

# The Factors Affecting Chinese College English Teachers' Learning Development: A Narrative Study

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Article information	Abstract
<p><b>Article history:</b>            Received: 27 Aug 2021            Accepted: 18 Apr 2022            Available online: 26 Apr 2022</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b>            Teacher learning            Teacher personal development            Teacher professional development            Chinese college English teacher            Narrative research</p>	<p><i>By ethnographic research, this study intends to explore the ways and influencing factors of college English teachers' learning through eight cases by means of qualitative multi-case study so as to identify how they achieve professional development. The results show that lack of time management, heavy administration work, over ambition and passiveness are the negative factors which affect teacher learning. Teacher learning happens with clear goal and motivation, while passive learning may lead to good results in terms of the teacher community. This study claims that teacher success will definitely be affected by teachers' clear goal and motivation with confidence, the influence of teaching community and the family influence.</i></p>

## INTRODUCTION

In China, college English teachers are a group of once proud but now the people with generally low professional titles and fewer prospects. Most English teachers are female and have been overloaded with classes for many years. After graduation, they have been faced with giving birth to children, taking care of children and being dragged down by housework. As time goes by, this has caused their less learning ability and are even not enterprising. However, at present, the national guide for college English teaching requires college English teachers to change their roles from only teaching EGP (English for general purposes), to teaching ESP (English for specific purposes) with the help of cross- cultures. For example, in China Standards of English (National Education Examinations Authority, 2018), ESP is included in level of 7, 8 and 9. At the same time, the world market also requires different talents, who needs to enhance effective communication in all areas of global context. These practices are needed by teachers so that they can develop students advanced communicative competences in college English education. But the biggest challenge for development of ESP teaching is the lack of qualified teachers (Cai, 2018). Most ESP practitioners move from EGP to ESP without much training in ESP (Campion, 2016; Huang, 1999).

Based on the above situation, most English teachers still have ambitions. For example, they try to learn by improving their teaching and research ability for promotion. But how they learn and why to learn should be identified so as to help such teachers above have proper ways to learn for development. Therefore, teacher learning has become a better way of learning. When

teachers consciously examine their own teaching behaviors and reasons, and when teachers “show” their silent and implicit personal knowledge and pursue its sources, they can raise their awareness, clarify concepts, and distinguish advantages and disadvantages, thus achieving the purpose of self-education (Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Woods, 1996; Farrell, 2008). Therefore, effective teacher education should strive to promote active and self-reflective teacher learning and avoid passive training-based teacher learning.

While there have been several studies on teacher learning, such as the teachers’ practice, teachers’ reflection, communication among teachers and the important role of teachers’ learning groups in the process of teachers’ learning and development, which challenges the traditional concept of teacher training. Teachers are no longer passive recipients of knowledge, but actively participate in the construction of new knowledge and ideas through personal experience of learned knowledge and communication with others. As a result, learners are the main body in the learning process, and their personal experiences and mental development are fully respected by teachers. The interaction among learners, teachers, learning tasks and learning environment has a decisive impact on the learning effect (Williams & Burden, 1997). Wallace (1998) claims that teachers promote individual learning and development through practice, reflection, practice and reflection cycle, and teachers’ reflective ability is becoming another important perspective in teachers’ learning and research, while Wenger (1998) emphasized the influence of learning significance, teaching practice, learning group and identity on teachers’ learning, which further opened up new ideas for people to understand teachers’ learning theory. These studies have shown the importance and necessity of teacher learning, and also the communication among learners can effectively help them form new personal views on teaching, promote the combination of book knowledge with colleagues and personal experiences, and then form personal teaching ideas and actively promote teachers’ learning (Gebhard, 1990; Knezevic & Scholl, 1996). This is, teacher learning is involved the communication with each other, and thus, the more opportunities for learners to communicate with each other, the more opportunities for teachers to reflect on teaching, which is conducive to promoting both teaching and learning.

However, fewer studies have dealt with the college English teacher learning through narrative studies in Chinese contexts, particularly how and why teacher learning has not been effective. In order to achieve teachers’ effective learning, it is necessary to fully understand the influencing factors of teachers’ learning, so as to make better use of the positive factors and overcome the negative factors. This study intends to explore the ways and influencing factors of college English teachers’ learning through 8 cases by means of qualitative multi-case study so as to achieve professional development. The following two research questions will be answered:

1. What factors affect the present Chinese college English teachers’ development when they learn to get their career promotion?
2. In what ways can the teacher learn in the teacher development?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1. Teacher learning theory

Teachers' learning is a method adopted by teachers for effective learning, and it is an important guarantee to enhance teachers' learning and growth. In the past 40 years, teacher learning has been studied by many researchers from different perspectives (Richards & Farrell, 2005; Tsui, 2007; Vescio et al., 2008; Appova & Arbaugh, 2018). Since the beginning of the 21st century, influenced by Vygotsky's Activity Theory (1978), especially the concept of intermediary, researchers and educators realize that teacher learning is not a linear accumulation of knowledge, but a continuous process of meaning construction in the interaction with the environment and others. Teacher learning is not a process of letting others instill or study behind closed doors, but a process of building new knowledge on the basis of personal experience, and a process of acquiring new knowledge under the adjustment of intermediary tools such as literature, teaching materials, lesson plans and lesson plans (Johnson, 2009). Effective teacher learning is a process of teachers' active construction and self-guidance, and reflective practice is an effective way to promote teachers' development. Beckett and Hager (2001, p. 302) claim that teachers' learning can be understood as "improving the ability to make appropriate judgments in a changing environment, which often occurs in the unique environment of many workplaces". Bakkenes et al., (2010, p. 536) define teacher learning as "a process in which teachers actively participate in activities, resulting in changes in knowledge, beliefs and teaching practices". From the above different definitions, it can be seen that teacher learning is a rich and dynamic concept, and the related research at home and abroad is deepening. However, in practice, teacher learning is difficult due to such obstacles as family problems, own personalities and so on. Teacher learning cannot be achieved with these difficulties.

Studies on teacher learning abroad started in 1980s, and can be roughly divided into two types. One is Direct research that explicitly focuses on teachers' learning, such as teachers' learning strategies (Richards & Farrell, 2005), the influence of teachers' learning on students' learning (Vescio et al., 2008), and teachers' learning machines (Appova & Arbaugh, 2018). The other is Indirect research, which explores teachers' learning indirectly by studying the related factors of teachers' learning, such as the change of teaching cognition in the process of teachers' learning and identity construction in teachers' learning (Tsui, 2007). These studies have made teacher learning a vibrant field in western teacher development research. Teacher learning can also be studied based on different theoretical perspectives. In acquisition perspective, teacher learning was a process in which teachers received the concerning knowledge (Meirink et al., 2009). Therefore, the outcome of teacher learning was changed in knowledge and skills. In cognitive constructivism, teacher learning is a process in which teachers evaluate, screen, absorb, digest, adjust or discard new information on the basis of existing knowledge to build new understanding and new knowledge and integrate them into teachers' personal knowledge system (Williams & Burden, 1997; Johnson, 2009).

### 2. Teachers' development goals and stages

Teachers' development goal is an important aspect in the research of teacher development,

but researchers have different opinions. Dewey was the first philosopher who regarded reflection as the goal of teacher education. He emphasized that reflection makes learners have clear goals and produce behaviors to achieve them. Schön (1983) pointed out that the reflection of professionals in practice is the condition to promote their growth. Under the influence of Dewey's teaching reflection theory, Wallace (1998) put forward that the reflection practice in the process of teachers' professional behavior provides the necessary impetus for the improvement of professional ability, and teachers achieve their professional development through practice, reflection, practice and reflection. Wallace's theory clarifies the reflection and development of teaching and the necessity, importance and development of reflection in teacher development. Lave and Wenger (1991), and Wenger (1998) put forward a new and important concept of promoting the development of teachers. They believe that teachers form a common cause, common investment and common experience with other participants through teaching practice, and form a mutual trust and dependence relationship, which forms an important driving force for their development in practice. Teachers' "community of practice" based on this provides an important impetus to promote teachers' common development. Other studies have shown that teachers' personality characteristics will have an impact on their career development. For example, "self-confidence" is an important personality characteristic of excellent teachers. Luo (2016) believes that the cultivation of teachers' good personality characteristics should be paid much attention to and encourages the transformation from skilled teachers to expert teachers. Cultivating teachers' personal qualities, including building self-confidence, should be an important goal of teachers' development. Nunan (1990, p. 62) claims that "the primary goal of in-service teacher education is to teach teachers to study their own classroom teaching methods" and to build teachers' self-confidence. Self-confidence can be built through several ways as Nunan (1990) suggests one of the ways: action research, because action research can not only improve teachers' teaching ability, but also promote teachers' reflection, strengthen the connection between theory and practice, and finally make them become researchers. Humanistic educators believe that the primary goal of teacher development should be the all-round development of teachers as "human beings".

Studies on the stages of teachers' development show that there are certain stages in the process of professional growth. Although there are different points in the division of teachers' development stages, it is the consensus of researchers that teachers have different cognitive needs and psychological characteristics at different stages. Burden (1979) divides the development of teachers into three stages: survival, adjustment and maturity. Survival stage means the novice teachers who have just become the teachers. Adjustment stage is that after teachers have taught for several years and have struggled to get promotion through their adjustment to the teaching situation, in which some teachers succeed in promotion but others fail. Then there comes the mature stage. Burden claims that teachers enter the mature stage after the fifth year of work. At this time, they are familiar with teaching, gain professional opinions, and have the ability to discuss problems in depth. Different from Burden (1979), Ye (2001) uses different terms to describe the teacher development. She claims that, when demonstrating the development orientation of teachers' "self-renewal", a teacher's growth should go through the stages from "non-concern", "virtual concern", "survival concern", "task concern" to "self-renewal concern". The "non-concern" refers to the stage of not entering normal colleges, mainly refers to the teachers who are from ordinary schools. The "virtual concern" refers to

the fact that teachers have entered normal colleges to study, but they haven't really graduated from school yet, so they can do real education and teaching work alone. The "survival concern" means the entry of teachers. Role change from students to teachers. If they want to survive in this new environment, they often ask such questions: "Can I do it?". Therefore, they pay more attention to the evaluation of others and concentrate most of their energy on improving interpersonal relationships. The "task concern" refers to the stage in which teachers' professional knowledge and skills are relatively stable and sustainable. Therefore, teachers pay attention to teaching tasks, students' academic achievements, whether to teach well, how to teach students to learn well, and so on. Teachers who have reached the stage of "self-renewal" can make conscious self-planning according to their professional needs and development status, and can strive for maximum self-development. Literature research shows that teachers' growth in teaching, regardless of the stage division, has to go through the process from survival to innovation and transition. Therefore, paying attention to the different characteristics and needs of teachers' growth stage, supplemented by appropriate training and promotion, is a challenge that teachers' education and development research projects must pay attention to.

Besides, when talking about the teacher development from teacher learning, we must consider the environment surrounding them. That is, the social factors will affect one's work and daily life. Teachers who have colleagues to talk with regarding new ideas have greater confidence to use them in instruction. Social factors can be from teachers' career environment, social network and the family. These factors may also matter for teachers' professional development. For example, having colleagues to talk to may be an inspiration, but colleagues may also act as a source of pressure on their fellow teachers to uphold standards of professionalism, such as by engaging in developmental activities (Reichenberg & Andreassen, 2018).

Literature review on teacher learning provides us with important theoretical guidance, which is developing from the traditional professional skills training and knowledge learning to the cultivation of teachers' reflective ability, scientific research ability, self-development ability and comprehensive quality. Besides, we should pay attention to the influence of social factors on teachers' development, the teachers' educational philosophy, reflective ability and teaching and scientific research ability in practice, and try to explore the internal and external conditions to promote teachers' comprehensive quality and personal development.

This study will investigate the professional development track of college English teachers while they are learning and teaching with the framework of the teacher development stages, using Burden's teacher development stages: survival, adjustment and maturity, because his framework can explain my study cases more clearly and appropriately. This study defines teacher learning through two aspects: explicit factor and recession factor. The explicit factor means that teacher learning happens by identifying their publication for promotion in their career, because this may be more obvious to see, while the recession factor means to identify teachers' teaching development in the classroom through their teaching competition award and their reflections.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study attempted to reveal the challenges that the present college English teacher learning encounters and the reasons why they learn to get their career promotion, and the ways they break through the obstacles through ethnographical research.

### 1. Research design: Ethnography

Ethnographic research is one of the most important qualitative research where researchers observe or interact with the target. Ethnography deals with the discovery and description of culture of a group or group of individuals. Ethnography is not only a method, which systematically records a group of people's behavior and interaction or daily lives with a long and deep observation (Crossman, 2019), but also a written product, which provides richly descriptive account of the social life and culture of the target studied group (Crossman, 2019). Ethnography is especially suitable for the study of social groups, the backgrounds of individuals and groups, and the process of interpersonal communication. It is the research that researchers observe, visit and record in the field for a long time, aiming at the selected place and the naturally occurring participants. In this study we mainly used initial observation, purposeful WeChat (an online tool, often used by Chinese people, similar to Twitter or Facebook in western countries) and open interview. In this study, ethnography research was adopted to investigate the professional development track of college English teachers while they are learning and teaching through ethnographical research.

### 2. Research procedures

From February 2019 to December 2020, I conducted ethnographic research in a key university to examine the college English teachers' present situation of career development, and identify how college English teachers worked and learnt under the present requirements from the government, trying to understand their challenges and requests.

During the initial observation, I found that college English teachers were insensitive to the requirements of the school, taught every day as required or a routine work, and were not interested in group activities. Some of them have strong desire to have the teacher development, but they do not know how to start their own teaching research, like headless flies. For family reasons, some people rush home to pick up and drop off their children after class, do housework, and have no energy to improve themselves through learning. This made me feel interested in and have desire to know how college English teachers improve themselves after class, and whether their study was related to teaching and scientific research.

This study lasted for one and half year and collected a variety of data, including open observation, text analysis for WeChat online and open interview.

#### 2.1 Observation

This study used open observation to select appropriate research participants for more than

one year. From the initial observation in the WeChat group of 62 teachers, the tentative conclusions were drawn, which inspired my further observation and then revised the conclusions. This is an exploration process guided by the experience gained in the research situation. The basic characteristic of ethnographic research is that the researcher needs to participate in the daily life of the research participant, observe and collect data in the natural situation, and describe the data by narrative way, so as to draw the research conclusion. The core of ethnographic research method is to participate in observation, including long-term residence, direct contact, repeated observation, inquiry, small talk, etc., and collect data in natural situations. After one year chatting in the WeChat group, I found some teachers keeping silent with no words in the group. Only 30 teachers communicated with each other now and then. After talking with them, I finally selected eight teachers as open interview participants.

## **2.2 Text analysis for WeChat**

Text analysis was used to analyse WeChat data. The texts collected were from the messages through WeChat. I determined the eight cases as research participants among 30 research subjects through representativeness, meaningful chatting messages between the researcher and the participants. I established a teacher community through WeChat group on purpose, with which teachers often had chats with one another and sent or collected materials, giving notices or sharing information.

Since WeChat talk is a meaningful communication, through which I can collect information in the continuous communication of people, things related to the environment, I must understand their thoughts, emotions and behaviors in order to explain the significance of the phenomenon. Only members living in the same situation can understand the meaning of various symbols and share their values. I can rely on their statements to understand the situation and obtain information in a natural and ecological way.

## **2.3 Open interview**

This study used open interview because I wanted to identify the participants' thought and feelings in their career development from different cases. I started with open questions such as "*I found that you really enjoy your teaching*", or "*you often hurry home as soon you finish your teaching. Can you talk about it*"? These questions are very personalized and depend on what the researcher observe in the initial observation. Since the interview started, I often chose not to stop the participant's talking until she had no words to say. I would ask some questions from what the participant mentioned and continued to know in-depth meanings (Minichiello et al., 1995).

## **3. Participants**

Eight college English teachers in a key university were examined, who had worked with researchers for more than 10 years. The reasons why these eight college English teacher were selected are as follows:

- They are the researcher's colleagues for more than 10 years, so they trust the researcher and would like to share their happiness and challenges in teacher development;
- They have rich teaching experiences and have deep understanding of the present situation of College English;
- They all obtained a master's degree in English and are ambitious in their professions;
- They are female teachers who represent the present situation of most College English teachers in the Chinese context.

**Table 1**  
The basic information of the 8 college English teachers

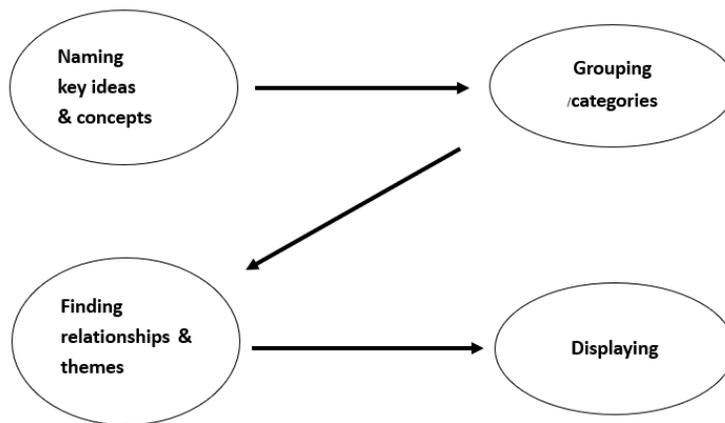
<b>Anonymous name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Year of Teaching college English</b>	<b>Academic degree</b>	<b>Title</b>
HXY	42	20	Master	Assoc. professor
LY	50	28	Master	lecturer
JT	46	24	PhD	Professor
YJ	46	20	master	lecturer
XCY	47	25	master	lecturer
SS	47	25	master	lecturer
ZM	48	26	master	Professor
YYM	42	20	master	Assoc. professor

#### 4. Anonymity

The WeChat observation lasted for more than one year; messages from the WeChat group were collected without telling the group members in order to ensure the truth of the messages. Based on the messages, we selected the eight interview participants. Since this study is ethnographical research, related to the person's privacy, the researcher used an anonymous name for each participant, concerning oneself with facts and not with individuals under the condition of obtaining the consent of the informants (see Table 1). Eight participants from a key university volunteered to be informants. All participants were willing to accept the invitation and filled in the consent form, in which they all agreed to use their WeChat records with anonymous names. They were invited for this study because they had teaching experiences and strong wishes to be promoted. The information sheet was delivered to informants to help them understand the research and decide whether they could be involved in the research with confidentiality.

## 5. Data collection

The data contains the WeChat information through the teacher community for more than one year and the open interview with the eight participants. So messages from WeChat were collected and the tape-recorded open interviews were transcribed into words. Both messages from WeChat and interview data were analysed by means of analytic induction (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) and constant comparison (Huberman & Miles, 1994). I followed O’Connell and Kowal’s (1995) principles for transcription. Richards (2005, p. 90) claims that there are three kinds of coding, descriptive, topic and analytical. Richards’ (2005) coding strategies made me realize that coding categories were important. I used Merriam’s (1998) recommendations to guide the process so as to ensure my categories’ validity and effectiveness. Freeman’s (1998) grounded data analysis procedure was also helpful in supporting me to ‘unpack the data’ (p. 102) according to the themes and concepts I saw. Figure 1 visualizes the process I followed, which reflected the two principles of selection and systematic analysis (Ezzy, 2002).



**Figure 1** Data collection and analysis framework (Simplified from Freeman 1998, p. 103)

In the first round of data collection, 427 WeChat mentions were collected from February 2019 to December 2020 and 31 mentions from the eight interview scripts, and then by constantly comparing and analyzing the themes, for example, the researcher stopped reading the information transcribed into words after naming key ideas for two weeks, then read the scripts second time and tried to group them into similar categories. Then I repeated this reading for categories for the third time. Finally, ten categories were determined from 33 themes, as Table 2 shows.

**Table 2**  
Key themes of WeChat messages collected through text analysis

Categories for themes	mentions	Key words
<b>1. time management</b>	48	1) sleeping (12); 2) no direction (16); 3) no time (20)

Categories for themes	mentions	Key words
<b>2. administration work</b>	<b>46</b>	4) heavy administration work (8); 5) arranging lessons for each teacher (3); 6) various meetings (17); 7) sitting exams (3); 8) applying different projects for teaching and research (7);
<b>3. overambition</b>	<b>53</b>	9) thinking too much, doing too little (9); 10) big goals/desires (8); 11) requiring more than doing (6); 12) no patience (9); 13) Weak compression resistance (21)
<b>4. passiveness</b>	<b>63</b>	14) no thinking (21); 15) passively doing everything (16); 16) teaching following teaching guideline (26);
<b>5. motivation</b>	<b>17</b>	17) confidences in finding research direction (9); 18) revising articles for article writers from other disciplines (8)
<b>6. action</b>	<b>47</b>	19) group arrangement (dividing members into several groups based on interests) (6); 20) establishing academic English article corpus (9); 21) face to face discussion between English teachers and article writers (32)
<b>7. teaching</b>	<b>62</b>	22) ESP material collection (6) 23) teaching and research discussion (26) 24) Teaching load (30)
<b>8. attending conference</b>	<b>21</b>	25) Conference abstract writing (12) 26) conference presentation (6) 27) conference article writing (3)
<b>9. teaching community</b>	<b>16</b>	28) Proposal application writing (8) 29) article writing (6) 30) learner corpus and official account (2, 1 respectively)
<b>10. family influence</b>	<b>62</b>	31) spouse encouraging (6) 32) raising children (28) 33) housework (28)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the different dimensions of development of college English teachers' learning through WeChat messages and eight cases, and found some specific categories and themes to answer the two research questions by identifying teacher learning through explicit factors and recession factors:

- What factors affect the present Chinese college English teachers' development when they learn to get their career promotion?
- In what ways can the teacher learn in the teacher development?

### 1. Factors that block the teacher development

Most college English teachers complain that they obtain fewer chances to develop their career because more and more new teachers, who have just obtained their Ph D degrees join the group of college English. This means the college English teachers who have no higher study degree lack more chances to get promotion. This practice is popular in the higher education of China, where teachers with Ph D degrees obtain more chances to get promotion due to their good research competence, while most present college English teachers only have master's degrees. Besides, most present college English teachers have taught more than ten years without doing any research and teaching competition due to different causes. In fact, they stopped learning in their early stage of teaching, that is, the survival stage as Burden (1979) claims. This study found that, some of the eight teachers experienced their survival stage and adjustment stage but stopped before the maturity stage, but some stepped out of these challenges. All subjects had desires to develop as soon as they became English teachers since they began to teach. They all obtained the chance to further their studies for master degrees, but stopped afterwards for the following external factors: marriage, raising children and heavy housework, but instead, there are some internal factors to block their development.

#### *Lack of time management*

XCY graduated with a bachelor of arts and a master's degree majoring in applied linguistics in the same key university about 20 years ago. She used to be vigorous and thoughtful in her teaching and research in the direction of second language acquisition as soon as she graduated. However, she gave up herself due to her sluggish temperature, though she enjoys her teaching because of her good language proficiency. However, her time management is very problematic (WeChat group, Dec. 11, 2019). I had a chat with her and wanted to know how she spent her whole day. She told me that she gets up early every morning, sends her daughter to kindergarten first, and then rushes directly to school for classes (usually four periods in the morning). After finishing her classes, and going home at noon, she has a very fast and rough lunch. She often "takes a long nap until three o'clock after lunch". Afterwards, it is almost time to pick up her daughter. After her daughter comes home, she is busy taking care of her daughter until her daughter goes to bed at about 20 o'clock. Then she has her own time to prepare for her next day lessons. She said, "I spend no time learning, and reading literature for doing research" (Open interview Feb. 6, 2020). Time has been lost day by day. Therefore, she basically gives up the possibility of getting promotion.

The case for XCY is a very typical case of College English teachers in my university. They stopped their teacher learning at the survival stage due to the family problem or their personality, as the case for XCY shows. They share some features in common. First, they are all female English teachers. As soon as they finished the master's degree, most of them were all old enough to get married. If time were not well arranged, they lost chances to learn for promotion, and with time going on, they lost the motivation and opportunity to pursue career development.

XCY represents college English teachers who stops in the survival stage due to the lack of time management and raising children (WeChat, Dec. 11, 2019).

### ***Heavy administration work***

LY has been the director of the college English section of non-English major graduates for nearly ten years, with good language quality, strong sense of responsibility and outstanding achievements in the management position. However, she has not found her research direction until now. She tried her best to develop her career in the adjustment stage. She succeeded in management work but failed developing herself due to no research direction and publications. Although she tried to do some teaching research with a leading professor and participated in different international and domestic academic conferences, and published a conference paper with other colleagues, her research direction was not clear enough, due to complicated management affairs, and heavy family burden (WeChat, Dec. 11, 2019). She told me: "I am very tired because I must deal with the administration for the graduates' section besides teaching. After work, I have to do my housework" (Open interview, Mar. 6, 2020). This reality leads to her unsuccessful development in the adjustment stage, since she has little time to think, especially reading and writing for publication. Without input, she has no idea to write, and without time to think, she has nothing to write. She is still struggling for the CSSCI articles, national funding projects, and coursebook production, which are all requirements for promotion for an associate professor.

LY tried to develop herself by changing teaching method, and using materials through the teaching reform project. Although teacher learning happened to LY, she still failed promoting in her career because she did not turn her thinking into words for publication, which is required by the university promotion.

### ***Overambition***

SS also stopped in the adjustment stage, though she is different from LY. SS had no administration work, but was interested in participating in different lectures and conferences. She has no child and has less housework to do as well. She tried every chance to participate in different domestic conferences and training programs since she found herself living with no purposes. She seemed very thoughtful, but she could not settle down and turn her thoughts into words. Her problems may be as follows based on the theme identified in this study: 1. A little inertia, but without time management; 2. Very thoughtful, but it can not be put into practice (WeChat, Mar. 6, 2020). "For a time, it seems that I were like an ant on a hot pot" (Open interview, April 2, 2020). She did not have own research direction. Whenever there is an academic conference or an academic lecture, she is eager to attend but she does not think of her purposes for doing so. This led to her unclear research direction.

## **Passiveness**

YJ graduated with an English major in her bachelor's degree, but had a Master's degree in Science from an overseas university. She has engaged in English teaching for nearly 20 years, teaching *College English, Business English Translation, English for Workplaces*. She also applied for a school-level project for educational reform, trying to learn to improve herself. She was introverted but self-motivated. All the work given to her is done very well. Under the guidance of a professor, she began to read relevant literatures and tried to find way out in the research direction of ESP (English for specific purposes). However, so far, she has no ideas both in her teaching development and publication for promotion. Her problems are as follows: 1. she lacks self-confidence (Open interview, April 6, 2020). Although the family burden has been reduced and she has a strong desire for professional development, she still has difficulties finding a research direction, and the age does not allow her to further a higher degree study, which is required by the university. That is, teachers who want to get promotion for associate professor must have a PhD ; 2. She feels afraid of dealing with the academic research due to her less literature review. Although there are some thoughts under the supervision and spur of the fight, the lack of initiative leads to the lack of good ideas and finally gives up halfway (Open interview, April 6, 2020). Similar to YJ, HY is another example. HY graduated from applied linguistics of our university with a master's degree majoring in teaching English for Specific Purposes. Because of her good family conditions, she lived in a comfortable environment and developed a pampered character, passive and procrastinating (WeChat, Nov. 16, 2019). Recently, she began to have some ideas. She attended international and domestic conferences on teaching and ESP research direction, co-authored a paper, and is translating an academic works. However, her time management and theoretical foundation are relatively weak (Open interview, April 6, 2020).

Teacher learning does not happen if teachers are passively received and less motivated with no purposes. This is why they failed developing for promotion.

## **2. Positive factors to help break through the obstacles**

Any success cannot happen without clear goal and motivation (Halvorson, 2012). Clear goals help teachers learn through efforts, while motivation is the guarantee to maintain the efforts until achieving their goals. Besides, learning cannot be stopped at any stages of the career. The following three cases are the representatives who have successfully entered the maturity stage because they have accumulated experiences in teaching, have their own thinking in their professional development, and have ideas to express themselves in depth. The most importantly, they have clear goal and know how to "self-renew" (Ye, 2001) through learning.

### **Clearer goal, greater motivation**

HXY has now just become an associated professor for her excellent teaching with the eclectic teaching method by using technology and flipped classes. Her teaching development succeeded for her clear goal and strong motivation. Although her health was not good and had been in the hospital for several years, she succeeded in promoting as an associated professor this year.

I felt that she was not such a girl who is eager for quick success and instant benefit. If she wanted to do one thing, she would do it well. She tried to teach different courses besides the school required courses. I thought she just tried every chance to improve her teaching skills and built her teaching experiences while earning some money. After obtaining her master's degree, she stopped studying for several years due to her health conditions. From 2015, she strove towards the goal of being promoted as an associate professor and succeeded. She told me: she took advantage of her strength, for example, her good spoken English and her inborn teacher talent. She tried every chance to participate in various teaching competitions, and achieved good results. At the same time, she participated in various teacher training, and joined various teams organized by the college, such as language testing team, interdisciplinary teacher development team and modern educational technology team, to recharge herself. Besides, she set up an online course team of *"English for Science and Technology"*, and won *"2018 Smart Teaching Star of Online Education Research Center of the Ministry of Education"*. Her online course *"Reading Academic Papers and Computer-aided Chinese-English Translation"* was selected as a municipal golden course (high qualified course) with more than 10,000 online participants (WeChat, Feb. 25, 2020). Besides the success of various competitions, she also published two research articles, cooperated with graduate students or other teachers, and finally she got promoted to be an associate professor in 2019. She continues to work hard to improve the online courses, and plans to further her study for a doctoral degree, which will lay a solid foundation for her theoretical deepening of her online courses that have begun to take shape. Her growing experience shows that as long as her goals are clear, there will be gains.

From HXY's success, we may find that a teacher in the maturity stage may experience her teaching reflection by thinking of her strength in teaching, and then gradually builds up her knowledge in teaching and research through different competitions with clear goal and motivation.

### ***The influence of teaching community***

JT, ZYP and YYM are three good friends from the same teaching community. They often teach and play together. JT's own time management is very good and strict. Similar to HXY, from the day since she became an English teacher, JT's career development direction has been very clear. Although she is in the similar age as the cases mentioned above, she took a master's degree and a doctorate degree while teaching. She said: "During my master's degree, my tutor, who furthered her study after being a professor, set a good example for me. I tried my best to arrange my time so as to deal with my study and work at the same time" (open interview, Feb. 17, 2020). After her Ph D graduation, she also kept learning and publishing relevant papers and was promoted as associate professor soon after, and then professor. During this period, she published many high quality articles, successfully applied for national social science projects, and this determined her research direction (open interview, Feb. 17, 2020). At present, she is striving to become a doctoral tutor (this title in China is much honored) and applying for key social science fund projects. Since her supervisor set a good model for her, JT's success also influences her good friends, ZYP and YYM, who developed their careers quickly as associate professors. Their teacher development results from JT's influence.

ZYP graduated from English major in 1996 and obtained a master's degree in business English in 2007. In 2019, she has become an associate professor. Her research growth is slightly different from HXY. After graduating from graduate school, her main focus shifted to family, looking after her daughter for nearly ten years. After that, she thought of her professional development. Like the previously mentioned cases, she participated in some lecture competitions (WeChat, Feb. 25, 2020), and won some teaching competition awards but this was not enough. Luckily enough, under the guidance of her good friend, JT, ZYP attended various international and domestic conferences with purposes, broadening and expanding her research horizon, and trying to communicate with the colleagues by presenting her research at international and domestic conferences. Besides, JT guided her to position her own research direction, the research on academic English, because JT was then interested in and applied for the concerning research projects, and needed helpers (open interview, Feb. 17, 2020). ZYP and YYM followed her as JT's co-researchers. Through their collaboration in the course "English for academic communication" for PhD students, ZYP and JT co-authored to publish a CSSCI article "*Enhancing PhD students' intercultural communication competences for academic purposes*". She was promoted to associate professor in 2019. Now she continues her research on the road of exploring the reform of doctoral public English course.

YYM's master's degree is in business English as well, and her family burden is heavy due to her husband's illness. However, YYM was influenced by her good friend, JT, and YYM was very self-motivated and studied hard. Despite her heavy housework, she still hasn't forgotten her career (open interview, Feb. 17, 2020). She was promoted as an associate professor in 2017.

### ***Family influence***

Similar to the previous female teachers, after getting a master's degree, FL was indulged in family affairs for ten years. Because her husband is engaged in an engineering doctoral program, she helped her husband translate some subject materials (see Category 10 in Table 2), which made her turn from a college English teacher to an ESP teacher. She applied for some educational reform projects, all of which were expanded from the perspective of engineering English teaching and translation, with great gains, and was awarded as an associate professor in 2016.

From the above cases it can be concluded that teacher learning occurs with a clear goal, strong motivation and patience. This study found two types of teacher learning: direct and indirect teaching learning. Direct teacher learning means teachers develop their professions with clear goal and motivation by doing their own research and teaching, while indirect teacher learning means teachers themselves have no ideas to develop themselves. Owing to the teacher community or friends' influence, they succeed in teacher development.

These three cases tell us that teacher learning may happen in the three stages but without a clear goal, nothing happens.

## CONCLUSION

This study, through initial observation among 30 teachers in a key university, examined eight experienced English teachers' challenges and found potential solutions to these challenges through ethnographic research with text analyzing the open interview and Wechat messages. This study shows teacher development needs both internal and external factors. The internal factor comes from teachers' own need and strong motivation with teachers' own quality and clear goals. Teachers need to pay for effort and persist constantly and finally succeed. The teacher quality lies in the teacher's own learning ability, while clear goal may help teachers focus more on what they want, and as a result, they may not waste any more time. External factors may vary with situations. As far as this study is concerned, family factors, teachers' community (or teachers' circle of friends) were suggested. But in fact, there are many other factors that are not mentioned in this study, such as teacher training, curriculum design requirements, students' influence and so on. Besides, the necessary teacher training and experienced teacher' guidance are also very important. This study recommends that three aspects must be paid attention to: 1. Seeking quick success, taking shortcuts, or failing to persist will make teacher development fall by the wayside. 2. From the teachers' circle of friends in this study, I found the importance of the teacher community, in which teachers may potentially influence each other. 3. Course competition may be a possible way to encourage teacher development.

Teacher learning is a long-term practice, and requires teachers to have motivation, clear goal and patience or perseverance. Without them, teacher development would not occur. It is suggested that the teacher community may be one of the good way to motivate and influence teachers to learn for development.

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