

Energizing the ESL Professional Learning Community in Guangdong and Cross-border Fertilization: The In-service Programme for Guangdong English Teachers 2011

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This paper reports on a three-week on-campus residential program organized by the Faculty of Education of The Chinese University of Hong Kong for 38 elite Guangdong English teachers from mainland China. The background of the program, followed by aims of the program as well as program activities and components will first be described. Next, participants' feedback on the program in the form of a questionnaire will be presented. Benefits from the program as perceived by the participants regarding ESL teaching approaches, school visits and classroom observations, development of school-based English language curriculum, adaptation and development of teaching/learning materials as well as educational practices in Hong

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Kong are discussed. The paper concludes with possible ways to sustain and expand the professional learning community among the Guangdong teachers themselves and with teachers in Hong Kong as suggested by the participants.

Key words: ESL professional learning community, training program for Guangdong teachers of English, professional development

Introduction

In the light of changing needs for the professional development of English teachers in mainland China and teachers of Putonghua in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Education Bureau and the Guangdong Education Bureau have engaged in a partnership to provide professional development opportunities for these two groups of teachers. Every summer, with an aim to promote professional collaboration and academic exchange between teachers in Hong Kong and mainland China, the Guangdong Education Bureau organizes a three-week residential program for teachers of Putonghua from Hong Kong in Guangdong and the Hong Kong Education Bureau receives a group of teachers of English from Guangdong.

In July 2011, the Centre for Enhancing English Learning and Teaching (CEELT) of the Faculty of Education of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) was commissioned by the Hong Kong Education Bureau to organize the “In-service Programme for Guangdong English Teachers 2011” for 38 elite Guangdong English educators. The participants were teachers from ten cities of the Guangdong Province—Foshan, Heyuan, Huizhou, Jiangmen, Jieyang, Shaoguan, Yunfu, Zhanjiang, Zhaoqing, and Zhongshan. All of them were English educators in the secondary school sector in Guangdong, including panel chairpersons, teachers, inspectors and researchers. They were from 31 secondary schools and 7 units in the Guangdong Education Bureau.

The Program

Program Aims

Subsequent to various discussions and negotiation with the Hong Kong Education Bureau, the three-week program in Hong Kong aimed to help participating teachers to develop and provide a quality program to enable participants to have a deeper understanding of the latest teaching methodologies of English language and to enhance their capacity to put theory into effective practice.

In the process of professional development, teachers, particularly those with many years of teaching experience, need to make deliberate efforts to reflect on or challenge their own knowledge about how students learn in order to enhance the teaching and learning process (Freeman, 2002; Mak 2010; Sen, 2002). It has been documented in many studies on teacher professional development (c.f., Carless, 2004; Littlewood, 2004) that teacher learning, like any human learning, is not a straightforward internalization of information. It is through constant reflection that professional development can sustain. As such, it is hoped that the participants in this program would aim at being reflective practitioners once they have acquired the skills and knowledge stated in the program aims.

As the program values the development and contribution of professional learning communities, a further aim to pursue is to explore ways to expand and sustain the professional learning community. Consistent with my professional interest to seek opportunities to collaborate with various sectors in the context of building, expanding and sustaining the professional learning community in the region, I believed that this Guangdong program would be a good starting point to provide a platform for developing the ESL professional learning community in the region. Exploring ways of expanding and sustaining the professional learning community is one of the inherent objectives of the program, although not explicitly laid out in the program aims, since this was not discussed with the Hong Kong Education Bureau.

Program Activities and Components

There were five major components to the program, namely, ESL teaching approaches, school visits and classroom observations, development of school-based English language curriculum, adaptation and development of teaching/learning materials as well as educational practices in Hong Kong.

These five components were identified with reference to the literature and the program director's experience as a teacher educator. Baker (2002), Hacker, Dunlosky, and Graesser (1998), Marton and Tsui (2004) as well as Nassaji and Wells (2000) have highlighted the importance of effective strategies and instruction in language and metacognitive development in successful language classrooms. It is through school visits and classroom observations as well as encounters with the educational practices in Hong Kong via these activities that the effectiveness or the limitations of these instructional strategies can be evaluated in an authentic manner.

Effective curriculum planning is an integral part of a successful language classroom. Wong and Li (2006) as well as Loewenberg-Ball and Cohen (1996) have modified Leithwood's (1982) curriculum management skills including the selection and application of a planning strategy for making decisions about development, implementation, and evaluation processes. Mak and Chik (2011) have also highlighted the importance of material design and adaptation in successful ESL secondary classrooms in Hong Kong.

In the program, participants were given substantial opportunity for collaboration, reflection and sharing. A variety of training modes including lectures, seminars, workshops, small-group discussions, experience-sharing sessions, hands-on practices, lesson observation/study through showing video-recorded English language lessons and follow-up discussions, school visits to local secondary schools, individual and group projects, and presentations were adopted in the program. Practical sessions were provided on using various e-learning resources to enhance English learning and teaching.

Learning support including academic mentors and on-campus library facilities (e.g., free access to the library and the internet) were provided.

Sparks and Louckes-Horsley's (1990) training model involving teachers in acquiring knowledge and skills through appropriate individual or group instruction was the model adopted in the program. Typically, all activities were conducted with a clear set of objectives or learner outcomes, including awareness or knowledge and skill development. It was the facilitator's role to select activities that would assist teachers in achieving the desired outcomes, with the purpose of all activities being to empower teachers to improve their thinking in order to be a reflective practitioner, which is the major aim of the program. In order to achieve all the program aims via the training model, the Guangdong teachers were first requested to attend a series of workshops at CUHK which equipped them with the knowledge and pedagogy in the teaching and learning of English. The workshop facilitators introduced various teaching strategies to the participants. The essential elements of an action plan were covered; ways to promote assessment for learning at secondary level were explained and the use of IT in enhancing English teaching and learning were illustrated. Other topics included cultivating a "reading to learn" culture, catering for learner diversity, developing students' lifelong language learning skills, and teaching language arts.

Visits to four local secondary schools were arranged. Participants attended lessons and various school activities, for example, school graduation, musical and drama performance. They also had the opportunity to meet with students and teachers over lunch. Participants appreciated these visits very much since they were able to observe English lessons and school activities and exchange teaching and learning ideas with local teachers and students. Participants also learned a lot of good practices from their Hong Kong counterparts and were deeply impressed by the hospitality of the host schools. It is through these interactions and visits that they were able to make contacts with Hong Kong teachers for subsequent professional exchange and development.

The use of discussion comes to the fore when new concepts or techniques are presented as a problem-solving tool after teachers have had an opportunity to try out new strategies in their classrooms. Timperley and Phillips (2003) state that training sessions can be chunked for improved comprehension to enable teachers to have opportunities for classroom practice, a strategy which makes peer coaching more effective than one-shot training. As the program was situated in the Hong Kong context, the participants did not have the opportunity to try out the strategies they had acquired with their own students and in the Guangdong context during the program. A microteaching session was made available for each teacher. At later stage of the program, teachers demonstrated what they had learned by conducting microteaching in some sessions. They were given feedback by peers and facilitators.

The program was concluded with a celebration ceremony with the presence of university academics including the Dean of Education from CUHK and representatives from the Hong Kong Education Bureau. Some participants' colleagues, friends and family members attended the celebration ceremony to render their support and congratulations.

To consolidate and reflect upon their learning and experiences gained from the program, the teachers also developed their own learning portfolios. The portfolio formed the basis for their later sharing with their colleagues in Guangdong.

Program Feedback

A mixed method approach was adopted to solicit participants' views on various aspects of the program.

Participants' views regarding ways to sustain and expand the professional learning community among the Guangdong teachers themselves and with teachers in Hong Kong were gauged via informal meetings and semi-structured interviews during the program.

A post-program evaluation was conducted through a questionnaire assessing the application of knowledge and skills acquired by participants from the program and evaluating how far participants could

apply the training knowledge and skills in the work context, the results of application as well as the usefulness of the training program.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The Post-program Questionnaire

A post-program questionnaire was distributed to the 38 participants to gauge their feedback on the program in the last day of the program. All questionnaires were returned, resulting in a response rate of 100%.

The questionnaire was in three parts. Part 1 investigated how participants felt about the program structure, content of the program and program effectiveness. Part 2 asked them to express the extent to which different aspects of the program were valuable/beneficial to them as an ESL teacher. Part 3 solicited their views about their own language proficiency after attending the program.

In Parts 1 and 3 of the questionnaire, participants were asked to rate on a 4-point Likert-type scale (where 4 = *strongly agree*) to show the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements.

a. Part 1: Participants' feedback on the program structure, content of the program and program effectiveness

The first five items related to program structure and content. Their means are presented in Table 1.

In Table 1, items 1–5 all were rated very highly by the participants as they all *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the item description. Over 50% of the participants indicated *strongly agree* for all the five items. For items 4 and 5, over 70% chose *strongly agree*.

All participants also rated the other items (items 6 to 10) indicating program effectiveness highly with more than 55% indicating *strongly agree* for all the five items. For item 10 concerning satisfaction with the program, more than 70% indicated *strongly agree*.

As can be seen from Table 1, all item means were above 3.5, showing a high degree of satisfaction.

Table 1: Participants' Feedback on the Program Structure, Content of the Program and Program Effectiveness

	Items	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
1	The structure of the program was well-tailored and systematic.	38	3.55	0.50
2	The content of the program was relevant to my work in school.	38	3.50	0.51
3	The learning atmosphere was warm and encouraging.	38	3.66	0.48
4	The facilitators are knowledgeable about the topics.	38	3.76	0.43
5	The facilitators explained clearly the application of the relevant concepts/theories.	38	3.71	0.46
6	The learning activities gave me insights into ESL teaching.	38	3.71	0.46
7	The coursework helped me develop knowledge and skills in ESL teaching.	38	3.63	0.49
8	The feedback on my coursework was useful.	38	3.55	0.50
9	The materials and handouts were useful.	38	3.55	0.50
10	I am satisfied with the In-service Programme for Guangdong English Teachers.	37	3.73	0.45

b. Part 2: Benefits from the program as perceived by the participants

In Part 2, participants were asked, in an open-ended format, what they had gained from the program as ESL teachers regarding the five major components of the program, namely, ESL teaching approaches, school visits and classroom observations, development of school-based English language curriculum, adaptation and development of teaching/learning materials as well as educational practices in Hong Kong.

The following sections describe participants' views as identified in this part of the questionnaire.

1. ESL teaching approaches

Many of the participants stated that they had learned a lot of new teaching approaches and practical classroom activities, in particular,

“task-based learning” and “co-operative learning” as highlighted by them. Examples of their qualitative comments are as follows:

Task-based teaching approach, cooperative learning, teaching English through language arts, using IT in teaching are practical and useful.

[learn how to] use a diversity of activities and integrate language skills.

[I learn about] interactions with students in English lessons, encouraging students to use the English skills that they have learnt, designing the teaching plan suitable for the students, and so on.

2. School visits and classroom observations

Participants opined that the school visits and classroom observations in Hong Kong had benefited them a lot and given them insights in various aspects such as the design and use of teaching materials, the creation of an English-rich environment in school, as well as teaching approaches and the real classroom situation in Hong Kong. Below are some of their opinions:

[What is valuable is the] language-rich [environment] in the campus with many slogans in English which can help students improve their English, and to develop many kinds of activities, such as English party.

It is necessary for English teachers to speak English in class and try to create good English learning environment by arranging all kinds of extra-curricular activities.

[I have learned how to] create [an] English-rich environment and develop the school-based English language curriculum.

3. Development of school-based English language curriculum

In Guangdong Province, most teachers teach according to the curriculum set by the Education Bureau. Consequently, textbooks closely based on the curriculum are their major teaching materials.

Developing a school-based English language curriculum was novel to the participants. The participants indicated that they had learned a lot about the school-based English language curriculum from the facilitators and their Hong Kong counterparts. Comments here were:

They devote themselves to school-based English language curriculum and have got very good results. We can also try to do that.

School-based English language curriculum should be developed in China to meet students' needs.

[Development of a school-based English language curriculum is] a good way to improve students' English skills.

4. Adaptation and development of teaching/learning materials

Many participants commented that the program had inspired them to choose/organize suitable teaching materials and to adapt/develop worksheets to cater for learner diversity. Below are some of their comments:

To cater for learner diversity, development of teaching and learning materials is important.

We can try many ways to collect and develop the teaching or learning materials such as surfing on [the] internet, using software, etc.

[We can use] other materials [to teach] English, such as dramas, poems, English songs and so on.

5. Educational practices in Hong Kong

Participants generally agreed that the educational practices they encountered in Hong Kong schools and educational settings were interactive, useful, and inspiring. They appreciated the teaching/learning activities involved, as well as the practices for catering for learner diversity. Some of their comments were:

It's good! We can [learn] many new and useful ideas of English teaching. And we can improve ourselves [and] reflect what we have learnt these days very well.

[The educational practices in Hong Kong are] more flexible and more attractive than those in Guangdong.

Like Hong Kong, [Guangdong community can learn from Hong Kong, that is] all people (including the government, schools, families and individuals) should play a part and make contributions to teaching our children.

To conclude, participants opined that they had benefited a lot from the program.

c. Participants' views about their own language proficiency after attending the program

In this part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to rate on a 4-point Likert-type scale (where 4 = *strongly agree*) regarding their perception of their language proficiency after having completed the program. Table 2 presents the means for the items.

100% of participants chose *agree* or *strongly agree* to the first four statements. Nearly 93% of the participants indicated *agree* or *strongly agree* to the fifth statement. All means were above 3, indicating that participants felt that the program had substantially enhanced their language proficiency.

Table 2: Participants' Views About Their Own Language Proficiency After Attending the Program

Items	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
1 My language skills have been enhanced.	38	3.32	0.47
2 My communication skills with Hong Kong people have improved.	38	3.29	0.46
3 I have been able to adapt to the English speaking environment in classrooms in Hong Kong.	38	3.32	0.47
4 I have been more confident in speaking English	37	3.38	0.49
5 I initiated conversations with Hong Kong people during gatherings.	37	3.16	0.4

As program director, I met with the whole group twice a week informally after class to solicit views regarding ways to sustain and expand the professional learning community among the Guangdong teachers and teachers in Hong Kong. Five such meetings were held with the number of participants ranging from 32 to 38, indicating an attendance rate of 84% to 100%. Suggestions made and views solicited from these informal meetings were adopted and/or used to develop the items for the semi-structured interviews. Some suggestions were immediately implemented: for example, as suggested, participants from the same city were grouped together in some of the discussion sessions during class to facilitate the build up of a professional learning community (inter-city professional learning community) as it ought to be easy for these teachers to sustain the inter-city professional learning community when they return to their own city because of similar needs and proximity. Nevertheless, participants teaching similar levels were also encouraged to form their own professional learning community to facilitate materials sharing, school exchange program, etc. As a result, three inter-city (participants are from the same city) and four intra-city (participants are from different cities) professional learning communities were formed during the program and participants welcomed the arrangements.

On the second last day of the program, six participants participated in the semi-structured group interviews. There were two groups, each comprising of the group leader or the assistant group leader and two volunteers. They were asked to comment on the suggestions proposed by other participants regarding professional learning community building and sustainability between themselves and with Hong Kong teachers.

Analysis of data collected in the informal meetings and semi-structured interviews regarding possible ways to sustain and expand the professional learning community among the Guangdong teachers themselves and with teachers in Hong Kong suggested by the participants are summarized in the following sections.

Participants felt that the formation of professional learning communities between different schools/districts/units would facilitate sharing of teaching ideas and materials. Subsequently, peer observation,

team teaching and sharing of materials can be implemented in a systematic manner. Participants from the same city strongly supported this idea.

Participants also suggested setting up teacher and student exchanges among schools/cities/districts. Such activities would provide opportunity for teachers and student to get exposed to different English language learning and teaching strategies in different contexts. Various activities, for example, writing competitions, drama appreciation, etc. might be put on.

With the potential afforded by modern technology, participants proposed that activities might be held virtually, for example, skype, emails, blogs, wikis, etc. Some participants, particularly those from districts with comparatively less resources, were hesitant about this suggestion because not all of their schools are well equipped with computers and most of their students do not have internet access at home. However, as all schools have internet facilities (though some may have interrupted access), this is a suggestion worth exploring, particularly for schools in the major urban cities in Guangdong, for example, Foshan, Jiangmen and Zhongshan.

As the present program was very well received, all participants were very eager to have ongoing and regular professional support from the CUHK team in the forms of workshops, intensive programs, visits and support via email exchanges, etc. Some of them would like me to be their mentor and visit their schools on a regular basis to provide school-based consultancy. Though I value their enthusiasm and would very much like to support them with my professional expertise, I am, however, mindful of resource implications.

Conclusion and Way Forward

On the whole, participants expressed a high degree of satisfaction with all aspects of the program and would recommend the program to other teachers. They appreciated the program structure and content, workshop quality, facilitators' professionalism, school visits, as well as administrative support from CUHK.

The program provided participants with stimulating and insightful experiences which will benefit not only their language and professional development, but also their personal growth.

The program was unique in three aspects. First, it built up a professional learning community among the participants. Participants were elite teachers from ten cities of the Guangdong Province. They were from 31 secondary schools and 7 units in the Guangdong Education Bureau. The program not only enhanced their English teaching and learning skills, but also gave them an invaluable opportunity to build up a professional learning community among themselves. Second, it helped to promote collaboration between the Guangdong and Hong Kong education communities. A few Hong Kong and Guangdong schools are in the process of organizing professional events for their teachers and building up links between their students to foster academic and cultural exchange. Third, participants will share their experiences with their fellow teachers after returning to Guangdong which will further benefit their community. Their learning portfolios developed during the program will facilitate the dissemination.

To conclude, professional learning communities among the Guangdong teachers and a number of Hong Kong teachers were formed and developed during and shortly after the completion of the program. I believe, however, that in order for professional development activities to take effect in teaching and learning, there must be a change of culture at all levels of the education system. To effect this change, teachers must be encouraged and helped to reflect on their role as change agents so that they are willing to take risks in changing their values, attitudes and practices. As indicated in their feedback — and the fact that professional learning communities have been so speedily initiated — the Guangdong teachers have clearly shown an ability to reflect on what they acquired and experienced over the course of the program. This is apparent, specifically, in their wish to enhance the learning and teaching of English in their own contexts as well as energizing the newly-formed professional learning communities. Support and effort by all relevant parties (i.e., participants' school management boards, colleagues, and their cities' Education Bureaus) will be required if the embryonic professional learning community is to succeed. Given the enthusiasm

and commitment, I witnessed from the Guangdong teachers in their — albeit short — residential sojourn in Hong Kong, such an objective is achievable.

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