

Article

English Teachers' Perceptions of Their Professional Development: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

The authors applied Bruner's tenets of learning and Knowles's Adult Learning Theory to investigate Chinese English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers' perceptions of their in-service Professional Development (PD). In this mixed-methods study, 60 participants were recruited from six secondary schools in China to complete a survey. Quantitative results from the survey indicated that the respondents perceived no significant difference between the influence of overseas PD and that of domestic PD on teachers' English teaching competence and on their students' English learning outcomes. Qualitative findings highlighted that the participants expected future ELT PD to be practical, discipline-specific, language skills focused, innovative, and virtual-delivery-friendly. It should be noted that expectations of PD to be discipline-specific and virtual-delivery-friendly are new to the existing literature, which deserve more attention and further investigation.

Keywords

Bruner's tenets of learning, Knowles's Adult Learning Theory, discipline specific, virtual delivery

1 Introduction

The implementation of curricular reforms fundamentally lies in in-service teachers' professional training (Yan, 2012). Professional development (PD) is intended to help teachers overcome potential difficulties and challenges in the process of carrying out new curricula (Wang & Lam, 2009). Effective PD is "structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p. 2).

In addition to the necessity and importance of PD, questions have been raised about how to design

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and implement effective PD. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), the following elements should be included in effective PD: focus on content, incorporation of active learning, support for collaboration, provision of coaching and expert support, offers of feedback and reflection, and sustainment of duration. To theoretically support effective PD, the authors of this article referred to Bruner (1960, 1967)'s tenets of learning and Knowles (1978)'s Adult Learning Theory (ALT). To practically contextualise effective PD, the authors explored the perceptions of PD among English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers in China. The authors chose ELT teachers' perceptions of PD in China based on the following reasons: ELT is a global topic academically; China has the largest population of English learners and users (for details, see Crystal, 2008, pp. 4-5); there has been a noticeable gap in the limited amount of research on ELT teachers' PD in comparison to a large number of domestic and emerging overseas PD programs (Li & Edwards, 2013; Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance of China [MOE and Mof], 2010); comparative analyses of domestic and overseas ELT PD programs is yet a new discourse in scholarship; ELT teachers are the targeted audience and direct beneficiary of ELT PD and their perceptions of PD can be employed to evaluate the effectiveness and popularity of ELT PD programs.

With the noticed lack of research on ELT teachers' perceptions of both domestic and overseas PD, this study was intended to examine two research questions: (1) What are Chinese ELT teachers' perceptions about the effects of PD programs, which they attended domestically and/or abroad, on teachers' English teaching competence and students' learning outcomes? and (2) What are Chinese ELT teachers' expectations from future domestic and overseas PD programs? The problem of this study was to investigate Chinese ELT teachers' perceptions of in-service PD. The purpose of this study was to generate bottom-up voices from grassroots teachers regarding their needs and expectations of PD and further shed some light on the connections among curricular reforms, in-class teaching practices with contextual considerations, and in-service Chinese ELT teachers' PD.

The global significance of this study lies in the current lack of articles that focus on ELT teachers' perceptions of their needs and expectations of PD, with reference to publication gaps for years in this population's PD despite the representation of domestic and overseas practices. Applying the discussions of this article, along with those of others in similar contexts including Jansem's (2020) and Noom-ura's (2013) studies in Thailand, Van Canh and Barnard's (2009) in Vietnam, and Zein's (2016) in Indonesia, PD program policymakers and directors would have theoretical references and practical approaches to develop appropriate and effective PD programs to enhance ELT teachers' roles in classroom practices. In an even wider sense, this study would be a basis to develop a theorised view about teachers' professional learning as a process of progressive and lifelong adult learning.

2 Literature Review

2.1 PD and ALT

PD can be in the format of "short courses, degree upgrading courses, participation in...seminars/workshops, conference attendance, school/classroom-based research, and partnerships with universities or external consultants" (Lee, 2011, p. 31). The various modes of PD include listening, watching, being observed, receiving feedback, engaging in academic and/or professional readings, discussing teaching with critical colleagues and/or experts, and discussing teachers' own philosophies of teaching (Timperley et al., 2007). The purposes of ELT PD vary, ranging from helping teachers overcome existing or potential difficulties and challenges arising from their teaching practices to helping them with their linguistic weaknesses (Wang & Lam, 2009), such as "pronunciation, cultural issues, idioms and expressions" (He & Miller, 2011, p. 440).

Knowles's five principles of ALT are applied to evaluate PD practices, as "promising PD reflects foundational concepts" in ALT (Baker, 2016, p. 25). Principle One discusses needs and interests as "appropriate starting points for organising adult learning activities" (i.e. PD; Knowles, 1978, p. 12), for

the sake of motivation. According to Knowles' ALT Principle Two, PD should also be "life-centred" with authentic "life situations" instead of subjects. Based on Principle Three, the existing PD methodology is "theory-driven" (Yan, 2012, p. 444), which needs to be modified using the analysis of experience as "the richest resource for adults' learning" (Knowles, 1978, p. 12). Through Principle Four, Knowles advocates learners' role as "self-directing", thus PD, rather than being "transmissive... and authority-centred" (Yan, 2012, p. 444), should be "a process of mutual inquiry" (Knowles, 1978, p. 12); it should function as a reoccurring space in which teachers feel comfortable to discuss their teaching and develop pedagogical innovations with peers (Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009). Knowles's ALT Principle Five delineates the increasing individual differences in age, thus PD should be flexible in "style, time, place, and pace of learning" (1978, p. 12). "Sustained, ongoing and relevant" PD is regarded as foundational in teachers' development (Baker, 2016, p. 25; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Lee, 2011).

2.2 ELT PD and Bruner's tenets of learning

The existing ELT PD has space to outgrow its own weaknesses, including its features of "knowledge transmission and knowledge consumption" (Lee, 2011, p. 30), "poor training management and the ambiguous selection of training participants" (Zein, 2016, p. 423), and the one-size-fits-all principle (Lee, 2011). Moreover, the participating teachers, in Song and Cheng's (2011) study, were found to have insufficient opportunities to "engage in authentic two-way interaction" (p. 97); the English PD sessions in Vietnam, in Van Canh and Barnard's (2009) study, did not emphasize "hands-on experiential learning" (p. 24); the participants, in the studies of both He and Miller (2011) and Wette and Barkhuizen (2009), did not have chances to discuss their tensions, frustrations, difficulties or challenges that they face in their routine teaching practices, or to seek help and guidance.

Bruner's tenets are suggested to improve the ELT PD practices. Bruner put forward the role of structure in learning, stating that "teaching and learning" should take this into account "by providing a general picture in terms of which the relations between things encountered earlier and later are made as clear as possible" (1960, p. 12). The ELT PD should embody Bruner's concept of structured learning in terms of contextualising and personalising content for target learners by forming a bridge between old and new knowledge.

Discovery learning, another Bruner's tenet (1967), is an inquiry-based and constructivist learning theory. In the concept of discovery learning, learners' own existing knowledge and past experiences are valued and used to discover new concepts, facts, relationships, and knowledge on their own (Jiang & Perkins, 2013). ELT PD should be inquiry-oriented and "hands-on experiential learning" (Van Canh & Barnard, 2009, p. 24). As Bruner's theory of discovery learning applies, effective PD for teachers should be "collaborative and collegial" to be constructive (Servage, 2008, p. 63). PD should function as "a community to sustain support and learning" (Klein, 2008, p. 85). In this professional learning community, teachers as trainees need to be encouraged to "move out of their submissive position" (Borg, 2009, p. 358), pose questions, generate knowledge, and discuss and find constructive solutions to their problems (Lee, 2011), via "authentic two-way interaction" (Song & Cheng, 2011, p. 97).

2.3 Empirical studies relevant to ELT PD

2.3.1 Studies focusing on domestic ELT PD

Zhan (2008) investigated a PD for in-service ELT teachers in primary and secondary schools via a survey of 490 ELT teachers in Baoding, China. One of the findings was the participants' beliefs in a "wider use of English language teaching abilities and strategies" by good teachers (p. 63). The ELT teachers, in Zhan's study, believed that they needed to "keep up with new ideas and research in the field of English teaching" and "foster a strong sense for the assimilation and acceptance of different cultures"

(p. 63). The participating teachers recognised that they needed three main types of knowledge and skills: teaching abilities and approaches, English language knowledge, and recent theories of English language acquisition (Zhan, 2008).

English language skills, in particular oral English proficiency, were mentioned by participating EFL teachers in Chen and Goh's (2011) study. In the study, 208 out of 331 teacher respondents from 44 universities in 22 cities across China reported their challenges and frustrations about their oral English proficiency and inadequate pedagogical knowledge "to plan and implement effective oral activities, to motivate students' participation and to balance (students') diverse development needs" (p. 337). In the semi-structured interviews, 28 out of 30 participating teachers stated their eagerness to improve their teaching approaches to speaking activities via PD "in how to design and implement effective tasks to motivate students' engagement in oral English activities" (p. 333); ten teacher interviewees emphasized that "the best way to increase teachers' knowledge about oral English and oral English teaching is to give teachers opportunities to participate in programs in English-speaking countries" (Chen & Goh, 2011, p. 340).

Noom-ura's (2013) survey covered many factors relevant to ELT problems in Thailand which included Thai ELT teachers' PD needs in secondary schools; the responses from 34 participating teachers reverberate with other empirical studies seen above and below, in the light of PD needs in "teaching strategies that enable students to communicate in English", teachers' own "English proficiency development" with emphasis in language output-- speaking and writing (p.144).

In a more recent study about 'professionalism' which can shed light on the goal of ELT PD, Jansem (2020) collected data via observations, interviews, on-line discussions and field-note recording from 20 Thai ELT teachers. The participating ELT teachers appeared to have a consensus that "English language knowledge is a preliminary element or gateway to professionalism... especially during the booming period of the communicative approach" (Jansem, 2020, p.4). The participants also agreed on other critical attributers-- curriculum design skills and pedagogical methodologies (Jansem, 2020, p.4).

2.3.2 Studies focusing on overseas ELT PD

Li and Edwards (2013) aimed to understand the impact of the UK-based PD program on 48 Chinese ELT teachers' practice. The findings included that participating teachers were aware of how to critically adopt the takeaways from their overseas PD into their own local circumstances. It should be noted that the authors concluded that the 10-days long program helped the participants' uptake from the level of knowledge or persuasion to the level of implementation of the curricular innovation and was "likely to be sustained against a background of continued curriculum reform in China" (p. 390).

Kurihara (2013) studied the transitional experiences of three Japanese ELT teachers, who had participated a 6-month or 1-year in-service PD program in the U.S., to their high schools in Japan. This study suggested that overseas teacher PD programs should consider how to "foster teachers' appropriation processes" in their teaching sites (p. 68). One of the considerations was the inclusion of target participants' teaching conceptions and practices as well as their teaching contexts, such as "school culture, teacher education, cross-cultural negotiation, and professional self" (p. 68).

The two studies reviewed above stand out among the recent studies in their particularity of overseas PD. They acknowledge the merits of overseas PD and the challenges of transferring the takeaways from those PD programs to participants' teaching contexts. The empirical studies in this section resemble the constructive perspective of PD and align with the constructive themes in ALT and Bruner's Tenets of Learning.

3 Context of the Study

Traditional ELT in China, similar to that in other EFL countries including Thailand (Baker, 2016) and

Vietnam (Van Canh & Barnard, 2009), promoted a strong linguistic focus on drilling, grammar, reading, and translation (Hu, 2002). Such behaviouristic teaching methods have been reformed many times at a national level; students in senior high schools in China, for instance, are expected to develop their language knowledge, skills, and competence for authentic communication (Ministry of Education of China [MOE], 2003). These curricular reforms are revolutionary in the sense that they are student-centred and involve active learning.

Alongside the ELT reform, Chinese ELT teachers' PD has been developed and highly prioritised in China (Hu, 2002; Li & Edwards, 2013). Various PD initiatives – in the forms of domestic workshops, visits to schools abroad, and invitations to overseas scholars – have been offered (Li & Edwards, 2013; MOE and Mof, 2010). The contextual reasons behind the reform include dissatisfaction with current ELT practices revealed by both teachers and students in China (Pan & Block, 2011), students' need for competence and skills, fossilisation or even deterioration of ELT teachers' English competence (Song & Cheng, 2011), inadequate teacher education (He & Miller, 2011), and the influence of traditional values and teaching practices (Li & Edwards, 2013).

4 Methods

To investigate Chinese ELT teachers' perceptions of their in-service PD in China and abroad, we chose a mixed-methods study as our research design. Mixed-methods research is “the collection, analysis, and integration of quantitative and qualitative data in a single or multiphase study” (Hanson et al., 2005, p. 224). The current research used a concurrent mixed-methods design in a single phase with two strands, one quantitative and one qualitative (Newman et al., 2011). The current study collected data via a questionnaire; the primary and secondary researchers developed the questionnaire, through which they collected both quantitative and qualitative data using both close-ended and open-ended questions. Based on the data collected through the questionnaire, a meta inference, or meta interpretation, was made. The meta inference should be “theoretically consistent” by integrating each strand of the mixed-methods research study to achieve “integrative efficacy” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008, p. 115). The integration of both quantitative and qualitative data can increase the “potential for transferability to similar contexts and groups” (Tashakkori et al., 2010, p. 39), leading further generalization and understanding (Bazeley, 2004).

4.1 Recruitment and participants

The researchers employed convenience sampling to select participants for this IRB-approved study. The primary researcher contacted her six former colleagues who were Chinese ELT teachers in different public schools in a coastal province in China, and explained the research study to them. She asked them whether they were willing to conduct and disseminate the survey. All of them agreed to help recruit participants in their schools. The eligible participants were Chinese ELT teachers in public schools in China and did not include the six survey conductors. Those survey conductors explained the research study and what participants needed to do, and then handed out the consent forms to the interested Chinese ELT teachers, who were made aware of the purpose and the procedures of the study and the estimated duration of the survey before they signed the consent forms. Participants were also notified that they could decide to quit at any time during the study for any reason, without consequences. By this process, 10 Chinese ELT teachers from each of the six secondary schools (n=60) were recruited, with their confidentiality guaranteed during and after the survey by giving a pseudonym to their preference. The primary researcher proposed 10 participants respectively, taking into consideration of the staff size in each school and their teaching load, availability, and willingness or openness to research participation.

4.2 Demographic information

Three male and 57 female Chinese ELT teachers, from secondary schools or equivalent, participated in this study in November 2016. Seven participants were aged from 25 to 29 years old; 38 participants were in their 30s; 14 participants were over 40; one participant's age was unknown. The duration of participants' English learning in school was scattered: one of them had less than 10 years; 23 had learned English for 11 to 20 years; 12 had done so for between 21 and 25 years; and 23 had learned English for over 25 years. When it comes to ELT experiences, 5 of the participants had taught English for no more than 5 years, 10 had taught for 6-10 years, 24 had taught for 11-15 years, 9 had taught for 16-20 years, and 12 had taught for more than 20 years. All participants held bachelor's degrees or above in English or English education. Among them, 26 had master's degrees or equivalent.

4.3 Survey

The survey, as the only instrument, was developed on the basis of the researchers' knowledge acquired from the existing PD literature (e.g., Chen & Goh, 2011; Zhan, 2008) and their own PD experiences in the context of the study. In detail, Zhan (2008) enlightened the researchers with survey items about classroom teaching activities, teaching strategies, and openness to English-speaking cultures (p. 59 & p. 63); Chen and Goh (2011) provided items about PD in teaching methods, English knowledge, and English proficiency. Both of the reviewed literature contributes to questions listed in table 1 and 2 below. The primary and third researchers had been ELT teachers in China for years and attended various PD programs both domestically and abroad. The survey was piloted, for validation, with a group of over 40 Chinese ELT teachers who took a boarding intensive PD training in the summer of 2016. The question design, overall structure, and wording were revised afterwards accordingly, for more clarity and precision. For instance, some questions were deleted for being loosely relevant, several sub-questions were rearranged, and a few questions were modified from open-ended to close-ended multiple-choice ones, when found with zero or extremely low response rates or with suggestions from the participants to do so. The finalised version of the survey had 19 questions, including 5 open-ended and 14 multiple-choice questions, in Chinese language. The survey included questions for demographic information, educational background, domestic and overseas PD experiences, and expectations of future ELT PD.

4.4 Procedures

Each survey conductor emailed participating ELT teachers an electronic take-home survey, which was estimated to be completed in a maximum of 20 minutes. After they finished the survey, the participants submitted, via email, their answer sheets to the primary researcher. The electronic copies will be kept securely for three years, starting from the date of publication, and will be discarded after that time frame.

There are three limitations in this study. First, the number of participants in this study was small (60 ELT teachers via convenience sampling), and the generalisability of findings in this study to a larger ELT teacher population is limited. Second, the survey was the only instrument to collect data, which might generate less data than multiple instruments and be at the risk of not achieving "integrative efficacy" (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2008, p. 115). Third, data were collected during the mid-term exam weeks in the schools of participating ELT teachers, thus participants might have less available time to maintain their patience toward completing the survey.

4.5 Data analysis

All quantitative data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet database. The quantitative data were then cleaned and analysed according to the research questions. The data were first analysed to determine the

frequency of each choice. The researchers used to consider employing paired-sample t-test to compare teachers' perceptions about domestic and overseas PD programs in their influence on teachers' teaching competence and students' learning outcomes. Therefore, Shapiro-Wilk test was applied to determine whether the variables for the targeted constructs are normally distributed, which is one of the main assumptions for paired-sample t-test. According to the Shapiro-Wilk test results, paired-sample t-test is not appropriate. Therefore, the researchers finally decided to employ Wilcoxon Signed Rank test, a nonparametric method, to compare teachers' perceptions about domestic and overseas PD programs in their influence on teachers' teaching competence and students' learning outcomes. The relationship between teachers' perceptions about the influence of PD programs and teachers' perceptions about the influence of short duration domestic/overseas PD programs was examined with Spearman's Rank correlation coefficient. The quantitative results were employed to answer the first research question.

Regarding qualitative data, content analysis refers to giving meaning to first impressions of those texts (Stake, 2005). The primary researcher wrote the first impressions on the margins of those responses to the survey. The participants' responses to the open-ended questions were coded in relevance to the research questions, to create categories and concepts via colour highlights (Elo et al., 2014). The coding categories were words and phrases that represented the regularities, patterns, and topics covered by the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), which were translated by the three researchers respectively and compromised to reach inter-translator reliability. The primary and third researchers pooled all three researchers' coded data together by making their own matrix and then combining the matrix. In the matrix, the categories, exemplified by corresponding data, were collectively finalised among the three researchers. After that, the primary and third researchers translated and categorised coding in order to find concepts and patterns and developed the concepts and patterns into themes through thematic analysis to help answer the second research question about expectations. For instance, coding related to *listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and/or vocabulary* was developed into the theme --*English language skills*. By comparing the responses of all the participants, the researchers intended to establish general patterns for the group (Wang et al., 2008). The primary and third researchers both categorised the answers and evidence from the analysed qualitative data and threaded the draft with themes.

5 Findings

5.1 Chinese English teachers' perception of PD

5.1.1 Professional development in China

Among the 60 participants, 41 had domestic PD experiences and the remaining did not mention so. The frequencies of the 41 respondents' perceptions about the influence of domestic in-service PD on their English teaching competence is demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Teachers' Perceptions about the Influence of Domestic In-service PD on English Teaching Competence

Aspects	Totally disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Totally agree (5)
Diverse teaching methods	0%	4.9%	9.8%	70.7%	14.6%
Flexible teaching styles	0%	4.9%	9.8%	73.2%	12.2%
Capacity of designing in-class activities from students' perspectives	0%	4.9%	14.6%	65.9%	14.6%
Broadening horizon	0%	2.4%	12.2%	51.2%	34.1%

Improving English language proficiency	0%	7.3%	24.4%	51.2%	17.1%
Capability of teaching English with English mindset	0%	9.8%	31.7%	43.9%	14.6%
Too short to have any influence	9.8%	39%	34.1%	9.8%	7.3%

As indicated in Table 1, the four most frequently perceived aspects according to respondents' agreement and total agreement (over 80%) are: diverse teaching methods, flexible teaching styles, broadening horizon, and capacity of designing in-class activities from students' perspectives, followed by improving English language proficiency (over 68%). Over 48% of the respondents reported disagreement or total disagreement with the statement that the PD was too short to have any influence.

The frequencies of the 41 respondents' perceptions about the influence of domestic in-service PD on their students' English learning outcomes is reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Teachers' Perceptions about the Influence of Domestic In-service PD on Their Students' English Learning Outcomes

Aspects	Totally disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Totally agree (5)
Stronger interest in English	0%	12.2%	36.6%	48.8%	2.4%
Strengthening oral English	0%	17.1%	31.7%	48.8%	2.4%
Strengthening English listening	0%	14.6%	29.3%	51.2%	4.9%
Focusing more on expressing in English	0%	14.6%	34.1%	46.3%	4.9%
Working harder to improve English learning skills	0%	12.2%	29.3%	56.1%	2.4%
More open toward Chinese and western culture	0%	4.9%	24.4%	58.5%	12.2%

As demonstrated in Table 2, for each aspect of the influence on their students' English learning outcomes, there are around 30% of the respondents choosing the neutral option. Over half of the respondents agreed or totally agreed on each aspect about the influence of domestic PD on their students' English learning outcomes. The most frequently perceived influencing aspect, according to the frequencies of agreement and total agreement (over 70%), is the statement of more openness toward Chinese and western culture, with the following statements close behind in terms of agreement and total agreement: working harder to improve English learning skills (over 58%), and strengthening English listening (over 56%). The remaining three aspects (approximately 51% in the total frequency of option "agree" and "total agree") are as follows: stronger interest in English, strengthening oral English, and focusing more on expressing in English.

5.1.2 Professional development abroad

Among the 60 participants, 32 had overseas PD experiences; six of them were in degree-seeking master's programs in TESOL and the other 26 were in either exchange non-degree-seeking or certificate-seeking programs. Twenty-seven out of the 32 respondents provided the names of the English-speaking countries

where they had their overseas PD training -- Australia (55.6%), the U.K. (18.5%), Canada (18.5%), and the U.S. (7.4%) respectively. The frequencies of the 32 respondents' perceptions about the influence of overseas in-service PD on their English teaching competence is in Table 3.

Table 3

Teachers' Perceptions about the Influence of Overseas In-service PD on English Teaching Competence

Aspects	Totally disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Totally agree (5)
Diverse teaching methods	0%	0%	6.3%	68.7%	25%
Flexible teaching styles	0%	0%	9.4%	65.6%	25%
Capacity of designing in-class activities from students' perspectives	0%	0%	3.1%	71.9%	25%
Broadening horizon	0%	0%	0%	62.5%	37.5%
Improving English language proficiency	0%	0%	3.1%	75%	21.9%
Capability of teaching English with English mindset	0%	0%	15.6%	62.5%	21.9%
Too short to have any influence	21.9%	62.5%	12.5%	3.1%	0%

As demonstrated in Table 3, over 84% of the respondents agreed or totally agreed on each aspect about the influence of overseas PD on their English teaching competence. The five most frequently perceived influencing aspects according to agreement and total agreement (over 90%) are: broadening horizon (100%), capacity of designing in-class activities from students' perspectives (96.9%), improving English language proficiency (96.9%), diverse teaching methods (93.7%), and flexible teaching styles (90.6%). Over 84% of the respondents indicated disagreement or total disagreement on the statement that overseas PD was too short to have any influence.

The frequencies of the perceived influence of the 32 respondents' overseas in-service PD on their students' English learning outcomes are in Table 4.

Table 4

Teachers' Perceptions about the Influence of Overseas In-service PD on their Students' English Learning Outcomes

Aspects	Totally disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Totally agree (5)
Stronger interest in English	0%	9.4%	9.4%	71.9%	9.4%
Strengthening oral English	0%	12.5%	21.9%	56.3%	9.4%
Strengthening English listening	0%	6.3%	25%	56.3%	12.5%
Focusing more on expressing in English	0%	9.4%	21.9%	56.3%	12.5%
Working harder to improve English learning skills	0%	9.4%	31.3%	53.1%	6.3%
More open toward Chinese and western culture	0%	3.1%	12.5%	59.4%	25%

As indicated in Table 4, over 59% of the respondents agreed or totally agreed on each aspect about the influence of overseas PD on their students' English learning outcomes. The most frequently perceived influencing aspects, according to agreement and total agreement (over 80%), are the statements of more openness toward Chinese and western culture and stronger interest in English.

5.2 Perceived influence of overseas PD vs. domestic PD

To decipher whether there was any significant difference in Chinese ELT teachers' perceptions about the influence of domestic PD and overseas PD, we conducted a Wilcoxon Signed Rank test, considering the distribution of the sample, on respondents ($n=23$) who had both domestic and overseas PD experiences. Each construct (perception about the influence of domestic/overseas PD on teachers' English teaching competence and perception about the influence of domestic/overseas PD on students' English learning outcomes) was created by averaging responses to corresponding statements. The results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test indicated the following: 1) the respondents' perceptions about the influence of domestic PD and overseas PD on their English teaching competence were not significantly different ($Z = -1.85, p > 0.05$); and 2) the respondents' perceptions about the influence of domestic PD and overseas PD on their students' English learning outcomes were not significantly different ($Z = -1.933, p > 0.05$).

The results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test also indicated that the respondents' perception about domestic PD being "too short to have any influence" (mean=2.48) was significantly higher ($Z=-3.176, p<0.01$) than their perception about overseas PD being "too short to have any influence" (mean=1.78). Spearman's Rank Correlation analysis demonstrated that the respondents' perception about domestic PD being "too short to have any influence" significantly correlated negatively (Spearman's $\rho = -0.436, p < 0.05$) with their perception of the domestic PD on their English teaching competence and that the respondents' perception about overseas PD being "too short to have any influence" significantly correlated negatively (Spearman's $\rho = -0.549, p < 0.01$) with their perception of the overseas PD on their English teaching competence.

5.3 Chinese English teachers' expectations on future PD

5.3.1 Professional development in China

Forty-five out of 60 participants articulated their expectations of domestic PD. The most expected duration of domestic PD was two weeks (38 out of 45 respondents); the other seven respondents preferred a longer duration of domestic PD, that is, at least half a year or one year. The expected content of domestic PD included (from higher to lower frequency): cutting-edge pedagogy (20%), professional practice (7%), listening/speaking/reading skills (7%), teaching styles and practices from English-speaking countries (5%), English and American literature (2%), professional knowledge (2%), cross-cultural understandings (2%), oral communications and practical use of language (2%), and teaching technology (2%). It can be generally inferred that *practice*, *practical*, *teaching skills*, and *newest* were the key words and main themes. It should also be noted that two participants expressed that they welcomed specified PD—targeted ELT for teachers from similar teaching contexts (i.e. grade levels and types of school). As an example, Maggi, who taught English in a vocational school, expressed her expectations of PD to be well-researched, scientifically designed and conducted, and formalism-free. The format of PD was expected beyond workshops or lectures; the participants also welcomed seminars, demonstrations, and online delivery.

Three out of 45 respondents to the question on their expectations of domestic PD mentioned that overseas or native-English-speaking ELT professionals were welcomed to lecture or instruct in their PD in China physically or virtually. For instance, Tan, an ELT teacher in a high school, stated, "I prefer...PD for ELT teachers, which adopts virtual delivery form taught by overseas educators." Han, another ELT

teacher working in the same high school, also mentioned that ELT experts from native-English-speaking countries were welcomed to train Chinese ELT teachers in teaching techniques, teaching practices, and cross-cultural communications. Flora, an ELT teacher working in a middle school, emphasized her expectations of PD to be led by overseas educators in a two-week-long time frame.

5.3.2 Professional development abroad

Forty-five out of 60 participants articulated their expectations on overseas PD. The expected time frame of overseas PD ranged from one week to three years. The expected content of overseas PD included (from higher to lower frequency): cutting-edged teaching philosophy (11%), ELT pedagogy (9%), TESOL and Second Language Acquisition (5%), English and American culture (5%), professional training (5%), practical training (5%), listening, speaking, reading and other language skills (2%), and oral English and communication skills (2%).

Some of the respondents mentioned their preference in either short-term teachers' training/exchange programs, or long-term degree-seeking programs. Take Maggi's response, for instance; she wrote her expectations of overseas PD as "cooperating with teacher education programs in education colleges/schools, such as that in Columbia University. Such a PD should last from three to six months, for better outcomes." It is indicated, based on 20 out of 45 respondents' expectations on overseas PD, that *practice*, *practical*, *cutting-edged teaching philosophy*, and *teaching skills* were the key words and main themes. It should also be noted that seven out of 45 respondents emphasized practical and specified PD—targeted to English teaching, in comparison to general PD for teachers of all subjects.

6 Discussions

6.1 Factors contributing to Chinese ELT teachers' perceptions of current PD

6.1.1 Duration

Both domestic and overseas findings indicated that the respondents perceived PD as short-lived. Such perceptions echo with the existing studies, such as those of Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), Lee (2011), and Wette and Barkhuizen (2009), which advocated PD as a continuing, on-going, sustainable, and even lifelong process. Such a call for sustainability of PD has strong reference to Knowles's ALT principles and Bruner's role of structure in learning.

6.1.2 Process oriented

The participants' perceptions of overseas PD resemble Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2017) advocacy that effective PD needs to be supportive of collaboration and coaching, both of which were represented in the participants' perceptions about the effects of overseas PD, including in-class activities from students' perspectives (96.9%), diverse teaching methods (93.7%), and flexible teaching styles (90.6%).

6.1.3 Epicentre authority of the English language

The participants' perceived authority of native-English-speaking educators might be relevant to their immersion in English-speaking contexts. English immersion was also mentioned in previous literature, such as a recent study conducted by Chen and Goh (2011), in which one third of interviewees remarked that "the best way to increase teachers' knowledge about oral English and oral English teaching is to give teachers the opportunity to participate in programs in English-speaking countries" (p. 340). The linguistic authority of the English language might also have its historic and political roots associated with

the language. Thus, when asked about domestic PD, the participants (e.g. Tan, Han, & Flora) welcomed native-English-speaking ELT professionals to train Chinese ELT teachers in teaching techniques, teaching practices, and cross-cultural communications virtually, if possible. It seems that the participants equated the “standard” English language with quality ELT.

6.2 Practical, specific, language skills focused and innovative ELT PD as expected

6.2.1 Practical

Four participants articulated that they regarded future domestic and overseas PD as practical and highly valued the best practices of ELT PD, both of which reflect the content focus, as one of Darling-Hammond et al.’s (2017) listed elements. For years, pedagogical knowledge and in-class tasks have consistently been the key words of teachers’ expectations of PD. Over 60 percent of the survey respondents in Chen and Goh’s (2011) study stated their frustrations about their inadequate pedagogical knowledge on how “to motivate students’ participation and to balance diverse development needs” (p. 337), and over 90 percent of the interviewees expressed their “eagerness to receive training in how to design and implement effective tasks to motivate students’ engagement” (p. 333). Such a call is also true of English teaching and English language skills in general, as reflected by the findings of many precedent studies, such as Jansem’s (2020), Noom-ura’s (2013), and Zhan’s (2008) studies. In Jansem’s (2020) study, the common call for ELT PD included curriculum design skills and teaching approaches. Findings from Noom-ura’s (2013) survey included Thai ELT teachers’ PD needs in teaching strategies. In Zhan’s (2008) study, the participating ELT teachers revealed that they needed “improved pedagogical content knowledge, that is, upgraded modern English teaching ideas, enhanced English teaching abilities and improved English teaching methods” (p. 61). The aforementioned five studies emphasizing ELT teachers’ needs embody the first principle of Knowles’ ALT, and all of them provide theoretical and empirical rationale for future PD improvement in practice.

6.2.2 Specific

It is noted that many participants mentioned that their future PD was expected to be specific in the field of English teaching, which indicated that their previous PD might be general to all teachers teaching various subjects and in different fields. Such indications were found in previous studies, with references to “poor training management and the ambiguous selection of training participants” (Zein, 2016, p. 423) and the one-size-fits-all principle (Lee, 2011). The participants’ expectations of PD to be specific also refers to their students’ grade levels and types of school, that is, junior/middle schools, high schools, or vocational institutes. As stated above, future PD is expected to be conducted on a smaller scale and be more relevant, tailored, and specific to better meet ELT teachers’ needs, the same as the call for “sustained, ongoing and relevant” PD in Baker’s (2016) study.

6.2.3 Language skills focused

Four participants asserted that they would improve their listening, speaking, reading skills, as well as oral communications and language use, through various PD. Such skills are themes of ELT reform in China, as the traditional teaching methods focus on drilling, grammar, and translation (Hu, 2002). Noticeably, ELT changes in China occurred from teacher-centred to student-centred pedagogy, with more chances of communicative interactions (MOE, 2003). It might also be implied that teachers’ expectations reflected their shortcomings in teaching practice, which in turn would impair their self-efficacy to deliver lessons in a communicative way and would impact students’ learning outcomes. Such needs and expectations restated the participating ELT teachers’ second most needed one, as described in Zhan’s (2008) study, --

“richer subject matter knowledge, that is, current English language competency, improved proficiencies in listening, speaking, reading and writing and better understanding of the culture of English-speaking countries” (p. 61). Several published studies shared the common expectations: Janssem’s (2020) study -- English language skills (with speaking skills particularly emphasized), and Noom-ura’s (2013) study -- “English proficiency development” with emphasis in language output—speaking and writing (p.144). Again, to develop students’ versatile language skills, teachers need to be empowered with the language proficiency and competency as the prerequisite.

6.2.4 Innovative

It might be the case that these participating teachers were not satisfied with some of the PD content and the delivery form, both of which were outdated. They hoped that PD would serve as a venue for introducing updated and cutting-edge teaching skills, pedagogical strategies, and methods. The future format of PD was expected to comprise seminars, demonstrations, and overseas online delivery. Two participants expressed their expectations of virtual instruction “taught by overseas educators” (an example from the excerpt from Tan, an ELT teacher in a high school). Their expectations of future PD to be innovative aligned with the existing literature (Lee, 2011; Timperley et al., 2007).

7 Conclusions

The traditional one-way one-size-fits-all model of PD does not work effectively and is not welcomed, which is evident from the findings of this study. The participating ELT teachers in China were aware of their challenges, needs, and areas to strengthen. They believed that PD has a substantial effect on their English language skills and ELT practice. They, however, were not satisfied with the existing PD, regarding its content, process, format, and duration. These Chinese ELT teachers expected more practical, specific, skill-focused, pedagogy-related, and cutting-edge ELT PD sessions in China and abroad. Their expectations closely resemble Knowles’ ALT and Bruner’s tenets of learning. It should be noted that their expectations on future PD to be specific and openness to virtual delivery are new to the existing literature and deserve further investigation. In addition to the two specific expectations as the food for thought about future research aforementioned, participants’ perceptions of domestic and overseas PD would be examined and cross-examined further, with possibly combinations of options in virtual and physical delivery.

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