self-evaluate our own teaching acts. And the SI will offer a great opportunity to equip the participants with the skills and knowledge.

Incorporating digital technology. We live in a digital and networked world. The ever-changing digital landscape affects the teaching of writing. In the digital era, students explore wiki's, blogs, and podcasts and they write more often than ever before. Teachers face the great challenge of meeting students' needs in the digital age. Teachers should think these questions: "How I do I learn and use full range of digital-age learning tools to engage student learning?" "How do I facilitate students' participation in a collaborative, web-based learning community?" The SI might increase the learning opportunities for participants to get to know more about teaching in the digital age. For example, teachers could discuss the characteristics of teaching in the rapidly changing world and how to prepare themselves for the change. They might also exchange particular teaching skills, meeting students' needs in the digital age. For example, teachers could collaborate with each other to make some products by the use of digital technology.

Setting support groups. The fifteen-day SI provides a great opportunity for participants to improve their writing and teaching. Participants can adapt what they have learned to their own particular teaching context, meeting students' needs and fitting into school culture. The follow-up activities also create a platform on which participants can report what they have achieved by applying the knowledge and expertise learned in the SI and continuously reflect on their classroom practices.

However, these activities are carried out outside of classrooms, which make it hard for the other teachers to give constructive suggestions for classroom practices. If some of activities could be adopted in school settings, teachers would have the opportunity to observe classroom practices and in return give prompt feedback. After the SI, in order to effectively support each other and enhance the learning outcomes, participants, under the guidance of the director of the SI, might set up support groups, each consisting of two or three members. According to Richards & Farrell (2005), support groups can serve the following purposes: collaboratively reflect on teaching, develop materials, try out new teaching strategies, and observe classes and videotapes. Group members could meet regularly to discuss goals, concerns, problems, and experiences and collaborate to achieve either their individual or shared goals. They could carry out activities such as peer coaching and classroom observation. Since the purpose of support groups is to help and facilitate each other's teaching, group members would not feel pressured from observation and discussion. Setting up support groups would enable teachers to get support, advice, and help from other like-minded teachers in a nonthreatening environment. Most importantly, in this way teachers could work together to pursue lifelong professional development.

Implications for In-service Training Models in China

This study showed that a training model seeks to facilitate growth of teachers' understanding of teaching and of themselves as teachers. It often involves examining different dimensions of teacher practice as a basis for reflective review and hence can be seen as "bottom-up." Reflecting on the practices in the SWGWP Summer Institute, lessons learned from this study could put forward with a local university-based, teachers-based in-service training model for foreign language teachers' professional development in China. The design of the model for China would and should consider the Chinese context and the premise that teacher development is an ongoing self-discovery and self-renewal process. Inquiry-based and discovery-oriented "bottom-up" approaches could be carried out to help Chinese participating teachers to realize the process.

More specifically, the authors would like to propose these purposes for the professional development model for foreign language teachers in China, which are (1) to empower teachers to transform the subject content knowledge they possess into forms that "are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students"(Shulman 1987, p.15) within the particular contexts of teaching; (2) to bring teachers from different levels together to explore teaching and learning; (3) to set up long-term learning communities; and (4) to prepare teachers to be classroom-based researchers. The professional development model for language teachers in China should feature characteristics such as participant-centered, reflective, classroom-based, and integrative.

Participant-centered. The design of training programs should be based on the needs of prospective participants. During the session, some activities, such as workshops, demonstration lessons, collaborative inquiry, group discussion, peer review, and seminars are already designed and implemented to make participants engaged. Before the training session, a questionnaire should be designed and administered to prospective participants to investigate their needs as well. The activities are designed to meet participants' specific needs and participating teachers play their active roles by putting forward with

Reflective. First, systematic approaches involved in reflecting on one's teaching should be discussed to empower participants with the methods and knowledge to pursue self-development. For instance, for reflective teaching, a cycle of activities, namely, mapping, informing, contesting, appraising, and acting in the process are discussed and put into practice. Some other approaches for teachers to seek professional development will be incorporated into the training curriculum, such as action research, teaching portfolios, peer observation, peer coaching, team teaching, keeping a teaching journal, self-monitoring, and teacher support groups..

Classroom-based. The practicing teacher equipped with adequate tools for exploration is best suited to produce a practical theory. The research question should be based on teachers' classroom activities with the purpose to improve teaching quality. The discussion of teaching theories and research methods is an indispensable part of the training, which can empower teachers with the knowledge, skills, and new conceptions to generate their own theories from practice. During the training session, teachers reflect on their teaching by identifying their own concerns, dilemmas and obstacles, and then they search for the solution based on their own particular context, including institutional culture, particular group of students, special curriculum and so on.. After this, they could apply what they have learned to their classroom practice to assess their research results. They could cooperate with other teachers in the program or colleagues who share the research question to do collaborative research.

In the process of training, participants could give their demonstration teaching pertaining to their research question. With the feedback from the other participants, the presenter could improve his or her own teaching. After training sessions, participants can invite group members to observe their classes to do peer or group coaching, which would help to improve teaching competence.

Integrative. Being integrative denotes the following dimensions: the integration of teachers from different grade levels, the integration of nation and local, the integration of training methods, and the integration of theory and practice. The integration of teachers from different grade levels can help teachers to understand the challenges of English teaching encountered in the classroom in China. The integration of nation and local should function well to suit local teachers' needs, and at the same time to keep teachers informed of the latest development of teaching circles across the country or beyond. The integration of training methods should include the use of digital technology, seminars, workshops, group inquiry and lectures given by experts and so on. With the shift of teachers' roles from theory receptors or implementers to theory generators or problem solvers, teachers actively and effectively reflect on their practice with the knowledge and skills empowered by the training to improve their teaching capability.

Conclusion

The key to long-term educational change lies in the development of local teachers' self-reflective competence and professional empowerment (Gu, 2007). This study put forward a professional development model for English teachers in China with the nationwide, local universities-based network, featured as being teacher-centered, classroom-based, collaborative, sustainable, and reflective. Some approaches, such as action research, journal keeping, and peer review, are recommended to empower participants to become reflective practitioners in postmethod era.

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