

Professional development through CoPs: a case study of a Chinese EFL teacher

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This paper reports how an EFL teacher transformed her learning through completing a professional development program based on a transformative model of professional development using a Community of Practice (CoP) framework. To achieve this aim, a case study was designed to collect data from multiple sources. Data were collected from: (1) interviews with the teacher who volunteered to participate in the CoP; (2) audio transcriptions of ten professional development meetings, and (3) blogs and a follow-up electronic interview six months after she attended the PD program.

It was found that the participant went through a significant evolution in her learning. She came to the program as an “outsider” and a listener who was willing to learn new practice from the other teachers. She experienced various cycles during which she implemented what she learned in the meetings and achieved transformation, which included both adaptation and adoption of new strategies in her teaching. The findings revealed that the process of teacher transformative learning in a CoP was complex, cyclical.

The broader study of this paper is an example of how a professional development model using a Community of Practice framework could be implemented for EFL teacher transformative learning in one Chinese university. The study proposed a model, then refined and extended this model which might be applied to other research contexts.

Keywords: Professional Development, EFL teacher, China

Introduction

Education reforms and new English Language Teaching (ELT) syllabus in Chinese tertiary education advocated a more communicative way of language teaching which has brought about the need for a shift in EFL pedagogies towards a more student-centred and communicative approach (MOE, 2000). As a result Chinese EFL teachers in tertiary education needed to learn how to design and conduct oral communication activities. However, ways to improve teacher quality were problematic in the current Chinese situation due to the lack of qualified teachers and inadequate PD programs (Dai, 2008; Guo, 2005). In this context, more research was needed to seek new models of teacher PD

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which focused on meeting teachers' needs in regards to developing strategies for teaching oral communication skills. The broad study of this paper addressed this problem through developing and implementing a teacher professional development model using a Community of Practice framework for sustainable teacher learning.

Chinese tertiary EFL teachers were provided with limited opportunities for PD, however, due to recent government initiatives for implementing changes in education and ELT, this study may contribute a deeper understanding of teacher transformative learning for the implementation of education reforms regarding student oral discussion skills. In this paper, findings from a case study is presented to provide a nuanced understanding of the process and a detailed account of an individual teacher's learning and transformation during her participation in the PD program.

Theoretical framework

The broad study of this paper based theoretically on transformative learning, teacher reflective practice, and the Community of Practice model.

Transformative learning is viewed by Mezirow (2000) as “a way of problem solving by defining a problem or by redefining or reframing the problem” (p. 20). That is, the process of teacher learning begins with the identifying a problem in professional that needs to be solved. Such a problem, for example, may be that a teacher could not manage students who behaved badly in a class. The main process to achieve transformation, according to Mezirow (2000) is to undertake reflection on the previous ideas or assumptions in the example provided.

As the central activity of transformative learning, critical reflection refers to the process of adults being critically aware of how and why their previous beliefs or assumptions have come to be obstacles to the way they understand their practice (Mezirow, 1981). This is also a vital feature of adult learning in education field, and the importance of engaging professionals in reflection has been widely recognized (e.g., Dewey, 1933; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Schön, 1983). Schön (1983) encouraged teachers to become reflective practitioners. He argued that for teachers, like other professionals, effective decisions made about teaching are based upon reflection on their practice. Schön's (1983) definition of reflection-on-action refers to the kind of reflection that may take place when teachers think back through recent practice. Reflection often occurs after class when teachers recall what happened in their classes and this helps teachers to explore what they did in class and question the activities and strategies they can use for future practice (Schön, 1983). Therefore, helping teachers with reflection-on-action should be a focus of teacher professional development programs, since teacher reflection in those programs is usually based on what they have done in the classroom (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Freeman & Richards, 1996).

The model that the broad study was based on is the Community of Practice model (CoP) which involves teacher learning through transformative learning activities in CoPs. The CoP model was defined as groups of professionals who share a repertoire of resources

while participating in a process of collaborative learning, which promotes the solution to problems (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, et al., 2002; Wick, 2000). The three main features of CoPs include mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). For example, a group of teachers who share a concern or a passion for improving their teaching meet regularly for communication (mutual engagement) to share their knowledge and experiences (shared repertoire) to improve their teaching (a joint enterprise).

The broad study of this paper designed and implemented a model for teacher transformative learning using a CoP framework. The preliminary model synthesises the elements that have been found in the pertinent literature to influence teacher transformative learning. This model comprises four stages which involve teachers learning in reflection and in group discussions with colleagues in ways that assist teachers to improve their practice of organising student oral communication activities in English.

Research Design

This study included four tertiary English language teachers participated in a PD program which involved them in weekly communicating within the CoP on issues of organising student oral communication activities. It was conducted in the English department of a Chinese University in 2007. Due to ethical considerations, the name of the university is concealed and given the pseudonym of “University L”. Four teachers participated in the PD program which was designed based on the transformative model using a CoP framework. They were named as Kate, SJ, Chelsea, and Josh. Table 1 presents the background information and qualifications of these four participants.

Table 1: Participants’ background (n=4)

Participants*	Gender	Age	Years of Teaching	Qualification
Josh	Male	27	4	BA
SJ	Female	30	7	MA
Chelsea	Female	31	8	MA
Kate	Female	33	10	MA

*The researcher, ‘Ping’ was also a participant/observer in the CoP.

In the meetings, the participants shared readings relating to how to organise oral discussion activities in class, reflected on their teaching through watching video recordings of their teaching practice and through discussions and communications within the group. This paper explores how one participant in the broad study, Kate, learned through completing the PD program for a nuanced understanding of her transformative learning in the CoP.

Kate’s story

When Kate participated in this study, she was 33 years old and was the most experienced teacher among the participants. She graduated from a university in the same city where University L is located and she completed her Master's degree in English literature in Japan. At the time of the study, she had been teaching at University L for two years. Compared to the other participants who had undertaken their Bachelor's degree at University L, Kate was a newcomer to the English department.

From the interviews and observation of Kate during the PD program, it was found that she was very gentle and modest. She spoke with a low soft voice and appeared to be quiet in public. When she entered the program, she was quiet in the group especially when compared to the other participants. She listened to the others attentively and noted what she thought was important. After the PD program, she maintained email contact with the researcher on a social basis.

In the following sections, Kate's prior experiences, values, and practice are first introduced, followed by her reflective activities and an account of how she developed a sense of belonging to this CoP. Kate's learning and adopting of new practice are then highlighted.

Prior experience

When Kate went to teach in University L, she regarded herself as a newcomer and was not confident about her teaching practice, yet she had been exposed to language learning in Japan, which inevitably affected the way she taught in class. In the preliminary interview, Kate explained in *Meeting 1* the reasons why she had not completed PD activities before:

Because I just started to teach here, I don't know how to improve my teaching, or from where to start. I am not very clear about what kind of PD activities I should attend. (KatePrePD: L85/87)¹

Although Kate was a teacher with ten years' teaching experience and recently back from overseas, she was a newcomer to the department. Thus she was unaware of the expectations for teaching competence in the department, did not have a sense of what she needed to do to improve her teaching, and did not know how to seek assistance. In her case, despite her prior teaching experience, she acted more like a novice teacher within the group.

When Kate participated in the PD meetings, new ideas from the shared readings and other members challenged her policy-driven practices. First comes the report on her reflective activities during the program.

Reflection that supports change

¹ This quote is from line 85 to 87 of the transcripts from Kate's preliminary interview.

The participants of this study reflected on their teaching practices by watching video recordings of their teaching and through sharing readings over several meetings. In Kate's case, her reflection was particularly stimulated by watching the video recording of her own teaching practice.

In Meeting 4 after watching herself teaching, Kate shared her reflections with her colleagues:

Kate: First, as for the students' pronunciation modelling, we prepared material in advance, and then I gave them feedback. These were all what I had learned from you people. And then I asked the students to teach the text. It was not as good as what I had expected. They were not capable to control the class...(M4L118)²

In this excerpt, Kate explained how and why she organised pronunciation modelling. She acknowledged that she put into practice what she learned from the other participants during the PD meetings. Her comments revealed that she had high expectations for the activity which were not fully realized in the classroom. Her response to the limited success was to blame the students rather than to question her own teaching. After she was encouraged to reflect more deeply on the excerpt using the PMI strategy (De Bono, 1994) that she was able to move beyond this position to consider why this practice might not be appropriate.

Kate: Let me do it first. ***The Plus***: I tried the peer-evaluation in my class to give students feedback. ***Minus*** has been raised by you people. I asked the student to stand in the front while giving her feedback. It was really ***embarrassing***... (Italicized and emphasized by the researcher) (M4137/139)

Watching the video, then engaging in structured reflection and responding to feedback from the other teachers led Kate to realise that it was "embarrassing" for students to receive feedback while standing in the front of the classroom. In the excerpt, Kate also became aware that her voice was too low in volume and that it was hard for the students who sat at the back of the classroom to hear her. This indicated that while reflecting on the video recording of her teaching, Kate managed to identify a problem she had not been aware of in class and felt comfortable sharing this with colleagues.

Six months after she completed this PD program, Kate reported in the electronic interview:

We (i.e. teachers in the PD program) watched the videos of our own class. It's really a good way to reflect on our teaching, to find out problems, and to discuss about the solutions to these problems. For example, while watching the video of my class, the other members pointed out that I only faced the very student who made mistakes in her presentation to correct her mistakes

² The quotation is from line 118 of the transcripts of *Meeting 4*.

neglecting the other students. I hadn't realized this problem before. So this is a very good practice (Kate: ePostPD)³.

The fact that she emphasized this incident six months after completing the PD program shows that those comments had left a lasting impression on her and implied a significant shift in her thinking about effective teacher practice. Kate regarded reflection in the PD meetings as a helpful way to identify problems and initiate discussion on solutions to problems. This response aligned with the purpose of reflective practice as the prelude to change, as documented in the literature (Schön, 2003).

Furthermore, the attendance at the ten meetings gave Kate, a teacher who was comparatively new to the English department, an opportunity to develop a sense of belonging to the group.

Belonging to this group

Since Kate had taught at University L for only two years at the time of this study, when she first entered the PD program she tried to merge into the local teaching context, rather than appear to be different. At that time, she wanted to teach in ways similar to the other teachers to show that she was 'one of them'. This also related culturally to the Confucian philosophy: one should always be ready to learn from others (Confucius, 500 B.C.E). Therefore, it was not surprising that Kate was ready to learn from other participants in the PD program:

Kate: I didn't group them. Two for each class.

SJ: Did the four of them comment on the same thing? Or they focused on different aspects?

Kate: Some on stress, some on sound, I *learned from* Ping... (M4L32/35)
(Italicized and emphasized by the researcher)

As she regularly attended the PD meetings, Kate became more familiar with the activities and felt more comfortable about sharing her practice with the other participants. She started to implement the strategies she had learned in the PD meetings and she gradually felt that she belonged to this group. She posted the following on her blog:

How time flies! *We*'ve already had all the meetings. I feel a pity when *we* have completed all the sections. Thanks for the efforts of all my dear colleagues, I have learned a lot and benefitted a lot. I look forward to the coming year. It is sure to be better in the next year. I hereby wish everybody a Happy New Year (KateBlog29/12)⁴! (Italicized and emphasized by the researcher)

³ The quotation is from Kate's post-PDelectronic interview.

⁴ It refers to the posting Kate made online on December 29.

Although this quote is partly Kate's evaluation of this PD program, her repeated use of "we" to refer to the other "dear colleagues" signified her appreciation of collegial feedback. Kate's journey of transformative learning is discussed in the following section.

Transformative learning

The goal of this PD program was to help teachers to enhance their knowledge and develop their teaching practice of student oral communication activities. Yang's participation in the CoP meetings for ten weeks took her on a significant journey of learning. Yang's learning is illustrated graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that Yang brought to this PD program her prior learning experiences, possibly because that was the most common topic that she could share with the others. Her concerns were about learning new ways of teaching from others and about the teaching the large number of students in her class – which she saw as an obstacle for organising communication activities. After the initial two meetings, the first change occurred in the form of adapting a new activity into her classroom. The use of this activity indicated that when Yang found the new strategy she learned from the CoP meetings to be practical, and was willing to take the risk of implementing it in her class. Her learning in this CoP was not simply to adopt the new activities but also to adapt them to her classroom teaching. By *Meeting 3* Yang had achieved one cycle of transformation.

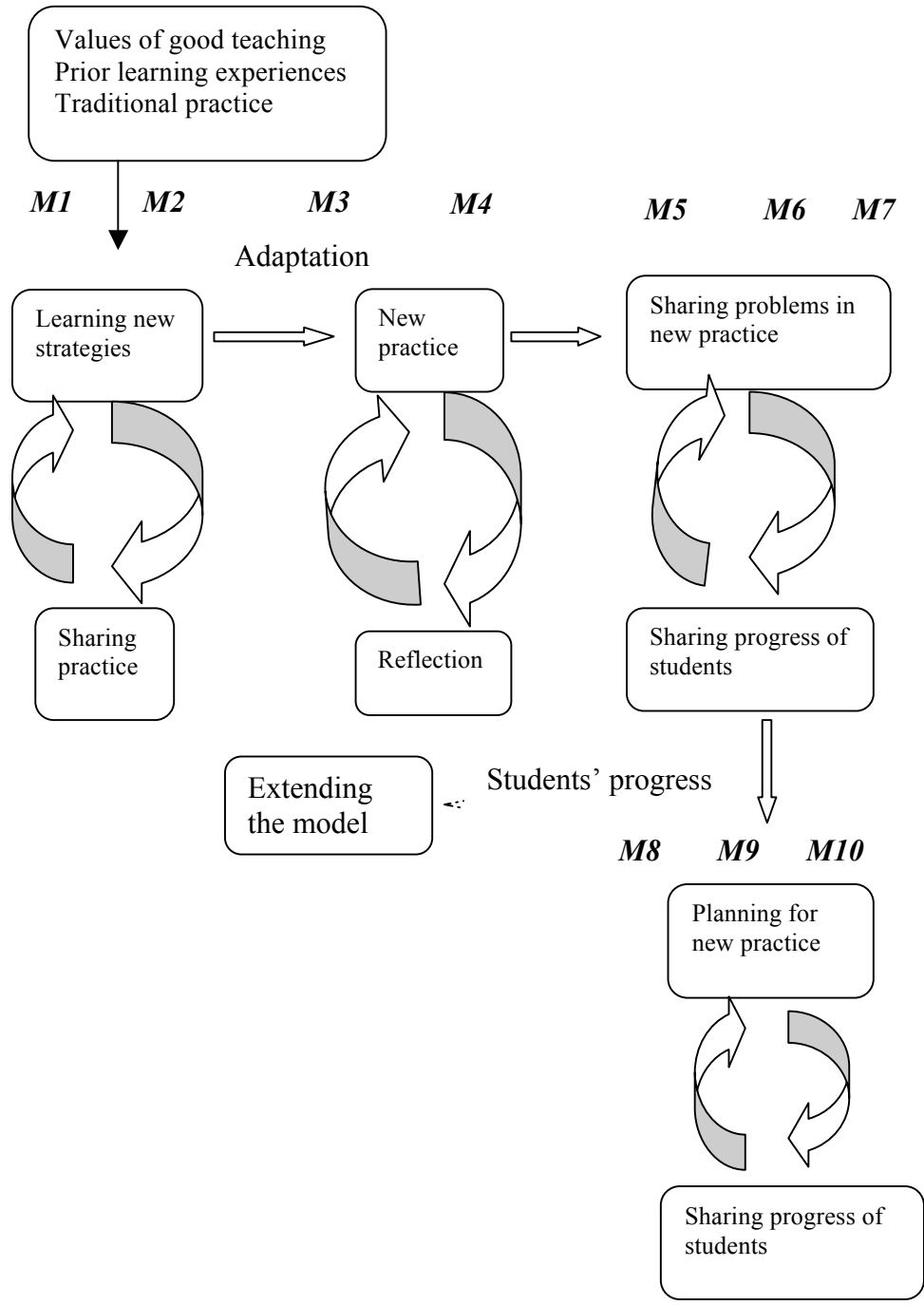


Figure 1: Yang's cycles of learning

In *Meeting 4*, Yang's reflection was supported by watching the video recording of her teaching. Such structured reflection helped her to identify problems in her teaching and seek solutions to improve her practice. The challenge she encountered in the middle of the PD program related to her students' English competence. Reflection occurred again

when Yang reported her implementation of the peer-evaluation activity, which was another cycle of learning that Yang experienced.

In *Meeting 5*, Yang reported her adaptation of the peer-evaluation strategy with the modelling routine. While sharing the problems identified in her class, she negotiated meaning with the other teachers to seek solutions. In this way, she completed another cycle as indicated by the model. After six meetings, Yang had tried new strategies and modified new and old strategies in her classroom. In this case, transformative learning occurred when Yang accommodated what she learned during the PD sessions to her classroom teaching. In *Meeting 8*, Yang planned to implement a new activity, silent discussion. However, because she was behind with her teaching schedule, she did not have time to implement the silent discussion activity in her class. This reflected a common problem that teachers encountered in their PD: they had to improve their teaching while carrying out the required teaching schedule. So her learning and implementations were hindered by external factors.

Yang then continued to share in *Meeting 9* her students' progress in oral communication activities. Finally, in *Meeting 10*, Yang helped to summarise all ten meetings and expressed her willingness to extend this model of learning into a different context. Her positive attitude towards PD indicated that Yang valued the learning that had resulted from completing this PD program and she was willing to share her learning experiences with other teachers beyond this group.

According to transformative learning theory, it takes time for an adult learner to adapt to new practice and achieve transformation (Mezirow, 2000). In Yang's case, she changed her thinking and some of her teaching practices within the ten week PD program. In this sense, the goal of this PD program, which was to help teachers learn new strategies to improve their teaching practices, was achieved.

Discussion

According to transformative learning theory, it takes time for an adult learner to adapt to new practice and achieve transformation (Mezirow, 2000). In Kate's case, she changed her thinking and some of her teaching practices within the 10 week PD program. In this sense, the goal of this PD program, which was to help teachers learn new strategies to improve their teaching practices, was achieved.

Kate was willing to learn from the other teachers when she came to the program. As the PD program progressed, Kate gradually felt more comfortable about sharing her practice with the other participants, seeking advice and offering feedback to her colleagues, engaging in discussions with the other group members until she felt that she belonged to this group and started to use the word "we" on the blog to refer to the group of participants. This finding aligns with the literature about membership in a CoP, that is, it takes time for a new member to feel a sense of belonging to the community (Wenger, et al., 2002). It further supports the results from the study of Laksov et al. (2008) that

developing collaboration and dialogue among members of CoPs is important for establishing a community.

In the meetings following her implementation attempts, Kate shared problems with the other group members and sought advice to help her further modify her practice and make improvements. This aligns with Richard's and Farrell's (2005) argument that many teachers adapt certain activities according to their own needs rather than directly adopt what they learn from their PD. This finding also extends Rao's (2002) research findings in that this Chinese EFL teacher, Kate, managed to combine the new communicative activities with the traditional routine classroom practice prescribed by the department. Furthermore, as a CoP participant, Kate sustained her learning after completing the PD program and continued to use the peer-evaluation activity in her class. The analysis of Kate's experiences during and after the PD program adds understanding of teacher transformative learning in PD.

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