

Article

Learning in Collective Lesson Planning Discussions: Shifts in EFL Teachers' Practices¹

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Abstract

This study examines the learning and related impact on classroom teaching of six EFL high school teachers' participation in collective lesson planning discussions (CLPDs) organised by a teaching research officer. Data were gathered from multiple sources, including observation notes, transcripts of collective lesson planning discussions and interviews, questionnaires and teaching materials. Data analysis shows that CLPDs exerted important influences on participating teachers' EFL teaching as a result of sharing resources and exchanging ideas. Some factors were found to impede the implementation of ideas and methods suggested in CLPDs such as teaching environment and students' language proficiency. Further research needs to examine the collaboration of teaching research officers and university researcher on a more constant basis to gauge the effectiveness of teacher development in fostering student achievement.

Keywords

Collective lesson planning discussion, EFL high school teacher, professional learning community, lesson preparation group, teaching research group

1 Introduction

Teaching is considered the most powerful influence on students' achievement, and the key to achieving such outcomes is improvement in teaching quality (Jensen, 2012). Accordingly, in China increasing attention has been given to improving the qualification of school teachers (Liu & Zhao, 2015). In particular, in-service teachers are encouraged to become involved in various kinds of teacher training programs locally, such as taking part in regular collective lesson planning discussions organised by teaching research officers² or attending lectures on teaching reforms or theories organised by local school districts. However, few studies have examined the implementation and effectiveness of these activities on inservice teachers' professional learning. To contribute to this domain, this study focused on collective lesson planning discussions (CLPDs), a common practice for in-service teachers in China, and examined the impact of CLPDs on participating teachers' practices in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), drawing on the perspective of professional learning communities.

2 Professional Learning Communities

In the Western world, over the past 20 years the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs) has gained increasing attention from schools, education systems and governments as a promising way of improving teaching and thereby student achievements (e.g. Hord 1997; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). In general, a PLC is considered as a group of people sharing and critically looking at their practice in a continuous, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented and growth-promoting way (Stoll, et al., 2006). A teacher PLC is a group of teachers or educators that engages in the continuous process of collective inquiry, constructive conversation about instruction and learning, and sharing teaching practice to enhance student learning and improve teaching practice (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Moreover, successful PLCs are found to hold supportive and shared leadership, shared value and vision, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions and shared personal practice (DuFour et al, 2006; Hord, 1997; Owen, 2014; Stoll, et al, 2006). A teacher PLC can take various forms, as long as it abides by the major principle of PLCs such as exploratory practice (e.g. Miller, 2003) and lesson study (e.g. Lee, 2008).

Though PLCs come in various forms, they are communities of continuous inquiry and improvement (Hord, 1997) and have been generally acknowledged as an effective means of connecting professional learning with classroom practices directed to student needs and learning. Research suggests the positive relationship between PLCs and the improvement in teacher practice and student achievement (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lomos, Hofman & Bosker 2011; Vescio, Ross & Adams 2008). More recent studies have shown that PLCs lead to increased involvement, ownership, innovation and leadership among teachers (e.g. Kaasila & Lauriala, 2010; Phillips, 2003) and developing teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (e.g. So, 2013). The affinity of PLCs to collegial interaction and teachers' shared practices indicates that collaboration among teachers is a significant force for both empowering teachers professionally and improving schools.

3 PLCs in the Chinese Context

In China, teachers often open their classrooms for observation and critique by their colleagues (Paine & Fang, 2006; Ryan, Kang, Mitchell, & Erickson, 2009; Sargent & Hannum, 2009). In general, discussions on teaching and learning are conducted through teaching research offices (TRO, Chinese term-Jiaoyanyuan, 教研员) at the district (or county) and municipal (or provincial) levels and teaching research groups (TRG, Chinese term- jiaoyanzu, 教研组) within a school. TRO is named and organised according to the subjects offered in the Chinese schooling system such as Chinese, mathematics and English. Each TRO at the municipal (or provincial) level consists of a number of TROs on the same subject at the district (or county) level, and each TRO at the district (or county) level is composed of various TRGs from different schools in the district. Each TRG consists of teachers of the same subject in a school, which is often further divided into various lesson preparation groups (LPGs, Chinese term-beikezu, 备课组) according to the grade it serves. In the Chinese schooling system, TROs and TRGs belong to a hierarchical teaching research system (TRS, Chinese term- jiaoyanxitong, 教研系统) (Paine & Ma, 1993; Sargent & Hannum, 2009). Each TRG has a leader in charge of routine teaching activities and holistic organisation and arrangement of collective lesson planning discussions. The person having direct contact with the group leaders from different schools is a teaching research officer from the district TRO. He or she is responsible for organising various professional learning activities each semester such as seminars, collective lesson planning, open research lessons and teaching contests and serves as a bridge between school teachers and teacher educators, usually university professors.

TROs and TRGs have existed since as early as the 1950s, giving teachers responsibility for carrying out collective lesson planning and teaching inquiry with the aim of improving instructional practices. So TROs and TRGs are a kind of contrived collegiality driven by administrative compulsion rather than spontaneous teacher collaboration (Wong 2010). Culturally, working together in TRGs is commonplace for most Chinese teachers. Given the collectivist ethos important to Chinese culture, teachers are used to collective activities and are willing to devote time and energy to collaborative work (Ryan, et al., 2009). More importantly, Chinese teachers are keenly aware of the importance of sharing and collaboration, seeing them as one way by which they can develop professionally (Paine & Ma, 1993). Therefore, despite the arranged collegiality, collective activities organised by TROs and TRGs, such as joint lesson preparations and collective inquiry into open lessons, have been embedded in teachers' daily work and become the most important forms and approaches of teacher learning and development in China (Wong, 2010).

The limited literature on Chinese PLCs mainly examines TRGs' functions and differences regarding TRGs across schools and regions (Cheng & Wu, 2016; Ryan, et al, 2009; Wang, 2015; Zhang & Pang, 2016). For example, Wang (2015) found that deliberately arranged organisational structures in the form of collaborative teams facilitate teacher collective inquiry and break down subject department barriers. Zhang and Pang (2016) found that TRGs provide strong structural support for PLCs in terms of time, physical space and resource and collective activities. However, Zhang and Pang (2016) said traditional cultural emphasis on respect and harmony may lead to a unified voice free of diverse, conflicting views, thus creating superficial collaborative cultures rather than creating engagement in genuine inquiry about effective teaching and learning.

CLPDs are commonly practised in TRGs in schools and TROs in districts in China. However, few empirical studies have examined the function of CLPDs in the professional development of school teachers. The existing literature regarding them is mainly from personal anecdotes. Therefore, the present study examined CLPDs among high school EFL teachers, a common activity of TRO in a district of Beijing, organised by a teaching research officer, in which a university researcher (here the author) was invited to take part. This study aims to answer the following questions:

- (1) Did CLPDs have any impact on teachers' practices in EFL teaching? If so, what were they?
- (2) Did any factors impede participants from implementing what they learned from CLPDs in their teaching? If so, what were they?

4 Methods of Inquiry

4.1 Context and participants

This study took place in an English TRO for Grade 11 at a teacher professional development institute in a district of Beijing during the 2011-12 academic year. There were 72 EFL teachers of Grade 11 from 62 high schools, who took part in CLPDs in the TRO organised by the teaching research officer, Huiwen (pseudonym), on every other Wednesday afternoon for two hours during the semester. Huiwen organised eight CLPDs each semester, in addition to three or four open research lessons and some emergent activities requested by the local education bureau. At the time of the study, Huiwen was under pressure to help EFL teachers to improve their teaching to meet the New English Curriculum Standard, which emphasised the development of communicative competence and critical thinking. To make CLPDs produce meaningful and constructive discussions instead of maintaining conformity and superficiality, Huiwen invited the researcher to take part in the activities she organised.

With the uniform textbooks, Huiwen assigned lesson planning tasks before the beginning of each semester. She assigned two LPGs to prepare the same unit, one from a key school³, and the other from a common school, to offer participating teachers more ideas for their own lesson planning. Each

CLPD session roughly followed similar patterns. The teachers were given 15 minutes to go through two lesson plans on the same unit prepared by two LPGs. The teachers then raised questions with the LPGs about the rationale and aims of various activities in the lesson plans. Next, Huiwen and the researcher commented on the strengths and weaknesses of lesson plans. If time was available, the researcher discussed some theoretical principles of language teaching, responding to the problems in those lesson plans. Finally, the teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire about their comments and suggestions on the CLPD.

In the present study, six high school English teachers were selected as the focal participants, and the other teachers taking part in the discussion were regarded as non-focal participants. They not only attended CLPDs on a constant basis but also completed the questionnaires carefully. Table 1 presents an overview of the focal participants' backgrounds.

Table 1

Profiles of the Participants

Group	School	Name	Age group	Years of teaching at school	Educational background	Study abroad Experience
Focal teachers	KSa	Bing	35-40	19	BA	10 months
		Mei	35-40	20	BA	3 months
	KSb	Wen	35-40	30	BA	40 days
		Dong	25-30	1	MA	None
	CS	Ping	35-40	17	BA	15 days
		Jing	30-35	16	BA	40 days
<i>Jiaoyanyuan</i>		Huiwen	50-55	22	BA	1 Year
University researcher		Luxin	40-45	0	PhD	6 years

Note. All names are pseudonyms except Luxin (the author). KS: key school; CS: common school.

The focal participants were female, with varying years of teaching experience. They were from three different senior high schools in Beijing. Only Ping and Jing worked with students having low intermediate English proficiency in a common high school, whereas the other four teachers worked with students having intermediate or advanced English proficiency in key schools. Bing, Wen and Ping, the English LPG leaders in their schools, were recognised as the most experienced teachers in this group. Dong was a novice teacher with one year of teaching experience and an MA degree. Apart from Mei and Jing, the other four teachers had all graduated from the same normal university, majoring in English education.

Huiwen had been a teaching research officer for more than 10 years. Before that, she had worked in a key district high school for 22 years. Huiwen acted as a group leader in CLPDs and as a bridge between teachers and the researcher, such as by forwarding the teachers' questions and lesson plans to Luxin before group lesson discussions. Luxin worked in a research institute as a full-time faculty member. She joined the CLPD as part of her national research project, aiming to explore the role of university researchers in the professional development of high school EFL teachers. Before each CLPD, she usually prepared some teaching materials and topics on pedagogy or teaching theories based on her reading of lesson plans.

4.2 Data collection

Data were collected from multiple sources, including interviews with participants, observation notes of

CLPDs and teaching practices, questionnaires and other supportive materials. The teachers were asked for their comments on strengths and weaknesses of CLPDs, the impact of CLPDs on their teaching, the role of researcher and teaching research officer in CLPDs, the support that the researcher was expected to provide, and their expectations and requirements for future CLPDs. Table 2 summarises the data collected. Eleven CLPDs were observed and digitally video-recorded with permission. Nineteen interviews and six classroom observations were conducted with the focal participants to learn about the impact of CLPDs on their teaching practices. All the discussions and interviews were recorded, and classroom observation notes were taken. Other data included some of the participants' teaching materials such as PowerPoint slides and lesson plans and student work during or after classes.

Table 2

Main Data Sources

Methods	Data	Total
Observations of group lesson discussions (2h per session/ video-recorded)	6 for the 1st semester 5 for the 2nd semester	11 sessions (22h)
Interviews (audio-recorded)	Ping (2, 50min), Jing (2, 50min), Wen (3, 1h), Dong (3, 2h), Bing (4, 1h), Mei (4, 1.5h)	18 (7h10min)
Class observations (40min each/field notes)	1 for Bing, Mei, Wen, Dong, Ping, Jing	6 (4h)
Questionnaires	For all teachers taking part in group lesson dis-cussions	258 copies
Documents	Course materials (textbooks, lecture notes, requirements for as-signments, previous PowerPoint slides); students' output	

4.3 Data analysis

All the video and audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and then coded, based on emerging themes and categories, and summarised into a report of each participant. Data analysis took the form of constant comparative analysis whereby themes were identified and coded as they emerged (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data were analyzed in an iterative manner, involving repeated reading of transcripts, comparing and contrasting them for similarities and differences and searching for recurrent themes. The teachers' changes in teaching practices were identified in terms of their daily teaching activities, such as reading, writing, listening, vocabulary and grammar teaching. The factors impeding the implementation of theories and methods discussed in CLPDs were mainly detected from factors embedded in CLPDs and the participants' working environment. The former includes the selection of topics and contents of each session and various needs of participating teachers. The latter usually includes students' lan-guage proficiency, limitation of class hours and administrative factors.

Then the author and the research assistant worked individually to triangulate the themes of each participant with evidence from other sources (e.g. classroom observation, lesson plans, PowerPoint slides) to identify items that all the participants had talked of. Intercoder reliability reached 90%. The discrepancies were then resolved through discussions. After this procedure, the author and the research assistant re-read the major transcripts to validate whether the major themes matched the holistic and abstract structures and cross-checked their individual interpretation. Aligning with this process, the

questionnaires from other participants in CLPDs, student works and other data were added to support the major findings and confirm the interpretation of the major data.

4.4 Changes of teaching practices

Through CLPDs, the participating teachers, the teaching research officer and university researcher together formed a PLC. The participating teachers had contributed greatly to CLPDs by discussing their practices of using the ideas or methods from CLPDs. They all made some changes in their teaching practices, though to different extents. For example, Mei, Wen, Dong and Ping all reported that they paid more attention to the effectiveness of their class and students' internalisation of knowledge. Bing, Mei, and Wen became practitioners of linking reading and writing. Ping and Jing increased the time of reading aloud, and Mei, Wen and Jing reduced the use of PowerPoint in their teaching.

(1) Bing and Mei

Bing and Mei said they agreed with the researcher's view on rigidity and lack of effectiveness in current EFL teaching practices. Bing reorganised her activities in teaching writing. In particular, inspired by the researcher's suggestions of linking reading and writing, Bing incorporated that into her teaching and gave students more freedom in completing their own reading and writing tasks. She named her method "jigsaw reading". In the interview, she illustrated with an example:

That was a lesson on ... outer space and ... astronomy. I gave my students four passages, describing the physical or mental problems the astronauts might encounter in ... space, the reason to explore ... space, achievements and problems through ... exploration. ... Due to the limited time in class, each member picked one passage to read and then exchanged what they got from the passage within the group. I then asked each student to do a writing task after class, giving a report on the life of astronauts, drawing on the passages they read and discussed in class. (Bing, interview)

Bing's teaching method was an application of linking reading and writing from CLPDs. She reduced the workload by advocating group collaboration and sharing information. Moreover, the materials that Bing selected were highly relevant to the topic of the unit and helpful in broadening students' horizons. The students were asked first to write a summary of the passage they had read and then to take notes while exchanging information with group members in class. This design integrated the tasks of reading, listening, summarising and writing and prepared students well for the final writing assignment.

In the interviews, Mei said that CLPDs made her reevaluate her teaching effectiveness. Through participating in CLPDs she paid more attention to the "knowledge (that) remained in students' mind(s)", meaning the knowledge they internalised rather than things they knew but could not apply.

Through participating in CLPDs I began to think: "How much have my students gained from my class?" and "What should I do to help my students gain more?" (Mei, interview)

This excerpt shows how reflective Mei began to be. She not only reflected on her preparation for the contents and teaching procedures in the class but also took into consideration the students' learning outcomes. In the interviews, she expressed full agreement with the advice to use PowerPoint less because fancy PowerPoint slides may distract students' attention and hinder their self-reflection. She also realised that traditional teaching aids such as chalk and blackboard could be helpful in highlighting key points and optimising the organisation of teaching activities.

Mei was also a creative practitioner of linking reading and writing. Her changes started from her attitude towards the focus in her reading teaching as she gradually learned to select key points and synthesise teaching materials according to her understanding of student needs. Moreover, she extended the ideas of linking reading and writing to other aspects of teaching, such as listening teaching. In the interview, Mei briefly described one of her lesson plans:

On the basis of the input of reading and listening, I designed a role-play activity. Students could either choose to form groups of three or four, or they could do pair work. One student took the role of the reporter; the rest pretended to be the astronauts who had landed on the moon. Each group exchanged their information on moon landing. This activity aimed to encourage students to use what they have learned from reading and listening activities. (Mei, interview)

This excerpt illustrates that Mei combined various methods and ideas discussed in CLPDs, especially linking input (reading and listening) and output (speaking and writing). Being critical, Bing and Mei also pointed out some barriers in implementing the ideas from CLPDs. For example, they indicated that one of the barriers was the quality of teaching materials:

Most ... reading passages are not compatible with high school students' ages. And many passages are not of the typical English writing style. ... How much time and energy should I spend on them? Is it meaningful if we ask our students to read such passages over and over again? (Mei, interview)

Furthermore, Bing suggested that with many students English had a lower priority than subjects such as mathematics, physics and chemistry. Both Bing and Mei suggested that the prevailing environment in society had exerted negative influences on students and placed barriers before teachers in their daily teaching. Many students did not want to put an effort into learning English and expected teachers to cut them some slack in the subject. As to CLPDs, Bing and Mei hoped that the sessions could cover more aspects and angles regarding real-life teaching situations to meet the diverse needs and interests of teachers.

(2) Wen and Dong

Wen and Dong reevaluated their teaching effectiveness through CLPDs. In particular, Wen realised the importance of having an overall plan for a semester and of considering the logical relationship among tasks in achieving teaching effectiveness. To achieve teaching effectiveness, Wen implemented the methods discussed in CLPDs such as linking reading and writing for each unit.

Now I pay more attention to writing. For example, the second unit was on the UK. The second reading passage was about sightseeing in London. Regarding this passage, I assigned my students a writing task: Suppose you are a tour guide, design a day tour and introduce at least three spots to your customers. This is a typical linking of reading and writing; students can refer to the passage in writing. (Wen, interview)

As a novice teacher in her first year of teaching, Dong regarded effectiveness as an indicator of her teaching capability. Compared with other participants, this young teacher reflected upon her own teaching more frequently and was also an active practitioner of the methods suggested in CLPDs. Through CLPDs she realised the importance of linking reading and writing:

Last semester I overlooked the writing part. Now I ask my students to write more and more. Even in the listening class I often ask them to write on the listening materials after discussion. Writing can make them feel they achieve a lot. (Dong, interview)

To foster her students' confidence in writing, Dong used the ideas given by the researcher in CLPD such as positive self-evaluation:

I ask my students to make comments on their own writing by underlining the well-written sentences. From the comments I collect, I find that most of them report that they become more confident than before. Many students report that they are satisfied with some parts of their writing. (Dong, interview)

Both Wen and Dong pointed out some difficulties in applying what they had learned from CLPDs to their teaching. For example, Wen said her students' poor English proficiency and variability in learning ability caused many problems in teaching. Dong, as a novice teacher, was busy absorbing knowledge from her colleagues and CLPDs, and did not mention the problems that Bing, Mei and Wen raised. She thought that the major problem was the interpersonal relationship within the community.

We are colleagues teaching in the same district. It is impossible to raise very sharp questions in CLPDs. In fact, we hold back what we doubt. (Dong, interview)

Dong's concern touches an important issue in PLCs. As Hargreaves (1994) indicates, contrived collegiality may lead to conformity and superficiality, resulting in few meaningful dialogues in PLCs. Too much emphasis on harmonious relationships, conflict prevention and respecting others (especially authority and elders) in traditional Chinese collectivism may lead to conservatism and hinder the development of PLCs.

As a young teacher with limited teaching experience, Dong expressed her difficulty of applying theories to her daily practice.

For example, in writing teaching, I need to make full use of the materials in the textbook and provide more input for students. The passages from other sources other than the textbook can also be part of teaching materials. I understand, but I don't know how to do it. (Dong, interview)

Building on the understanding of theories or ideas, teachers need to be creative and flexible in the way they teach. Experienced teachers tend to be resistant to new ideas in language teaching because of their rich experience, whereas young teachers appear to be open to new ideas but be impeded by their limited teaching experience in putting theories into practices.

(3) Ping and Jing

Ping's changes mainly occurred in her reading teaching. In reading teaching, many high school EFL teachers were restrained to some prefabricated procedures. Some teachers preferred to use the top-down model. That is, teachers first asked students to read a whole passage silently and then asked students to talk about the main ideas of the passage and explained some words or grammar structures that students were unclear on. In contrast, some teachers preferred to use the bottom-up model. That is, they first dealt with vocabulary and grammar before students were allowed to read a passage. In either case, teachers tended to ignore the contents and features of the passage and the proficiency of the students. Through CLPDs, Ping realised the importance of combining the top-down and bottom-up approaches in reading teaching, depending on the type of passage and students' previous knowledge and language proficiency.

In particular, Ping fully supported the researcher's advocacy of having reading aloud activities in language class, because she benefited from reading aloud when she was a high school student. She strongly believed that without enough input of reading and reciting, students would be unable to speak and write fluently and properly.

In high school, after reading after the teacher three or four times, I could read fluently myself and even could recite the whole passage. I could definitely understand the meaning and adopt what I had learnt to my writing. (Ping, interview)

Through CLPDs, Ping came to understand the variety of writing tasks such as short answers to questions, summary and jigsaw writing. She then gave students more writing tasks to help them internalise what they had learned from reading and listening.

In contrast, Jing made few changes in her teaching. The only substantial change was increasing reading time and reducing the use of PowerPoint. Jing reduced mechanical drilling exercises and gave students more time to read at their own pace. As with other teachers, Jing started to reconsider the use of PowerPoint:

Instructions are not necessary to write on the PowerPoint slides. If teachers want to raise questions they can speak out instead of reading the PowerPoint. (Jing, interview)

Jing agreed with the researcher's suggestions on EFL teaching. However, she said that the low English proficiency of her students hindered her from applying many of the ideas discussed in CLPDs to her teaching. Most of her students had limited vocabulary, constraining them from developing other language skills such as reading, listening and writing. Despite these difficulties, Jing, inspired by CLPDs, started to intergrate vocabulary teaching into reading activities:

After reading the passage the students are asked to fill in the blanks according to the passage. The initial letter is given. With this hint, the students are able to recall the words. The purpose of this exercise is to check the students' comprehension of the passage. (Jing, interview)

Jing intended to link the meaning of a passage and the use of vocabulary. By putting vocabulary in context, students can memorise words meaningfully. Linking the two also enhanced her teaching effectiveness.

As with other participants, Ping and Jing indicated that student language proficiency was the major barrier to putting ideas from CLPDs into practice in their teaching. Jing further commented that students' lack of social experience also impeded their deep understanding of texts. Ping indicated that teachers' deterioration of English competence and school administration also hinder teachers' innovation in teaching. Many teachers seemed to have neither the time nor the interest to read materials other than textbooks and examination papers once they become teachers, resulting in a decline in their own English language competence. Despite their awareness of such deficiencies, many teachers still have little time to read and write because of administrative responsibilities.

In brief, the participating teachers indeed made some changes to the way they taught. But they also pointed out the factors impeding them from including ideas or methods discussed in CLPDs in their teaching. Some were embedded in the flaws of the contents and organisation of CLPDs, bringing teachers' needs and the contents of CLPDs into conflict. Others sprang from the working environment, such as students' language proficiency and learning attitudes, teaching materials and the miscellaneous administrative tasks teachers are required to do.

5 Discussion

Taking part in CLPDs, the teachers all gained new understanding of language teaching and learning, resulting in some changes in their teaching practices. In other words, a PLC was gradually formed through regular CLPDs. The PLC is a melting pot in which individual participants exert influence on one another, forming common ground and a collective learning culture. In particular, the teaching research officer (Huiwen) and the university researcher (Luxin) contributed significantly to the gradual establishment of the PLC. Huiwen was the bridge between the teachers and the university researcher by planning CLPDs each semester and assigning the preparation of lesson planning to various teachers. Luxin responded to these lesson plans and provided academic support during CLPDs, helping the participating teachers reflect on their teaching practice. The participation of the researcher solved the problems that often occurred in a PLC with an enclosed circle of teachers by bringing new and innovative perspectives to the PLC.

The PLC aimed to improve the quality of teaching so as to improve student learning. However, the participating teacher's experience may facilitate or constrain his or her acceptance of new ideas or change the way he or she teaches. In particular, the teachers with years of teaching experience (e.g. Mei and Jing in this study) appeared to be more confident in questioning theories and suggestions discussed in CLPDs or developing their own ways of improving practices. In contrast, novice teachers are more open and sensitive to new ideas discussed in CLPDs and are more willing to use those ideas in their teaching. Moreover, the unified forms and contents may fail to meet the diverse needs of all the participants in CLPDs. Teachers from key schools (e.g. Mei & Dong) may find that discussions give them new ideas regarding teaching, while those like Jing (i.e. teaching students with lower proficiency) may find theories or methods hard to apply in the classroom. In order to increase the efficiency of CLPDs, some teachers have suggested "layered CLPDs", or grouping teachers according to the proficiency of their students or their different years of teaching experience. However, it is difficult to implement this proposal because of the limited time and resources and the difficulty of classifying teachers. A practical solution is to find as much common ground as possible to satisfy the majority of the participants.

Despite this issue, the participating teachers expressed their appreciation for the innovative CLPDs, which had formed a stable and growing PLC. Such a PLC had satisfied teachers' desperate need for the opportunity to share their knowledge and teaching resources, discuss their concerns and connect new ideas and strategies to their own teaching. During the sessions teachers exchanged their opinions about how to handle each unit through studying each other's lesson plans and discussing each other's teaching practice. That is, the PLC allowed the teachers to learn from their peers' wisdom and reflect on their own ideas and practices.

The PLC also updates the teachers' views of teaching by establishing common goals in enhancing their students' learning. These goals include teachers' professional capability, teaching aims and course design. When it comes to fostering students' learning ability, teachers appear to focus more on the process of teaching and learning – including knowledge and skills, process and methods, attitude and value – than on examination results. In other words, the PLC has helped teachers to shift their focus from teaching to learning. Teachers start to concern themselves more with whether their students have benefited from their teaching.

CLPDs within a PLC can sustainably enhance teachers' professional development. Compared with independent lesson planning, CLPDs allow teachers to reexamine their lesson plans from diverse perspectives and thus deepen and broaden their understanding of teaching materials and students' needs. The PLC provides the opportunity to combine collective wisdom and individual strength through CLPDs. Such a combination provides practice-based knowledge insurance for teachers' professional development, which also enhances their growth, both personal and professional.

6 Conclusion

This study examined the impact of CLPDs, an important activity in a PLC on participating teachers' EFL teaching practices through sharing various resources and exchanging ideas. This study has witnessed the specific changes and progress the participants made and provided an example of a new form of school-university collaboration in which the teachers, the teaching research officer and university researcher forged a closer relationship than is the case in any other kind of teacher development program. The study suggests that CLPDs with collaboration between school teachers and university researchers are an innovation of the traditional ones with the participation of only teachers and teaching research officers.

In fact, school-university collaboration is still under development in most schools in China because the quality of teaching resources in districts, cities and provinces can vary widely. With the obvious benefits of combining theory and practice, such a model deserves further propagation, the natural outcome of which would be higher-quality teaching.

This study also noticed the participating teachers' educational context in applying the ideas of CLPDs, indicating the difficulty of satisfying the diverse needs of teachers in CLPDs. Therefore, teaching research officers and university researchers need to seek the teachers' questions and comments before each CLPD to find as much common ground as possible. Moreover, university researchers or teacher educators should visit schools more often to find out what is happening in classrooms. With the insight gained, university researchers or teacher educators would be able to offer better support to inservice teachers.

This study also found that during CLPDs the opportunities for communication between teachers from different schools are highly limited because of time constraints. The PLC, though formed by heterogeneous participants, could be largely deprived of its integrity because of this lack of communication among members. The future PLC could try to create more opportunities for participating teachers to communicate and thus form a more cohesive community. Furthermore, future research could examine the collaboration of schools and universities on a more constant basis to gauge the effectiveness of teacher development in fostering student achievement.

Notes

1. This study was supported by the Project of Discipline Innovation and Advancement (PODIA)-Foreign Language Education Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing (Grant No 2020SYLZDXM011).
2. Teaching research officers are mainly responsible for the development of teachers in local districts by observing classes and arranging collective lesson planning discussions and open (research) lessons in China. They are usually recruited from experienced or expert teachers in local schools.
3. The concept of “key schools” emerged in the early 1980s. In keeping with Deng Xiaoping’s idea to “let a number of people become well off first” as applied in the field of economics, the government decided to turn better-equipped schools into key schools, the aim being to use them as educational models for others to follow.

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