

Ways to Achieve Language Teachers' Professional Development*

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Abstract—With the development of the times and new curriculum reform, there are high requirements for language teachers' professional quality and professional development. The paper discusses the current problems faced by language teachers in the background of college and university level in China today with some of the feasible strategies helpful to language teachers' sustainable professional development.

Index Terms—language teachers, professional development, teacher education

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a large number of articles are published on the research of language teacher professional development covering different researches and development procedures. Most of these researches are designed for teachers, with teachers and by teachers aimed at their professional learning and academic development with an eye on their impact on teachers and student and environment changes.

It is acknowledged that teachers are not only the processors and transmitters of knowledge, but also the creators of the knowledge they teach. And teachers themselves, their students, the curricula and classroom settings are all the contingent factors affecting their teaching experience. Thus teacher learning and development is compulsory and lifelong in the teaching career, through various experiences in social contexts: as observers and learners in classrooms of both their own and other teachers; as participants in professional teacher education and training programs; and as members of communicative groups of all peer teachers.

Scholars have used a "new professionalism" (Hargreaves, 1994) to conceptualize teaching as part of a communal endeavor which is different from the traditional views of teacher professionalism. This communal aspect of teacher professionalism has been highlighted by McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) who found that "teachers' responses to today's students and notions of good teaching practice are heavily mediated by the character of the professional communities in which they work". There are also many studies focused on teacher professionalism which characterize the influence exerted by teachers in their workplace on a day-to-day basis at the school-site level. (Charles & Ellen, 2011) Besides, arguments for teacher influence in school-wide decisions and teacher autonomy relying on teachers as experts aroused the need for teacher's professional development. According to Ingersoll & Alsalam (1997), teachers' professional development is to help teachers achieve a professional-level mastery of the complex skills. (Charles S. Hausman, Ellen B. Goldring, 2011) This is a process of learning and upgrading which requires advanced knowledge and skills of teachers in their fields, teachers' energy and freshness, their sense of efficacy, and their personal needs for achievement and growth.

For language teachers, there is a similar concept but with many specific details. Language teachers' professional development emerges from a process of refreshing and reshaping teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs and morals, and practices and reflections rather than just simply imposing fresh language teaching theories, methodologies and teaching materials on teachers. Thus language teachers' professional learning is a complex process which requires knowledge in varied disciplined fields of psychology, sociology, methodology, etc. Besides, teachers' cognitive and emotional involvement individually and collectively, the capacity and willingness to examine teachers' professional convictions and beliefs, and the strong eagerness for professional improvement and change are all needed in the process of language teachers' professional development.

Studies on teacher development in western countries have gone through a long period from recognition to sophisticated analysis, from theoretical study to practical exercise. According to the research by Beatrice Avalos, in recent ten years, studies on teacher development focus on the following related topics:

Professional learning (general): Canada (1 paper), England (2 papers), The Netherlands (2 papers), S. Africa (1 paper), USA (3 papers)

- Reflection processes: Australia (1 paper), Canada (1 paper), England (1 paper), Portugal (1 paper), The Netherlands

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(1 paper), USA (6 papers)

- Tools as learning instruments: Australia (1 paper), Spain (1 paper), Taiwan (1 paper), USA (7 papers)
- Beginning teachers learning: Australia (1 paper), Belgium (1 paper), Canada (1 paper), England (2 papers), Hong Kong (1 paper), Ireland (1 paper), Norway (1 paper) Scotland (1 paper), The Netherlands (1 paper), USA (3 papers)

Mediations

- School university partnership: Canada (2 papers), Greece (1 paper), USA (8 papers)
- Teacher co-learning: Canada (2 papers), Hong Kong (1 paper), Singapore (1 paper), The Netherlands (2 papers), USA (7 papers)
- Workplace learning: Japan (1 paper), The Netherlands (1 paper), USA (1 paper)

Conditions and factors

- Macro conditions: South Africa (1 paper), USA (9 papers)
- School cultures: Canada (1 paper), England (2 papers), USA (3 papers)

Effectiveness of professional development

- Cognitions, beliefs and practices: Italy (1 paper), New Zealand (1 paper), Portugal (1 paper), The Netherlands (2 papers), USA (5 papers)
- Student learning & teacher satisfaction: Belgium (1 paper), Canada (1 paper), Israel (1 paper), Switzerland (1 paper), USA (3 papers)

Specific areas and issues: Australia (1 paper), Canada (1 paper), Ireland (1 paper), The Netherlands (1 paper), USA (4 papers)

(Beatrice Avalos, 2011)

According to the above statistics, scholars in developed countries and areas attached much more attention to teacher development researches and studies in the past decade with more related and significant studies from various perspectives, whereas in most developing countries, such as China, researchers have not yet noticed the importance of teacher development and its significance.

II. DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN TEACHER TRAINING AND TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Although quite similar in literal interpretation, there are in fact some basic distinctions both conceptually and practically between the two important terms: teacher training and teacher development.

Teacher training means the whole process of preparing the pre-teachers, in their college or university level, for teaching practice through some formal courses, and finally resulting in certain kind of academic accreditation. Teacher development, on the other hand, means the form of learning and studying carried out by those teachers already teaching in the classroom (in-service teachers). And it features the daily informal ways of learning either by the teacher individually or in cooperation with some other teachers. Except the difference in defining these two terms in definition, distinctive aspects also lie in the practical field.

First, Teacher training is usually a period of regular training program carried out by an authorized institute or organization based on a set teaching schedule, a fixed syllabus, normally with a training course procedure and an evaluation and scoring system for a certain training term. While in teacher development, there is no pre-set teaching syllabus, course procedure or final evaluation. It depends on the teachers who make their own decision on what, how and where they need to know and learn, how to fulfill the research and discussion, when to share experience or cooperate with each other, and whether to make evaluation themselves. So if we compare the two concepts, it is easy to find out that teacher development is a much more dynamic and interactive activity that easily arouses teachers' initiative in the whole process.

Second, teaching training usually follows a trainer teaching—examples setting—suggestions giving structure, while the trainees accept the training project and the skills passively. On the contrary, teacher development start with teachers' existing knowledge and personal teaching experience. New information is collected, sought and shared collectively with each other rather than being imposed by someone, and is then learnt and remembered by being reflected on, tried out, processed in terms of personal experience and perception, and finally is obtained by the teachers appropriately. (*Penny Ur, 2000*)

Third, teacher training stresses on the cognitive development of the trainees, trying to increase their knowledge and skills to be professional and competent teachers. But in teacher development there is a difference focus because a considerable stress is put forward on the development of the 'whole person' rather than just make the 'teacher' as a professional. (*Penny Ur, 2000*)

Finally, teacher training takes the form of one-off courses, beginning and ending at predetermined times and taking place at pre-set locations. On the opposite side, teacher development is more flexible and is taken as an ongoing, even lifelong process. (*Penny Ur, 2000*)

To summarize, we have to admit that teacher development takes an advantage and plays a pivotal role in the form of teacher improvement and educational reform. In the long term of teacher profession, teacher development is the most proper and flexible personal experience conducted by teacher himself aiming to develop himself.

III. CURRENT PROBLEMS FACING LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN CHINA

In China nowadays, most language teachers for college students have obtained their master degrees domestically or abroad in their academic study fields. Some of them even get doctorate degrees in language or certain related academics. The fact is that seldom of them are inadequate of their academic knowledge or expertise. However, a survey in 2011 showed that 87% of the college students confessed that they were bored by college language lessons which could not help make their expected achievements in language studies and especially language examinations, such as CET 4 and CET 6 (two largest and influencing nationwide language examinations for college students). In such situations, should their teachers be blamed? Although students' incompetence in languages should not be the fault of their teachers, teachers need some reflections of the causes of themselves.

First, most colleges and universities in China currently are public schools in which teacher's position is immobile and teacher's qualification is life-long. Most language teachers, especially those who have worked for more than ten or twenty years teaching first year and second year college students take their language teaching work routinely without passion or enthusiasm. As admitted by many educators, teaching itself involves moral action. In classes, teachers are moral agents, and education as a whole, and thus classroom interaction in particular, is fundamentally and inevitably moral in nature (Buzzelli, C. & Johnston, B., 2001). Thus teacher's energetic role as a model for students is vital and irreplaceable. Therefore, language teachers should face the current situation and find a proper solution accordingly.

Second, in China today most language teachers are the experts in languages rather than the all-round instructors in social science. Language teachers' interest only focuses on linguistics and literature, but ignores those important social science fields which provide broad and comprehensive knowledge and judgment for teacher profession, such as education, psychology, sociology, etc.

Third, unlike some developed countries, such as U.S., UK and Australia, in which professional standards of pre-service teacher and in-service teacher have been made and carried out for more than a decade, in China there is still no specific professional standard drawn for language teachers. Lacking of professional standards causes a series of questions on teacher qualification, reliability and responsibility.

Fourth, since the large number of language teachers in the country, they are offered limited chances of teacher training and are required little for their scientific research and studies. Although the rapid development of the internet technology provide language teachers with more training programs via videos in computers, their training target is improving language teaching techniques instantly other than enhancing the overall competence of themselves. On the other hand, colleges and universities give too much daily teaching task to language teachers to reflect and develop themselves through teaching research and studies.

IV. WAYS TO ACHIEVE LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The particular way in which background contextual factors interact with teachers' learning needs varies depending on the traditions, culture mores, policy environments and school conditions of a particular country. The starting point of teachers engaging in professional development in the Namibian study may not be relevant to teachers in Canada or The Netherlands (Beatrice Avalos, 2011). Likewise, in China it is a unique set of ways to achieve language teachers' professional development.

A. *Establishing Standards for Teachers' Competence and Morality*

Scholars throughout the world have gradually been aware of the urgency of highlighting language teachers' professional development during the years. While in some developed countries, especially in America, professional organization standards of pre-service teacher preparation have been carried out for more than a decade, such as the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC, 2002), the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages/National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (ACTFL/NCATE, 2002), and the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2001, here "standards"). These standards have attempted to address comprehensively what teachers need to know and are able to do in the foreign language classroom. At the same time, these standards are meant to represent professional consensus in the field of language teaching, add rigor to teacher preparation programs, including the admissions process, and provide consistency in the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of those entering the foreign language teaching profession. (Shuhan C. Wang, 2009)

But the situation in China today is that no specific professional standard is yet drawn for college language teachers under the urgent requirements of a good and proper one. For language teachers themselves, the standards should inform them on what they need to know and offer general guidance concerning how to achieve these goals. It is possible to assess teacher quality and preparation programs through standards while simultaneously acknowledging and respecting the dynamic and situated nature of developing understandings of teaching and learning. (Shuhan C. Wang, 2009)

Besides, since there is an obvious declining in college language teachers' professional belief and morality today in China, the standards set up for college language teachers should also be the guideline for their professional belief and morality. Teachers, or instructors, are defined and accepted differently and more meaningfully in China than some western countries. Affected by traditional Chinese standard of judging a good teacher in Confucian theories, a good teacher should be a morally good human in the first place, only in this way he or she would set a morally good example for the students. Since teaching is taken as an inherently moral enterprise, the type and quality of relationship between teachers and students profoundly influence the effect of teaching and learning. So it is believed that teacher's

professional belief which is associated with teacher's professional morals should be standardized, too. And these standards may be: a teacher should love his or her teaching work, and consider it as a serious, valuable and worthy career; a teacher should be a kind, caring, patient, energetic, encouraging, careful, responsible and respectable person; a teacher should be a good model both in classes and in daily life. These standards set as the professional standards for teaching staff not only in colleges and universities, but also in all levels of education, should be regulated and assessed by school administrative department at regular time.

B. Putting Teachers into Narrative Inquiry

Learning is a process of experiencing the unknown things, make sense of them, and take action to reflect them, in this way, teacher's learning from his or other's teaching experiences are not informative and trained. So inquiry into the teaching experience which is educative propels teachers to not only question the immediate fact but to draw connections among all the teaching experiences and reflect on their own teaching actions and then act with foresight.

The word "narrative" is a synonym of "story". The way of taking narrative inquiry is learning to think narratively. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2005). Narrative has played an important role in teacher education as a method in inquiry. While narratives do not only mean the stories of individual teacher reflecting his or her teaching experiences in isolation, but by their nature mean the social and relational social experiences. Besides, to make a teaching experience educative, teachers need to use narrative inquiry both as a set of prescriptive skills carried out and a mind-set of attitudes through which they individually and collectively question their teaching experience from a perspective of assuming and revealing their roles in teaching, and how the teaching is the way it is. Through their inquiry, teachers become to recognize their students, the teaching contexts, and even question the teaching functions and responses. Inquiry promotes and evolves the knowledge of the teachers and of what teach, thus makes a change and growth in teachers' professional development. Inquiry into experience enables teachers to act with foresight, to organize, articulate, and communicate what they know and believe about teaching and who they have become as teachers.

A narrative inquiry approach to language teaching as a language teacher education and development entails consideration of narrative as phenomenon and narrative as method. Narrative here entails three aspects: teachers' personal practical knowledge, in which the personal and experiential is important; teachers' professional knowledge landscapes, in which the context in which teachers work is important; and the intersection of different ways of knowing and being, in which the intersection of cultural narratives is important (Shijing Xu, F. Michael Connelly, 2009).

Narrative inquiry conducted by language teachers individually or collaboratively, tells the teachers' professional development within their own professional worlds. As a useful way for language teachers' professional development, we should make sure that this narrative inquiry is driven by teachers' inner desire to understand the teaching experience, to reconcile what is known and find out what is hidden, to affirm and reconstruct understandings of themselves as language teachers and of their own teaching situation. (Danjun Ying, 2007)

C. Expanding Language Teachers' Knowledge Base

Expanding the knowledge base of language teachers is to acknowledge teachers as learners to enlarge their horizon to the world. For a qualified language teacher, his knowledge of the language he teaches and his proficiency in using that language are the first and principal requirements. Besides, he should also be a master of some theories and rules of language acquirement and teaching which may include how a language is structured, acquired, and used. These are considered fundamental to the understandings and process of language leaning as well as the activity of language teaching. Language teachers should also be equipped with some basic knowledge of language comparison and cultural differences which would help understand the interior distinctions between languages, find ways to deal with the bad effect caused by mother language transferring and increase effective language use in real pragmatic settings. Also language teachers would better hold a vast knowledge in the fields of both natural sciences and social sciences, such as geography, information technology, philosophy, literature, history, law, music, art, etc. This huge knowledge base of encyclopedic sources forms an important and necessary part in language teachers' knowledge structure in the endless quest for knowledge from their curious students.

Teaching methodology is very important for college language teachers in classroom language teaching. It is reasonable to believe that teaching and their tacit understandings of the activities of teaching itself does not preclude disciplinary or theoretical knowledge from remaining foundational to the knowledge base of language teacher education. Teachers should choose a useful and appropriate method according to the teaching aims, teaching material and quality of the students in the classes. So sometimes it is not a easy thing to apply a suitable language teaching method in certain classroom among the many, such as, communicative teaching method, task-based teaching method, situational teaching method, etc., unless the teacher is experienced and intelligent enough to make a proper choice.

D. Aiming at Education Reform and Students' Requirements

In recent years, language education, especially foreign language education in China is undergoing reforms in order to keep up with China's overall development and modernization. According to the Higher Education Department of the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2001 and 2007, college education aims to cultivate multi-national, inter-disciplinary talents to serve the country. Thus foreign language courses are bound to not only provide some basic knowledge of English for communication, but also help learners to broaden their horizons and gain different cultural background

knowledge associated with the language. In China, students spend abundant time and energy in learning foreign languages, particularly English, from primary school to university, with majority of them is in a medium level of language competence. So it is critical for language teachers to understand the requirements of the students and make specific teaching plans accordingly before give language courses.

Besides, it is high time for college language teachers to be aware of the importance to increase their professionalism. should understand the presentation of knowledge approach must be distinguished from the traditional 'indoctrination' *teaching methods*; emphasis on *foreign language teaching* practice the value of knowledge, to take a broader, closer to the time of epistemological perspective, the theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge have been recognized at the same time, these goals need schools and relevant education sector support to improve the environment for the development of teachers, teachers to expand space for development, the development of mechanisms to further optimize the teachers.

V. CONCLUSION

When students are to develop high levels of proficiency in languages, teachers need to bring to them the sufficient language knowledge and teach skillfully in the classrooms. Language teachers' professional development is an urgent issue that universities and colleges are facing in China today. Identifying the central role of language teachers in classes is at the core of promoting language teachers' professional development. Then the focus should be on the specific fields in language teachers' learning which is a complex process requiring knowledge in varied disciplined fields of psychology, sociology and methodology. Language teachers' professional development emerges from a process of reshaping teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs and morals, and practices and reflections rather than just simply imposing fresh teaching theories, methodologies, teaching materials on teachers. Through narrative inquiry, increasing knowledge base and establishing standard for language teachers, we may achieve our goal of improving language teachers' quality as well as promoting their professional development.

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