Needs and Problems of Professional Development of Secondary School English Teachers in Kunming, China

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Abstract

This study aimed to achieve two primary objectives: 1) to investigate the professional development needs of secondary school English teachers and 2) to identify the challenges these teachers face during their professional growth. The study also explored key teaching concepts and skills, such as English pronunciation, lesson planning, classroom management, and the underlying theoretical teaching framework. The research focused on 42 secondary school English teachers from seven Kunming Wu District, Yunnan, China schools. The sample included 40 purposively selected teachers, determined using Krejcie and Morgan's sample size formula. These teachers, all Chinese nationals, taught English to students in grades 7-9. The group was diverse regarding educational background, teaching experience, age, and gender. Notably, many of these teachers did not have a degree in English or English education and commonly used Chinese as the medium of instruction. To maintain ethical standards, all participant information was kept confidential and used solely for educational purposes. Data collection involved a four-part questionnaire, with a five-point Likert scale used to assess the teachers' professional development needs and problems. Additionally, two open-ended questions gathered teachers' opinions and suggestions regarding these issues. The data collected from 42 teachers were analyzed using the SPSS software.

The findings revealed that secondary school English teachers needed to improve their listening and speaking skills. They also desired to

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enhance professional development through information technology (IT) and the Internet. However, the study identified significant challenges, including a lack of ongoing feedback in training programs and time constraints due to heavy workloads, which hindered their professional development efforts.

Keywords: Professional development, needs and problems, secondary school English teachers.

Introduction

Middle school education is a critical stage in China, providing essential knowledge that prepares students for secondary education and enabling them to function effectively in society. In China, primary to middle school education is compulsory for all children aged six to fifteen, as mandated by the 1986 Compulsory Education Law and reinforced by the State Council in 2001. This law underscores the government's commitment to ensuring that every child receives a primary education. Middle schools, therefore, play a crucial role in establishing a solid foundation in English, which is vital for students' success in secondary education. Students who fail to acquire practical English skills at this stage may struggle in later academic pursuits. This issue cannot solely be attributed to the students but may also reflect broader challenges such as teaching methods, learning environments, and the need for appropriate instructional materials (Birner, 2012). Teachers, especially those who serve as role models, must continuously develop their skills to avoid passing on incorrect knowledge or misconceptions. As language and educational technology evolve, teachers must engage in lifelong learning to stay relevant and practical. Traditional methods, like rote learning and grammar translation, are increasingly outdated, mainly as modern technology enhances English teaching in the classroom and at home. However, challenges remain, including a shortage of qualified English teachers, with many teaching English without a relevant degree. This lack of expertise can weaken students' foundational knowledge as they enter middle school. Professional development is therefore crucial for teachers,

not only to improve their skills but also to impact student outcomes positively. While many training programs are available, they often do not meet the specific needs of teachers. Therefore, understanding these needs is essential for effective professional development, which is vital to a successful teaching career. Professional development is necessary for secondary school English teachers, who serve as role models for their students. When teachers demonstrate strong English skills and positive attitudes toward the language, students are likelier to emulate them, fostering a positive learning environment (Noom-ura, 2013). This foundation allows students to advance to higher levels of education with a solid understanding of English and accurate instruction. Thus, teachers should prioritize professional development to ensure a successful teaching career.

The findings from this study can provide valuable insights and guidelines for educational organizations and schools to address the specific needs of middle school English teachers, ultimately enhancing their potential. The study also aims to highlight teachers' challenges in professional development, offering solutions to help stakeholders make informed decisions about addressing these issues. Secondary school teachers can manage their classrooms more effectively by improving teaching skills and English proficiency. While many studies focus on improving teaching and language skills, few have examined middle school teachers' specific challenges and professional development needs. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring these needs and identifying the problems English teachers face in developing their skills and profession. Furthermore, it addresses the mismatch between the content of training programs, seminars, or conferences and the real-world challenges teachers encounter in the classroom. Often, traditional teaching methods prevail, limiting students' ability to use English communicatively. By helping teachers identify their professional development needs and challenges, this study aims to guide them toward practical solutions, ensuring continuous improvement in their teaching practices and language proficiency.

Research Questions

1. What are the needs of secondary school English teachers in developing their profession?

2. What are the problems secondary school English teachers face when they do their professional development?

Research Objective

1. To investigate the needs of secondary school English teachers in developing their profession.

2. To find out the problems that secondary school English teachers encounter when they do professional development.

Literature review

1. Professional Development

Professional development is activities intended to enhance staff performance and prepare them for current and future roles (Little, 1987, as cited in Desimone, 2009). Mizell (2010) describes it as educational experiences linked to work, essential for improving teachers' skills. Archibald et al. (2021) emphasize that professional development activities are designed to enhance teachers' knowledge, improve student outcomes, and refine instructional practices. It can occur formally, through conferences, workshops, and seminars, or informally, during work hours or free time, such as through discussions with colleagues or independent learning (Mizell, 2020). Desimone (2021) proposes a Conceptual Framework for evaluating effective professional development, highlighting five critical components: content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. Content focus refers to the knowledge gained, while active learning involves teachers engaging in activities like lesson planning or student performance review. Coherence ensures alignment with teachers' beliefs and educational policies. Duration pertains to the time spent on professional development, and collective participation involves teachers within the same school engaging in shared activities (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010, as cited in Kang et al., 2013).

Desimone (2009) also outlines a four-step process where high-quality professional development changes teachers' beliefs and knowledge, alters instructional practices and ultimately improves student performance. Contextual factors, such as school culture and leadership, also significantly affect professional development effectiveness (Harwell, 2003). Mizell (2010) suggests effective professional development requires thoughtful planning, careful implementation, and feedback to meet teachers' needs. Teachers face new challenges yearly, necessitating continuous professional growth (Timperley, 2007). Loucks-Horsley et al. (1998) advocate aligning professional development with classroom practice and suggest using a "mirror method," where teachers first experience new curricula before applying them to students.

Professional development should be linked to the school system, considering factors like student abilities and curriculum, and it must be continuously evaluated to identify areas for improvement (Dunne, 2002).

2. Definition of Needs

Needs can have many meanings depending on the contexts of the situation and perceptions of the people involved. The Cambridge Dictionary Online (2016) defines need as wanting something very much or having something. Meanwhile, the Oxford Dictionary Online (2016) defines a need as requiring somebody/something because they are very important or essential. Likewise, it can be defined as a situation in which something or someone must have or do something, and it also means a strong feeling that someone wants something in order to succeed, live, or gain happiness (Merriam-Webster, 2016). However, ELT needs are related to people in education who aim to set educational purposes. Dudley-Even & St. John (1998) explained that outsiders receive perceived and objective needs from the facts which can be known or verified. In contrast, felt and subjective needs are received from insiders, and they are involved with affective and cognitive factors. In a learning situation, students have both

subjective and objective needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) defined needs as necessities wants, and lacks. Necessities are the things that students must know in order to perform effectively in the target situation. Lacks refers to students' current language abilities where they have to learn the skills they do not know. Wants to mean the desire to fulfill their own needs. Robinson (1991) said that needs can be defined as the learners' study or job requirements or what learners have to be capable of doing after the end of the courses.

3. Problems of Professional Development

It refers to something concerning their teaching practices. Teachers cannot manage the activities correctly, so they stop improving themselves as a professional teacher and continue using traditional ways of teaching methods teachers, which also have costs. Lack of financial aid may result in missing an opportunity to attend the activities that help teachers improve language and teaching skills. Some schools, especially in rural areas, may be unable to allocate or provide financial support to pay for professional development. Joyner (2005) stated that one-time workshop professional development is ineffective because it does not offer ongoing feedback. A key problem that obstructs teachers' professional development is time constraints. In some middle schools, teachers are responsible for full-time class contact and may be unwilling to participate in additional activities (Rhodes & Beneicke, 2002). Similarly, Gates and Gates (2014) revealed that insufficient time is the most common barrier to teachers' professional development. For example, teachers have inadequate time to do professional development because of workload. Administrative tasks can be one of the factors causing teachers not to have ample time to develop their profession. Another problem is financial. Mizell (2010) pointed out that when teachers participate in out-of-state conferences, the expenditure will include transportation, registration, meals, and accommodation. If schools invite an expert or a guest speaker

to educate and assist, it is crucial for practicing and retaining new teaching strategies. After participating in an activity of professional development, teachers cannot apply their knowledge in the classroom because teachers are passive recipients. Gulamhussein (2013) states that a traditional workshop does not change teachers' practices because it concerns evidence-based research and theoretical concepts. The role of teachers is only that of passive listeners. Teachers do not actively get involved in research or theories they are learning. Therefore, they might misunderstand the concepts. However, when teachers focus on many professional development activities, it may not produce better results, so teachers should concentrate on one or two essential activities. With a specific goal of professional development, teachers can accomplish it faster than multiple activities because teachers will have an opportunity to reflect on their learning and can emphasize that particular skill (Joyner, 2005). Mizell (2010) has drawn attention to the fact that teachers must participate in professional development activities that do not address the real problems they face in the language classroom; consequently, it culminates in ineffective professional development.

Methodology

1. Population and sample

1.1 The population was 42 secondary English teachers working in private and public schools from seven Kunming Wu District schools in Yunnan, China.

1.2 The sample group was 40 secondary school teachers purposively selected from the above population. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). They were all Chinese teachers who taught English subjects from Grades 7-9. They were a heterogeneous

group. Some may not have graduated with English or an English teaching degree. Moreover, they had different teaching experiences. The ages of participants were also different, and they were male and female teachers. Most of them used the Chinese language as a medium of instruction. Because of ethical considerations, the information from the teachers will be kept secret and used only for educational purposes.

2. Research Instrument

A questionnaire was used to investigate teachers' needs in professional development. The questionnaire was based on a 5-point Likert scale. This instrument consisted of 4 sections. The first part was to enquire about the personal information of participants. It included age, gender, educational background, field of study, teaching experiences, and frequency of participation in professional development activities. The second part was about teachers' needs in professional development. The third part concerned the problems of developing teachers' professional skills. The last section consisted of two open-ended questions asking about their opinions and suggestions for teachers' professional development and the problems they had been facing during their professional development. Regarding reliability, an expert revised the questionnaire before distributing it to the participants. Also, five secondary English teachers piloted this questionnaire, which was analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha, where the result was equal to 0.87.

Result

Demographics of respondents

The result provides an overview of the respondents' demographics, including gender, age, educational background, major of study, teaching

experience, and participation in professional development activities. The study involved 40 predominantly female participants, who comprised 95% of the respondents, while only 5% were male. The largest group (35%) was aged between 41 and 50 years, followed by those aged 31-40 years and 51-60 years (27.5% each). Ten percent were between 20 and 30 years old, with no participants over 60. Educational background: 67% of the participants held a Bachelor's degree, 30% had a Master's degree, and only 2.5% had education below a Bachelor's degree. None of the participants held a Doctoral degree. Regarding their field of study, 52.5% did not major in English; instead, they studied areas like Early Childhood Education, Curriculum and Instruction, Library Information, or Thai language. The remaining 47.5% had a major in English or a related field. The teaching experience of the participants varied, with most having worked between 6-10 years or 11-15 years. Twenty percent had 16-20 years or more than 20 years of experience, while 10% had 2-5 years of experience, and only 5% had less than one year. Regarding English teaching experience, 25% had taught English for 6-10 years and 20% for 11-15 years. Seventeen percent had taught for less than one year, 15% for 16-20 years, 12.5% for 2-5 years, and 10% for more than 20 years. For professional development, 85% of participants had attended English teaching training programs, seminars, or similar activities, while 15% had never participated. Over the past two years, 37.5% attended 1-2 sessions, 25% attended 3-4 sessions, and more than four sessions, while 12.5% had not participated in professional development activities.

Needs of secondary school English Teachers in Professional Development

Table 1 English language skills

English skills	Mean	S.D.	Level of skills	Interpretation Ranking
Listening	4.03	1.025	High	1
Speaking	4.03	0.974	High	1
Reading	3.87	0.911	High	2
Writing	3.58	1.010	High	4
Grammar	3.73	1.037	High	3
Average	3.84	0.9914	High	

Table 2 Needs of Professional Development

Items	Needs of secondary English teachers in professional development	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	S.D.	Level of Interpretation	Ranking
1	You need to attend the seminars or participate in the training programs	4.07	0.694	High	2
2	It would be best if you learned by yourself from the library.	3.48	0.816	High	10
3	You need to learn by yourself from the Internet and Information Technology.	4.15	0.662	High	1
4	It would be best if you observed your colleagues' classes.	3.72	0.640	High	7

5	You need to exchange knowledge with your colleagues.	3.80	0.648	High	6
6	You need to conduct the classroom research.	3.83	0.781	High	5
7	You need suggestions 4.00from the experts.	4.00	0.641	High	4
8	You need the experts to evaluate your teaching.	3.62	0.952	High	8
9	You need to take English courses with Chinese teachers	3.40	0.928	Moderate	12
10	You need to take English courses with native English teachers.	4.03	0.768	High	3
11	You need to take English courses in a university e.g., a diploma in English language teaching	3.43	0.874	High	11
12	It would help if you studied Master's degree or Doctor's degree in China	3.13	0.911	Moderate	14
13	It would be best if you studied Master's degree or Doctor's degree in other countries	3.03	1.121	Moderate	51
14	You need to have a field trip to China.	3.30	1.091	Moderate	13
15	You need to have a field trip to other countries.	3.52	1.176	High	9

| 16 | Others | - | - | - | - |

Table 2 presents the fact that secondary English teachers need to develop their professional skills. The result showed that the first three items that had the most significant levels of interpretation agreed upon among the participants were items 3 "You need to learn by yourself from the Internet and Information Technology" (mean score = 4.15), item 1 "You need to attend the seminars or participate in the training programs" (mean score = 4.07), and item 10 "You need to take English course with native English teachers" (mean score = 4.03). All levels of interpretation of their professional development needs are rated high. On the other hand, the three everyday items that had minor significant levels of interpretation among the participants were item 13, "You need to study Master's degree or Doctor's degree in other countries" (mean score = 3.03), item 12, "They need to study Master's degree or Doctor's degree in China."(mean score = 3.13), and item 14, "They need to have a field trip in China." (mean score = 3.30). All of these levels of interpretation of their professional development needs were moderate. The overall mean score of interpretation level in developing teaching profession skills among secondary school English teachers was 3.63, which showed a high level of need.

Table 3 Topics of training programs, seminars, or conferences in which primary English teachers are interested in

Items	Topics of training programs	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	S.D.	Level of Interpretation	Ranking
1	Technology in English Teaching	4.20	0.564	High	1

2	Material Development for English Teaching	4.15	0.662	High	3
3	Curriculum Planning	3.87	0.757	High	6
4	Teaching Techniques and Principles of English Language Teaching	4.18	0.781	High	2
5	The Knowledge of English Language	4.00	0.641	High	5
6	Testing and Assessment of Students' Language Proficiency	3.77	0.620	High	7

Table 3 presents topics of training programs, seminars, or conferences that secondary school English teachers were interested in. The three most exciting topics for their professional development were item 1, "Technology in English Teaching" (mean score = 4.20); item 4, "Teaching Techniques and Principles of English Language Teaching" (mean score = 4.18); and item 2, "Material Development for English Teaching" (mean score = 4.15). On the contrary, the outcomes showed that teachers paid less attention to three topics, which were item 12, "Classroom Observation" (mean score = 3.60), followed by "Action Research/ Classroom Research" (mean score = 3.43) and "English for integrated studies" (mean score = 3.00). Nevertheless, the level of interpretation of the most interesting and the least interesting topics was high. Similarly, the overall mean score was 3.81, considered a high level.

Table 4 The support from institutes or organizations

Items	The support from institutes or organizations	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	S.D.	Level of Interpretation	Ranking
1	Your educational service area	3.73	0.716	High	3
2	Private organizations	3.62	0.868	High	5
3	Several universities	3.70	0.939	High	4
4	Organization of English teacher in China (ChinaTESOL)	3.78	0.891	High	2

Table 4 shows secondary English teachers needed support from their school most (mean score = 4.05), which was at a high level of interpretation, followed by ChinaTESOL (mean score = 3.78), their educational service area (mean score = 3.73) and several universities (mean score = 3.70). They also needed help from private organizations (mean score = 3.62). Other schools with the same educational service were the institutions where primary English teachers needed their support the least (mean score = 3.47). The overall mean score of the interpretation level of the support from institutes or organizations was high (mean score = 3.72).

Problems of Secondary English Teachers in Professional Development

Table 5 Problems of Professional Development

Items	Problems of professional development	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	S.D.	Level of Interpretation	Ranking

1	You do not know how to develop your profession regarding English language skills.	3.12	0.966	Moderate	6
2	You do not have enough time for professional development because you have many teaching hours.	3.53	0.960	High	2
3	You do not have experts to give you some advice about professional development.	3.43	1.059	High	3
4	You cannot apply theoretical knowledge of English language teaching in practical ways.	3.05	0.904	Moderate	8
5	You have been developing many skills at the same time, so it is difficult to achieve the skills that are crucial for English teaching.	2.93	1.118	Moderate	11
6	You do not get the convenience of attending seminars, training programs, or conferences.	2.93	1.185	Moderate	11

7	You have financial problems to do professional development.	3.23	1.000	Moderate	5
8	You have to take care of your family, so it is an obstacle to developing your profession.	3.35	1.001	Moderate	4
9	The training programs you participate in lack ongoing feedback or do not have a follow-up action.	3.70	0.992	High	1
10	You have problems with the period of the training programs, seminars, or conferences; for example, they are too long or too short.	3.35	0.864	Moderate	4
11	The topics in seminars, training programs, or conferences do not respond to your needs.	3.43	1.035	High	3
12	The learning resources or valuable tools such as books or electronic devices are inadequate	3.03	1.097	Moderate	9

	for developing your profession.				
13	You do not get support from the organizations to attend the English training programs, seminars, or conferences.	3.07	1.141	Moderate	7
14	You do not get support from the organizations to conduct the classroom research.	3.00	1.155	Moderate	10
15	You do not get support from the organizations to further your study in Master's or Doctor's degrees.	3.00	1.132	Moderate	10

Table 13 illustrates problems of primary English teachers in professional development. The most common problems found in teachers' professional development were items 9, "The training programs you participate in lack ongoing feedback or do not have a follow-up action." (mean score = 3.70); item 2, "You do not have enough time to do professional development because you have many teaching hours." (mean score = 3.53); item 3 "You do not have experts to give you some advice about professional development" and item 11 "The topics in seminars, training programs or conferences do not respond to your needs." Both item 3 and item 11 had the same mean score of 3.43. The level of interpretation of item 9, item 2, item 3, and item 11 were high.

Meanwhile, the least problematic item for primary English teachers in professional development was item 5: "They have been developing many skills at the same time, so it is difficult to achieve the skills that are crucial for English teaching." Item 6: "You do not get the convenience of attending the seminars, training programs, or conferences." Items 5 and 6 ranked the same as the mean score, 2.93. In addition, item 14, "You do not get support from the organizations to conduct the classroom research and item 15, "You do not get support from the organizations to further their study in Master's degree or Doctor's degree," also had the same number of mean score which was 3.00; therefore, the level of interpretation of item 4, item 5, item 14 and item 15 was at a moderate level. The overall mean score of problems of secondary school English teachers was 3.21, which resulted in a moderate level rating.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the professional development needs of secondary school English teachers and identify the challenges they face during this process. The findings suggest that teachers have significant needs in various aspects of professional development, including participation in training programs, taking English courses with native speakers, and seeking help from experts. However, the study also reveals a connection between these needs and teachers' challenges, such as time constraints and the lack of continuity in professional development activities.

Needs of Secondary English Teachers: The majority of participants expressed a need for self-directed learning through the use of technology, aligning with findings from Eksi & Aydin (2013) and Korkmazgil & Seferoglu (2013), who highlighted technology's role in updating teachers' knowledge. Teachers preferred using technology for professional development due to its convenience and flexibility (Roux & Valladares,

2014). The most popular topics among participants were related to "Technology in English Teaching," emphasizing the importance of integrating technology into professional development. Additionally, many participants wanted to attend seminars or training programs, consistent with Noom-ura (2013) and Roux & Valladares (2014), who noted the positive impact of such programs on teaching practices. Teachers also expressed a strong desire to improve their English skills, mainly listening and speaking, through courses with native English teachers, as noted by Noom-ura (2013).

Problems in Professional Development: One major issue identified was the lack of ongoing feedback or follow-up actions in professional development programs, a concern echoed by Meng and Tajaroensuk (2013). The absence of continuity and evaluation of these programs limits their effectiveness (Richard & Farrell, 2005). Time constraints also emerged as a significant barrier, with many teachers unable to engage in professional development due to heavy workloads and extensive teaching hours (Carney, 2003, as cited in Meng & Tajaroensuk, 2013). Additionally, the topics covered in seminars and training programs often did not align with teachers' needs, leading to ineffective professional development (Gumus, 2013; Konokorn et al., 2012). Finally, the study highlighted the lack of access to expert guidance, which could help teachers acquire new teaching techniques and share knowledge with colleagues, as suggested by Yumru (2015).

Conclusion

The study concluded that secondary school English teachers recognize the need to improve their listening and speaking skills to enhance their teaching effectiveness. The results indicate a strong demand for self-directed learning through the Internet and Information Technology, mainly due to convenience. Teachers also expressed a

significant need to participate in seminars and professional development programs, particularly given the low frequency of participating in such activities—most had attended only 1-2 sessions. The most sought-after topics for these programs included "Technology in English Teaching," along with "Teaching Techniques and Principles of English Language Teaching," and "Material Development for English Teaching."

The study identified that schools, Chinese TESOL, and Educational Service Areas should be responsible for organizing professional development activities. However, teachers reported several challenges, including a lack of follow-up actions or ongoing feedback in the training programs, insufficient time for professional development due to heavy teaching loads, and a disconnect between the programs offered and their actual needs. Additionally, the absence of expert guidance was highlighted as a significant issue. To address these challenges, some participants suggested that professional development activities should be held at least twice per semester and that scholarships should be available for teachers to conduct classroom research or pursue advanced degrees. They also recommended involving native English speakers in professional development programs as trainers or guest speakers to meet their learning needs better.

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