Constructing a Transitional K12 English Teacher Training Model with U-S-P Collaboration

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Abstract: Education is the basis for a nation’s one-hundred year strategy, while teachers are the basis for the nation’s education. Teachers should be life-long learners. Teacher training of basic education needs to be linked from one stage to the next. For one thing, it is crucial in their professional development. For another, that is the requirement of the Teachers’ Professional Standards issued by the Chinese Education Ministry. However, up till now, teacher training in China and other countries is still conducted by the stage. Elementary school teacher training and secondary school teacher training are designed and implemented separately. There is scant linkage in English teaching knowledge and skill training. Consequently, the transition of teaching and learning between these two stages remains a vain slogan. This also hinders the systematic and sustainable development of the English teacher’s professional competence.

Hebei Normal University and Hebei Education Press, collaborated with K12(from primary school to high school) teaching researchers experimented on 1000 English teachers in China by conducting a three-year transitional English teacher training program. The research with the U(University)-S(Schools)-P (Press) collaboration proves that transitional English teacher training for basic education can be done and done effectively.

Keywords: English teacher training; transition; model; U-S-P Collaboration.

1. Introduction

Defining “transition”:

The earliest research on “educational transition” can be traced back to the 17th century. In 1632, The Czech educationist J. A. Comenius first proposed the concept of transitional monorail system. (Ren Zhongyin, 2006) Comenius stressed the priority of student’s ideological transition in education and teaching. “Transition” is the most commonly used word now to indicate the linking in teaching.

In China, the term “transition” was first used to refer to the cross-stage transition by the Education Ministry in the Opinion of the Disposal Suggestions of Carrying Out Transition between Middle School Curriculum Reform and High School Math and English Teaching. By nature, this means the natural and scientific transition from elementary education to high school education, so as to bring about the continuity of cross-stage teaching. (Zhao Yu, 2006)

In searching for “transitional teacher training, EFL, Model, EFL teaching, training model, transition, transition from primary school to secondary school, EFL teacher training/Development, transition from primary school to secondary school”
in-service EFL teacher training (model)” of recent 15 years, a very limited number of journal articles and degree theses are found in authoritative literature data banks including EBSCO, SAGE journals Online, Google Scholar. This reveals that research in the transitional training of teachers is inactive and rarely done. One phenomenon that takes our notice is that since the 1980s, post-method pedagogical philosophies views English teacher education from a new perspective: from the usual imparting model to a conversing model. Teachers should be empowered in that teacher education researchers should do research together with the teachers, instead of researching on the teachers any more. (Dong Jinwei, 2008) “The future teachers should be supported to establish foreign language teaching philosophies and master foreign language teaching research methods”(Chen Li, 2009: 5)

In all, the studies in other countries on transitional teacher training trended from scattered attention to focused areas, and from scratching the surface to deepening and refining. The focus of research in the last century was in three dimensions: problems and causes in teaching transition (such as teachers, teaching styles and activities), the influence of such problem on students, methods in settling transitional problems. However, there was little achievement in establishing transitional teacher training models.

In China, elementary school English teaching started as early as in 1962, when English was taught in Grades 4 and 5. But the study on K12 English teaching transition was lagged until in the 1990s, trial transitional work was done about teaching content and methods in Hong Kong and Taiwan. On the mainland, in 1997, the National Education Ministry held the first National Conference on Basic - Higher Education as a Whole. Ever since then, transition has gained pervasive and highly notice. Some scholars write articles and books on this issue, including Cheng Xiaotang (1998), Fan Wenfang (2000), Dai Weidong (2001), Yu Li and Zhu Jiasheng (2003) and Wang Qiang (2009). These works all promoted establishing a theoretical and practical system which is special of the Chinese Education-As-a-Whole in directing English teaching. Wang Ying and Qin Jie (2014) made a survey about K12 teachers’ professional teaching knowledge. In the practical sector, some projects were conducted in certain regions. Apart from these, from 2006 till now, relevant teaching research activities are organized all over China, in which class observations and teaching exchanges increase every year, and all levels of “Credit Teacher’s Studios” are founded and operated.

In literature research of cnki (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) and others, the small number of conference and journal articles began to multiply since 2006. But none of them is on the subject of K12 transitional English teacher training. Only one dissertation was found on K12 English teaching transition. Less than 100 post-graduate degree theses were found, in which Zhao Yu (2006), Huang Abin (2008), Liu Jie (2010), Ye Dan (2013) and Yue Man (2014) and others mostly used investigative methods. Their research themes and proposals were similar and lacked creativity.

In a word, most of the Chinese core journal articles interpret transition teaching theoretically and in a macro scope, but lack specific inquiry. Theses and dissertations concern all aspects, but lack theoretical establishment. Most of the literature proposed similar subjective settlement of problems.

An overview the literature of the world leads to the findings that there are three similar dimensions of policy and academic foci, a large part of which are only macro planning and do not aim at transition of teacher training. The attribution of transition problems are all directed to teacher’s style and methodology. Teachers of different stages are trained with different philosophies and activities. Insufficient systematic research is done. Neither is a model established.

The theoretical foundation extends to Constructivism, Socio-constructivism, Developmental Psychology, Group Dynamics Theory, ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), Metacognitive Theory and Post-method Pedagogy.

The present study aims to establish a model through experimentation for K12 transitional English teacher training in China, which should be applicable in teacher training in similar circumstances in the world.
2. Methodology

To start with, a U-S-P (University-School-Press) collaborative research community of 16 people was established, with 7 members from the pre-service teacher training practice base schools of Hebei Normal University, 4 teachers from the elementary and high schools affiliated to Hebei Normal University, 3 teaching research directors from Shijiazhuang educational Bureau and 2 from the editing and training sections of Hebei Education Press.

Based on the annual officially-supported teacher training programs and the textbook interpretation programs by Hebei Education Press, a total of 1000 K12 teachers were taken as the subjects (200 from senior high schools, 400 from junior high schools and 400 from elementary schools). Teachers’ professional development principles were adopted in choosing the subjects. Most of them were with strong plasticity and in the first 5 years of their teaching career, from 7 districts of Hebei Province and Gansu Province. Each training session was mixed with teachers of the three stages, hoping that they get aware of each other’s level of knowledge and skills to teach and to teach with.

The research took triangulation as its research method, integrating literature study, asking questions, experimenting and numerical analysis. Questionnaires, interview outlines and evaluation forms were developed and applied.

The longitudinal research lasted for 3 years (2014-2016). In the first year, a model of K12 transitional teacher training was designed and tested among 1/3 of the subjects. In the second and third year, the model was experimented in the 2/3 of the subjects, modified and established.

The sequence of the model testing in 1/3 of the subjects is as follows:

1. Diagnosis of the subjects’ English language knowledge and skills. In the enlightenment that teachers should at least possess a higher level of the English language knowledge and skills than their present service level. Hence, TEM (Test for English Majors) 4 paper was used on senior high school teachers. College Entrance Exam Paper was used on junior high school teachers, and Senior High School Enrollment Test Paper was used on primary school teachers.

2. Diagnosis of the subjects’ English teaching knowledge and skills. Test papers were designed about the National English Curricula (for K9 level and for high school level). The national English teacher’s Teaching Qualification Test Paper was used to test the subjects’ skills in lesson planning, teaching performance and assessment.

3. Training model formalizing and training syllabus design. Based on the relevant psychological, sociological theories, curriculum design theories, language teaching and learning theories, as well as the achievements of former teacher training, a transitional K12 English teacher training model was created at the beginning of the 3-year training experiment, for which the training procedure, training methods and evaluation constitutes the major part. All of the dimension are stratified and mixed with variants targeted at the sustained development of all the three stages of trainee teachers in a harmonious way.

Based on the diagnoses, some problems in K12 English were detected. The subjects showed ignorance of the importance of teacher’s professional standards, lacking in the knowledge of foreign language teaching methodology and the National English Curricula. They need English pronunciation and grammar knowledge updating, lesson planning knowledge and language skill teaching strategies. Moreover, they lack the awareness of classroom observation instruments and teaching research methodological knowledge.

Thereafter, a special transitional teacher training syllabus was designed. This is particular in that the courses and activities are for a mixed learning community with K12 English teachers. The major courses are Teachers’ Professional Standards(one for K6 and the other for high schools), English Teaching Reform and Suggestions for Teachers, English Core Competences and Teaching, Suggestions on Textbook Application, Linking English Teaching from Elementary School to High Schools, English Pronunciation Updating, Lesson Plan Improvement, Classroom Observation, Classroom Teaching Assessment, Micro-teaching Skills, Strategies in Teaching Reading (Writing Listening and
4. Implementation of the training model. This is the first trail to bring K12 English teachers to one learning community at one time. Every semester, the subjects were organized for the 20-day training on weekends and their collective teaching research weekdays. Interactive lectures were given by scholars and prestigious peers, workshops were run. Lesson plans were improved, lessons were taught and observed, and lesson study programs were carried out. Reflections were written and shared. Procedural and Summative assessments were conducted. Online course study was enforced. Tracking evaluation was also made.

5. Summarizing and adjusting the model. Formative and summative assessments of the training model were carried out in the ways of lesson study, training reflection and interviews, etc. which supplied data for adjusting the model. For example, in terms of the syllabus, the trainees’ lesson study reports revealed their weakness in developing classroom observation forms and writing up literature review. Hence in the following training sessions, relevant contents were added. Some reflections showed that the trainees needed English language corpus knowledge, which was also added to syllabus. Regarding the training manner, some trainees suggested for more peer teaching activities. In the aspect of training evaluation, interviewed trainees wished their extracurricular English activity participation be counted. This was found to be reasonable, for in modern curriculum philosophies, teaching and learning should take place not only in class, but also be extended to out-of-class circumstances (Song Xiaoshu, 2015). Thence, the evaluation system was improved.

Summative assessment was carried out at the end of each training session. The trainees were required to sit in some test papers. These papers are designed by scholars in China and used nationwide or in different provinces. Their reliability and validity have been authoritatively tested.

To assess the trainees’ language knowledge, TEM (Test for English Majors) 4 papers were used on senior high school teachers, college Entrance Exam Papers for junior high school teachers, and Senior High School Enrollment Test Papers for primary school teachers.

To test the subjects’ English teaching knowledge and skills. The national English teacher’s Teaching Qualification Test Paper was used to test the subjects’ skills in lesson planning, teaching performance and assessment.

6. Retesting the model. In the second training session of the first year, the revised training model was further tested for its plausibility. In the second year, the other 2/3 of the subjects was trained in similar patterns so as to testify the reliability of the model. In the third year, the model gradually matured and stabilized.
7. Data analysis and discussions

Figure 3 Subjects’ levels in pronunciation& grammar knowledge, language skills, teaching knowledge and teaching skills

The figure shows the pre-experiment state of the subjects’ levels in pronunciation and grammar knowledge, teaching knowledge and skills. K1-6 teachers generally have a lower level in the four aspects. K7-9 teachers are stronger. K10-12 teachers are even stronger in language knowledge, especially in grammar, stronger in reading and writing skills. Yet their teaching knowledge is weaker than K7-9 peers. Their teaching skills are even more invariable. Most probably, due to their focus on preparation for the College Entrance Examination, neither teaching knowledge nor teaching skills are crucial to these teachers.

From Figure 3, it can be found that elementary teaching force is comparatively the weakest in every aspect. The K7-9 teachers and K10-12 teachers are stronger in their particular ways. The figure also proves that there is not a positive co-relationship of the four aspects across the three teaching stages.

Before the experiment, the subjects showed their training needs in aspects of pedagogical knowledge, language knowledge and language skills, teaching knowledge and teaching skills as well as research methods. The subjects unanimously wished for specific teaching skill enrichment. On the other hand, few of them realize the importance of pedagogy and language knowledge and skill updating. They showed the lowest demand for learning research methods.

The first year’s experiment turned out to be effective in different ways with the three groups of subjects. The K1-6 teachers’ progress by the year is very remarkable. The K7-9 subjects developed more considerably in the first two years than in the last year. The K10-12 subjects’ change was the least outstanding.
6. Model construction and report composition. Model finalizing work was done including the K12 transitional English teacher training syllabus, implementation methods, evaluation system and tracking research methods, etc. Test papers of pronunciation and grammar, evaluation forms of their lesson plans and classroom teaching as well as their reflections were produced to check the training effect.

3. Conclusion

The 3-year experiment is significant in that ideologically it is aimed at enhancing the sustainability of China’s K12 English teachers’ professional development. In practice, the former researches in this field were mostly literature study and investigative, while this experimental research method is pioneering and convincing. What is more, the transitional teacher training model permeates the boundaries between the different stages in K12 education, surpasses the usual imparting training style, links and extends the concept of teacher training. It is a rational attempt in formalizing a model
of co-construction type. It offers a replicable example for transitional teacher training.

Admittedly, none of the following is easy job: sampling in interviews, developing quantitative instruments, finding sufficient teaching resources in experimental schools, etc. All of those have led to the difficulties and possible shortcomings existing in the data collection and analysis. Without doubt, the research result is unavoidably defected.

Further research in stretching the model up to the college level teacher training will be even more meaningful in such countries as China. For one thing, it fits into the theory of teach-and-learn in a teacher’s professional development. For another, it is of tremendous significance in the country’s strategic and educational construction.

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