Chapter 13
Thriving in the New Normal:
In-Service Professional Development Needs and Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Language education in higher education has been significantly impacted by COVID-19, and this has placed significant pressure on practitioners around the world irrespective of their respective experience prior to the pandemic. Teachers are now expected to deliver classes utilising new mediums whilst learning how to use different technologies. This can place a significant strain on individuals, institutions, and education sectors as everyone is expected to become proficient in a new normal working environment. In light of this, this chapter considers the in-service professional development needs and experiences of 88 language teachers at a Sino foreign university in Mainland China. The aim is that the insights provided here will help education providers better understand the challenges that their staff may be facing and consider ways in which teacher learning can be addressed. This chapter should be of interest to educators, managers, leaders, and policymakers in a wide range of international settings.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the outbreak of the Covid-19, online learning has become increasingly important with higher education increasingly moving in this direction since early 2020 (Murphy, 2020; Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020). This movement in higher education has occurred in many countries around the world, such as China, Iran, Italy, the USA and the UK, to name just a few. For that reason, many different online learning platforms like Tencent classroom, Google classrooms, Moodle, Teams and Zoom have become essential to enable the possibility of synchronous teaching so that the same level of learning

success can be achieved online, or via blended learning, as in traditional classrooms. However, given that online learning was implemented as an immediate solution to mitigate the impact of the closure of universities, questions have been raised about the effectiveness of this approach. Related issues such as the affective aspects of online learning, motivation, autonomy and engagement, and teachers' competence and confidence in embracing the new teaching methods are a few shared concerns among researchers. Online teaching is particularly challenging for language teachers, as a language classroom involves many interactive activities, such as collaborative work to practice the target language. As such, the impact of teaching online has placed a vast amount of pressure on practitioners and institutions around the world. For example, teachers are now expected to deliver classes and present material using new mediums whilst simultaneously learning how to use a range of technological applications, but at the same time, many of the normal day-to-day challenges remain. This can place a significant strain on individuals, institutions and education sectors as everyone is expected to become proficient in a new normal working environment without the conveniences of the campus. In light of these problems, this study considers the in-service professional development needs and experience of language teachers at a Sino-UK university in China. The importance of this inquiry lies firstly with teachers needing to develop professionally throughout their careers in order to be effective (Burns & Lawrie, 2015), in particular, when innovations are introduced so that they have the skills and knowledge that they require to develop expertise (Evers, Van der Heijden & Kreijns, 2016; Li, 2017a). The second important value of this work stems from literature suggesting that teachers need to be active learners and 'autonomous thinking professionals, on whom the success of innovative techniques, methods, learning materials and tests depends' (Kiely, 2019, p. 82). In this process, teachers not only create a high-quality learning environment for students, but also develop a community to support each other (Evers et al., 2016).

BACKGROUND

Professional development is a key area for teacher education. There is a widespread view that it is critical for teachers to play an active role in their learning processes, as it will increase the success of development (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan 2001; Little, 2006; Li, 2017a). In terms of teacher learning, there are different approaches, and research suggests that the bottom-up efforts that are instigated by individuals and groups (e.g., Cheng & Wang, 2004) are more effective because such efforts are often closely related to teachers' own needs. Mann (2005) highlights the core elements of teacher development, including the need to address the insider view rather than the outsider view and its nature of being a continuing process of becoming and a process of articulating an inner world of conscious choices made in response to the outer world of the teaching context (105).

From an institutional perspective, it is essential that an educational provider supports and upskills its staff if it wishes to be competitive in an increasingly uncertain global market, as most initiatives are only likely to be as successful as those tasked with running them. One challenge, however, is that often in-service teachers have no training to tackle possible new challenges in an educational context (Hayden, 2002). In a period of ever-greater uncertainty and pressure, the need to take appropriate supportive action has rarely been more significant. Therefore, the importance of understanding teachers' professional needs to help them cope with any difficulties they might encounter should not be underestimated. This is an area that is undoubtedly requiring more academic research (Halicioglu, 2015). As far as expatriates are concerned, Roskell (2013) suggests that satisfaction with the school environment is more important for

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