



**Sustaining Expertise
through Collaborative/Peer-Mediated
and Individual Reflections:
The Experiences
of Chinese English Language Teachers**

By Faridah Pawan & Wenfang Fan

Introduction

This exploratory investigation of the professional development of Chinese English Language teachers (ELTs) was part of a collaboration between two teacher educators, one from the U.S. and the other from China, during the 2011-2012 academic year. We were involved in the professional development in three schools (elementary, middle and high schools) in Beijing's northwest area, in which teachers worked intensively with peers in "jiaoyanzu" or teacher research groups. During our shared experiences, we found ourselves pursuing the question of what type of knowledge emerges when teachers reflect with peers. We were interested specifically in teacher reflections for their contributions to the professional development of the Chinese ELTs with whom we were working in particular, and of language teachers in general.

Faridah Pawan is an associate professor in the Department of Literacy, Culture, and Language Education of the School of Education at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Wenfang Fan is a professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Tsinghua University, Beijing, China. fpawan@indiana.edu & wenfangfan@126.com

Research Setting

“jiaoyanzu” and Workplace-Based Professional Development

In the schools we were attached to, much of the in-service teacher professional development (PD) was school-based. This is typical in China, where formal education in universities marks only the beginning of PD for teachers, which is expected to continue in schools as the primary sites of their learning (Tsui & Wong, 2010). The defining feature of school-based PD sessions is teachers working together in “jiaoyanzu.” (Although *jiaoyanzu* is translated from Mandarin as “teacher research groups,” peer-mentoring teaching activities are the mainstay of group meetings). Each group consists of six to eight teachers, including a head teacher assigned by the principal. Usually a “backbone” or model teacher is also in the group, i.e. someone most experienced in the subject area, and who might also be the head teacher. New teachers are also assigned mentors from the *jiaoyanzu* to provide individual support.

The teachers we worked with shared a spacious office space reserved for English teachers. In that space, they spent a great deal of time in proximity with each other because most taught only two or three 40-minute periods a day or ten to twelve periods a week, especially at the middle and high school levels. (American middle and high school teachers generally teach 15-20 periods a week). In these offices, ideas are shared, lesson plans are revised and resources are prioritized, of which the most important are teaching powerpoints, which are central in public school teaching. Additionally, new and veteran teachers develop powerpoints for each other as they share mandated teaching texts and follow prescribed curricula outlined by the approved textbooks. Discussions often center on how to use the powerpoints to teach the textbooks. The focus of these is primarily on a well-sequenced approach to topic coverage, usually involving knowledge points (aspects of the topic students need to know), main ideas and key points, and points that students are likely to have difficulty with (Tsui et al, 2010). In the schools with which we were affiliated, *jiàoyánzu* groups also discussed the macro aspects of teaching and school-related affairs including test preparation, schedules, teaching/research projects, government regulations and the standardized curriculum.

Another very important feature of these *jiaoyanzu* meetings is the preparation of new and younger teachers (less than 40 years old) for demonstration teaching (open classes) or teaching competitions, which happen at least twice a year. Often during these meetings, senior members of the *jiàoyánzu* group report on award-winning practices they observed when attending national teaching competitions in other provinces. Teachers also engage in frequent observations to learn from each other and from more experienced teachers, and they are frequently observed (we saw over 15 observations in one semester) by head, backbone, and mentor teachers and peers who belong to the *jiaoyanzu*. Moreover in our schools, each classroom was also videotaped and channeled live to the principal’s office. These observations

and the briefings that follow are a means not only to evaluate but also to support teachers through feedback and suggestions for improvement. Thus, teachers extensively reflect together on various aspects of their teaching through intensive study, practice, discussions, and observations.

In addition to the school-based meetings, jiaoyanzu teachers are also expected to attend weekly or biweekly district meetings to be updated on aspects of teaching, including best practices, test preparation, and upcoming initiatives at district, provincial and governmental levels. Finally, the teachers in each jiàoyánzu are required to take part in a research project as a means of professional development. In the schools we worked in, the focus of each project was determined through a multi-step process. First, the teachers collaborated with university professors to identify research areas. The lead teachers in the jiaoyanzu then proposed the areas to the schools' principals, who made the final judgment on the topics' suitability based on their alignment with the standardized curriculum or current governmental initiatives). Finally, the teachers submit their research findings in an annual merit report.

Thus, jiaoyanzu activities are perhaps best characterized by the "apprenticeship model" (Tsui et al, 2010) of teaching. Senior and model teachers are expected to "bring along the young" (lao dai qing) (Paine, 1990), namely to mentor and support younger teachers. Although the notion of collaboration that is mandated with specific guidelines as to what is to be achieved may seem paradoxical, in our observations of dyadic and group jiaoyanzu discussions, we found that teachers did engage in reflecting on and deconstructing the instructions handed down to them, particularly those concerning classroom practices. In this regard, there is a famous Chinese saying that speaks of the dissipation mandates undergo as they descend to the level of teaching realities: "Heaven is high and the emperor is far away."

Being modeled after the Russian commune system (Tsui et al, 2010, p. 281), the jiaoyanzu operates in the spirit of a collective. As a consequence, teachers plan their classes together, share materials, observe each other's classes regularly and provide critical comments and guidance as pedagogical support. Thus, it was not surprising that the teachers with whom we worked often described themselves as "sisters and brothers in a family" to express the tight interconnectedness of their working lives. This strong sense of group cohesion and the importance of pursuing a common goal may also shed a more positive light on the mandated nature of the collaboration.

Jiaoyanzu groups allow Chinese teachers to experience professional development (PD) primarily in their own schools. The PD sessions are led by experienced teachers who are grounded and knowledgeable about teaching in their specific contexts. This current research provides a small window into the reflective discussions that took place during those sessions as well as when teachers reflected on their own.

Literature Review

Reflective Teaching Research

Reflective teaching has become the focus of efforts to bridge the long-standing gap between teaching theory and practice. Researchers' interest in reflective teaching is an acknowledgment of the value of teacher insider knowledge (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 1998; Korthagen, 2001). In this perspective, teachers are not viewed as vessels to be filled or passive recipients of knowledge, but are recognized as producers of teaching knowledge, based on what they know about themselves as learners, the sociocultural (school and schooling) contexts in which they work, and the teaching and learning processes that take place in their classrooms (Freeman and Johnson, 1998). Reflection is also considered an essential component of teachers' growth and professionalism. Kyriacou (1994), for example, asserts that teachers are "the main agents of change of their own professional growth... in that teachers who regularly think of their own teaching are more likely to develop and improve their classroom practice" (p. 10). Intentional reflection also professionalizes teachers by informing them of who they are and what their expertise is (Peck & Westgate 1994).

Interest in understanding what constitutes reflective practices has resulted in numerous studies, which provide a foundation for conceptualizing reflective teaching. Rogers (2001) reviews the conceptual bases of reflection and their implications for teaching practice through the work of many scholars, including Dewey, Loughran, Mezirow, Seibert and Daudelin, Langer, Boud, Keogh, and Walker and Schön. Their contributions were analyzed along seven parameters: terminology, definitions, antecedents, context, process, outcomes, and techniques. For instance, with regards to terminology, Rogers identifies three categories covering no fewer than 15 terms, grouped under: (1) general terms, for example, Dewey's (1933) reflective thought; (2) terms based on the timing of reflection, for example, Schön's (1983) reflection-in-action; and (3) terms relating to the content of reflection, for example, Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning model consisting of content, process, and premise reflections. The proliferation of terminology suggests a need for consensus in order to achieve the "widest understanding and application of reflection" (Rogers, 2001, p.49).

Another line of research on reflective teaching concerns the process of effective reflection, which, it is generally agreed, begins with problem identification. Langer (1989) focuses on mindfulness as a means to engage individuals in active reflection, and Loughran (1996) suggests intellectualization of the problem once it is identified in order to consider it rationally. In the process studies, researchers are cautioned not to formularize or oversimplify reflection. What is important is the nurturing of teachers' capability to make a conscious choice to reflect and to be intentional about the purposes of their reflection (Rogers, 2001). Overall, Rogers' review highlights that reflection enhances teachers' learning and their "personal and professional effectiveness" (p. 49).

Marcos and Tilemma (2006) in their review directly address the question of what contributions reflection studies have made to actual teaching. They identify two issues of relevancy: the problem of the fragmentation of reflective studies that enable them to “tell only half the story”; and the problem of reporting outcomes that go beyond what can be known (p. 114). To critique the research in terms of these two problems, Marcos et al have dubbed the four criteria constituting their analytical framework as “talking the talk,” “talking the walk,” “walking the talk,” and “walking the walk” (p. 115).

“Talking the talk” focuses on descriptive studies featuring teachers’ explanations of how they interpret their practice. For example Smith’s (2005) study focused on experienced and novice teacher stated beliefs on characteristics of a good teacher. For “talking the walk,” Marcos et al review research dealing with reported action. Meijer, Zanting, and Verloop (2002), for example, used videotaped lessons and stimulated recall interviews with 20 experienced teachers to engage them in describing the thinking behind their teaching as they watched the lessons. “Walking the talk” refers to studies that outline the relationship between an intention and the action sequence that follows, identified as the process of prospective reflection (Van Manen cited in Marcos et al, 2006). An example is Conway’s (2001) study in which teacher interns graphically depicted, wrote and talked about what they anticipated and later what they remembered from their teaching experiences, thus capturing both prospective reflections and the evaluation of actual teaching performances. Finally, “walking the walk” covers studies whereby teachers’ actions are observed to see whether they exemplify teachers’ knowledge. John (2002) observed two teacher educators and interviewed them on their experiences, assumptions and expertise afterwards in their workplaces. His content analysis of time-ordered narratives and field notes resulted in his framework of four dimensions of the educators’ practical knowledge of teaching, namely, intentionality, practicality, subject specificity and ethicality. Marcos et al, conclude by discussing how difficult it is for studies to bridge the worlds of “talk” and “walk,” that is, of reflection and practice, and propose standards for studies in each of the four dimensions whereby findings are contextualized according to the nature of the research. “Talking the talk” studies should be assessed by the criterion of openness and non-framing; “talking the walk” by authenticity; “walking the talk” by intentionality; and “walking the walk” by situatedness.

As shown above, research on reflection is wide-ranging, and evidence of future trends has begun to emerge. Arguably the most significant in terms of the post-modern and critical frameworks of current academic discourse is exploration of critical reflection. Fook, White and Gardner (2006, p. 13) have defined critical reflection as “reflective abilities to achieve some freeing from hegemonic assumptions.” Howard (2003) for example looked at critical reflection in teaching as a foundation for the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy in ethnically diverse classrooms. Citing Brookfield (1995, p.8) Fook et al point out that “reflection is

Sustaining Expertise

important for the daily business of living, but that critical reflection... is vital if we are to make crucially relevant changes....”

The present research extends the discussion as it pertains to the knowledge that emerges from the reflections that might be useful for teachers’ professional development. We describe the different types of knowledge emerging when teachers reflected with their jiaoyanzu peers and then we compare them with knowledge that emerged when the teachers reflected on their own.

Sociocultural Perspective on Teacher Learning and Professional Development

The jiaoyanzu’s prevalent role in Chinese ELTs’ lives is especially noteworthy in light of the teachers’ lengthy and rigorous pre-service training programs (three to four years; 96-128 credit hours), covering both content and pedagogy, particularly if they attended normal (teaching) universities. The teachers also have to study for and complete rigorous teacher certification examinations. In addition, the ELTs undergo at least three hours per week of in-service professional development offered by district and provincial governments. The prevalence of the jiaoyanzu represents recognition of the importance of supporting engagement among teachers with various levels of experience in a shared context.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning is mediated through social and cultural artifacts and interactions, by which people develop their cognition and ways of thinking. This sociocultural perspective proposes that human thinking, and behaviors, while unique to each individual, cannot be understood by looking at the individual in isolation, but must be viewed as embedded in social engagements in the contexts of politics, culture, and history. Johnson (2006) describes this epistemological shift as evolving “from behaviorist, to cognitive, to situated, social and distributed views of human cognition” (p. 236). She wrote:

The epistemological stance of the sociocultural turn defines human learning as a dynamic social activity that is situated in physical and social contexts, and distributed across persons, tools, and activities. (p. 237)

The sociocultural perspective has thus validated the conception of teachers as “socioprosessionals” (Freeman, 2009, p. 15), whose learning is embedded in their participation in social as well as professional practices. As Freeman argues, disciplinary knowledge (applied linguistics, second language acquisition, literature and culture) accompanied with pedagogical knowledge of how to teach falls short of developing the professional unless the two are situated in the interpersonal interactions and activities taking place within the teaching/learning context. In this regard Freeman (2009) expands the gyre of the professional development of language teachers to encompass what he calls, substance, engagement and outcomes (p. 15). The expansion focuses on social and intellectual scaffolds for teachers that “build toward fully competent professional participation” (p. 17). Freeman advocates movement away

from casual teacher engagement with each other (for example, in group study) to a deliberate use of participation and social engagement for learning.

The central constructs of sociocultural theory provide us with deeper insights into the juxtaposition of content, process and sociocultural participation in teacher knowledge base and development. Johnson and Golombek (2003) argue that sociocultural theory is a useful theoretical framework to explain the processes of teacher learning in terms of the three key components: (a) internalization and transformation; (b) the zone of proximal development (ZPD); and (c) mediational means. In terms of internalization and transformation, sociocultural theory focuses on how an individual moves back and forth from external activities to internal and cognitive analyses. In this process, the internal and external transform each other. The authors state that, "Internalization involves a process in which a person's activity is initially mediated by other people or cultural artifacts but later comes to be controlled by the person as he or she appropriates resources to regulate his or her own activities" (p. 731). The second component points to social mediation occurring in what Vygotsky defined as the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which suggests that people can advance in knowledge through collaboration with other more capable individuals and supportive resources. Finally, mediational means within the ZPD includes three levels (Johnson and Golombek, 2003): other-regulation (e.g. talking with other teachers), object-regulation (e.g., lesson plans) and self-regulation (e.g., keeping personal teaching diaries). This mediation allows teachers to experience a transformative and dialogic process that involves seeking help from people and resources including themselves, making adjustments in both their activities and cognition, and gaining new understandings of their work.

Jiaoyanzu teacher groups, characterized by reflection with peers and sharing of resources, fit well into the sociocultural perspective. They align with the Vygotskian notion of the expert-novice continuum in two important ways. First, experienced teachers are recognized as having richer experiences and therefore more contextually-relevant knowledge than beginning teachers. Second, to grow professionally, teachers with limited experience need the help and continuous feedback of experienced teachers through optimum collaboration in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a necessity captured in the aforementioned concept of "lao dai qing," "the elder teachers guide the younger" (Wang, 2001). To explore these premises, we compared the outcomes of teachers' reflections and engagement in these collaborative jiaoyanzu groups with the outcomes of teachers' individual reflections.

Teacher Knowledge and Freeman and Johnson's Tripartite Sociocultural Framework of Teacher Knowledge Base

The sociocultural perspective integrates teacher knowledge with teaching practice, helping to break down the dichotomy between formal/disciplinary knowledge and experiential knowledge. Teachers are regarded as drawing not only from disciplinary content knowledge (such as Second Language Acquisition [SLA] theory and

Sustaining Expertise

research) acquired in pre-service and professional development programs but also from “a wide range of experiences and their whole intellectual histories in and out of schools” (Cochran & Lytle, 1999, p. 275). Teacher expertise is not merely the product of accumulated knowledge from external sources but, more importantly, the transformation of that knowledge and the generation new and unique knowledge. This perspective also challenges the dichotomy between disciplinary content (such as SLA) and pedagogical content knowledge (ways of teaching content knowledge) (Shulman, 1987). The discussion now centers on how these work together to shape teacher knowledge (see McEwan & Bull, 1991). Hence, the focus is on encouraging teachers to analyze and reflect upon their “classroom practice, their learning and professional lives and the socio-cultural contexts in which they work” (Freeman & Johnson, p. 412, 1998).

Teacher knowledge from this perspective consists also of a dialectical relationship between teaching as practice and teaching as praxis. Being informed by the cultures of their communities, schools, and classrooms, teachers’ knowledge provides them with the means to question and critique what they see as undermining education and its main beneficiaries, the students. This sociocultural perspective on teacher knowledge is reflected in Freeman and Johnson’s tripartite teacher knowledge base framework and its domains. This framework underscores an interpretative epistemological stance in teacher knowledge in which interest lies in uncovering and describing what teachers already know, are able to do and how they can make sense of their teaching in their contexts (Johnson, 2009, p. 9).

Thus to understand the teacher knowledge base emerging out of Chinese English Language teachers’ reflections with jiaoyanzu peers and individually, we used Freeman and Johnson’s (1998) tripartite framework (see Figure 1), which situates teacher knowledge base in the nexus of: (a) the teachers’ experiences as learners, (b) the nature of schools and schooling within local contexts, and (c) the nature of language teaching and learning in the classroom. The focus of “teachers as learners” includes how teachers’ prior knowledge, beliefs and training inform their current instructional practices. It also focuses on teachers as learners of teaching. The nature of schools and schooling refers, respectively, to synchronic and diachronic influences of teachers’ experiences in schools and communities and how their learning unfolds over short and long periods of time (Freeman, 2009, p. 16) in those contexts. As integral members of their communities, teachers understand not just their immediate physical and socio-cultural settings but also deeply embedded elements such as underlying values and hidden curricula that are developed and held over time. The third domain of the framework is predicated on teachers’ understanding of learners and learning processes in their own classrooms, which, however, cannot “be separated from the teacher as a learner and from the contexts in which teaching is done” (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 410). Teachers see their classrooms as more than places for application: they are also places for teacher learning (Freeman, 2009, p. 14).

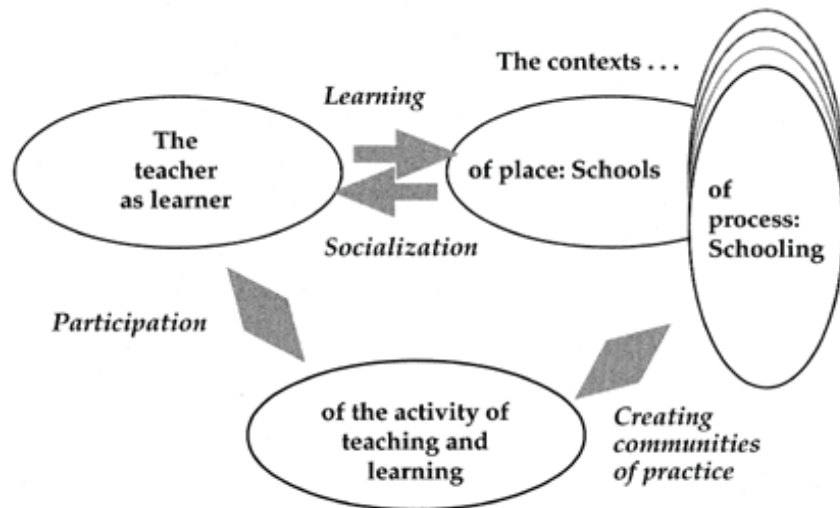
Research Question

Given the prevalence of the jiaoyanzu in the Chinese English Language teachers' lives, the main research question we investigated in the study was: what aspects and sources of teacher knowledge can be identified when teachers reflect with members of the jiaoyanzu in comparison to when they reflect individually?

Method

We employed a mixed methods design that combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Before we investigated the research question, we first surveyed the 30 Chinese English Language teachers in the middle and high schools we worked in and obtained descriptive statistics from the teachers on their perceptions of the nature and the importance of working and reflecting together with jiaoyanzu members. The survey, which was translated into Mandarin and to which teachers responded in a mixture of Mandarin and English, asked teachers to rank their reasons why collaborating with the jiaoyanzu peers was important (See Table 3 for findings). The return rate to our survey was 92% or 28 out of 30 respondents. This information helped us to contextualize our findings within this collaborative system that is unique to Chinese teachers.

Figure 1
Freeman and Johnson's (1998) Tripartite Framework



Note. Domains are in boldface; processes are in italics.

Sustaining Expertise

Our qualitative approach involved the analysis of five female teachers' verbal and written stimulated recalls (SRs), (by themselves and with peers) in response to their video-recorded teaching (see Table 1 for the description of the five female teachers).

We facilitated the reflection with the following general questions:

- What new information did you obtain about your lesson after you completed the peer- and self-reflections? As you reflected with your peers and by yourself, did your lesson happen the way you wanted it to happen?
- What did you learn about your teaching and yourself as a teacher through the peer- and self-reflections?

Data Collection

We collected the SR data in two phases. In Phase 1, each teacher was video-recorded teaching for about 30-40 minutes, after which she met with two colleagues (a teaching peer and a senior colleague/administrator) to watch and discuss the video clip. In Phase 2, the teachers were given a hyperlink to their teaching video clips and/or DVDs of their teaching to reflect on alone at home. In both instances, the teachers then reported their reflections in writing and verbally to the researchers. The teachers took anywhere from two to five days to complete the reports on their reflections. Thus sources of data for the study are as follows:

- survey results on the importance of teacher collaboration
- teachers' written reports on their reflections with peers
- teachers' discussions with researchers regarding peer-reflection reports (transcribed)
- teachers' written report on their self-reflections vis-à-vis the video-recorded teaching
- teachers' discussions with researchers regarding self-reflection reports (transcribed)

Table 1
Teacher Demographic Chart

	Age	Grade level	Teaching Years
Li Laoshi ¹	31	Elementary	8 years
Fang Laoshi	52	Elementary	13 years
Xi Laoshi	42	Middle	20 years
Wen Laoshi	33	High School	10 years
Zhong Laoshi	52	High School	30 years

¹ All names used are pseudonyms. Laoshi means teacher, an honorific placed next to teachers' names.

Data Coding and Analysis

Data were analyzed by three coders using descriptive statistics and analytical themes. The survey provided descriptive statistics on the importance of the jiaoyanzu. Participants rated reasons for working and learning with peers in the jiaoyanzu on a Likert scale that ranged from “1 - Most Important” to 5 - “Least Important” (see Table 2 for findings).

The coders analyzed the data using the thematic approach. A theme is a pattern emerging within the data set that responds to the study’s research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coders then analyzed the data for themes using Freeman and Johnson’s teacher knowledge base framework . Units of analysis were speech segments, which Henri and Rigault (1996) defined as “the smallest unit of delivery linked to a single theme, directed at the same addressee (all, individual, subgroup), identified by a single type (illocutionary act), having a single function (focus)” (p. 62). As can be seen below, the theme is Tsui Laoshi’s open class and teachers A and B (addressees) suggesting (illocutionary act) helping her with it:

A: We are meeting in the morning after Tsui Laoshi’s open class?

B: Her open class is her second and we are looking for improvement?

A: If none, we may have to work on her lesson many more times until the competition.

Disagreements among the coders led to the narrowing, expansion, and/or elimination of themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 64). Inter-rater reliability was 91.1%, based on the ratio of agreements to total agreements and disagreements.

Findings

We started the research with a survey that provided a context for the findings directly related to the research question. The survey findings are summarized in Table 2. Because jiaoyanzu teacher groups are mandated, we had expected “mandated school rules” to be a powerful external motivator, but in fact they were ranked the

Table 2
Collaboration Motivation

Reasons for Collaboration	Likert Scale				
	Most Important				Least Important
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Additional Resources	37.2% ranked 1 and 2				
2. Friendship with colleagues	20.1% ranked 1 and 2				
3. Students' achievement	18.6% ranked 1 and 2				
4. Additional Training	15.5 ranked 1 and 2				
5. School Rules	9.9 ranked 1 and 2				

Sustaining Expertise

lowest. Also unexpected, “friendship with colleagues” emerged as a significant reason for working together. Thus, although their participation was not voluntary, participants rated sustaining interpersonal relationships over authoritarian directives as an important reason for working in the jiaoyanzu. Trusting relationships and sense of interdependency fostered by the jiaoyanzu may have empowered the teachers in their work together despite the top-down nature of school rules. As one teacher put it,

We are always seeking to get into the same office quickly so that we can exchange our opinions every day, every minute, if we work together. We come together and discuss what we are going to teach and how we are going to do this, and then we share the teaching load so that we can finish our unit... We pass lesson plans around so that everybody can share and learn. This time the experienced teachers wrote three lesson plans, next the younger teachers will prepare three classes. Everybody is supposed to do that... We can't change what we are told to do but we can help each other. (Wen Laoshi, stimulus recall interview, June 19, 2011)

Sztompka's (1998) argument that power from the top disrupts collaboration through the arbitrary imposition of rules that diminish trust among colleagues did not apply in our study. Rather, our survey findings show that when a mandate from the top coincides with the organic ways in which teachers work, it is subsumed by the teachers' regular activities. Administrators who pay attention to how their teachers conduct their activities and provide directives that are in line with existing practices may find that their initiatives receive teacher support.

Given this background information, the subsequent findings in the study provide a picture as to the importance these Chinese ELTs placed on the knowledge gained working with jiaoyanzu peers (see Table 3).

When teachers reflected with their peers, analysis of written reports and transcripts revealed that knowledge related to “classroom teaching and learning” (22/55 or 40%) emerged most significantly. Within this knowledge type, the top three areas of peer-based reflections (22.04% of all statements) were about “what students liked,” “students' struggles,” and “task-based teaching.” In contrast, when the teachers reflected alone, they focused most frequently on knowledge based on “contextual issues” (16/36 or 44.44%). In terms of self-reflections, the main areas involved knowledge derived from understanding the “outside pressures from society, school, district, national exams;” “teachers' many roles in school;” and “overworking.”

Reflections with Jiaoyanzu Peers: Focus on the Technical and Informative Aspects of Classroom Instruction

Fang Laoshi (Elementary):

“What students liked”

Most students like presentations in class that are close to their lives, like the “Riddle.” The new standards in China stress that now, real life, real life. For most students, they also expect the presentation to be lively and interesting. “More fun

and less knowledge,” this is what the students often say! We have to think about what students are interested in always. My partner and I talked about that.

Li Laoshi (Elementary):

“Students’ struggles”

This year I taught that third year boy, you know. He studied very hard. He reads the books, listens to the tapes and recites the words. But he cannot remember and he cannot speak English. I teach him so many times. I don’t know what to do.

Laoshi Zhong (High School):

“Task-based teaching”

Ms. Chia and I were talking about how teachers should not only rely on their experience. They should also participate in research. Task-based teaching is what we are talking about now in standards.

Table 3
Most Frequently Identified Themes and Focus Areas

Freeman & Johnson’s Framework Domains	Peer-Reflections Themes	No of statements out of 617	Self-Reflections Themes	No of statements out of 274
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge gained from reflecting on teachers’ experiences as learners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content • Working with peers • Research-based information 	72 statements (11.6%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content • Research-based information • Historical information 	29 statements (10.58%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge gained from schools and schooling contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressures from school, district, national exams • Difficulties with students’ diverse backgrounds • Limited use or availability of English in immediate environment 	79 statements (12.8%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressures from school, district, national exams • Teachers’ many roles in school • Overwork 	45 statements (16.42%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge gained from classroom teaching and learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What students liked • Students’ struggles • Task-based teaching 	136 statements (22.04%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What students liked • Things to do next time • Teaching mannerisms 	31 statements (11.3%)

Individual Reflections:

The Macro Aspects of School, Schooling and Societal Contexts

In terms of individual reflections, the following excerpts demonstrate teachers' awareness of the situatedness of their teaching in the larger institutional and societal infrastructure:

Fang Laoshi (Elementary):

“Pressures”

Our teachers work so hard, very hard. It is very hard for teachers, we use most lunch times for remedial class. Some teachers go to students' homes and give them extra lessons. And this is because the principal is focusing on the whole school... we must have the number one score for our district. It is very terrible for students and for us... What happens to the 3% of students who cannot pass?

Xi Laoshi (Middle School):

“Teachers' Many Roles”

In my class, I shared the story of “sand and stone.” If someone hurts you, write his name on the sand. The wind will blow it away and you forgive and forget; but if someone helps you, you'd better carve his name on a rock, and remember him... I share stories like that in my class because look at what is happening in our school. Students have no one but the teachers. Our society is so busy. Parents often call me for help. All of us are busy but we must care for our students. We become many things to them. Maybe that's the most important thing.

Li Laoshi (Elementary):

“Overworking”

In China, we always say that the teachers are just like candles. We burn ourselves out as we give light to our students. This is not a good sacrifice.

Using Freeman and Johnson's framework, we found that when teachers reflected together, they mainly focused on the practical aspects of classroom teaching and what they learned from events in their classrooms. This finding confirms the emphasis on technical matters often cited in teacher reflections (see Zeichner & Liston, 1987; Korthagen, 2001; Ghaye, 2011). When teachers reflected individually, on the other hand, the highest percentage of their statements, 16.42%, concerned pressures on teachers and their multiple roles. More importantly, these statements demonstrated teachers' awareness of the embeddedness of their work in the larger society. Overall, the data show that when busy teachers get together to reflect, they are very task-oriented and get down to business very quickly. Additionally, particularly in a high context culture such as China where personal reputation depends largely on smooth interpersonal relationships, there can be face-saving issues and personal risk in overtly criticizing the macro system. In contrast, when teachers are reflecting alone, there is more time and opportunity to pull back and to see the larger picture without the competing agendas of other individuals and without the concern that self-revealing information might incur criticism or be used irresponsibly by colleagues.

Discussion and Implications

At this early point in our work, our research has enabled us to make the argument that jiaoyanzu/peer- and self-reflections serve different but complementary roles in English language teachers' learning and professional development. While jiaoyanzu reflections are most conducive to a focus on practical matters of instruction, self-reflections led teachers to step back and critique the larger picture of the context in which they were teaching, particularly the challenges and constraints imposed upon them by the macro (school, district, provincial, federal) systems in place. We constructed this argument as we reflected upon our data vis-à-vis Van Manen's (1977) three types of teaching reflection. In "technical reflection," the focus is on the efficiency of the application of educational knowledge and principles toward the attainment of specified goals; in "practical action," the concern is with clarifying assumptions underlying teaching and assessing the educational outcomes of instructional action (Zeichner & Liston, 1987); and finally, "critical reflection," targets the moral and ethical justifiability of educational practices, policies, and social infrastructure that results in judgments situated in the socio-historical-politico-cultural contexts in which teaching and learning are undertaken (Hatton & Smith, 1994). In light of the data as illustrated in the excerpts quoted above, we see, for example, that "technical rationality" is particularly evident in Freeman et al's framework domain of "Classroom and Teaching and Learning." "Critical Reflection," on the other hand, often appears under the domain of "School and Schooling Context" (see Table 3) in which the teachers questioned the impact of circumstances in their workplace on their students' performance and their own teaching and other responsibilities.

Nevertheless, our data do not show a precise division between the types of reflections when teachers reflected with jiaoyanzu peers and when they reflected alone. However, as we mentioned above, the data do show the potential for these two types of reflective settings to yield different but equally valuable information, underscoring the importance of opportunities for both in professional development programs for teachers. Both modes of reflection are ways in which teachers are actively involved in their own learning and acquisition of expertise, negating the notion that teacher professional development should start by looking at teachers as "empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical skills" (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 401), but rather by considering how teachers' experiences and beliefs inform and shape their teaching theory and practice. Also professional development programs should not be assessed according to how well and efficiently teachers, as passive knowledge consumers, implement new theories, methods, or materials imposed on them; rather success should be measured by how effectively teachers are engaged in exploring how they can "reconstruct themselves as legitimate knowledge producers" (Shin, 2006, p.162) and as generators and theorizers of teaching knowledge in their own right (Johnson, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Due recognition is to be

Sustaining Expertise

given to teacher “insider knowledge,” which is a relevant and critical component of teachers’ professional development in that it situates knowledge in the specific rather than hypothetical circumstances of teachers.

Our research also affirms the multiple sociocultural sources of teachers’ knowledge and information that constitute their expertise. The complex makeup of their knowledge base became especially clear in their discussions with us, as they described combining knowledge drawn from formal sources, such as the method of task-based teaching, with knowledge of the particulars of their own settings and experiences, such as students’ limited opportunities for using English in large classes and pressures imposed by external forces (e.g., high stakes exams). They understood it was impossible to implement instructional strategies, no matter how effective in other settings, without accommodating these realities. Given, moreover, the necessity of flexibly adjusting to every new set of students and every new mandate from above, they could be said to be continuously in an inquiry mode, interpreting immediate needs in the context of professional knowledge that was, itself, always developing.

Limitations in Freeman and Johnson’s (1998) tripartite teacher knowledge base framework were also highlighted through the study. The framework aptly describes the sociocultural nature of teacher knowledge-base, but it does not allow for a description of the knowledge as advocacy, which should be central for the framework to capture the embeddedness of teachers’ social engagement and participation made possible by their understanding of the systems in place, which enabled the teachers to advocate and take action on issues of social change at the local level through their teaching. However, neither advocacy knowledge nor the critical reflection it requires for teachers to interrogate and to act in response to educational inequity and injustice is fronted in Freeman et al’s framework. Nevertheless, critical reflection and resulting advocacy are essential components of any discussion about teacher professional development (PD) and its potential to make a meaningful difference (see Freeman, 2009; Johnson, 2006).

Overall, our study informed us that as teacher educators, we all play a valuable role in creating opportunities and safe spaces for teachers to reflect on their learning and development process. Reflections create pathways for meaningful change. As a testament to this conclusion, Fang Laoshi’s reflection below provides us encouragement that in the schools we worked in, it may already be on the way:

Maybe we can change the way we’re teaching, not the traditional way, or maybe not the Chinese way or the American way. Maybe we can mix them together. We have to change. There is a Chinese saying, “be not afraid of changing slowly; be afraid only of standing still.” My conversations with my young partner (nian qing jiao shi tong ban) have shown me this.

References

- Bailey, K., Curtis, A. & Nunan, D. (1998). Undeniable insights: The collaborative use of three professional development practices. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(3), 546-556.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. *Review of Research in Education*, 24, 249-305.
- Conway, P. F. (2001). Anticipatory reflection while learning to teach: From a temporally truncated to a temporally distributed model of reflection in teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 89-106
- Fook, J., White, S., & Gardner, F. (2006) Critical reflection: a review of contemporary literature and understandings. In S.White, J.Fook, & F.Gardner (Eds.), *Critical reflection in health and social care*. Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Freeman, D. (2009). The scope of second language teacher education. In A. Burns & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education* (pp. 11-19). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(3) 397-417.
- Ghaye, T. (2011). *Teaching and learning through reflective practice: A practical guide to positive action* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Hatton, N., & Smith, D. (1994, July 2-6). Facilitating reflection: Issues and research. *Proceedings from the 24th Conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association*. Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.
- Henri, F., & Rigault, C. (1996). Collaborative distance education and computer conferencing. In T. T. Liao (Ed.), *Advanced educational technology: Research issues and future potential* (pp. 45-76). Berlin, Germany: Springer-Verlag.
- Howard, T. C. (2003). Culturally relevant pedagogy: Ingredients for critical teacher reflection. *Theory Into Practice*, 42, 195-202.
- John, P. D. (2002). The teacher educator's experience: Case studies of practical professional knowledge. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 18, 323-341.
- Johnson, K. E. (2006). The sociocultural turn and its challenges for second language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 235-257.
- Johnson, K. E., & Golombek, P. R. (2003). Seeing teacher learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(4), 729-737.
- Korthagen, F. A. J. (2001). *Linking practice and theory: The pedagogy of realistic teacher education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kyriacou, C. (1994). Reflective teaching in a wider context. In A. Peck & D. Westgate (Eds.), *Language teaching in the mirror: Reflections on practice*. London, UK: Center for Information on Language Teaching Research.
- Langer, E. J. (1997). *The power of mindful learning*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Loughran, J. J. (1996). *Developing reflective practice: Learning about teaching and learning through modeling*. Washington, DC: Falmer Press.
- Marcos, J. J. M. & Tillema, H. (2006). Studying studies on teacher reflection and action: A appraisal of research contributions. *Educational Research Review*, 1, 112-132.
- Meijer, P. C., Zanting, A., & Verloop, N. (2002). How can student teachers elicit experienced teachers' practical knowledge? Tools, suggestions, and significance. *Journal of Teacher*

Sustaining Expertise

- Education*, 53(5), 406-419.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. Z. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Paine, L. W. (1990). The teacher as virtuoso: A Chinese model of teaching. *Teachers College Record*, 93(1), 49-81.
- Peck, A., & Westgate, D. (Eds.). (1994). *Language teaching in the mirror: Reflections on practice*. London, UK: Center for Information on Language Teaching and Research.
- Rogers, R. R. (2001). Reflections in higher education: A concept analysis. *Innovative Higher Education*, 26(1), 37-57.
- Shin, H. (2006). Rethinking TESOL from a SOL's perspective: Indigenous epistemology and decolonizing praxis in TESOL. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 3(1), 147-167.
- Smith, K. (2005). Teacher educator's expertise: What do novice teachers and teachers educators say? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21, 177-192.
- Sztompka, P. (1998). Trust, distrust and two paradoxes of democracy. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 1(19), 19-32.
- Wang, J. (2001). Contexts of mentoring and opportunities for learning to teach: a comparative study of mentoring practice. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17, 51-73.
- Westgate, D. (1994).. Introduction. In A. Peck & D. Westgate (Eds.), *Language teaching in the mirror: Reflections on practice* (pp. 3-8). London, UK: Center for Information on Language Teaching and Research.
- Van Manen, M. (1977). Linking ways of knowing with ways of being practical. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 6, 205-228.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zeichner, K. M., & Liston, D. P. (1987). Teaching student teachers to reflect. *Harvard Educational Review*, 57(1), 23-48.