Perceiving Technology-Based Professional Development Practices for Teachers: Accounts From English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teachers in China

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how 26 Chinese EFL teachers perceived community-based, technology-supported professional development practices. The methods of data collection in this study blend quantitative and qualitative techniques: 1) questionnaire survey of teachers’ satisfaction about community-based technology-supported professional development practices; 2) online teacher discussion postings; 3) teacher self-reflection journals; and 4) semi-structured interviews. Data analysis revealed a generally positive attitude and empowering feelings in these Chinese EFL teachers who viewed technology-facilitated practices as affording constructive functions for their professional development. Results also revealed a range of factors that apparently mediated/limited EFL teachers’ participation in the professional development activities. This study thus contributes to the understanding of the reality in relation to actual utilization of technological resources in second-language teacher development in the context of a developing country such as China.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration, Community of Practice, Institutional Culture, Interaction, Online Learning Community, Teacher Professional Development, Teachers’ Belief, Technology-Based Professional Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of curriculum paradigm transformation, teacher education research has focused on the development of teachers themselves (Day, 1999). Educators and researchers have recognized that the core of teachers’ professional development is achieved through teachers themselves, largely determined by professional agency and identity (Vähäsantanen, 2015; Wenger, 1998; Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014). Essentially, teachers’ professional development is intertwined with changes in teachers’ behavior (Opfer, Pedder, & Lavicza, 2011). Therefore, teachers’ professional development inevitably requires the establishment of the paradigm of “teachers are researchers” and “reflective practitioners” (Schön, 1987; Killen, 2009; Smith, Geng, & Black, 2017). Meanwhile, with the development of information technology, teachers’ professional development has expanded its breadth and scope as a result of the use of technology in fostering developmental practices.

DOI: 10.4018/IJCALLT.2020040103

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There has been a growing recognition of the advantages and benefits of technology-facilitated teachers’ professional development practices which include: 1) reducing teacher isolation and establishing professional identity (Clarke, 2009; Hramiak, 2010; Trent & Shroff, 2013), 2) nurturing mutual support and promote peer collaboration (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010; Paulus & Sherff, 2008), 3) increasing teachers’ reflective practice and self-efficacy (Stiler & Philleo, 2003; Vavasseur & MacGreor, 2008), and 4) triggering teachers’ participation and knowledge (Tang & Lam, 2014). This seems particularly true in China where technology use as a teaching and learning tool has been widely acclaimed as a catalyst for educational transformation by policy makers and teachers (Yang, 2012). In recent years, however, while there has been an increasingly large body of research into technology-supported teacher professional development, published research on the actual utilization of technological resources in teacher development in the context of a developing country such as China has been sparse. In this paper, we explored how 26 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in China perceived their technology-based professional development practices, examining their perceptions, beliefs, practices, and the concerns and challenges that they experienced. The central research questions that this paper aims to answer are:

1. How do English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university teachers in China perceive technology-based professional development practices?
2. How do these teachers perceive online learning communities for professional development?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Technology Use in Teacher Professional Development

In terms of teacher professional development, Clandinin and Connelly (1995) highlighted the importance of teacher’s collaborative learning by stating that teachers “need others to engage in conversations where stories can be told, reflected back, heard in different ways, retold, and relived in new ways in the safety and secrecy of the classroom” (p.7). With the development of the Internet, computer-mediated communication has emerged as an easier and more convenient way for teachers to communicate than traditional face-to-face communication. Hough, Smithey, and Everson (2004) stated that computer-mediated communication is a universally available tool for teachers to electronically discuss and reflect upon their teaching strategies so as to promote professional development. This is confirmed by Wenger, White, and Smith (2009) who contended that “technology extends and reframes how communities organize and express boundaries and relationships, which changes the dynamics of participation, peripherality and legitimacy” (p. 11).

The recent upsurge in the research on the technology use for teacher development has followed several trends. For teacher development, the use of technology creates affinity spaces different from traditional settings limited by hierarchies and bureaucracies (Gee, 2004) and thus technology integration can be utilized to explore a transformative teacher professional development model (Lee & James, 2018). Interactive technology-based tools such as Twitter, microblogging and online platform foster spaces rich in discussion and interactivity. Mouzaa and Barrett-Greenly (2015) presented how teachers in underserved urban schools in the U.S utilized iPads and educational apps to promote professional development. Carpenter and Krutka (2015) conducted a survey on teachers’ use of Twitter for professional development, showing that teachers’ positive and collaborative professional activity was facilitated by Twitter. The research of Tang and Lam (2014) showed the positive impact of blog-based teaching portfolios on teachers’ professional development. Some researchers have conducted survey on using microblogging tools to support professional development (Cho, Ro, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2013; Gerstein, 2011). These investigations demonstrate the significance of technology-based tools for supporting teachers’ professional development.
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