

# Teacher Learning Community and EFL Teacher Professional Development

Hongmei Han and Jinghua Wang  
Hebei University, Baoding, China  
Email: cathyhbm@126.com, Wangjh2808@sina.com.cn

**Abstract**—This study explores the impact of teacher learning community on EFL teachers' professional development. The participants are 17 EFL teachers from Hebei University in China. A year-long study was conducted on these teachers' group learning activities through participatory observation and in-depth interviews. The preliminary results are as follows: 1) Generally speaking, through conversation, interaction and online peer evaluation in learning community, participant teachers have improved professionally in terms of critical thinking, academic writing, reflective thinking and research awareness; 2) In learning activities of the community, the experienced teachers focused more on the construction of knowledge regarding research methodology, through interaction with others and participation in teaching-based research activities, to reconstruct their knowledge about teaching and research; while the novice teachers placed more emphasis on the reconstruction of knowledge regarding pedagogical theories and the way these theories are applied in teaching practice, through social interaction with other teachers.

**Index Terms**—teacher learning community, EFL teacher, teacher development

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to socio-cultural theory, learning is a process of social interaction between people and their social contexts (Lantolf, 2006). In specific learning situations, individual teachers share knowledge and experience through dialogue and negotiation with others, and reconstruct their cognition. When teachers as learners, construct knowledge through cooperation with their peers, such as communication and discussion, the learning effect is strengthened (Tang & Lam, 2014).

In recent years, relevant studies have been conducted on research-based teacher learning community, which highlighted the positive effects of the socialized context of teacher learning groups on teacher professional development (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Grossman *et al.*, 2001; Wen, 2011; Wen & Ren, 2012). The interactive group learning mode has become an effective way for teachers' professional development. At the theoretical level, a number of studies have discussed the characteristics of teacher cooperation (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), interactive development mode (Wen & Ren, 2012), knowledge construction (kuusiasari, 2014;

Tang, 2011); orientation in cooperative learning (Saleh, 2011). At the level of empirical study, a number of studies examined teachers' attitude, willingness, ability and influencing factors (Clarke, 2009; Guo & Xu, 2015). These studies indicate that teacher cooperation can promote teachers' professional development.

As a common model of teacher development, practice community can enhance the learning motivation of teachers and learners, promote peer cooperation and dialogue, improve professional quality, and ultimately enhance the effect of teaching practice (Vescio *et al.* 2008; Tseng & Kuo, 2014; Warwas & Helm, 2018; Wen & Ren, 2012; Hu, Lang & Jiang, 2018). There have been many studies on Cooperative Learning in Teachers' learning community. A study conducted by Wen & Ren (2012) reports a qualitative study on the facilitating effects of an interactive model on EFL researchers' professional development. The findings indicate that the interactive model improves the researchers' interpersonal communication skill and their ability of integrating theory with practice. Through participant observation of a tertiary English teachers' project-based community of practice (CoP) and informal interviews, Hu, Lang & Jiang (2018) investigates teachers' cooperative learning in the CoP and its influence on their professional development. Their study indicates that teachers' cooperative learning features various behavior patterns of communicating emotions, assigning tasks, delivering messages, sharing knowledge, making plans and rules, and seeking for or offering help. It has influences on English teachers' personal, social and professional development to different degrees.

It can be seen that researchers have conducted more in-depth discussion on teacher cooperation and professional community from theory to practice. However, the research on research-based cooperative learning of online and offline teacher practice community is still rare. There is lack of in-depth empirical research, especially qualitative research on the process of teachers' academic research and learning. Furthermore, the way different types of teacher learning groups shape the professional development of teachers requires further exploration. On this basis, a case study is carried out to collect qualitative data and explore the impact of teacher learning community on their cognition and research practice, which is a beneficial attempt in this respect.

---

Manuscript received December 15, 2020; revised February 1, 2021.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study explores the impact of teacher learning community on EFL teachers' professional development. The participants are 17 EFL teachers from Hebei University in China. A year-long study was conducted on teachers' group learning activities through participatory observation, in-depth interviews and reflective journals. The research aims to answer the following two questions: 1. What is the impact of the learning community on EFL teachers' professional development? 2. Are there any differences between novice teachers and experienced teachers in their process of professional development within the context of learning community? If so, what are the characteristics of the development patterns of the two groups of teachers?

### A. Participatory Observation

In the process of participating in community activities, researchers observe the participant teachers from the perspective of "insiders", observe the attendance of teachers, the participation of teachers in group presentation, group discussion and interaction, noting down the performance of individual teachers, and make relevant records. The observations were supplemented by field notes taken as the researcher was observing the learning activities.

### B. Reflective Journal

Reflective journal was used to explore the behavior, feelings, and thoughts of participant teachers. Based on the results of the group discussion, participant teachers were asked to write reflection journals to explain personal thinking about group learning activities in teacher learning community. Key issues covered in reflective journals include teachers' perceptions about group presentation and discussion, such as ideas, problems, and suggestions for improving group discussion activities. The researchers collected reflection journals and gave feedback before each group meeting to discuss the next improvement plan. The reflective process was found to be an effective tool for supporting teachers to critically think about their learning experience and changes that might take place in their learning process, thus providing data for the researcher to analyze emerging viewpoints regarding the impact of the learning community on teachers' professional development.

### C. Case Study

According to years of teaching and research experience of participant teachers, two novice teachers and two experienced teachers were selected for case study to investigate their characteristics and changes in the process of professional development. The interview data were analyzed using the method of content analysis (King *et al*, 2019; Lindlof, 2019).

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Findings of Reflective Journal

Through the content analysis of teachers' reflective journal, it is found that through the cooperation and

discussion among team members, the professional development of teachers has been greatly enhanced, which is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

#### 1) Critical reading

Most teachers (88%) think that participating in research community activities can greatly promote their ability of critical reading. In the process of reading research essays, they learned to analyze and summarize the author's ideas, and comment on the research design of the studies reported in the essays. In the reflective journal, Zhang asserted that learning in the community is a process of summarizing and reflecting on the research essays, "Before reading academic essays, I need to consult the author's previous publications, so as to briefly understand the author's background, academic achievements and major views. This helps me to find a proper perspective for critical reading." Zhao expressed the same feeling: "An article that seemed to be very obscure has become much easier for me to understand after group learning and discussion. Learning with peers in a community gave me enlightenment in analyzing relevant literature. After preparing and giving presentations based on the thorough analysis of an academic essay, I find it easier to understand the relevant theories and methods. In a sense, what I have learned in the learning community is more than an essay."

#### 2) Academic writing

Most teachers (63%) believe that the group presentation and discussion activities in the community expand their ideas of academic essay writing. Xu expressed the influence of academic reading, "in the analysis, the presenter summarized the framework of the article, and introduced the contents in detail. By analyzing the relevant literature through the inherent writing template, readers can see the context and structure of the article more clearly." Lu mentioned that "The presenters' detailed explanation of the article has given me a preliminary outline of the overall structure of the essay. I have also enhanced my understanding of the ideas, methods, research design and data collection in study reported in the essay." It is clearly shown that participant teachers were actively engaged in the learning process. They broadened their insights and have developed better ideas for their research questions and methods.

At the same time, as the organizer of the research community activities, the author collected the research essays of participant teachers, evaluated the content and structure of these papers, and put forward suggestions for revision. Based on the analysis of the essays submitted by participant teachers, most of them have made remarkable progress in summarizing and evaluating relevant studies. For instance, in the literature review section, they can point out the limitations as well as the advantages of the previous studies, and put forward suggestions for further research.

#### 3) Reflective thinking

The majority of the participant teachers (86%) mentioned in the reflective journal that after the group discussion, they take the initiative to reflect on their own

teaching process, keep record of their problems in classroom practice, analyze the reasons and propose solutions. In the reflective journal, Xu said, "Since first time I participated in group learning, I have been writing reflective journals. I have developed great interest in exploring new perspectives regarding teaching design, methods and classroom management experience. I keep record of the students' problems with language learning, analyze the reasons and provide solutions based on the theories and ideas I learned in teacher learning community. I find it helpful to do so, especially in terms of improving my problem-solving and classroom management skills." This shows that constant reflection on learning experience motivated participant teachers to seek solutions to problems, explore better teaching strategies and refine their teaching ideas and practice. Lu reported similar experience: "Group learning and discussion help expand my knowledge about research methods. In addition, I find that writing reflection is really good. It is also a process of internalization while writing and summarizing what I have learned." This further indicates that teacher learning community is supposed to provide more opportunities for member teachers to learn and research because teachers need such exchanges and discussions to develop understanding and formulate ideas about academic research.

#### *4) Research awareness*

Most of the participant teachers (75%) mentioned that participation in the community's group presentation and discussion activities promoted their awareness about academic research. They tend to apply into research practice what they have learned in teacher learning community. Three novice teachers mentioned that they had relatively weak awareness of academic research, and they had no idea about how to actively conduct research in a certain field, but the learning experience in the teacher learning community has improved their initiative in doing academic research. As Mr. Gao said, "Previously, I had a vague idea about the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research, especially qualitative research, which was rarely touched. But After doing academic reading and group presentation, it became clear to me that quantitative research is to test theory, while qualitative research is to establish theory. Recently, I am planning to apply for a research project. This report has given me great inspiration, which makes me decide that this research design is mainly qualitative, supplemented by quantitative, and adopts action research as a whole. It should be regarded as learning for application." In the process of online peer evaluation, teachers can point out the advantages as well as the limitations in the essays of their peers, and put forward corresponding suggestions, which indicates that they have made great progress in essay evaluation.

#### *B. The Findings of Case Study*

Through the case study of four participant teachers, it is found that the learning activities in the teacher learning community facilitates the process of sharing academic reading experience and reflecting on teaching experience, which is conducive to the construction of new

knowledge structure regarding classroom-based research practice. However, the cognitive development mode of novice teachers and experienced teachers shows different characteristics:

The development mode of novice teachers in the research community shows the following characteristics: 1. The learning motivation of novice teachers is insufficient, mainly due to the lack of research knowledge and experience. Xu said in the interview, "I have little understanding of research methods, and I can't determine my own development direction at present." Gao expressed her feelings about doing research, "I feel that I have no self-confidence and even have a fear when talking about doing research and writing research papers. I have some ideas about how to improve my teaching, but they end up dead because I can find no theoretical support for them and have no clues about essay writing." 2. Novice teachers focus more on the construction of knowledge regarding pedagogical theories and the way theories can be applied in teaching practice. Xu and Gao attributed their motivation for participating in the teacher learning community to their individual need to find solutions to problems in classroom teaching and the willingness to develop new ideas about teaching through discussion with their colleagues. It is clear that novice teachers tend to reconstruct their knowledge through discussing with peers their teaching practice. Through observations, it is obvious that novice teachers had low participation in discussions regarding research design and methods. The low participation might be due to the fact that novice teachers have less project-based research experience.

The development mode of experienced teachers is characterized by the following aspects: 1. the learning motivation of experienced teachers can be divided into two types: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Zhang mentioned that she usually "read relevant literature and books before writing a thesis or applying for a project." Li attributed her motivation for participating in the teacher learning journal the willingness to expand knowledge of scientific research and seek professional growth. It is suggested that participant teachers who are driven by intrinsic motivation are more concerned about their professional development. Li expressed her intention in the interview, "I encountered a bottleneck period in my personal development, so I look forward to the guidance of senior peers in a learning community." Zhang mentioned in the interview that "I feel great pressure under the requirements for scientific research papers and projects. I expect that expert teachers can help me move towards a higher level of teaching and research." In contrast, teachers who are driven by extrinsic motivation have lower participation and integration. 2. Experienced teachers focus more on the construction of knowledge regarding research methodology. Li expressed that "I have achieved the transition from the role of learners to researchers after a series of learning activities." Zhao mentioned that "The communication and sharing of groups provides more opportunities for me to learn theories and methods about scientific research". It is clear that experienced teachers

tend to reconstruct relevant knowledge about academic research through frequent consultation with peers and active participation in project research activities.

Due to the fact that participant teachers have different levels of research ability, their participation in the learning community varies accordingly. Some teachers who have certain research experience can quickly grasp the content learned in the process of research community activities, and actively participate in group discussion; while teachers who have little or almost no research experience need to invest more time and energy in learning, and need to enhance their participation in group discussion activities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study investigates teacher cooperation and interaction in a teacher learning community in aiming at promoting professional development. Through group learning and discussion with peers, teachers read academic essays, analyze the research design of academic studies, give group presentations and do peer evaluation. With clear learning tasks, group learning activities are effective in enhancing teachers' professional development. The teacher learning community initiates the external adjustment mechanism through tutor demonstration and peer assistance, which is conducive to questioning, clarifying and updating ideas, reflecting and improving teaching and research practice, so as to achieve internal self-regulation. In addition, the development of teachers in the research community is situational, interactive and complex, involving learning and growth at the individual level and community level. At personal level, teachers' personal growth is reflected in research awareness, research knowledge and research practice. At community level, teachers' development is reflected in the process of teachers' group cooperation and interaction. Finally, there are differences between experienced teachers and novice teachers in learning motivation and research experience, which leads to different levels of learner participation. However, the difference serves as the motive for teachers to reflect and progress.

Other studies that have been carried out in China seem to be consistent with our findings. In a recent survey that involved participant observation of a tertiary English teachers' project-based community of practice and informal interview, the researchers explore teachers' cooperative learning in the community and its influence on their professional development. The findings of the study indicate that the community has influences on English teachers' personal, social and professional development to different degrees (Hu, Lang & Jiang, 2018). The findings of another study also reported that teachers' communication and interaction within a learning community have positive effects on EFL researchers' professional development regarding their ability of applying theory into teaching and research practice (Wen & Ren, 2012). These studies, however, were unable to inform educators on the intricate processes of how teachers' professional development

were shaped in the teacher learning community and what other factors were at play since they were based on teachers' self-reports. In-depth understanding of the process and feature of teachers' professional development, triangulated through observations of their practices is an identified area where more empirical studies are needed. This case study contributes to the literature by reporting how experienced teachers differ from novice teachers regarding their learning motivation, knowledge construction and participation in group discussions.

This study has two implications for teacher development. First of all, EFL Teachers need to be aware of the importance of a learning community as a platform to exchange ideas, expand professional knowledge and enrich research experience. EFL teachers professional learning could not only depend on themselves, but also need support and help from experts and peers, and they need to hear different voices from others through discussions and dialogues. Teachers could express their growing confusion and actively seek help from experts and peers within a learning community. Teacher educators should help teachers to actively find their own ways to acquire new knowledge and skills, to keep up with the world change around us, to empower themselves with new knowledge and to combat negativity in our teaching context. Secondly, careful design is needed for the construction of teachers' learning community. The organizer of the teacher learning community needs to fully consider the needs of teachers, set up appropriate platforms for interactive communication, and provide continuous support. With the help of teacher learning community, which is an environment for learning and communication and a tool for instant communication, the group learning activities can enable members actively participate in the community. In the follow-up research, we can also conduct in-depth research on the role of different links in teacher learning community and the long-term impact on individual members.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Hongmei Han conducted the research and wrote the paper; Hongmei Han and Jinghua Wang analyzed the data; all authors had approved the final version.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors wish to thank Peiya Gu who provided expertise that greatly assisted the research. This work was supported in part by a grant from National Social Science Foundation of China and provincial-based National Social Science Foundation of Hebei, China.

This paper presents part of the research results of the project supported by National Social Science Foundation of China - "Research on the path and mechanism of English teachers' professional development supported by information technology" (project number: 17BYY096) and the project supported by the provincial-based

National Social Science Foundation - "A study on the characteristics of teachers' beliefs and model of teacher professional development mechanism in the context of foreign language teaching reform" (project number: HB16YY011).

## REFERENCES

- [1] L. Clarke, "The POD model: Using communities of practice theory to conceptualise student teachers' professional learning online," *Computers & Education*, vol. 52, pp. 521-529, April 2009.
- [2] P. Grossman, S. Wineburg, and S. Woolworth, "Toward a Theory of Teacher Community," *The Teachers College Record*, vol. 6, pp. 942-1012, 2001.
- [3] D. W. Johnson and R. T. Johnson, "Making cooperative learning work," *Theory into Practice*, vol. 38, pp. 67-73, Spr. 1999.
- [4] H. Kuusisaari, "Teachers at the zone of proximal development - Collaboration promoting or hindering the development process," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 43, pp. 46-5, Oct. 2014.
- [5] J. P. Lantolf, "Socio-cultural theory and L2: State of the art," *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, vol. 28, pp. 67-109, March 2006.
- [6] N. King, C. Horrocks, and J. Brooks, *Interview in Qualitative Research*, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2019.
- [7] T. R. Lindlof, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. Los Angeles, SAGE Publication, 2019.
- [8] T. A. Saleh, "Statistical analysis of cooperative strategy compared with individualistic strategy: An application study," *Journal of Effective Teaching*, vol. 11, 19-27, Spring 2011.
- [9] E. Tang and C. Lam, "Building an effective online learning community (OLC) in blog-based teaching portfolios," *The Internet and Higher Education*, vol. 20, pp. 79-85, January 2014.
- [10] F. C. Tseng and F. Y. Kuo, "A study of social participation and knowledge sharing in the teachers' online professional community of practice," *Computers & Education*, vol. 72, pp. 37-47, March 2014.
- [11] V. Vescio, D. Ross, and A. Adams, "A review of research on the impact of professional learning communities on teaching practice and student learning," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 24, pp. 80-91, Jan. 2008.
- [12] J. Warwas and C. Helm, "Professional learning communities among vocational school teachers: Profiles and relations with instructional quality," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 73, pp. 43-55, March 2018.
- [13] X. Chen, "Why teachers' professional development and learning should be school-based," *Tsinghua Journal of Education*, vol. 1, pp. 36-43, 2014. (in Chinese)
- [14] Z. Hu, J. Lang, and Z. Jiang, "The influence of cooperative learning on teacher development in project-based community of practice," *Foreign Language World*, vol. 4, pp. 27-35, Oct. 2018. (in Chinese)
- [15] Y. Guo and J. Xu, "An empirical study on the construction and effectiveness of a professional development community of college English teachers in China," *Foreign Language World*, vol. 5, pp. 16-29, 2015. (in Chinese)
- [16] M. Tang, "The cooperative leaning of university English teachers," *Journal of Southwest Minzu University*, vol. S1, pp. 93-95, Spring 2011. (in Chinese)
- [17] Q. Wen, "Theoretical framework for developing a professional learning community of university foreign language teachers," *Foreign Language Teaching Theory and Practice*, vol. 3, pp. 1-9, Sep. 2017. (in Chinese)
- [18] Q. Wen and Q. Ren, "Effects of an interactive model on EFL researchers' professional development," *Foreign Language World*, vol. 4, pp. 16-29, Oct. 2012. (in Chinese)

Copyright © 2021 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License ([CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)), which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided that the article is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.



**Hongmei Han** (PhD) was born in Shihezi City, Xinjiang Province, China in 1972. She is currently a professor and Chairperson of Graduate English program at Foreign Language Teaching Department, Hebei University (HBU), China.

She obtained her M.A. in English Language and literature from English Department at Hebei University in China in 1998. She got her Ph.D. in Linguistics from University of Science, Malaysia in 2014. She has taught EFL courses for 24 years at Hebei University. Her areas of interest include syntax, L2 writing and teacher education.

Prof. Han is deputy director of Hebei University Foreign Language Teacher Development Research Institute, China. She is the author of the following book and journal articles:

H. Han, "The integration of grammar into communicative language teaching: A study of university teachers' beliefs and practices," Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. English, University of Science Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, 2014.

J. Wang and H. Han, *Professional Development of University EFL Teachers in China: Theories, Current Status and Strategies*, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2014.

H. Han and J. Wang, "A review of research on EFL learners' critical thinking ability," *Journal of Hebei University*, vol. 4, Oct. 2011. Email address: Cathyhnm@126.com



**Jinghua Wang** was born in Jingjiang City, Jiangsu Province, China in 1963. She is currently a professor and dean of Foreign Languages Teaching Department, Hebei University (HBU), China.

She obtained her M.A. in English Language and literature from English Department at Hebei University in China in 1984. She has taught EFL courses for 33 years in Hebei University. Her areas of academic interest include TESOL and teacher education.

Prof. Wang is director of Foreign Language Teacher Development Research Center of Hebei University. She is the author of the following book and journal articles:

J. Wang and H. Han, *Professional Development of University EFL Teachers in China: Theories, Current Status and Strategies*, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2014.

H. Han and J. Wang, "A review of research on EFL learners' critical thinking ability," *Journal of Hebei University*, vol. 4, Oct. 2011. Email address: wangjh2808@sina.com