Understanding Professional Challenges Faced by Chinese Teachers of English

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Abstract

Drawing on work in general education, second/foreign language teacher education has begun to recognize that within its knowledge base, teachers, apart from the methods and materials they may use, are central to improving English language teaching. To understand the professional development of teachers in the English as a foreign language context, this paper reports a survey study among 47 in-service secondary teachers of English (Grades 7-12) who were attending a summer professional upgrading program in a Teacher College in Northern China. The results indicate that the challenges these teachers face are connected with the unique centralized examination-driven educational system. The findings also provide an understanding of their professional development needs and entail implications on second/foreign language teacher education programs in such a context.

Introduction

Drawing on work in general education, language teacher education has begun to recognize that teachers, apart from the methods and materials they may use, are central to improving English language teaching (Freeman, 1991; Johnson, 1992; Prabhu, 1990; Richards & Nunan, 1990). Freeman and Johnson (1998) argue that the core of language teacher education must centre on the activity of the teaching itself, the teacher who does it, the context in which it is done, and the pedagogy by which it is done. Undoubtedly, this reconceptualization in teacher education is posing great challenges to teachers within the English as a second language (ESL) context in English speaking countries, and as a foreign language (EFL) context in China in particular. And these challenges, just as Curtain and Pesola (1994) put it, require second/foreign language teachers to have "a combination of competencies and background that may be unprecedented in the preparation of language teachers" (p. 241). However, relatively little has been studied in ESL/EFL teacher education, even less among Chinese teachers of English teaching at the school level.

In 1999, the Ministry of Education in the People's Republic of China (PRC) documented an action plan for vitalizing education for the 21st century. One of the key components addresses the urgent needs for professional development for in-service teacher education, which has impact on more than 550,000 secondary teachers of English, and millions of students learning English at the secondary level in China (Liu & Gong, 2000). Upgrading their subject and pedagogical knowledge of this enormous number of teachers—with only 55% and 80% junior and senior secondary teachers respectively holding a university degree at the moment of this study—provides a daunting task for Education Colleges and Teacher Colleges across the country. [-1-]

In the midst of this, we conducted a two-stage study within the context of such a professional upgrading program in EFL between January-August, 2002. The purpose of this study was to understand the professional challenges faced by those Chinese teachers of English. The first stage of the study delineated the curriculum components of this teacher education program in order to understand where those teachers were in their subject and pedagogical knowledge (see Cheng, Ren, & Wang, 2003). The second stage was a survey study among 47 in-service secondary teachers of English (Grades 7-12) who were attending a summer professional upgrading program in a Teacher College in Northern China, which will be reported in this paper.

Teachers, Their Teaching Context, and Their Professional Development

To achieve a better understanding of what language teacher education should be, it is important to take a closer look at the knowledge base of second or foreign language teachers of English, their pre-service education and in-service training (Cheng, Ren, & Wang, 2003). By doing this, it enables teacher educators to understand where language teachers are, what their professional needs are, and how they can be assisted to attain their professional goals in various teacher education programs. It is hoped that such an understanding of TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) targeted professional development will enhance teaching and learning in the ESL/EFL context.

Much research on knowledge base for teacher education in the field of general education (Hegarty, 2000; Shulman, 1986, 1987; Turner-Bisset, 1999) and that of ESL/EFL education (Fradd & Lee, 1998; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Vélez-Rendón, 2002) has been conducted both conceptually and empirically during the past two decades. The term knowledge base, in Fradd and Lee's (1998) understanding, is the repertoire of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that teachers entail to conduct classroom practices effectively. In the exploration of the knowledge base for teaching in general education, Shulman (1986, 1987) initiated his theoretical framework which probes the domains and categories of content knowledge in the minds of teachers and distinguishes three categories of content knowledge: subject matter content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and curriculum knowledge.

Within Shulman's content knowledge taxonomy, *subject matter knowledge* refers to "the knowledge, understanding, skill, and disposition that are to be learned by school children" (Shulman, 1987, pp. 8-9). *Pedagogical content knowledge* includes ideas, analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations, that is, ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to students. It also includes the pedagogical reasoning skill, the capacity to transform subject matter of instruction into "forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students" (p. 15). *Curriculum knowledge* consists of programs designed for teaching particular subjects and topics and a variety of instructional materials in relation to those programs.

In addition to the aforementioned three categories, general pedagogy, learners and their characteristics, educational contexts, and educational purposes constitute the rest of the knowledge base in Shulman's analysis of teacher education (1986, 1987). Ever since then, the impetus for developing the knowledge base has ignited the spark in many researchers and scholars who have elaborated and conceptualized the knowledge base for teaching in some other fields such as math, science, social studies, physical education, and English.

Particularly, English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) teacher education, supported by research from general education, has gradually achieved "a sense of autonomy, with its own knowledge base, paradigms, and research agenda" (Richards, 1987, p. 210). This TESOL knowledge base (Fradd & Lee, 1998) seems much more vital for ESL/EFL teachers than ever before at the new millennium. In fact, to a large extent, developing and strengthening this knowledge base points to the challenges that ESL teachers in the North American context and particularly EFL teachers in the international context have been facing in their professional development to effectively carry out their occupation (Crandall, 2000; Guntermann, 1993; Schick & Nelson 2001; Sullivan, 2001). The challenges, as Schrier (1993) stated, require a much wider array of competences for the future foreign language teachers, who are expected to be proficient in foreign language and its culture, proficient in language and culture of the school's community, expert in curricular design and implementation, and technologically sophisticated. [-2-]

The recognition of the importance of this TESOL knowledge base also resonates with Richards' (1987) assertion that research on teacher education in TESOL switched from focus on examining teaching to that on the teacher along its development since the 1950s. The previous lack of emphasis on the teacher runs the risk of forgetting the fact that teachers as the main decision makers at the classroom level, decide, shape, and modify the curriculum based on their classroom reality (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992). The neglect of what the teacher is and what role the teacher plays in the school undoubtedly brings about problems such as teachers' lack of interest to implement new curriculum, passive involvement in the teaching activity, low motivation to improve in terms of pedagogy, resistance to innovation, and so on.

However, the reconceptualization of who language teachers are, what language teaching is, and how language teachers learn to teach has been the research agenda in the 1990s (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). As Freeman and Johnson (1998) claim, "teachers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical skills; they are individuals who enter teacher education programs with prior experiences, personal values, and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do in their classrooms" (p.401). In other words, teachers' classroom practice is especially influenced by their beliefs and other factors.

Lortie's (1975) apprenticeship of observation explains that prospective teachers have deep-held beliefs of what it means to teach when they start their education programs, because long before their teaching starts, they have observed different classroom teaching. This observation has a pervasive influence on their own classroom decision making in their later teaching career. As well, teachers' beliefs not only determine what they do in the classroom but also how they interpret classroom events. Woods (1991) illustrates this by his longitudinal study of two in-service ESL teachers in a Canadian university who teach the same ESL course but hold different theoretical orientations. He found that (1) the decisions made in planning and carrying out the course were internally consistent, and consistent with deeper underlying assumptions and beliefs about language, learning and teaching; yet (2) each teacher's decisions and beliefs differed dramatically from the other along a number of specifiable dimensions (p. 4).

Apart from the research on what the teacher is, studies have also pointed to the significance of contextual factors, which affect teachers' classroom teaching as well as their professional development. Delineating TESOL knowledge base development as part of a university-level teacher education program in the United States, Fradd and Lee (1998) emphasize the vital role of context in students' learning process. They believe that teachers should have the knowledge of their students, their schools, and their communities in order to gain understanding and support for effective instruction. These authors finally advocate for integrating and expanding the TESOL knowledge base to enhance the professional development at local, national, and international levels.

Taking the social contexts of teaching in school as of primary concern and conducting a more critical socio-political analysis of language teaching environment at the macrolevel, Crookes (1997) argued that second/foreign language teachers often perform their teaching tasks under the conditions of far less autonomy than other professions as regards curriculum, materials, and school structure. He claimed that "the way teachers teach is influenced by the effects of the social structures in which they are embedded, which create them, and which they in turn create" (p. 73). Thus, he called for an adequate administrative support for language teachers' professional development. As well, Vélez-Rendón (2002) emphasized to conduct research on contextual factors influencing second language teachers' ongoing professional development, such as school culture, cooperating teachers, university supervisors, parents, and students. This reconceptualization of the new knowledge base in language teacher education suggests that teacher educators and researchers in whatever setting should draw much closer attention on the context where language teacher education programs in professional development are administered. Quoting Freeman's (2002) words, "In teacher education, context is everything" (p. 11).

This claim is especially true in the EFL context, where language teachers' professional development may have to cover more than just the subject matter and the pedagogy. After all, the ultimate goal for EFL students to learn a foreign language is to obtain the necessary information related to their field through using the language both orally and in written form. In order to develop their students' language proficiency, language teachers first of all are expected to have a good command of the target language. Otherwise, fostering students' language proficiency would be a very difficult task to accomplish. That is why Falvey and Coniam (1999), when designing the English benchmarks in Hong Kong, contended that the most important elements of language teachers' competence there should consist of language ability, subject content knowledge and language awareness, and pedagogic content knowledge in English. More specifically, language ability should be benchmarked in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and classroom language, which Falvey and Coniam consider to be paramount in order to improve their classroom teaching and teacher education programs should prepare teachers for. [-3-]

Therefore, it is not only necessary but also crucial in language teacher education programs to be conducted in the EFL context to achieve an understanding of language teachers' knowledge base to get a sense of where they are, to comprehend their teaching context, and to know their professional development needs. A search of the relevant literature in Chinese teacher education has revealed that very few

empirical studies have been undertaken, especially regarding EFL teachers at the secondary level. However, there are a number of discussion papers available in English focusing on reforms in the Chinese teacher universities and colleges (Ding, 2001; Hare & Thomas, 2002; Shen, 1994; Wu, 1995; Xie, 2001), policy development in the secondary English curriculum (Adamson & Morris, 1997; Hawkins, 1992; Lin & Xun, 2001), and challenges primary and secondary teachers face (Fang, 1999; Guan, 1999). As well, a couple of empirical case studies have touched upon pre-service English language teacher education for secondary teachers (Adamson, 1995; Guo, 1999).

Guo (1999) explored current issues in Chinese teacher education. The results of his survey indicated that teacher training for primary and secondary schools was very inadequate concerning teaching skills. The prospective teachers received very little practice teaching in classrooms, usually only teaching for one week out of their eight weeks' practicum. From his four years' teaching experience in a teachers college in Northern China, Adamson (1995) analyzed the changes to the college curriculum for junior secondary EFL teachers and practices and pointed to the gap between secondary schools where the curriculum has become communication-oriented and teachers colleges where traditional methods of teaching still prevail. He also criticized the negligible status of teaching practice on the curriculum, which constitutes only six weeks out of three-year certificate course for teachers of English. This lack of practicum experience is resonant with what has been claimed by Sharpe and Ning (1998), Li (1999), Hu (2002) and Cheng, Ren, and Wang (2003).

In addition to the inadequacy of Chinese secondary EFL teachers in terms of pedagogical skills and practicum teaching experience, status and treatment of these teachers in Chinese society, pre-service teacher education curriculum, and assessment practice are other features which are different from other teacher education programs such as in England and other countries (Cheng, Ren, & Wang, 2003; Li, 1999; Sharpe & Ning, 1998). As a matter of fact, all these studies have demonstrated that teacher education for secondary EFL teachers in China is an area where more empirical work needs to be conducted. It is based on the above research literature, we decided to survey a group of EFL teachers in China as an initial case study. The purpose of this study is to explore (1) who these EFL teachers are, (2) under what teaching context these teachers are teaching, and (3) what their professional development goals are in TESOL.

The present study

The study was conducted in the summer of 2002. The participants of this study were 47 in-service secondary school teachers of English who were attending a professional development course at Qingdao Education College in Northeast of China. The professional development course lasting for six weeks aimed to upgrade both the subject and pedagogical knowledge of local in-service secondary teachers of English. These teachers were invited to participate in this study, as they are the best informants of the research questions to be explored in this study as mentioned above. These questions thus form the theoretical framework for the survey questionnaire to be used in this study.

The questionnaire consists of three parts of 28 questions and statements in a mixed format of Likert Scale, choices and open-ended questions (see Appendix). The survey was designed based on Epstein (2001), Cheng, Ren, and Wang (2003), and the literature review conducted above. The survey was used to be an initial case study on a small scale based on the limited empirical research conducted in this context. It was also served as a pilot so that a more structured questionnaire could be designed to survey a larger sampling of Chinese teachers of English. *Part One* consisting of 6 items was about teachers' personal and educational backgrounds, which demonstrated who they were as teachers of English in Chinese secondary schools. *Part Two* consisting of 11 items asked questions about their teaching context, where they conducted teaching in relation to their students. *Part Three* of 11 items explored these teachers' professional development beliefs and activities as to what they did and why they did them.

The survey was conducted during the course as part of their professional development. The coordinator of this course was onsite to explain the purpose of this survey. Key terms in the survey were translated into Chinese and definitions explained in the appendix. It took the participants about 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

The survey data was analysed using SPSS. As this is a very small sample of teachers of English in Chinese secondary schools (n=47), and the study is of exploratory in nature, only descriptive analysis was conducted. [-4-]

Results

The results reported here are summarised according to the three research questions asked in this survey study—the teachers, their teaching context, and their professional development.

The Teachers of English in this Study

It has been discovered that among 47 teachers in the survey (see Table 1), 78.7% of them started to learn English when they were in junior secondary school (Grade 7-9, Age 13-14), and 8.5% started during senior secondary (Grade 10-12, Age 16-17). Only 12.8% started learning English when they were in elementary school. It has been studied (Krashen's critical period hypothesis, 1982, 1985) in the second language acquisition (SLA) that the age at which learning of another language starts is a crucial factor determining how proficient a learner can achieve. This indicates majority of these teachers started to learn English after the critical period.

When the teachers were asked to identify the kind of teaching methods when they were learning English, 74.5% reported grammar-translation method, 2.1% and 6.4% reported communicative method and audio-lingual method respectively. The rest 17% reported other methods and a combination of different methods. Regarding the context of their education, 36.2% of them received their education in big cities, 34% and 29.8% from rural areas and medium size cities respectively. Due to the vast size of China, the quality of English education varies to a great extent. The quality of teachers, teaching resources and the amount of time spent on English in class can vary depending on where a learner receives his/her education. Big cities tend to have advantages over the quality of the teachers and teaching resources in China.

When these teachers were asked about their educational qualifications, 69% of them have a three-year degree certificate from teachers' colleges. Only less than 16.7% have a bachelor's degree, and 1 out of 47 teachers (2.4%) has a master's degree. Among the teachers, 85.1% of them are currently teaching at the junior secondary level. As is reported in Cheng, Ren, and Wang (2003), many in-service teachers of English in China who are teaching at the junior secondary school do not have a bachelor degree with the national average being 55% with bachelors at this level of teaching. However, the result also indicates that this group of teachers were relatively experienced—25.5% of them with 5-9 years of experience, 34% with 10-14 years of experience, 23.4% with more than 15 year and 14.9% with more than 20 years of experience.

Table 1. Teachers' Educational Background

Variables	N = 47 (%)
The time teachers starting to learn English	
Elementary school	12.8
Junior secondary school	78.7
Senior secondary school	8.5
The methods used when they were taught English	
Grammar-translation	74.5
Communicative method	2.1
Audio-lingual method	6.4
Others	17.0
The context of childhood education	
Rural areas	34.0
Big cities	36.2
Medium-sized cities	29.8
Qualification teachers have	
Certificate from teachers' college	69.0
Bachelor degree	16.7

Master degree	2.4
Others	11.9

The context of teaching

Junior secondary school	85.1
Senior secondary school	2.1
Others	12.8

The years of teaching experience

1-4 years	2.1
5-9 years	25.5
10-14 years	34.0
15-20 years	23.4
Over 20 years	14.9

[-5-]

From the result, we can see that this group of teachers of English in this study started to learn English after puberty. They were taught predominately by traditional teaching method. Majority of them have only three-year college education. They are, however, very experienced teachers majority of them having more than 10 years' experience. This shows a typical group of secondary teachers in the Chinese context with limited English language proficiency and teaching methodologies, yet they are the major teaching force in Chinese secondary schools.

The Teaching Context

This section explores the context where the teachers of this study were teaching. First, we look at the education qualifications it is required to teach in their current schools, their workload, their class size, and the influence of standardized testing on their instruction (see Table 2). Second, we look into their teaching responsibilities, their teaching activities, their teaching evaluation, the factors influencing their teaching, and the challenges they face in teaching English in China (see Figure 1 and Table 3). Third, we explore from the teachers' perspectives the challenges their students face in learning English and the kind of activities they do to motivate their students to learn (see Table 4).

It is discovered that 67.4% of the teachers in this study reported (see Table 2) that a certificate from teachers' colleges was required to teach in their current schools, and that only 16.3% said their schools required a bachelor degree. None of the schools where the teachers were teaching required a master's degree. The rest of 16.3% commented that a combination of qualifications was required to teach in their schools. This again indicates a teaching force with limited language proficiency and lack of teaching methodology training within a three-year teacher education program (Cheng, Ren, & Wang, 2003).

44.7% of the teachers in this study were teaching 8-9 hours per week. One third of the teachers (29.8%) were teaching 10 hours per week, and the rest of 25.5% of the teachers were teaching more than 11 hours per week. This does not seem to be heavy till we look at the size of their classes. Only 19.2% of the teachers were teaching a class of 41-50 students, and the rest of 80.8% of the teachers were teaching classes with more than 50 students, which are extremely large for a language classroom where language interaction is a great challenge to these teachers. This demanding teaching context together with the lack of language proficiency and teaching methodology contribute to the current English language teaching situation in Chinese secondary schools. In addition, within this environment, 76.6% of the teachers commented that their students had to take standardized testing at the national, provincial, or municipal levels. However, only 47.8% of the teachers said such testing was influencing their teaching vs. 52.2% said no.

Table 2. Background of Teachers

Variables	N = 47 (%)
Qualifications required to teach English in school	
Certificate from teachers' colleges	67.4
Bachelor degree	16.3
Master degree	0.0
Others	16.3
The number of required hours of teaching per week	
8-9 hours	44.7
10 hours	29.8
11-12 hours	6.4
13-14 hours	10.6
Over 15 hours	8.5
The size of the class	
41-50 students	19.2
Over 50 students	80.8
Required standardized tests	
Yes	**76.6**
No	**23.4**
Standardized tests affecting teaching	
Yes	47.8
No	52.2

[-6-]

When asked how often certain teaching activities in their teaching were conducted, it was shown that 45 participants (96 percent) listed reading as the most commonly used activity whereas 37 (79 percent) and 39 participants (83 percent) mentioned practicing grammar items and learning vocabulary as the other two frequently used activities respectively in their teaching (see Figure 1) followed by doing mock exams and writing. Group discussion and conducting games are the least frequent activities in these teachers' classrooms. From this figure, we can almost sense the English teaching and learning atmosphere in Chinese secondary schools.

Figure 1. Teaching Activities

When the teachers were asked about the kind of teaching responsibilities they had in their schools, it turned out that 82.6% of the teachers were mainly involved in teaching (see Table 3). No one was involved with curriculum development. Very few teachers 2 out of 47 were involved with material development and research respectively, 3 were involved with testing. When they were asked how their teaching was

evaluated in their schools, it turned out that 90.7% of the teachers were evaluated by their students' test and examination scores. This indicates the important role that standardized testing plays in teaching and learning in Chinese secondary schools, and what would drive teachers to do more in their classrooms. However, teachers' opinions seem to split half when they were asked about the impact of testing on their instruction (see Table 2 above). Furthermore, the factors influencing these teachers' teaching were also public examination (58.1%) followed by the need to obtain satisfaction in teaching (20.9%) and teaching experience and beliefs (11.6%). When asked about the challenges these teachers were facing teaching English in China, 57.1% listed teaching methods, followed by 38.1% standardized testing, which also indicates an examination-driven teaching context. Besides, more than half of the teachers commented to be concerned about their own language proficiency (19%) and skills in English (30.9%), which is consistent considering the teachers' characteristics discussed above. And one third were concerned about ways to motivate their students to learn (30.9%).

Table 3. Teaching Context

Variables	N = 47 (%)
Your main responsibilities in your school	
Teaching	82.6
Curriculum development	0.0
Material development	4.3
Research	4.3
Administration	2.2
Student placement	0.0
Testing	6.5
The way teachers are evaluated	
Own reflections on teaching	4.7
Students' test and exam scores	90.7
Inspection of students' work	0.0
Completion of the subject contents	2.3
Anonymous student evaluation of teaching	0.0
Evaluation by colleagues	0.0
Evaluation by principals or school inspectors	2.3
The factors that most influence teaching	
Professional training	2.3
Academic seminars or workshops	0.0
Teaching experience and beliefs	11.6
Teaching syllabus	2.3
Past experience as a language learner	0.0
The need to obtain satisfaction in teaching	20.9
Textbooks	4.7
Public exams	58.1
Learners' expectations	0.0
Three main challenges you face in teaching English in China*(N = 42)	
Teaching method	24
Standardized high-stakes testing	16
Improve language proficiency	8
Listening, speaking and reading	13

How to motivate students to learn English	13
Poor English learning environment	7
Fewer class hours	7

When these teachers were asked about the challenges their students face in aspects of learning English (see Table 4), 52.3% listed speaking, followed by listening (40.9%), memorization of new words (38.6%), and how to use grammar (29.5%). The rest of the aspects in communication skills, poor English learning environment and writing were commented by about 25% of the teachers. Combining with the results about what teachers do mostly in their teaching, it is not surprising that speaking is the most challenging task. It simply does not seem there is any time for practicing speaking in their classrooms.

When teachers were asked about the ways they used in their teaching to motivate their students, doing more simulated exam papers were again rated highly by 51.1% of the teachers, followed by organizing real-life activities and interesting language games. Encouraging students to learn was commented by only 8.9% of the teachers, and 2.2% mentioned better classroom discipline.

Table 4. Challenges and Activities

Variables	
Three challenges your students face in learning English in China*	**(N=44)**
Speaking	52.3
Listening	40.9
Memorization of new words	38.6
How to use grammar	29.5
Communication skills	25.0
Poor English learning environment	22.7
Writing	22.7
Test-oriented educational system	11.4
Activities you use to motivate your students in learning English	**(N=47)**
To do more simulated exam papers	51.1
To use more authentic materials	4.4
To organize real life language activities	22.2
To do more interesting language games	11.1
To give students more encouragement to learn	8.9
To create a positive attitude toward language learning	0.0
To provide student with effective language learning strategies	0.0
To have better classroom discipline	2.2

Teachers' Professional Development

In this section below, we will first explore the kind of teaching methods these teachers used in their teaching, the activities they were involved for professional development and the kind of professional development activities they participated, the learning experience that contributed to their professional development, and access to teaching resources. We will then explore what they wish to learn more about teaching, and what they wish to do to improve their teaching (see Table 5). In the end, we will explore further the reasons why they entered

the teaching profession, whether they wanted to continue the profession and the reasons for the continuation (see Table 6).

When asked about the most popular teaching method these teachers used in their teaching, it is shown that 41.3% mentioned that they used communicative teaching method, followed by grammar translation method (34.8%) and audiolingual method (23.9%). When they were asked to rank two professional development activities they had been involved over the past five years, developing teaching materials was the first choice for 44.4% of the teachers and test preparation was chosen as the second choice by half of the teachers. When asked about the kinds of professional development activities they participated over the five years, 75.6% commented on observing other teachers' classes, very few of them (6.7% and 8.9%) mentioned attending summer courses, conferences, and workshops respectively. Furthermore, 67.4% commented working with other teachers in their schools had contributed to their professional development. About 10.9% of the teachers felt that membership in professional teachers' association and writing reflective journals helped their professional development. 61.4% of the teachers said they had access to English teaching journals, books and Internet resources while more than one third of the teachers (38.6%) said that they did not have access to the above resources, which may be due to the different regions in the province where these teachers teach.

The teachers were also asked to rank two things that they would like to learn more about English language teaching. 84.8% of them commented on communicative language teaching as their first choice. 40.5% of the teachers ranked computer-based and assisted teaching and learning as their second choice. Surprisingly, no one commented on the desire to learn more about testing and evaluation as their first choice in such a highly examination-driven context, and only a quarter of the teachers mentioned as their second choice even though 90.7% of the teachers' teaching was evaluated by their students' test scores (see Table 3). When we explored the ways they wish to do to improve their teaching, 52.3% mentioned pursuing advanced degrees, followed by working with other teachers (15.9%), and mentors (13.6%), attending workshops and summer courses (9.1%).

Table 5. About Teachers' Professional Development

Variables	N = 47(%)	
The most popular teaching method in teaching		
Grammar-translation method	34.8	
Audiolingual method	23.9	
Communicative method	41.3	
PD activities involved over the past 5 years	1st	2nd
Curriculum/syllabus	4.4	0.0
Research reports	1.1	0.0
Teaching materials	44.4	5.6
Designing tests	22.2	27.8
Organizing extracurricular activities in English	8.9	16.7
Test preparation	8.9	50.0
Professional development activities participated		
Conferences	8.9	
Summer courses	6.7	
Workshops	8.9	
Visiting other schools	0.0	
Observing other teachers' class	75.6	
Other learning activities contributing to PD		
Membership in English teachers' association	10.9	
Internet resources	8.7	

Working with other teachers in the school	67.4
Writing reflective teaching journals	10.9
Other informal learning	2.2

Access to English teaching journals, reference books

| Yes | 61.4 |
| No | 38.6 |

Aspects requiring further study	1st	2nd
Communicative language teaching	84.8	0.0
Material development	6.5	14.3
Classroom management	6.5	19.0
Testing and evaluation	0.0	16.7
Unit, lesson, and curriculum (syllabus) planning	2.1	9.5
Computer-based/-assisted teaching and learning	0.0	40.5

Ways to improve English teaching

Formal education opportunities	52.3
Distance programs (or self-study)	4.5
Workshops or summer courses	9.1
Work with other teachers with similar experience	15.9
Work with more experienced teachers	13.6
Being observed by others and receiving feedback	0.0
Others	4.5

[-9-]

Teachers were then asked why they chose to be an English language teacher, 22 out of 47 said they love English. Other reasons such as loving children, liking to be a teacher, English being useful were commented by 15, 13 and 12 of the teachers respectively. 23 teachers mentioned personal reasons, which we cannot explain via this survey. The majority of the teachers (87%) said that they would continue to teach, yet more than one third of them indicated that they were unsure at the time of the survey, no teachers said no to continue to teach English. The reasons for them to continue to teach are listed as liking teaching English by 16 teachers, loving teaching by 12, English being useful by 7 and loving children by 5. It seems that the reasons for them to enter and continue the profession were more or less the same kind of reasons, yet in different ordering, which might be due to the fact that this part of data was collected through teachers' own words.

Table 6. Professional Development

List three reasons that motivated you to enter this profession (N=41)	
Like English	22
Love children	15
Like to be a teacher	13
English is useful	12
Personal reasons	23
Specify two major reasons for your choice (N=38)	

Like teaching English	16
Love teaching profession	12
English is most useful	7
Love students	5

*These results are summarized based on these teachers' own words and the frequency
they commented on certain issues. Therefore, the number in this category only
indicates how many teachers commented on the category.

Discussion and conclusion

In summary, this survey serves as a first step and a case study to understand this group of teachers who teach English as a foreign language in China. Within this context, fewer empirical studies have been conducted at the secondary level or in the light of the Chinese government's mandate to upgrade these teachers' knowledge and skills within a short period of time.

Overall, this group of secondary school teachers of English is less prepared in their subject matter knowledge compared with TESOL teachers in the other parts of the world and the university teachers of English in China, Hong Kong, and Canada (Cheng, Rogers, & Hu, 2004; Sun & Cheng, 2002). 69% of them have only a three-year diploma, which indicates the lack of subject content knowledge, and probably pedagogical content knowledge. However, this is a group of teachers (72.3%) who have been in the teaching profession for more than 10 years. Yet the majority of them (78.7%) only started to learn English when they reached Grade 7, and were taught predominately by grammar and translation method, both of which factors could have serious implication on their English proficiency and on the way they teach English in their classroom. These teachers' English language ability, subject content knowledge and language awareness, and pedagogic content knowledge in English should have been the task for pre-service teacher education before they enter the teaching profession. It is, however, one of the major tasks in their professional development. Also in order to succeed in foreign language teaching as indicated by Schrier (1993), these teachers need a much wider array of knowledge and skills. Besides English language proficiency, they also need the language culture, the culture of the school's community, expert in curricular design and implementation, and being technologically sophisticated. This indicates that the professional upgrading of teachers of English in China is an urgent need and requires a great deal of more research. [-10-]

The teaching context where these teachers teach are involved with very large classes—80.8% of the teachers with more than 50 students, and highly influenced by standardized testing—76.6% of the teachers commented that their students are required to take standardized testing. 90% of their teaching is evaluated by students' test scores and 58.1% agree that public exam is the most influencing factor in their teaching. This finding pictures a context where standardized testing plays a dominating role and has a tremendous impact on instruction. The challenges that these teachers face are teaching methods, high-stakes testing, their language proficiency and ways to motivate their students to learn English. Such a context can also be found in other parts of the world especially within the EFL teaching and learning context where English is taught as a subject in schools (Cheng & Watanabe with Curtis, 2003).

To meet these challenges, 84.8% of the participants mentioned that the predominant communicative language teaching (CLT) was what they needed to gain more knowledge of through their professional development. And computer-based and computer-assisted teaching and learning technology was the second choice in their professional development needs (40.5%), which demonstrated the significant role that technology could play in the foreign language teaching when the learning of English is not immersed in aspects of life. With the advance of technology and Internet development, more and more information and English language input should be available to those teachers if proper guidance and training is included in this type of professional development course. Among this group of teachers, 87% commented they would continue their English teaching profession, which is encouraging for English language education in China when in other parts of Asian, e.g. Hong Kong where English language teachers are head-hunted by major business companies (Cheng, 1998; Falvey, 1995).

The results from this survey offer some implications for the large-scale in-service teacher education endeavour in the PRC and further serve as a window to understand the kind of challenges that Chinese secondary teachers and learners of English are facing. In terms of methodology, we recognize the limitation of this small case study using a questionnaire with a small group of informants from a single research site. The ideal situation would be to conduct follow-up interviews with the teachers and observations of their classroom teaching,

which can offer a much richer source of data. Also due to the small sample, we could not conduct more detailed analysis thus limiting us looking at the data only at the descriptive level.

This study, however, offers implications to other EFL contexts where teachers of English started learning English later in secondary school, were taught mostly through traditional teaching methods, and were lack of advanced subject and pedagogical knowledge in English (Ishida et al., 2002; Li, 1998). Furthermore, this study helps to inform other teaching contexts where there is also a predominated centralized examination driven system (Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996; Wall & Alderson, 1993; Wall, Kalnberzina, Mazuoliene, & Truus, 1996; Watanabe, 1992). In addition, we recognize the reconceptualization of what language teachers are and what they do is necessary. But the transformation will not occur in China or in other similar ESL/EFL contexts unless teachers themselves feel the need for such a transformation.

Acknowledgement

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