

# A Case Study of EFL Teachers' Collaborative Professional Inquiry Group

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Chen Xiaorui



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# Foreword

Despite the increasing attention to EFL teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) in China, few studies have examined the inquiry processes and outcomes of these EFL teachers as they conduct group discussions to meet individual needs for their professional development. The purpose of such discussions is to develop a model for advocating learner-centeredness, autonomy, agency, reflection, collaboration, and networking with others, all of which constitute a still uncommon practice in Chinese universities.

Grounded in activity theory (AT), in addition to published literature on the Collaborative Professional Inquiry (CPI) model, the present research explored an intra-department CPI model by pursuing a close examination of an EFL teacher participants' group activity for professional development at one Chinese university over the course of a semester.

I present a case study of a group of Chinese EFL teachers who taught a College English course (4 focal participants and 12 non-focal participants). Sources of data included questionnaires, interviews, group discussions, reflection papers, QQ exchanges, and documents (reading materials, school documents, department files, my field notes, research journals, and students' assignments). My analyses demonstrate the processes of interaction and negotiation in the course of group discussions, influential factors that facilitate or constrain the model of this group activity, and strengths and weaknesses of this model for EFL teachers' professional development.

The development of this CPI group emerged in four phases (the Exploration Phase, the Regression Phase, the Transitional Phase, and the Recovery Phase), proceeding in a circuitous manner. Participants' co-construction of this group was primarily mediated through peer-peer dialogue (group discussions and QQ exchanges), assigned materials, and interaction with me. Certain participants (such as Sara and Shirley) emerged as leaders or coordinators within the group. EFL teachers' autonomy, agency, attitudes, personalities, capacities, degree of collaboration and reflection, combined with discussion topics, mediational tools, rules,

division of labor, contexts and culture, are all influential factors that facilitate or constrain group activity. The main perceived strengths of this CPI model include discussion and interaction, professional learning, motivation and teaching. That is, participants believed that this group activity motivates and promotes professional learning and teaching through discussion and interaction. However, weaknesses in this model also exist, including the limited devotion to group discussions and intermittent attendance due to the lack of a mechanism for supervision, and a low theoretical level due to the lack of support from experts or adequate preparation before group discussions begin.

# Contents

<b>Chapter 1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 EFL Teachers' Continuing Professional Development in the Research Context.....	1
1.2 Research Questions .....	4
1.3 Overview of the Book.....	4
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review .....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1 Sociocultural Perspective.....	6
2.2 EFL Teachers' Continuing Professional Development .....	14
2.3 The Collaborative Professional Inquiry Model.....	19
<b>Chapter 3 Methods of Inquiry .....</b>	<b>27</b>
3.1 Sites and Participants .....	27
3.2 Context.....	33
3.3 My Role as a Researcher .....	46
3.4 Data Collection Procedures .....	47
3.5 Data Analysis .....	55
3.6 Establishing Trustworthiness .....	55
<b>Chapter 4 Findings .....</b>	<b>58</b>
4.1 Collaborative Processes of the CPI Group .....	58
4.2 Strengths and Weaknesses of the CPI Activity .....	115

<b>Chapter 5 Discussion and Conclusion</b> .....	<b>122</b>
5.1 Summary of the Major Findings and Discussion.....	122
5.2 Implications .....	140
5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research .....	145
<b>List of Terms</b> .....	<b>146</b>
<b>Appendix A</b> .....	<b>147</b>
<b>Appendix B</b> .....	<b>152</b>
<b>Appendix C</b> .....	<b>155</b>
<b>Appendix D</b> .....	<b>156</b>
<b>Appendix E</b> .....	<b>157</b>
<b>Appendix F</b> .....	<b>158</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>159</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>168</b>

# Contents of Figures and Tables

Figure 2.1	Diagram of mediation .....	7
Figure 2.2	The schemata of activity system .....	12
Figure 2.3	Spectrum of CPD phases, approaches, dominant power, and models .....	15
Figure 2.4	Relationship of single-/double-loop learning with andragogy and heutagogy .....	18
Figure 3.1	The procedure of the CPI model at ECMU .....	44
Figure 4.1	Four phases of the CPI group development .....	58
Figure 4.2	Contextual diagram of the Exploration Phase of the CPI group .....	60
Figure 4.3	Contextual diagram of the Regression Phase of the CPI group .....	71
Figure 4.4	Contextual diagram of the Transitional Phase of the CPI group .....	90
Figure 4.5	Contextual diagram of the Recovery Phase of the CPI group .....	97
Figure 4.6	Attendance of CPI group meetings .....	110
Figure 4.7	The foci of EFL teachers at ECMU with an illustration of three layers of codes .....	112
Figure 4.8	The number of contradictions occurring in each group meeting .....	114
Figure 4.9	Strengths of the CPI model at ECMU: three layers of codes and frequency of responses ( <i>N</i> ) .....	116
Figure 4.10	Weaknesses of the CPI model at ECMU: three layers of codes and frequency of responses ( <i>N</i> ) .....	118
Figure 5.1	A specified developmental process of a CPI group .....	124

Table 3.1	Participants and attendance of the CPI group meetings	28
Table 3.2	The detailed profiles of focal participants	30
Table 3.3	Course coefficients at ECMU	36
Table 3.4	The calculation method of teaching research articles	37
Table 3.5	The calculation method of academic research articles	38
Table 3.6	The schedule of CPI group meetings	44
Table 3.7	The rules of the CPI model at ECMU	44
Table 3.8	The time, forms, structures and themes of the two questionnaires	48
Table 3.9	The time schedules, main foci, participants, dates and durations of the three in-depth individual interviews	51
Table 3.10	The dates, meeting places, durations of sessions, and number of participants in CPI group discussions	52
Table 3.11	Multiple relevant written documents collected and the corresponding copy collected during the course of this study	53
Table 3.12	The data collected for the research (July 2017–February 2018)	54
Table 4.1	Strengths of the CPI model at ECMU: codes, examples and frequency of responses ( <i>N</i> )	116
Table 4.2	Weaknesses of the CPI model at ECMU: codes, examples and frequency of responses ( <i>N</i> )	119
Table 5.1	Influential factors from the perspective of AT	142
Table 5.2	Guidelines for starting and operating a CPI activity	143

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 EFL Teachers' Continuing Professional Development in the Research Context

In recent years, much attention has been drawn to EFL teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) in China. All levels, from the central government to local governments and from individual schools to intra-departments, regard EFL teachers' CPD programs or activities as obligatory items in corresponding documents, work plans or reports. EFL publishing houses also contribute to EFL teachers' CPD through hosting a variety of related programs or activities.

In regard to the government, the 2017 *Guidelines on College English Teaching* (GCET) added a "Faculty Development" section among others to highlight the importance of EFL teachers' CPD (Wang, 2016). This section emphasizes that EFL faculty development needs support and a policy guarantee from institutions and departments. In addition, GCET explicitly recommends the coaching/mentoring model for young EFL teacher development and "team development" for all faculty. Additionally, GCET suggests that EFL teachers increase their autonomy to renew their professional knowledge, change their teaching beliefs, improve their skills and efficacy, and become teachers of lifelong learning (ibid). It is clear that the government views school contexts and the teacher autonomy as two important premises for EFL teachers' CPD. In March 2018, the *Action Plan for the Revitalization of Teacher Education (2018–2022)*<sup>①</sup> was released, advocating increasing support for teachers to serve as visiting scholars at home and abroad, and establishing communities of teacher education and

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① The notice of the *Action Plan for the Revitalization of Teacher Education (2018–2022)* was co-released by the Minister of Education, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, and State Commission Office of Public Sectors Reform. The notice functions as a guideline for the corresponding work of local governments ([http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-03/28/content\\_5278034.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-03/28/content_5278034.htm)).

development, which is more evidence of the government's increased attention to teachers' CPD. The provincial government has for many years been providing funds for teachers to become visiting scholars abroad. Normally, only one EFL teacher in the case university can be supported each year, far from enough to satisfy EFL teachers' needs.

At the local level, the case university, for example, has designated the Center for Teacher Development to make plans for teacher cultivation and development to establish long-term training programs (more than three months), degree study (one to three years), visiting scholar programs (six months or one year), and postdoctoral program (two years)<sup>①</sup>. However, because the resources for the long-term programs are limited, most of the EFL teachers cannot count on local funding for their CPD. Besides, the Two-child Policy causes a shortage of human resources. Therefore, the opportunity to obtain long-term funding is much more difficult than it was before. That is to say, long-term programs may only affect a very small percentage of EFL teachers. Under the circumstances, regular CPD activities seem to be an indispensable supplement to long-term programs. The case university tends to hold interdisciplinary activities regularly targeting for all faculty. Therefore, in most cases, the content is mostly about general teaching methods and skills or experience sharing of certain teachers' overseas study, not strictly related to EFL education. The mismatch between the CPD support and EFL teachers' actual needs makes it impossible for these programs and activities to be the primary means for realizing EFL teachers' CPD.

In terms of the case department, EFL teachers' CPD plans seem to be more targeted. Inviting related-field scholars to provide lectures or workshops is the most popular form of assistance. This traditional one-shot pattern of CPD may be relevant for transmitting a new trend in a related field or knowledge that is easy to impart, or at least inspire EFL teachers for a short time. However, the question of how to apply what they learn to practice is another matter. In addition, assigning teachers to EFL national conferences or short-term training programs is welcomed because this form is more eye-opening compared to an intra-department form, owing to the opportunity to interact with peers from other institutions. After that, seminars presented in a cascade method among colleagues are common. However, all of these forms are not teacher-centered, but lecturer-centered. In such cases, teachers are simply passive listeners. Finally, collective lesson preparation activities held by teaching groups are the most common form. These groups tend to hold weekly meetings to solve problems about

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① It is from an internal document of the case university: *Methods of Supporting Project of Youth Backbone Teachers' Development*, released in January, 2017.

knowledge and explicate teaching methods. Because such activity is routine, it is most likely to lead to formalism.

As regards EFL teaching and research publishing press, short-term training programs, seminars, and workshops are the primary forms of CPD<sup>①</sup>. In particular, with the rapid development of technology, online seminars and short-term courses have become increasingly popular as an effective supplement to off-line learning (Ma et al., 2011). Online free activities such as literature co-reading and course display and direction are even held through WeChat (Messenger, an online concurrent chat program) via cell phones<sup>②</sup>. The advantages of the online form are obvious. First, it is convenient and available as long as there is Internet access (Yang, 2018). Second, EFL teachers can participate in the online form voluntarily according to their needs (ibid). Third, online lectures by domestic and even world famous scholars (such as Wen Qiufang, Rod Ellis, Alister Cumming, etc.) are within reach and questions could be raised to them, with the expectation of receiving answers. However, downsides also exist. For one, some experts only answer part of the questions raised by participant teachers, citing the excuse of time limit. For another, face-to-face communication is not available. Hence, there always seems to be an affective barrier between experts and teacher participants, as well as among other participants. Finally, the online form is still expert-centered. Hence, it is difficult for EFL teachers to exert their agency.

Although EFL teachers' CPD programs and activities mentioned above all have disadvantages, their prevalence indicates their values of existence. What is needed is to compensate the deficits found in these programs and activities. It is evident that apart from these led, top-down patterns of CPD, autonomous and bottom-up programs or activities of collaborative professional learning launched by individual teachers are rare. In America, Edcamp sets a good example of a teacher-centered professional learning model, which is known as collaborative professional inquiry (CPI). However, some believe that CPI among colleagues might encounter barriers, especially in China. Tao and Gao (2016) argued that EFL teachers in China were busy with finishing their required workloads and had no time to participate collaborative activities. In addition, a "competitive relationship", known as

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① The notices of these EFL teachers' CPD programs are accessible on presses' related websites, such as <http://teacher.unipus.cn/>.

② The notices of literature co-reading and course display and direction are accessible on WeChat subscription account (the basic type of account, which regularly pushes new content for subscribed followers to read and updates notification in the subscription area), named Unipus Teacher Development.

“two of a trade can never agree”, has long existed among Chinese teachers’ (Tao et al., 2016). Therefore, it seemed difficult to have an actual collaborative relationship among colleagues (ibid). Though at times tensions may occur, it is these contradictions that can drive development (Lantolf et al., 2013). Besides, Wang and Gu (2007) assumed that professional learning groups among colleagues have obvious drawbacks. Confined to their similar experiences, participants tend to cycle at the same level and cannot reach a theoretical height. Indeed, colleagues are most likely to be at a similar professional level, but what they learn from other forms of CPD might compensate for this gap. In turn, CPIs provide room for EFL teachers to transform content they learned outside the CPI and give them opportunities to internalize their gains. The advocacy of the CPI model is not to deny other CPD forms but rather to admit that a combination of them would be an appropriate way to realize EFL teachers’ CPD. Therefore, CPI is supposed to be an effective model for EFL teachers’ CPD. In addition, it is worthwhile to find out how participants collaborate in the process of a CPI activity.

## 1.2 Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to understand the CPI experience and the perceptions of EFL teachers in the same department, which includes participants’ collaborative process, and their evaluations of the CPI group. Specifically, two research questions were formulated to guide the analysis.

- (1) What were the participants’ collaborative processes in the CPI group?
- (2) What were the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the CPI activity?

## 1.3 Overview of the Book

Chapter 1 provides an overview of EFL teachers’ continuing professional development in the research contexts from the central government to local governments and from individual schools to intra-departments, as well as the support from EFL publishing houses. In addition, it advocates the CPI model to compensate for the drawbacks of other CPD programs. Finally, two research questions are proposed for this inquiry.

Chapter 2 reviews relevant published literature and presents the conceptual framework for this research. First, the sociocultural perspective is introduced as a macro-theoretical framework, followed by its main concepts regarding EFL teacher development. Within these

concepts, activity theory (AT) serves as an analytical framework for determining the processes of collaboration. Next, EFL teachers' CPD is reviewed with respect to its diachronic directing approaches and corresponding models. Finally, essential factors of CPI are outlined as recipes of CPI design. This previous research reveals a lack of knowledge about EFL teachers' CPI experiences among colleagues. This lack of knowledge provides the orientation for the present research.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the method employed in this research. First, research sites and participants are described, followed by a description of the local professional contexts, including College English teaching at the case university, College English Test Band Four (CET-4), documents and regulations regarding EFL teachers, and EFL teachers' opportunities for professional learning at the case university. Then, my role as a researcher is explicated. In addition, the instruments and procedures of data collection and analyses employed in this research are outlined. Finally, the trustworthiness of this research is discussed.

Chapter 4 presents the findings for the two research questions, describing the process of group discussion with the guidance of activity theory and presenting participants' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the CPI model.

Chapter 5 summarizes the main research findings and discusses the influencing factors of the CPI model. In addition, it analyzes contributions and limitations of the study, and concludes with the researcher's suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

This chapter introduces the sociocultural perspective for this research and its main concepts related to EFL teacher professional development. Within these concepts, activity theory is the theoretical framework of analyzing the processes of each CPI group discussion. Next, EFL teachers' CPD is reviewed with regard to its diachronic directing approaches and corresponding models. Finally, essential factors of CPI are outlined.

### **2.1 Sociocultural Perspective**

Recently, the sociocultural theory (SCT) has had an extensive influence on western psychology, educational theory and applied linguistics (Zhang et al., 2016). Broadly speaking, this perspective may include Vygotsky's SCT, language socialization theory, situated learning, Bakhtin's dialogism, conversation analysis, and poststructuralism (Swain et al., 2007; Zuengler et al., 2006). However, narrowly speaking, this perspective only concerns Vygotsky's SCT. The academic community in linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA) tends to agree on this narrow concept (Wen, 2008; Zhang et al., 2016). With the increasingly influential power of SCT, some scholars (such as Arshavskaya, 2014; Freeman et al., 1998; Johnson, 2006; Johnson et al., 2011; Lee, 2013; Tasker et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2014; etc.) applied it to the field of second/foreign language teacher research.

SCT concerns the development of higher mental functions, and it offers a systematic framework of investigating cognition within a social context (Lantolf et al., 2013). The basic assumption is that a highly consequential relationship exists between human mental functioning and the activities of everyday life, so that cognitive development and functioning are strongly and qualitatively impacted by participating in culturally organized activities, life-long involvement in various communities, and humans' use of tools and artifacts (Lantolf et al., 2013). Within the Vygotskian tradition, culture in SCT is viewed as "an objective force that infuses social relationships and the historically developed uses of artifacts in concrete activity". It also demonstrates itself at the level of local interaction in the form of actual

communicative activity, and at the social and national level, “such as language policy and ideology, and public education as mass social intervention” (Lantolf et al., 2013). Therefore, behavioral processes and environments would create optimal conditions for cognitive development.

To summarize, the SCT perspective “heavily focused on the impact of culturally organized and socially enacted meanings on the formation and functioning of mental activity” (Lantolf et al., 2013). Therefore, the goal of research from this perspective is to understand the relationship between human mental functioning and historical, cultural, and institutional settings (Wertsch, 1995). Teacher learning is a higher human mental functioning activity, so EFL teacher research from this perspective may uncover the relationship between teacher learning and EFL teachers’ past experiences, living environments and professional contexts.

The major concepts of SCT include mediation, internalization, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), scaffolding, and AT. The following discussion gives an introduction of the major concepts, and attempts to find a way for their application in EFL teacher research.

### 2.1.1 Mediation

Mediation is the central concept in SCT (Zhang et al., 2016). It refers to “the process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artifacts, concepts, and activities to regulate the material world or their own and each other’s social and mental activity” (Lantolf et al., 2013). Figure 2.1 represents the process of mediation.

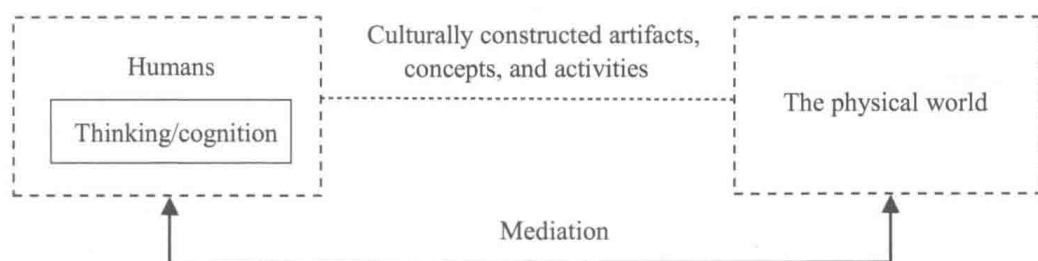


Figure 2.1 Diagram of mediation<sup>①</sup>

Culturally constructed artifacts, concepts, and activities are mediational means. In addition, culturally constructed artifacts can be further divided into two categories: physical tools and symbolic artifacts. The former (such as hammers, pencils, paper, laptops, etc.)

<sup>①</sup> A modified form of Wang et al., 2014.

enhances humans' biological ability to act upon the physical world, while the latter (such as language, music, mathematics, artistic works, literary works, etc.) "amplifies memory and increases the capability to organize and communicate information and knowledge" (Scollon, 2001). Within symbolic artifacts, language is the most important mediational means for human thinking (Lantolf et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2016). In conclusion, humans do not directly act on the physical world, but indirectly interact with it through various mediational means. Cognition develops in this process (Zhang et al., 2016).

Mediation has significant implications for teacher development. Vygotsky (1987) defined two concepts when elaborating on a learning mechanism: everyday concepts and scientific concepts. For teachers, everyday concepts may refer to teachers' understanding of their daily teaching experiences, while scientific concepts may refer to teachers' systematic generalization of their disciplinary-related theories and research achievements. Thus, in a sense, teacher learning is a process of understanding scientific concepts based on everyday concepts. In this process, mediational means (such as courses and activities of teacher professional development, teaching resources, tutorial teachers, etc.) inevitably play a regulating role (Zhang et al., 2016). When elaborating on the implication of mediation for EFL teachers, Johnson (2009) divided mediational means into three categories: culturally constructed artifacts and activities (such as syllabi, textbooks, teaching practices, professional training, etc.), scientific concepts (such as psychology, SLA theories, pedagogy, etc.) and social relationships (such as the teacher-student relationship, the teacher-parent relationship, the teacher-colleague relationship, etc.). Although she adopted a different categorization, Johnson noted that mediational means promoted EFL teachers professional growth.

### 2.1.2 Internalization

Vygotsky (1987) proposed internalization as the mechanism through which humans establish their control of natural mental endowments. To put it explicitly, internalization refers to a process in which individuals change from accomplishing an activity with the help of others or culturally constructed artifacts to finishing a task independently using their own mental capabilities. Internalization is the essential element in the formation of higher mental functions (Kozulin, 1990). Imitation is the mechanism for the occurrence of internalization (Lantolf et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1987). However, the imitation viewed here is different from that of behavioral psychology (Wen et al., 2010), not "a mindless copying activity", but rather "an intentional, complex and potentially transformative process" (Lantolf et al., 2013).

According to the concept of internalization, learning is a process of internalization, and so