



An Analysis of the Significance and Feasibility of Cross-School Collaboration Among English Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Teacher development has been a key focus of research into educational reform in recent years, and teacher collaboration is an important means of promoting professional growth. Collaboration between university English teachers and secondary school English teachers not only reflects the university's role in serving the local community, but also meets the need to improve teaching quality and foster teachers' own professional development. The unity and continuity between secondary school English and university English, coupled with secondary school English teachers' desire for professional development and the widespread use of internet communication technologies, have also made such collaboration possible.

Keywords: Higher Education Institutions, Secondary Schools, English Teachers, Collaboration, Professional Development.

Introduction

With the rapid development of society and the ongoing deepening of educational reform, the challenges faced by teachers are growing by the day, and professional development has become a hot topic. Due to the influence of traditional thinking, teachers' educational philosophies and teaching practices have long remained relatively conservative, insular and isolated, with little communication between teachers. Consequently, research into promoting professional development through collaboration is attracting increasing attention.

I. The Current State of Professional Development for English Teachers

Although teachers work with large groups of students, they often find themselves working in isolation, far from the view of their peers. It is a highly individualized and solitary profession, lacking in dialogue and interaction, and devoid of a sense of community. Teachers make teaching decisions and resolve teaching issues on their own, with very limited collaboration among colleagues. At present, the research capabilities of primary and secondary school English teachers in China remain in urgent need of improvement, and there is still a lack of awareness regarding the role of collaboration among teachers in their professional development. In recent years, although they have begun to move from complete isolation towards some collaboration, there is still room for further expansion in both breadth and depth^[1].

In May 2023, the School of Foreign Language, Yangtze University took the lead in establishing cooperative relationships with five secondary schools in Jingzhou, thereby establishing a 'University-Middle School Integration Community'. At the same time, teacher training colleges and universities across the country, or institutions with teacher training programs, have consistently fulfilled the function of pre-service training for English teacher trainees, making a significant contribution to the development of primary and secondary school English teachers. However, teacher training programs at most higher education institutions remain largely confined to pre-service education, whilst the integration of pre-service and in-service education remains a blank slate^[2]. At present, vocational training is primarily carried out by teachers of primary and secondary school teaching methodology from foreign language or education faculties, with very limited participation from other staff. In short, in-service education for primary and secondary school English teachers has not received sufficient attention from higher education institutions,

and the vast pool of resources represented by the university English teaching staff has not played its due role in this process.

II. An Analysis of the Significance of Inter-school Collaboration Among English Teachers

1. This is necessary to fulfil the service functions of higher education institutions

One of the key functions of universities is to serve society. Serving the local community is an inevitable choice for universities to fulfil their role in higher education, adapt to the localization of higher education, and achieve mutual interaction between universities and society; it is determined by the nature and laws of higher education, and is also a consistent requirement of China's higher education policies and regulations^[3]. As centers of teaching and research, universities should make full use of their high-quality resources to provide comprehensive, high-level services to society, thereby becoming centers of social service. Universities primarily achieve their social service mission through teaching and research activities, including resource-sharing services, technology transfer services, and continuing education services. Therefore, fostering collaborative teaching and research between university and secondary school English teachers to promote the professional development of the latter is an objective necessity for universities to serve local cultural and educational needs.

2. It is necessary for the professional development of teachers

Everson advocates the establishment of inter-institutional collaborative teams to enable teachers to support one another within the same field^[4]. As opportunities for English teachers in many of China's higher education institutions to undertake further training abroad are extremely limited, and such opportunities for primary and secondary school English teachers are even more scarce, teachers' applications for domestic further training, part-time degree programs or full-time further training are also subject to various institutional policies^[5]; therefore, through inter-institutional collaboration, university English teachers can utilize their advantages in terms of professional knowledge, research methods and resource retrieval to guide and assist secondary school English teachers, whilst secondary school English teachers possess a wealth of first-hand materials, such as classroom recordings and experience in classroom organization and management, which can also provide valuable insights for university English teachers engaged in university English teaching and research. Some scholars have found that research into collaborative initiatives between university and secondary school English teachers not only helps secondary school English teachers learn how to conduct research, but also enhances their awareness of professional development and promotes greater teacher autonomy^[6].

3. This is necessary to improve the quality of English teaching

The ultimate aim of teachers pursuing professional development is to improve the quality of teaching. Improvements in the quality of university English teaching depend to a large extent on the standard of secondary school English teaching. If a solid foundation in English is not laid during the secondary school years, it is extremely difficult to make significant progress at university. Many students say that passing university English proficiency tests relies on 'living off past achievements'. At the same time, a considerable number of students believe that after two years of university study,

their English proficiency has not only failed to improve but has actually regressed; this phenomenon gives cause for serious reflection. University English places particular emphasis on the cultivation of listening and speaking skills; however, without training and accumulation during secondary school, relying solely on development during university is equally difficult to achieve. However, if university English teachers and secondary school English teachers were to engage in collaborative research and teaching, exchanging teaching experiences and providing feedback on teaching issues, and if secondary school teachers were also to relay students' learning weaknesses to university teachers, so that the latter could identify and address gaps, enabling university English teachers to deliver more targeted instruction, such cooperation and exchange would undoubtedly advance the overall quality of English teaching.

III. Feasibility Analysis of Inter-school Collaboration Among English Teachers

1. Both sides are keen to learn from one another

Driven by professional instinct, every teacher harbors a deep-seated desire to gain a clearer understanding of their own teaching practice and to discover better teaching approaches and methods, thereby becoming a teacher deeply loved by their students. This sense of self-actualization is the fundamental driving force behind teachers' pursuit and realization of professional development^[7]. Particularly in the rapidly evolving information age, professional theory and knowledge, as well as teaching methods and tools, have become increasingly diverse; teachers are eager to exchange ideas with their peers, learning from one another's strengths to compensate for their own weaknesses. According to relevant surveys, English teachers possess an awareness of and commitment to self-development, alongside an urgent need for professional growth^[8]. All of this provides the subjective conditions for collaboration among English teachers.

2. There is no fundamental conflict of interest between the parties

Lauty points out that a key reason for the lack of cooperation among teachers is, firstly, that the cellular structure of schools makes professional collaboration between teachers extremely difficult; and secondly, the institutional environment, which places excessive emphasis on competition among teachers, also reinforces tendencies towards non-cooperation^[9]. According to Tyson's self-esteem maintenance theory, if a close friend outperforms us in an area we value, our self-esteem is likely to be threatened, and we will feel anxious. To alleviate this anxiety, we may adopt corresponding countermeasures, including distancing ourselves from our friends (as long as we turn this accomplished person into a stranger, the individual no longer feels pressured and can happily continue to perform at a non-outstanding level; this seems to be a method employed by most people). Similarly, in China there is the saying 'scholars tend to look down on one another', meaning that educated people are prone to self-righteousness, unless the other's achievements are so great that they cannot be ignored; otherwise, they are accustomed to looking down upon them. However, this behaviour only manifests within the same field^[10]. This determines that it is difficult for teachers working together in the same subject to engage in genuine and effective collaboration. Yet, there is no conflict of interest between university English teachers and secondary school English teachers, and the two are closely linked and mutually influential in their English teaching, which offers the possibility for collaboration between them.

3. Alignment of Teaching Content and Learners

English is one of the very few subjects in China that is a compulsory course extending from primary school through to university. The New English Curriculum Standards and the Teaching Requirements for University English Courses have respectively established progressive teaching requirements for English courses at the secondary and university levels; the former serves as the foundation for the latter, whilst the latter is a continuation of the former, forming a unified whole. Since they belong to the same system, university English teachers should have a thorough understanding of the requirements, current status, and learning needs of secondary school English. Similarly, as the primary agents of English learning, university students, having undergone six years of secondary school English education, carry the imprint of their secondary school experiences in their learning styles, habits and difficulties. As Sunheng points out, university education is a process whereby teachers continuously exert an educational influence on learners within a specific educational environment, whilst some of the learners' personality traits and qualities have already been formed during their foundational years. Therefore, in cultivating innovative talent, higher education institutions must rely on their own academic strengths and collaborate with primary and secondary schools to carry out various educational reforms and innovations, such as providing professional training for primary and secondary school teachers^[10].

4. The Convenience Offered by Internet Communication Technologies

With the rapid advancement of modern transport, communication and internet technologies, the world has become increasingly smaller, and work and life are becoming less and less constrained by time and place; people can communicate and solve common problems simultaneously from different locations. Various synchronous and asynchronous communication enable people to communicate whenever, wherever and however they wish. For cross-school teacher collaboration, apart from physical distance and organizational differences, everything seems within easy reach. The sharing of teaching resources, understanding of teaching philosophies, resolution of professional queries, exchange of modern technologies, discussion of teaching methods, analysis of learning difficulties, development of teaching projects, and critique of teaching videos can all be achieved through the aforementioned media and platforms.

In summary, establishing collaborative relationships between university and secondary school English teachers to promote the professional development of English teachers is not only of significant practical importance but also entirely feasible. However, a series of issues—such as how to break away from the traditional training model in which only a few teachers from the School of Education or English departments participate, how to mobilise the enthusiasm of the broader university English teaching community for collaboration, how to establish a regularised system for cooperation, and how to evaluate the effectiveness of teacher collaboration—remain to be explored in future.

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