Views of English Language Teachers in Private Colleges Regarding Microteaching

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Abstract—Since the Economy Opening-up policy in China, English has become a compulsory component in curriculum from primary school to university. Studies on ELT teachers in China are abundant, however, they tend to gaze at the ELT in government- sponsored units. With more and more private institutions commenced to provide ELT course for diverse levels and for various purposes, there emerges a relative unfamiliarity with these teachers working in private sectors. This mixed-method study aims at understanding their perspectives and experiences of micro-teaching as measures of their professional development. Current study demonstrates that teachers from private institutes in China are aware of different aspects of microteaching, but some of them, due to their leaders' and schools' respective contexts and culture, deem the function and influence of microteaching recommended by researchers from western world are not adequate to improving teaching in a Chinese context.

Index Terms—microteaching, reflective practice, ELT teacher professional development

I. INTRODUCTION

Reflective practice has become a major instrument for teacher training (Pollard, 2008). It has even been incorporated into teacher training guidelines in many countries (Maaranen & Krokfors, 2007). Wallace (1991) raised microteaching as a pathway to facilitate reflective practice that has since caught many people's attention. However, teacher training in private colleges in China is not yet satisfactory (Kuai, 2005); literature on implementing microteaching as a reflective practice in private institutions is relatively limited.

Since the Economy Opening-up policy, English has become a compulsory component in curriculum from primary school to university. Studies on ELT teachers in China are abundant, however, they tend to gaze at the ELT in government- sponsored units. With more and more private institutions commenced to provide ELT course for diverse levels and for various purposes, there emerges a relative unfamiliarity with these teachers working in private sectors. This mixed-method study aims at understanding their perspectives and experiences of micro-teaching as measures of their professional development

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

My area of interest is the views of English language teachers in private colleges regarding the use of microteaching as a reflective practice for professional development. In China, after the 'opening-up' policy, the number of private tuition centres increased rapidly. However, due to lack of governmental supervision and encouragement, teachers' professional development programmes are not particularly rigorous (Kuai, 2005). In this review, I argue that one approach to teacher training which would be useful and possible in private colleges, is the use of reflective teaching as training. Reflective practice falls within the mainstream of professional development and claims have been made that it is important for improving teacher's professionalism (Schon, 1983). Maaranen and Krokfors (2007, p. 362) note that reflective teachers become competent professionals and that they see reflective teaching as a "requirement set for future teachers".

Reflective teaching may be a corrective to more traditional craft modes of professional development, where "the young trainee learns by imitating the expert's techniques and by following the expert's instructions and advice" (Wallace, 1991, p. 6). This traditional teacher training approach (Stone & Morris, 1972) has undergone criticism from many authors, e.g. Kumaravadivelu (2006). In recent years countries have listed reflective practice as one of principles guiding teacher education; e.g. England, Scotland, Northern Ireland (Pollard, 2008) and Finland (Maaranen & Krokfors, 2007). Reflective teaching is an important approach to professional development because it requires practitioners to reflect critically on their experience, their personal contexts and also to interrogate and evaluate their daily professional practice (Pollard, 2008). Therefore, reflective teachers can learn from their own experiences and improve (Schon, 1983). There is not as yet a single clear definition of reflective practice. One important reason for this is that the theory is

developing; authors are acting from different angles and contexts to offer new understanding and interpretation of the practice. Dewey (1933) is usually cited as the basis of theories regarding reflection (Pollard, 2008, p. 14). Dewey claimed that reflective thinking would stop people performing routinised behaviour and allow them to be more insightful in seeing things they could change and improve in their practice. However this theory did not receive the attention it deserved until the 1980s, when Schon (1983) suggested that professionals implement "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action" within their own problem setting. This had the advantage of utilising past experience and tacit knowledge in order to prepare for uncertain changes and complexity, as well as to enhance their professionalism (Schon, 1983, p. 133-156). Schon's work aimed to provide a new form of professional development.

Other authors built on Schon's work and incorporated their own understanding of reflection into theory building. For example, Killon and Todnew (1991) further developed Schon's 'reflection-in-action and on-action'. They added 'reflection-for-action' to compliment these as part of the reflection cycle. Rogers (2002, p. 851) interpreted Dewey's reflective thinking theory as a "stream of consciousness, invention and belief" and developed a different cyclical structure of reflection: "presence to experience, description of experience, analysis of experience and intelligent action". However, more recently, reflective practice as a theory has been challenged. Main stream criticism has come from those who argue that reflective theory is over individualistic and has failed to make a connection with "social dimensions" (Kotzee, 2012). Kotzee (2012) stated that reflective practice should not merely be confined to the domain of introspection. Likewise, Kumaravadivelu argued that it should have a connection with "learners, colleagues, planners and administrators" (2003, p. 16). Furthermore, it has been criticised for ignoring the importance of the implicit influence of social rules on practitioners' behaviour (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Kotzee, 2012). Kumaravadivelu (2003) defined reflective practice as a pathway whereby teachers can become intellectually transformed, linking reflective practice closely with the social dimension. Various other authors then gradually began to pay attention to the notion of sharing and cooperation between teachers. Pollard (2008) stressed that reflective teaching could be strengthened through learning with colleagues. However, when reflective practice became a common subject in publications of professional education, authors such as Bradbury *et al.* (2010) began to feel that reflective practice as an approach for mainstream professional development had lost its critical edge (Kotzee, 2012).

At a practical level, many authors have defined specific methods by which to implement reflective practice. Proctor (1993) suggested that reflection could be employed as a tool for evaluation. Francis (1995) suggested using a reflective journal. Elliott (2007), on the other hand, stresses the importance of performing action research to reflect on classroom practice. Wallace (1991) developed a reflective model, which included microteaching as an element aimed to boost trainees' experiential knowledge. According to Wallace (1991), microteaching equips teachers with broader schemata from other colleagues, which, together with teachers' own schema, influence teachers' behaviour in class. Many researchers report the progress teachers made after adopting a development approach involving micro teaching e.g. Golightly (2010), Ismail (2011). However, reflective practice as an idea is also subject to critical scrutiny. As more authors begin to select their best method by which to instigate reflective practice, Galea (2012) points out that reflective practice is increasingly in danger of being so systemised and stereotyped that teachers' own mode of reflection is being lost. Despite the above controversies, reflective practice has evolved from an individual idea to a range of principles and methods; from merely reflecting on practitioners' own teaching, to reflecting on peers' work and the wider social context.

In the light of the above studies, it may be that reflecting on peers' microteaching is an option for developing reflective practice for private college teachers. This is due to the nature of microteaching and its appropriateness for authentic situations. Microteaching, as defined by Wallace (1991), allows trainees to achieve experiential knowledge as a resource for reflection. The procedure normally requires trainees to teach and critically evaluate the teaching session, then re-teach each other. Not only does having teachers micro teach connect them with each other allowing more social support, but it also enables them to more readily share educational resources. Based on this research background, I would like to examine whether reflective practice, and in particular microteaching, could be a useful part of professional development for English language teachers in Chinese private colleges. There are a number of issues, which may affect this, one of which is the views of the teachers on the idea, since reflection requires the co-operation and commitment of the individuals (Wallace, 1991). Indeed, the research into teachers' perceptions and background suggests that this has significant implications on the way they teach (Foley, 2010).

Therefore, to investigate views of English language teachers in private colleges on the use of microteaching as a reflective practice for professional development, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1. What are the views of English language teachers within private colleges in China regarding the idea of microteaching?

RQ2. To what extent do English language teachers within private colleges in China think microteaching could effectively improve their own teaching?

RQ3. Do English language teachers within private colleges in China think the potential exists to adopt microteaching to their professional settings?

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was used. Skype-based semi-structured interviews with 13 questions were undertaken with five teachers. On-line questionnaires were made via using Survey Monkey. The questions were mostly closed. The interview participants were chosen purposively, according to their position and the questionnaire respondents were recommended by the interviewees, based on snowball sampling. In order to mitigate bias thus produced respondents were guaranteed that their information would be kept anonymous and that their personal data would not be released. Thematic coding was proposed for analysing the qualitative data and Excel for the quantitative data. During the research planning stages, an interview and questionnaire were piloted and some modifications subsequently made. Ethical issues were considered: informed consent forms were sent to interviewees and announcement of intent to guarantee the anonymity of the respondents' data was added at the beginning of questionnaire. Research participants' names were to be coded; the data only being handled by me, and protected on my PC. Methodological triangulation, member checking, audit trails and asking other translators to recheck the translated interview transcripts was intended to maintain research validity. In terms of dissemination, the research results will be shared and checked with the interviewees.

In the design stage of the research, a mixed-methods approach was used. The researcher began with the qualitative interviews (Skype-based semi-structured interviews with 13 questions were undertaken with five teachers) as a basis for the online questionnaires: the opinions from the five interviewees were used to produce choices in questionnaires. Mixed-methods research can improve methodological triangulation (Bush, 2012), and can bring meta-inference to bear on the research findings (Hibberts & Johnson, 2012). I have chosen to use mixed-methods in order to enhance the research and maximise validity. Firstly, research into the views of private institute teachers on microteaching in China's private colleges is rare. Thus, a qualitative approach would seem appropriate as it can cover nuanced data and provide a thick description (Duff, 2006). Secondly, the positions and backgrounds of the interviewees differ (one school principle, one teacher trainer, two experienced teachers and one novice teacher). As a result, each is likely to have different perspectives. While they may hold similar views about microteaching, their reasons for this are likely to vary. I have also used a quantitative research method (questionnaire) to collect more data about views of micro teaching in private colleges as there is a lack of research on this subject and a survey is likely to provide a wider perspective. Quantitative data is more rigorous, and so to some extent may compensate for the "lack of methodological rigour" involved in qualitative research (Dornyei, 2007, p. 41).

I used purposive sampling for the selection interviewees. According to Teddlie and Yu (2007) (cited by Cohen *et al.* 2011, p. 156), purposive sampling is undertaken with the aim of "achieving representativeness" and "enabling comparison". This may appear to be limited by the small sample of the study, however, owing to their varying backgrounds the interviewees' understanding of micro teaching is anticipated to be different, which is likely to add depth to the research. Being in the UK limits my ability to contact a large number of teachers in China, thus, on-line questionnaire participants will be selected based on recommendations by interviewees. This is snowball sampling, whereby friends introduce friends and acquaintances recommend acquaintances (Browne, 2005). Snowball sampling could be used to access populations that would otherwise be difficult to approach (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Nominated sampling was used in cooperation with snowball sampling technique to select questionnaire respondents, in order to increase the response rate. According to Morse (2004, p. 885), 'nominated and snowball sampling is particular useful when groups are hard to identify or may not volunteer or respond to a notice advertising for participants'. On the other hand, by nominating respondents from different provinces and cities in China, we could collect more ideas and improve respondent triangulation (McFee, 1992). As a result, fifty questionnaire answers were collected: a response rate of 77%.

Faced with the large and diversified interview data in this study, codes and categories need to be concluded and compared for conclusions. These are the functions of content analysis concluded by Cohen et al. (2011). Instead of manually analysing qualitative data, Nvivo9 was used. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) claim that Nivivo is strong in analysing comparative data from subgroups in hierarchy. In this study the hierarchy, though small in number, is consisted of school leaders, teacher trainers, teachers, interns and others. Moreover, it has strong functionality in transcribing and doing matrix queries. Quantifying qualitative data is recommended by Chi (1997) as a good way to analyse complicated data. SPSS is recommended by many authors (e.g. Newby, 2010) to analyse quantitative data. I used SPSS to calculate Chi-square in order to test if the frequencies of choices of different groups in question 7 were achieved by chance (Thomas, 2009) and whether each group is different from others in terms of their choices (Newby, 2010).

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

A. Participants' Views and Experience of Microteaching

All five interviewees held common views of the purpose, process, and frequency of microteaching. Although the interviewees all stated that one purpose of microteaching was professional development, they had different views about other purposes. Headteacher B thought microteaching should concern 'the position he wants to take', assisting in the recruitment of new teachers. Two respondents thought microteaching should be a salary evaluation system. Headteacher A claimed: 'we link this (microteaching) to their (teachers') salary to make it more serious.' Similarly, Teacher B said 'microteaching is connected with salary.' Some schools even consider microteaching to be a supervision system. For example, teacher B claimed: 'Thursday is a chance for school leaders to check and supervise if teachers' lessons have

been prepared well.' The respondents' consensus was that microteaching should include teachers teaching and getting feedback on their teaching. However, their assumptions about processes differ: separating new and experienced teachers, arranging workshops, seminars, impromptu demos, or using a grading system. Although all the interviewees implied microteaching should be a consecutive activity, they suggested frequencies were as different as weekly, monthly and even three-monthly.

The interviewees did not hold the same opinions about the focus of microteaching. However, both headteachers highlighted that one of the focuses of microteaching was to nurture teachers' teaching skills. For example, according to Headteacher A, 'for those in the first level, they need to learn from microteaching. Without microteaching, new teachers cannot improve much'; Headteacher B claimed that 'progress could be made only through repetitive practice and suggestions.' Colleagues who served in the School C implied that microteaching should focus on equal and friendly communication. For example, Headteacher B stated 'old teachers can also take this chance to share some of their troubles in teaching to let others realise and offer help'; teacher C claimed 'It increases the internal communication.' Besides these similarities, they had their own suggestions for focus, including supervision, motivation and correction.

The questionnaire was based on the consistent answers in the interviews about purpose, focus, frequency and process. An open question was added to collect data about ideal microteaching models. As the statistics show, besides the choice 'others', each of the remaining five choices were supported by at least 70% of respondents. 80% of respondents agreed with the School C teachers' consensus: that the aim is 'to communicate and share' equally and friendly. Three respondents provided details to the choice 'others': 'microteaching should contain records of each teachers' teaching for future sharing'; 'it should include a competition regulation' and 'it should include a session for colleagues to increase their mutual trust'.

B. The Effectiveness of Microteaching

a. The perceived strength

Interviewees perceived that the strengths of microteaching were in three groups: enhancing school management and development, cooperation with curriculum and courses, and teacher learning. The two headteachers emphasised the amplified functions of microteaching when combined with a fixed course and curriculum. In terms of the strengths of microteaching in school management and development, Headteacher A and Teacher B believed it could succeed in the form of school leaders' supervising teachers, and teacher B also claimed that microteaching could help the school 'reach a highly unified standard in teaching'. The perceived strength for teachers' learning is where interviewees mostly agreed. However, their answers covered a variety of points: motivating teachers, sharing and communicating, reflecting, practicing teaching skills, chances to observe and receive feedback, inspiration by others' strengths, familiarizing environment and regulation, enhancing foundation, combining theory with practice, building up confidence and accumulating experiences. In the questionnaire results, each of the perceived strengths was to some extent agreed upon. Among all these choices, 'share and communicate with each other' and 'learn from others' strengths and get inspired' were mostly agreed upon. 70% agreed that microteaching offered a good opportunity to reflect on themselves, identifying microteaching as a reflective activity. Only one participant provided answers to the 'others', which was that 'microteaching can improve the fellowship and partnership experienced by teachers in one specific department'.

b. The perceived weakness of microteaching

The weaknesses of microteaching could be grouped into five points: the innate problems of microteaching, negative effects of feedback and suggestions, psychological stress, abilities that microteaching cannot nurture, and that microteaching cannot represent the whole picture of teacher training. The items listed are general and nebulous categories associated with weakness, and each item contains a variety of sub points. As shown in the questionnaire, each of the items was supported to some degree. However, 64% opined: 'the negative effect of feedback and suggestions' should be phrased as microteaching weaknesses. Only 18% of participants supported 'abilities microteaching cannot nurture'. Questionnaire respondents' ideas regarding specific stress, innate problems of microteaching, activities to integrate with microteaching, abilities microteaching cannot nurture and other weakness of microteaching were also collected as supplementary for interviews.

c. The potential of microteaching

All the interviewees agreed on the necessity to develop microteaching. Some of them even gave preconditions and some highlighted the importance of microteaching. While in the questionnaires, only 4% thought it was impossible, 50% agreed that it was promising and 46% insisted it was promising unless the preconditions were fulfilled. A 5×3 Chi-square analysis showed that the statistical significance of participants' position and their agreement and recognition of the potential of microteaching was at $p < 0.05$ level with the $x^2 (8, 50) = 18.689$, $p = 0.017$.

d. The perceived constraints

The constraints perceived by respondents appeared to fall into two general categories: hardware and teachers' own reasons. In terms of teachers' own reasons, two head-teachers emphasised that teachers' preparedness could be constraints. Another reason given by head-teacher B and Teacher A was the negative competition between teachers. In terms of hardware constraints, five sub groups were extracted from the nodes: facility and fund, number of teachers, professionalism of supervisor, support and emphasis from school, and whether it was combined with other activities. In the questionnaires, 68% agreed on 'personal reasons': teachers' competition, and teachers' preparedness. By

comparison, regarding hardware reasons, 50% and 52% respectively supported 'the support from school' and 'the professionalism of supervisors', while the remaining items were not largely supported. Only one respondent chose 'others' and suggested 'the stereotypical mode of the process.'

V. Discussion

A. What Are the Views of English Language Teachers within Private Colleges in China Regarding Microteaching?

a. Microteaching in different contexts of private colleges

Besides the consensus, there are different interpretations by each interviewee in microteaching. One of the examples introduced indicated the 'purpose of microteaching': in the contexts of Headteacher A and Teacher B, microteaching as both a salary and a supervision related system, while for Headteacher B, microteaching can be a tool during the recruitment process. The difference requires consideration of the type of school and the characteristics of human resources: Headteacher A and Teacher B serve School A and School B respectively, both of which typically employ full-time staff, therefore, microteaching is a useful management device as a way of determining salary and of guaranteeing some level of supervision. In contrast, the teachers of the domestic examination department at School C, where Headteacher B works are mostly part-time teachers, hence using microteaching as part of the process for interviewing new teachers is a beneficial use of time and human resources. Microteaching is well suited to all these processes and contexts. This is a finding consistent with that of McGarvey and Swallow (1986, p. 3), who claimed that microteaching was symbolised by its remarkable flexibility and capacity to 'be varied as desired to suit local needs and conditions'.

b. The component of microteaching in the eyes of English language teachers

Together with the five interviewees' shared view of microteaching, Teacher A and Teacher C who had undertaken postgraduate study in the UK thought it would be better to arrange a tutor modelling session prior to microteaching. These results are reminiscent of Wallace's (1991, p. 93) division of microteaching into the 'briefing', 'teaching', 'critiquing' and 're-teaching' stages. Differing from once a week (Wallace, 1991), teachers A and C claimed that micro-teaching should be fortnightly, monthly or even three-monthly, to allow teachers time to digest and practice what they have learned.

c. The mixed-approach feature of microteaching in private colleges in China

Microteaching was thought by 46% of the respondents as teachers practicing their teaching skills. To some extent this suggests that teachers regard microteaching as beneficial for the acquisition of skills (McGarvey & Swallow, 1986). 90% of respondents felt that microteaching could help them reflect. Reflection and evaluation of teachers' own teaching is what McIntyre et al. (1977) reported as a cognitive structural approach to microteaching. 34% of respondents thought that microteaching could help teachers relate theory to practice, which is what Morrison and McIntyre (1969) claimed as symbolic of the social psychological approach to microteaching. Furthermore, Guelcher et al. (1970) claimed that a dynamic skills approach of microteaching could also be seen in what Headteacher A and B advocated: combining microteaching with a fixed curriculum. In Teacher B's context, as mentioned in group activities some classroom management skills were taken into consideration in microteaching, thus it can be seen as a feature of Sydney's Micro skills (Turney, 1973).

B. To What Extent Do English Language Teachers within Private Colleges in China Think That Microteaching Could Improve Their Own Teaching?

Research participants believe to different degrees that microteaching could improve their teaching. However, the participants also agreed that it is problematic in five respects, as the results show. Interestingly, some participants agreed that microteaching could make them feel uncomfortable, contradicting Wallace's (1991) original intention: that microteaching is less stressful than a real class setting. The participants think that there should be other activities accompanying microteaching, which is consistent with Wallace's (1991) assumption. However, he argued that all the activities should be arranged in a spectrum from low risk and cost to high, while the data in this research shows that teachers mentioned activities like reading, brainstorming and even having dinner together. Some of the participants claimed that microteaching does not help nurture abilities like communication with pupils' parents, and some claimed it does not improve teachers' charisma. These comments are probably related to private school culture in China: in some schools like School C, teachers' personal charisma is considered to attract students; some private schools specialises in primary and secondary education in order to keep their pupils well supervised, parents may request teachers to text-message or telephone them.

C. Do English Language Teachers within Private Colleges in China Think the Potential Exists to Adopt Microteaching in Their Professional Settings?

According to the research findings, only 4% of the questionnaire respondents do not think microteaching has potential. This result is significant at $p < 0.05$ level. Regarding constraints, there are some points worthy of explanation. To understand the point 'self protection and negative competition among teachers', the specific culture needs to be considered: in some private schools, the number of classes and the level of payment for each period is determined by

students' satisfaction rate and the extent of students' progress as shown by their midterm grade and their final exams; teachers in such competitive circumstances always work hard to maintain their competitive edge.

VI. CONCLUSION

Current study demonstrates that teachers from private institutes in China are aware of different aspects of microteaching, but some of them, due to their leaders' and schools' respective contexts and culture, deem the function and influence of microteaching recommended by researchers from western world are not adequate to improving teaching in a Chinese context. More means of communication, such as conferences and associations related to private institutes might address this issue. Furthermore, research into the relationships between microteaching, teacher comfort and accountability are indicated.

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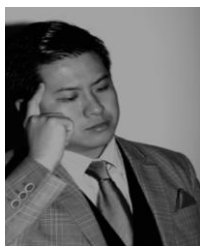
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