

Digital learning and professional development: Exploring the nexus between digital teacher education, classroom practices and teacher development in China

Written on behalf of ELT-Consultants for the British Council as part of the National Online Digital Development of English Teachers (NODE) China Project (2022–2023)

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Abbreviations

CEAIE	China Education Association for International Exchange
CoP	communities of practice
CPD	continuing professional development
EAR	exploratory action research
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELT	English language teaching
IT	information technology
MOE	Ministry of Education
NODE	National Online Digital Development of English Teachers
OCPD	online continuing professional development
PD	professional development
RQ	research questions
S-Star	Survey Star
TPD	teacher professional development
TPR	total physical response

Executive summary

Introduction

In August 2022, British Council China published a call for proposals for a pilot year of a National Online Digital Development of English Teachers (NODE) project in China. The project consisted of two components – a continuing professional development (CPD) training and a supplementary research component. ELT-Consultants, a UK-based international consultancy organisation, submitted the successful bid to conduct the key components of the planned project.

The aim of the CPD component was, among other things, to deliver online training and development for English language teachers in basic education contexts in China through a range of digital delivery methods. It was designed to offer a blend of global and localised digital content that would help Chinese English teachers develop different aspects of professional knowledge and skills, while also providing a platform for honing and improving materials and pedagogic practices. Based on prior research (Borg et al., 2022), the British Council call identified four key thematic areas to be addressed in the training. These included teaching speaking, motivating students, teaching reading and 21st-century skills. The research component – agreed between British Council China and the team of researchers from ELT – Consultants – was framed around the topic ‘Exploring the nexus between digital training, classroom practices and teacher development in China’ and guided by the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1** What is the nature of teachers’ current engagement with digital opportunities for teacher training and professional development?
- RQ2** What are teachers’ perspectives on the accessibility and usability of the different digital CPD* opportunities in their context?
- RQ3** How does access to digital professional development impact teachers’ classroom practices and professional growth?

*Digital CPD is also referred to as online CPD (OCPD). These terms are often interchangeable.





Methodology

Data for this study was collected between November 2022 and June 2023 through a sequential mixed - methods approach framed around two main phases. Phase One data was collected in December 2022, through an online open-ended baseline questionnaire distributed to NODE participants and a wider pool of teachers within the networks of British Council China and the local research team members. The questionnaire consisted of five questions that sought to identify online CPD platforms used by teachers, understand the nature and extent of their involvement in online CPD, and gain insights into the perceived benefits and challenges of their professional learning. A total of 2, 836 teacher responses were obtained from primary, junior high and senior high schools from both urban and rural parts of China. Phase One survey data was analysed both quantitatively, through descriptive statistics, and qualitatively, through thematic analysis.

Phase Two of the research component consisted of an exploratory action research training and mentoring intervention with a smaller group of six teachers. Participants in the intervention were trained on different components and stages of exploratory action research and were mentored through a process of identifying classroom puzzles, developing exploratory research questions to understand the puzzles in their classrooms as well as collecting, analysing and interpreting classroom data in order to make informed changes to their practice. The intervention ran for 14 weeks, from 27 March to 30 June 2023, and the five teachers who successfully completed the programme presented their research at a webinar organised by British Council China in July 2023. Data for this phase of the study was collected through a focus group discussion with all six participating teachers at the end of the mentoring programme, with the aim of obtaining participants' experiences of the programme as well as any changes to their practices and sense of agency as a result of their participation. Data from Phase Two of the study underwent thematic coding and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Key findings

In relation to the nature of teachers' current engagement with digital opportunities for training and professional development (RQ1), findings from the survey revealed that a vast majority of teachers surveyed (76.5 per cent) were currently engaged in digital CPD. The findings also suggested that the most important factors that motivated teachers' participation in online CPD were intrinsic, including their needs for professional excellence (improvement of professional knowledge, skills and expertise – 51.5 per cent of China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE) respondents and 44 per cent of S-Star respondents^①) and personal growth (self-improvement – 29.3 per cent of CEAIE respondents and 31.9 per cent of S-Star respondents), both of which represent their own personal interest and enthusiasm. A smaller proportion of the teachers (16.2 per cent for CEAIE teachers and 18.7 per cent of S-Star teachers) expressed extrinsic factors (administrative requirements) as their motivation for attending online CPD. It was also found that these intrinsic and extrinsic factors were more important for teachers when considering CPD activities than the medium (online or face-to-face) of their CPD experience.

Regarding teachers' perspectives on the accessibility and usability of different digital CPD opportunities in their context (RQ2), teachers identified a large number of digital platforms through which they engaged in OCPD, with Tencent Meeting (75 per cent), Ding Talk (70.6 per cent) and WeChat (9.8 per cent) emerging as the top three most familiar platforms. Despite the many existing platforms with which teachers are familiar, and through which they access OCPD, respondents highlighted a number of challenges encountered during their engagement with digital CPD. These included challenges such as time constraints, heavy workloads, low language proficiency exacerbated by the digital space, lack of relevance and interaction in many OCPD events, as well as difficulties in translating the theoretical knowledge from such trainings into their classroom practices (see sections 4.3 and 5.6). These challenges show that teachers' engagement in OCPD is influenced by factors other than simply the accessibility and usability of digital platforms. The findings from both Phase One and Phase Two of this study provide evidence that beyond the platform used for CPD, teachers engage better with training and CPD opportunities that help them directly address their classroom concerns. Teachers' perspectives on their experiences in the classroom research training and mentoring programme in Phase Two highlighted practicality and relevance to the teachers' immediate classroom needs as key strengths of the mentoring programme.

A third key finding of this study was in relation to how access to digital professional development impacts on teachers' classroom practices (RQ3). Data from 1,582 (56 per cent) survey respondents revealed that online CPD offered teachers opportunities and rich resources for professional learning and space to interact with like-minded colleagues or engage with people outside their schools (see section 4.5). Such opportunities can potentially help teachers improve their own classroom practices and enhance their sense of agency. Findings from Phase Two of this project showed that through engagement in a structured online exploratory action research training and mentoring programme, teachers not only gained research skills but they were also able to develop a better rapport with, and understanding of learning processes from, their students, improve their classroom practice, and develop a sense of agency. Phase Two participants' reflections on these changes showed how the evidence-base for their practices had been developed, positioning themselves not only as reflective practitioners but also as generators of pedagogical knowledge in context.

^① In this report we distinguish between two groups of teachers – the CEAIE teachers and the other teachers, whom we refer to as S-Star teachers as their data was collected via Wenjuanxing (translation: Survey Star, henceforth S-Star), a popular survey platform accessible to all teachers in China.



Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered as a way forward for sustainable digital teacher professional development in China.

1. Digital or online CPD (OCPD) providers should be aware of the platforms that teachers are currently familiar with so that they can use these rather than introducing new platforms that might add to the cognitive burden of teachers and impede their subject content and pedagogic knowledge development. It is particularly important that foreign providers of OCPD are aware of local platforms, as what is often construed as a 'global platform' and the generic norms of OCPD prevalent in the West are often not applicable in China. Therefore, it is, for example, worth looking at the platforms that schools currently use for teaching and learning and exploring these options for digital CPD offers and delivery so that teachers' digital learning spaces are consistent with their day-to-day digital teaching spaces.
2. OCPD providers need to consider teachers' real and emerging needs and involve them in decisions about the content and delivery of CPD. Chinese teachers are less concerned about the medium of their CPD (digital or face-to-face) than they are about the method and materials used. As shown in this study, teachers need hands-on practical resources and activities that can directly inform their classroom practices rather than theoretical discussions that might not be immediately relevant for their daily work. Consideration needs to be given to existing differences in teachers' language proficiency levels, their pedagogic knowledge and the levels (e.g. primary, junior high school, etc.) in which they teach in order to design more focused and relevant CPD packages for more teachers.
3. Consideration should be given to diversifying digital CPD provision with the view of supporting teachers to develop knowledge and skills for the classroom, while at the same time harnessing their ability to generate their own knowledge and critical understanding of language education in their context. In this study, the research team proposed a form of classroom research mentoring – exploratory action research – as a possible alternative to top-down theory-led training and the evidence presented in section 5 of this report highlights that this can be a powerful way of developing student – teacher collaboration, leading to improved classroom interaction, shared ownership of learning and enhanced teacher agency. In consideration of supporting teachers at scale, the research team recommend a cascading model of development, which initially supports a pool of local mentors through experiential online training and expert mentoring via a combination of synchronous and asynchronous modes. The sustainability, impact and eventual upscaling of classroom research mentoring can be enhanced by collecting teachers' research presentations and reports (such as those from the programme trialled in this study) into an open access digital repository that other teachers are encouraged to explore.



4. A combination of group and one-to-one school - or community of practice (CoP) - based mentoring that provides teachers with step-by-step support while respecting their agency should be explored. This could be through self-paced or self-directed online programmes, such as upscaling an improved version of the content processes of the programme trialled in this study. Such a programme would include pre-prepared recordings of key presentations with accompanying resources and embedded tasks for teachers to complete. Establishing a community of practitioner-researchers working together on exploring aspects of their practice could help them support, motivate and inspire each other (as shown in section 5.6) and create long - term bonds to sustain their professional learning.

5. Education authorities and employers should consider making OCPD part of a comprehensive formal offer of time and resource allocation for teachers to specifically engage in digital CPD. Particular attention needs to be paid to the CPD of primary - level teachers in rural communities, given that a high proportion of respondents who had not participated in OCPD in the previous two years were primary school teachers (405 out of 590), and 63.5 per cent of these teachers were from rural areas. It is also important to bear in mind that while classroom research processes, such as exploratory action research, can be embedded into teachers' daily classroom practices, training to become a classroom researcher requires time commitments that may be impractical for busy teachers struggling to complete a syllabus and prepare students for high - stakes exams.

6. The research team recommend that classroom research should be treated in a similar way to existing classroom-based teaching competitions that support a competitive comparison across regions. This could include a collaborative dimension, with teachers encouraged to work together on a joint classroom research project as part of a community of practice, either in their own district or across multiple districts.



1. Introduction

This report presents the processes and outcomes of the research component of the British Council China NODE (National Online Digital Development of English Teachers) project conducted between November 2022 and June 2023. The call for proposals for a pilot year of this project was issued in August 2022, and ELT-Consultants (UK) submitted the successful bid to conduct both the large-scale CPD and the research components of the project.

The aim of the CPD component was, among other things, to deliver online training and development for English language teachers in basic education contexts in China through a range of digital delivery methods. It was designed to offer a blend of global and localised digital content that would help Chinese English teachers develop different aspects of professional knowledge and skills, while also providing a platform for honing and improving materials and pedagogic practices. Based on prior research (Borg et al., 2022), the British Council call identified four key thematic areas to be addressed in the training. These included: teaching speaking, motivating students, teaching reading and 21st-century skills. The project processes, outcomes and recommendations of this component of the project have been recorded in a separate report.

The (supplementary) research component of the British Council China NODE project was to be based on a topic agreed between British Council China and the preferred delivery partner – ELT-Consultants – and to be independent of the ongoing monitoring, evaluation and learning of the training and development component while, at the same time, offering real insight into pertinent areas of digital learning and training delivery in China, based on the NODE project scope.

The proposed research component was expected to be outward-looking – that is, beyond the NODE project – and to include some technical fieldwork, interviews and experimentation with selected stakeholders. It was also expected to consider previous delivery experiences and other relevant regional and country-level considerations to better understand digital teacher professional development possibilities and challenges in the China context.

In consultation with British Council China, the research component for the pilot year was framed around the topic ‘Exploring the nexus between digital training, classroom practices and teacher development in China’. This report provides insights into the theoretical ideas that informed the research, the methodological procedures undertaken, the findings obtained and some reflections on challenges, opportunities and the way forward for sustainable teacher professional development in China.

2. Review of literature

2.1. The context of teacher professional development in China

China has been ‘going global’ since it adopted the policy of ‘Reform and Opening up’ in 1978 (Wen & Zhang, 2020). In the last four decades, China has experienced a dramatic leap in social development, although this has not been evenly felt across different segments of the country, as acknowledged by government reports (e.g. Xi, 2017) and academic researchers (e.g. Huang, Ning & Tian, 2018; Zhou, Guo & Liu, 2018). Regional and urban – rural disparities persist across this geographically large country, with a population of 1.4 billion. According to local reports, the country’s poorer rural population was only lifted out of ‘absolute poverty’, defined by living on an annual income below CNY4,000, or roughly US\$611.40, at the end of 2020 (Xinhua, 2021).

With great importance attached to education, China has invested great effort in teacher education over the last four decades, despite various challenges (see e.g. Wen & Zhang, 2020). The government has developed interconnected systems of professional promotion and continuing education to support its teachers, with the former setting out the route for teachers to obtain higher professional qualifications and titles throughout their careers, and the latter providing professional development opportunities to help teachers meet their promotion conditions (e.g. earning mandatory credits of continuing education) and to realise lifelong learning (Zhang, 2021). The continuing education system involves two key departments within educational authorities of different levels: the continuing education centre (in Chinese, *jixv jiaoyu zhongxin*), which manages training programmes and the records of teachers’ continuing education credits, and the teaching and research office (*jiaoyan shi*), with experienced teachers serving as researchers (called *jiaoyan yuan*). These researchers regularly organise CPD activities and visit schools to support local teachers; hence, teacher professional development is generally top-down and mandatory in China (Zhang, 2021; Zhou, 2014).

As Villegas-Reimers (2003) notes, teacher professional development is seen as one of the key elements of educational reform in many societies. Similarly, in China, the importance of enabling CPD among teachers is often acknowledged by the authorities alongside the country’s continuous curriculum reform, which has been part of its opening-up to the outside world agenda since 1978 (Zhang, 2021). In their latest curriculum reforms, the relevant authorities underlined fostering integrity and promoting the rounded development of people (in Chinese, *lide-shuren*) as a fundamental task of education (Hu, 2012), and they have also underscored the importance of promoting the development of students’ key competencies and core values (Lin, 2017) through their learning of school subjects. The English language curriculum (MOE, 2017, 2020, 2022a), for example, specifies the primary goal of learning English as gaining language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capacity and learning ability. Many CPD programmes and activities are therefore organised to help teachers better understand, and put into practice, new curriculum ideas.



Despite significant differences in digital resources among teachers in rural and urban parts of China, the 21st century remains arguably a digital era for China, as it is for many societies. In the field of teacher professional development, digital training – which incorporates digital methods of using technological hardware and the internet in in-service training activities or programmes – has become increasingly common around the world. The advantages of digital training have been acknowledged by education authorities and numerous providers of CPD opportunities in China, including the British Council. With the increasing feasibility and reach of digital training brought on by rapid, continuous economic growth, and being normalised by the Covid-19 pandemic, education authorities appear keen on adopting digital training mediums to help teachers, especially those in lower-resourced schools and districts. For example, Guangdong province includes in its 2021 Action Plan for High Quality Development of Basic Education a section on education aid for lower-resourced areas in the province, and it notes that ‘support should be provided to help teachers in lower-resourced areas to effectively use online learning spaces and CPD communities, and to carry out online teaching research, school-based CPD and so on’ (People’s Government of Guangdong Province, 2021).

Currently, there are various locally developed digital training platforms available making CPD opportunities and resources more accessible to teachers, regardless of where they are in China. For example, in 2021, five ministerial departments issued a joint document asking local governments, based on the efforts made during the Covid-19 pandemic, to further strengthen the construction and application of online resources and platforms for school education so that ‘ICT can be best exploited to help facilitate educational modernisation’ (MOE et al., 2021). The Ministry of Education (MOE) has also upgraded the national platform, Smart Education of China, which provides free learning, teaching and CPD resources and links to platforms developed by local governments and approved institutions such as state universities and publishing houses (MOE, 2022b). Besides government or institutional platforms, there are also those constructed by private institutions, such as computer or mobile apps developed by information technology (IT) companies. These platforms and apps showcase China in the digital era and play an important role in teacher professional development within the country.

The research component of the British Council China NODE project, which is reported on here, falls within this policy framework in the sense that it has sought to better understand teachers’ current digital CPD practices and experiences and to offer insight into areas of digital learning and training delivery based on the NODE project scope, as well as more broadly. The main aims were to identify the optimum digital delivery method that supports positive change in teacher practice and professional development in China and use the findings to inform the development of an in-built teacher research mentoring intervention with the view of exploring its potential for enabling sustainable CPD and teacher agency.

2.2. Digital teacher education: Possibilities and issues

Advantages of digital training documented in the literature include bringing relevant content to a wider base of teachers who might not otherwise have access to professional development opportunities (Heranen et al., 2021) and connecting teachers physically far from each other to form an online learning community that can help reduce a sense of teaching isolation and occupation burnout (Li et al., 2021). This is particularly important in the Chinese CPD context where there may be significant differences in access to training opportunities between teachers in urban and rural communities. Despite the increased CPD opportunities for teachers, there are challenges in the implementation of digital CPD and training (e.g. Li, 2011; Zan, 2021). In a recent study by Zan (2021), the results of questionnaires and interviews indicated that schoolteachers had insufficient motivation to engage in specific online training they had received, and they considered that the online training content lacked practicality. These findings are consistent with Borg et al.'s (2022) survey of 6, 469 teachers in China, which investigated factors that influence Chinese teachers' participation in digital professional development and found interest in activities that have direct, practical implications and use in their own classrooms as the most influential factor. The study also reported generally high levels of interest in free online professional development opportunities or resources. Teachers from both urban and rural contexts reported little difficulty in accessing digital teacher professional development (TPD), although they acknowledged limitations caused by high data costs. An important implication of these studies is that online training projects need to consider an inbuilt mechanism for supporting teachers as they transition from virtual training into the real classroom.

Looking beyond China, researchers such as Dede et al. (2009) have argued that until more rigorous online TPD research is conducted, developers will remain hard pressed to know the best design features to include, and educators will remain uninformed on which program can best help support teacher change and student learning. More recently, Nese et al. (2020: 151) also suggested that 'while online learning has shown to be an effective tool for increasing teacher knowledge, questions remain about how to best use the technology in building and supporting effective teaching practices, and the extent to which stakeholders perceive key features of Online Learning Modules as more or less supportive of its efficient and effective use'.

The NODE research project builds on the arguments above and the view that TPD is essentially 'a continuing process of becoming' (Mann, 2005: 105), and a career-long process of an individual teacher's change manifested and influenced by a range of activities (Day & Sachs, 2004; Zhang, 2021; Zhang & Hanks, forthcoming). In this light the research team considered digital training activities or programmes as situated along the process of change, and designed a research procedure that allowed us to investigate this process. Our investigation has also been informed by the British Council's stages of teacher development as captured in the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Framework for Teachers (2019). From this, the study was designed to collect baseline quantitative data with the view of identifying patterns that could help us design, trial and evaluate an alternative teacher research mentoring programme. To achieve our objectives the study was guided by the following three research questions:

- What is the nature of teachers' current engagement with digital opportunities for teacher training and professional development?
- What are teachers' perspectives on the accessibility and usability of the different digital CPD opportunities in their context?
- How does access to digital professional development impact teachers' classroom practices and professional growth?

3. Methodology

To respond to these research questions, this study adopted a sequential mixed - methods approach framed around two main phases. A mixed - methods approach was considered the best way of collecting data that addressed the research questions in both breadth and depth. What is more, the sequential nature of the study allowed the research team to collect baseline data from a large number of participants and to use the findings of this data to inform an intervention around a second qualitative phase including a smaller number of participants. Below, the report describes the participant selection processes and methods of data collection, including the background of research participants and the data analysis procedures for each phase.



3.1. Research participants

Participants for this study were identified and recruited through convenient sampling. Phase One made use of a stratified convenience sampling method to recruit participants from the British Council China NODE teacher training project. The online questionnaire was distributed to NODE project teachers from within the China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE) and teachers from both the research team members' and the broader British Council China networks. Given the restricted nature of access to the CEAIE teachers, the research team was forced to treat their data separately from the other groups¹, as there was no independent control over how data was collected or filtered. For this reason, in this report the research team distinguish between two groups of teachers – the CEAIE teachers and the other teachers, whom the research team refer to as S-Star teachers as their data was collected via Wenjuanxing (translation: Survey Star, henceforth S-Star), a popular survey platform accessible to all teachers in China. In total, there were 2, 836 responses to the survey in Phase One.

Phase Two participants were selected through an open invitation to respondents within the British Council China network to recruit teachers interested in conducting classroom research. The research team designed an invitation outlining the objectives and process of the classroom research mentoring programme and inviting teachers who were both interested and able to participate in the programme to complete an application form (see Appendix 1). In total, the research project received nine applications, which were all accepted, although only six participants – all female – engaged with the programme till the end. This number included five participants who successfully completed the classroom research-mentoring programme and one who participated till the end but was not able to complete all of the required tasks.

3.2. Methods of data collection

3.2.1. Phase One

Data for Phase One of the study was collected in December 2022 through an open-ended baseline questionnaire. The questionnaire mainly consisted of five questions that sought to identify online CPD platforms used by teachers, understand the nature and extent of their involvement in online CPD and gain insights into the perceived benefits and challenges of their professional learning. The questionnaire was first drafted in English (See Appendix 2) and then translated into Chinese. Given that the research team had no prior knowledge of the English proficiency levels of the respondents, and to avoid responses being affected by possible language barriers, the S-Star teachers were administered a Chinese version of the questionnaire distributed through the British Council China and the research team's professional networks. Following guidance from the CEAIE hierarchy, CEAIE respondents were given a bilingual version of the questionnaire (see Appendix 3), which was uploaded on a platform designated by CEAIE. The CEAIE teacher responses were later shared with the research team via an Excel spreadsheet.

A total of 2,836 questionnaires, 128 from CEAIE respondents and 2,708 from S-Star respondents, were returned. As shown in Table 1, 2,594 participants (representing 91.5 per cent) of participants were female and 229 (8 per cent) were male; while 13 teachers did not specify their gender. In terms of institutional representation, 1,645 (58 per cent) respondents were English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers from primary schools, 994 (35 per cent) from junior high schools and 184 (6%) from senior high schools. A further 13 did not specify. Of the total respondents, 1,572 (55 per cent) taught at urban schools and 1,244 (44 per cent) taught at rural schools. A further 20 did not specify. The 128 CEAIE respondents were all junior high school teachers, except for one who did not specify.

Table 1: Gender and school background (CEAIE N=128; S-Star N= 2,708; Total N=2,836)

		CEAIE	S-Star	Total
Gender	Male	8	221	229
	Female	120	2474	2594
	Not specified	0	13	13
School level	Primary school	0	1645	1645
	Junior high school	127	867	994
	Senior high school	0	184	184
	Not specified	1	12	13
School context	Urban	111	1461	1572
	Rural	16	1228	1244
	Not specified	1	19	20

In setting up the questionnaire online, the research team programmed the Survey Star software to allow respondents to skip questions for which they had no answer. This was to avoid teachers feeling pushed to give an answer to every question given the fact that some questions were interconnected. For instance, teachers who had not participated in any online professional development (PD) activities in the last two years (i.e. choosing 'no' for Question 1) might have nothing to say about reasons for participating (Question 2) and challenges they met (Question 3). As expected, therefore, the response frequencies of the survey varied from one question to another (see Table 2).

Table 2: Response frequencies (CEAIE N=128; S-Star N=2,708; Total N=2,836)

	Q1	Q2 Reason 1	Q2 Reason 2	Q3 Challenge 1	Q3 Challenge 2	Q4	Q5
CEAIE	127	70	60	91	75	125	94
S-Star	2685	2088	1679	1885	1364	2574	1488
Total	2812	2158	1739	1976	1439	2699	1582

As the numerical spread of responses in Table 2 indicates, out of a total of 2,836 respondents, 2,812 (99 per cent) responded to Question 1 (Q1), and 2,699 (95 per cent) to Question 4, both of which were closed-ended questions requiring participants to tick a box on a range of suggested responses. The other three items on the survey were open-ended questions and received a significantly lower rate of response, with average response rates of 69 per cent and 61 per cent for Questions 2 and 3 respectively, and 55 per cent for Question 5.

3.2.2. Phase Two

Phase Two of this project was informed by Borg et al.'s (2022: 8) recommendation to diversify professional development activities in order to provide Chinese teachers with 'a wider range of online PD activities to be explored and implemented, particularly those involving teacher-led and collaborative approaches'. Given that the NODE project did not include a teacher research component, and following the benefits of teacher research projects in other parts of the EFL teaching world, particularly in the global South (e.g. Smith, Kuchah & Lamb, 2018; Smith & Rebolledo, 2018; Kuchah, Salama & Salvi, 2022), the research team proposed to explore the potential of digital classroom research training and mentoring in promoting teacher development and agency.

a) The intervention

The programme was originally designed to support teachers on the NODE project in translating the training received from the project into their classroom practices via a classroom research mentoring programme. NODE participants were offered the opportunity to choose between participating in the evaluation and monitoring component of the project or in the research component. Unfortunately, none of the teachers volunteered to be part of the research project. This might be explained by the fact that the NODE training itself was intensive and required a significant time commitment from teachers who were working full-time. As a result, they could not afford additional time to engage in research, which they perceived as additional work. Following discussions with British Council China, the research team was encouraged to recruit participants from beyond the NODE project via British Council China networks (see section 3.1). The teacher research component consisted of an intervention – an exploratory action research training and mentoring programme – which ran for 14 weeks, from 27 March to 30 June 2023. Participants were asked to identify a problem or a puzzle with their own practices as a starting point for the online training. Participants in the research mentoring programme were then required to complete five core activities in the course of the research training and mentoring as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Classroom research process

Classroom research process

1. Identify a problem or a puzzle with your own practices (e.g. (a) My students find it difficult to speak in class or (b) How can I help my students develop their reading skills?)
2. Design a classroom research study to collect data that helps you understand the problem or puzzle. This will include collecting data from your own students (and colleagues) through questionnaires, focus group or individual interviews, student written or spoken productions, your own reflective notes, etc.
3. Together with students and/or your colleagues, develop and try out ideas for solving the puzzle/problem in your lessons. This will include at least two or three lessons (action research cycles), with reflections after each lesson. Data to be collected at this stage could be reflective notes, student feedback after each lesson or colleagues' observation comments.
4. Analyse the data collected through the different stages of the study and prepare a PowerPoint presentation.
5. Write up your research project for publication.

In addition to ongoing support from your research mentors, you will be required to attend a total of four webinars at different points of your classroom research journey. These will help you develop your research skills as you go along.

During the training, participants took part in four interactive sessions delivered by the lead researcher, Dr Harry Kuchah. The sessions addressed different aspects of exploratory action research based on the work of Smith and Rebolledo (2018) and following a model that has been successfully trialled in Africa (see Kuchah, Salama & Salvi, 2022). The key topics covered in the training included 'how to develop exploratory questions around your puzzle', 'how to collect data in exploratory action research', 'how to analyse data' and 'how to interpret data and make use of findings in exploratory action research'. These sessions were spread out over the first 12 weeks of the programme to allow individual participants to apply their knowledge and engage with their mentors as they developed their individual classroom research projects. At the end of their exploratory action research project, participants prepared and delivered individual presentations at a virtual event organised by British Council China. A video recording of the event can be found via the following link:

<https://www.britishcouncil.cn/en/teach/JulyWebinar>

b) Data collection

Data for the second phase of this study was collected by all three members of the research team, mainly through a focus group discussion at the end of the mentoring programme. The focus group discussion was designed to obtain the participants' experiences on the programme and to record any changes to their practices and sense of agency as a result of their participation. The focus group was semi-structured in nature allowing participants to raise issues that were important to them while responding to four main prompts (see Appendix 4). To supplement focus group interviews, further data was also collected through (a) recordings of participants' evolving ideas using informal online chats during the training sessions in addition to conversations with mentors about participants' work in progress, and (b) participants' reflections on their experiences of the mentoring programme via online presentations. Data collection mostly took place via the Tencent Meeting platform identified as the most used platform (by respondents) in the baseline survey and confirmed by participating teachers. The research team also used the WeChat platform to share documents such as presentation slides and research reports, which included those about participants' transformative experiences on the programme.

3.3. Methods of data analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The research team used Excel's statistic functions to analyse the data for such descriptive statistics as those presented in Tables 1 and 2. The S-Star platform also offered a descriptive statistics function that the team checked against our Excel analysis, particularly for Questions 1 and 4. Data from other questions (2, 3 and 5), as well as data from Phase Two of the study, underwent thematic coding and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Below are the findings from this study, starting with an analysis of data collected in Phase One and then Phase Two. Then, a discussion is offered on both sets of findings, in line with the aims and objectives of the research component of the NODE project, in addition to recommendations for future reflection and action in online teacher professional development in China.

4. Findings from Phase One

In this section, the report highlights emerging themes from the data collected through the baseline survey. These themes are in respect to schoolteachers' involvement in online CPD activities (Q1–Q3), their familiarity with digital platforms (Q4) and their perspectives on the relationship between their involvement in digital CPD and their professional development (Q5).

4.1. Involvement in online CPD activities

Question 1 of the baseline survey asked about the respondents' involvement in online continuing professional development (OCPD) activities in the last two years. OCPD was roughly defined in the introductory text of the survey as referring to a range of online opportunities for professional development, including online courses, webinars, conferences and other online resources related to teaching English. Of the 2,812 teachers who responded to the question, 76.5 per cent were involved in online CPD activities and 23.5 per cent were not (see Table 4). This result is consistent with the observation that teachers received more online CPD opportunities in the last two years because of the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to a rapid digitisation of teaching and CPD activities and the provision of free resources by education authorities (MOE, 2020; Xinhua, 2020), companies and institutions.

Table 4: In the last two years, have you been involved in any online CPD activities? (Q1)

	CEAIE		S-Star		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Q1: Yes	57	46	2093	78	2150	76.5
Q1: No	70	55	592	22	662	23.5
Responded	127	100	2685	100	2812	100

Worth noting from the data presented in Table 4 is the fact that there were significantly more CEAIE respondents (55 per cent) than S-Star respondents (22 per cent) who reported that they had not been involved in any online CPD activities. In other words, although online CPD resources and opportunities might be 'a click away' (Zhang, 2008: 293), not all teachers were involved in using them for their professional development. Better understanding of teachers' geographical (rural vs urban) or institutional (primary or secondary) contexts and motives for involvement in online CPD is necessary here. As shown in Table 5, a significant majority of CEAIE respondents who reported having no online CPD activities were from urban areas (84.1 per cent). Of the S-Star respondents who reported the same, 59.3 per cent came from rural areas, while only 40.7 per cent were from urban areas.

Table 5: No involvement in any online CPD activities: urban/rural distribution

	Urban		Rural		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
CEAIE	58	84.1	11	15.9	69	100
S-Star	240	40.7	350	59.3	590	100

Given the inconsistency between the two data sets, the research team focused on and further analysed the S-Star data, which had a much larger sample of respondents from different school levels rather than only focusing on junior high schools as found in the CEAIE data set. The analysis took both geographical contexts and school levels into consideration (see Table 6).

Table 6: No involvement in any online CPD activities in the last two years (Q1): urban/rural and school level distribution (S-Star data)

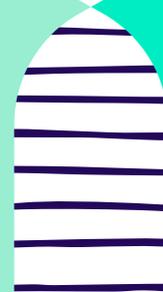
		Urban		Rural		Total	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
S-Star	Primary school	148	36.5	257	63.5	405	100
	Junior high school	79	47	89	53	168	100
	Senior high school	13	76.5	4	23.5	17	100
	Sub-total	240	40.7	350	59.3	590	100

Consistent with the school level distribution in the full S-Star data set (Table 1), the majority of the S-Star respondents who reported no online CPD involvement were primary school teachers (405 out of 590), and 63.5 per cent of them were from rural areas. The results indicate that geographical and institutional contexts play a role in teachers' involvement in online CPD activities and that more rural primary school teachers need support, for example in accessing digital CPD opportunities.

4.2. Reasons for involvement in online CPD

To ascertain respondents' motivations for participating in online CPD activities, Question 2 asked them to give two top reasons. Findings from the short responses of the 2,150 (76.5 per cent) who said they had participated in online CPD events were analysed thematically, and responses within each theme were collated numerically to identify trends in teacher motivation to participate in OCPD. The following four main themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the short responses:

- convenience during the Covid-19 pandemic
- online CPD as mandatory administrative requirements
- improvement of professional knowledge, skills and expertise
- personal development and self-improvement.



The 57 CEAIE respondents who reported to have been involved in online CPD activities (see Table 4) provided 104 responses, 99 of which fell into the above four categories of reasons and five did not include sufficient information to be categorised (e.g. 'no environment'). Some respondents gave no responses or only one reason. Among the 99 categorised responses, the top reason was for the improvement of professional knowledge, skills and expertise (51 responses, 51.5 per cent), and the second reason was for personal development and self-improvement (29 responses, 29.3 per cent), while the reason of convenience had only three responses, with a percentage of 3.0 per cent (see Table 7).

A similar picture emerged when the responses of the 2,093 S-Star teachers with involvement in online CPD activities (see Table 4) were analysed numerically using SPSS Statistics 26. The 2,093 S-Star respondents gave a total of 3,488 responses, including 3,341 that could be categorised into the above four themes of reasons and 147 that could not (e.g. 'time conflict with work'). Improvement of professional knowledge, skills and expertise was also the top reason for S-Star respondents, although the percentage (44.0 per cent) was lower than that among the CEAIE responses (51.5 per cent). Similarly, the second top reason was for personal development and self-improvement (31.9 per cent), and the reason of convenience during the Covid-19 pandemic had the lowest percentage of responses (5.5 per cent).

Table 7: Category distribution of top reasons for being involved in online CPD activities

	Convenience		Administrative requirement		Professional improvement		Personal development		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
CEAIE	7	3	16	16.2	51	51.5	29	29.3	99	100
S-Star	184	5.5	625	18.7	1471	44	1066	31.9	3341	100

The four themes are elaborated below in order of frequency, each followed by illustrative answers drawn from the data set.

a) Improvement of professional knowledge skills and expertise: responses suggested that some teachers were motivated by their 'enthusiasm for teaching' and participated in OCPD because it helped them 'to improve my teaching' or 'to improve my teaching skills' and 'to develop professional skills'. Other responses included 'to improve teaching and research ability', 'to update teaching concepts and skills', 'to get more information about teaching', 'to learn advanced teaching methods', 'to learn new ideas of teaching English', 'to teach students better', 'to improve professional abilities to motivate my students to enjoy learning English', 'to help students develop well-rounded personalities', 'to improve teaching quality', 'to improve classroom efficiency'. There were also references to 'improve English proficiency', which suggests that teachers were conscious of the importance of subject content knowledge in their professional work. Overall, the responses suggested four main areas. These were teachers' interest in (a) improving language proficiency, (b) developing pedagogical knowledge and skills, (c) improving their teaching practices and (d) investigating their classroom practices; all key themes in the literature on teacher professional development.

b) For personal development and self-improvement: beyond the need to develop professional knowledge, skills and expertise, responses also revealed that OCPD offered teachers opportunities 'for personal development', 'self-development' and 'autonomous development' that could help them build their 'self-confidence'. These perspectives point to the important role of CPD in developing professional identities.

c) Online CPD as mandatory administrative requirements: respondents pointed out that their participation in OCPD was ‘arranged by the school’ and as such was a mandatory ‘school requirement’. Given that 23 per cent of respondents for Q1 said they had not been involved in digital OCPD over the last two years, it seems that not all teachers were mandated to participate in OCPD by their institution. Attending OCPD was also perceived as participating in ‘National Teacher Training tasks’, ‘[top-down] full coverage teacher training’ to support their ‘continuing education’.

d) Convenience during the Covid-19 pandemic: respondents reported that ‘because of pandemic restrictions’ imposed on them by the Covid-19 pandemic, CPD ‘had to be online’. They noted that online CPD offered them the most convenient pathway to access CPD opportunities from their homes and described it as ‘Convenient and fast’, reporting also that it provided them with ‘rich online resources’.

Among the four main reasons presented above, the last one (convenience during the pandemic) was specific to online CPD, while the other three reasons could be argued to be more general. What is more, the first two groups of responses that were highly mentioned by teachers point to intrinsic factors, while the last two (‘c’ and ‘d’) suggest extrinsic factors at play. It appears, therefore, that when considering online CPD activities, respondents are not only motivated by how and when CPD activities are provided but also by their intrinsic needs for professional excellence (teaching improvement) and personal growth (self-improvement) as well as by extrinsic reasons (administrative requirements).

4.3. Challenges to online CPD

Question 3 asked teachers to give short answers about the challenges they have met in prior online learning or training. The following eight categories of challenges were identified from the data set.

- **Time challenge:** time problems caused by schedule conflicts and overwhelming workload as illustrated in the following excerpts from the qualitative data: ‘time conflict’, ‘time stress’, ‘training time and work conflict’, ‘conflict between work and learning’. Respondents also reported lack of time and energy due to their heavy workload: ‘I don’t have enough time’, ‘It takes too much time’, ‘have to deal with too much training’, ‘sometimes I am too busy’, ‘I have a heavy workload at the school in the daytime and have to work overtime at night. The study time is tight’, ‘Work and training cannot be balanced at the same time’, and ‘there is too much work and too many classes to teach. I have no more energy to deal with training and learning beyond working hours’, ‘checking students’ homework takes up too much of my time so I have no more time for my own learning’. Challenges with managing their time also meant that teachers could not find time to ‘finish all the online lessons’ or to finish the ‘too many assignments’, some of which they found ‘difficult’. This suggests that time flexibility needs to be given to teachers when planning online CPD events (including live ones), in addition to provision of policy support for reducing teachers’ workload in the school and wider contexts. The perspectives expressed here have implications for projects such as the NODE programme, and any kind of live CPD events that are time-bound. If teachers are expected to pursue OCPD opportunities over and beyond their allocated workloads, CPD providers need to engage with teachers to understand their preferred options for accessing CPD. For example, it would be useful to know more about whether teachers prefer accessing asynchronous or recorded content for time, schedule and language considerations.



- **Technology challenge:** IT problems caused by limited technology skills or poor internet connection and equipment were noted, as illustrated in these excerpts: ‘not skilful in using technology’, ‘poor IT abilities’, ‘I can’t skilfully use all kinds of IT software’, ‘I always want to get screenshots or take notes, but can’t manage manage efficiently’, ‘unstable internet connection’, ‘network equipment is not good enough’, ‘greatly affected by network speed’, ‘slow network speed’, ‘network congestion’, ‘difficulties in accessing the websites’.
- **Low proficiency and the digital space:** difficulty in understanding online learning and training content due to limited English language proficiency or theoretical background knowledge was evident. This was highlighted through excerpts from the data such as the following: ‘can’t follow the teacher’, ‘some places incomprehensible’, ‘can’t understand, feel sleepy’, ‘language barrier’, ‘poor English proficiency’, ‘limited vocabulary’, ‘weak listening’, ‘oral English is poor’, ‘Difficulty in English communication’, ‘[challenges of] understanding and application of technical terms’, ‘knowledge is updated too fast, can’t catch up’, ‘not enough professional abilities’, ‘too much input of knowledge.’
- **Issues with the relevance and quality of provision:** responses also suggested that online learning and training was not often useful or effective when interaction with the speaker was restricted online, with no opportunities to connect personally with trainers. This was particularly the case with large webinars where participant microphones and videos were turned off and where there was very little engagement between the presenter and the audience. They also suggested that many online seminars and lectures were neither practical nor rooted in their contextual realities and that very few of the schoolteachers’ lessons available to observe online were of really good quality. These perspectives are supported by excerpts such as: ‘not as efficient as offline training’, ‘lack of interaction’, ‘can’t ask if you can’t understand’, ‘can’t observe on site’, ‘training knowledge is fragmental’, ‘not close to my own teaching reality’, ‘not practical’, ‘not very useful’, ‘too much theory, little practice’, ‘not very pertinent’, ‘The professor is boring. I need a lot of energy to focus my attention’, ‘real quality lessons are very few’, ‘online training is bad for my eyes’. The responses indicate that what concerns teachers about online CPD provision is not only the content and trainer but also the ways in which OCPD is delivered, particularly whether teachers are given opportunities to interact with people (especially the trainer). Low interaction may jeopardise the effectiveness of online CPD. A key message from these perspectives seems to be that CPD events with low interaction between facilitators and participants could be even less effective than recordings that include hands-on illustrative activities that teachers could see and try out.
- **Application of professional learning:** an additional issue emanating from the one above was the difficulty of translating what they learned online into their classroom practice, in other words, ‘how to put the theory into practice’, ‘how to apply what I have learnt to my own teaching’, ‘the application of the teaching methods’, ‘Using what I learnt in online training to class’, ‘how to integrate what I learn with my own teaching at my school’. As these excerpts suggest, there seems to be a training – practice disconnection that necessitates careful reflection on how to embed real contextual experiences into online training, particularly at a time when teaching is returning to face-to-face. This is especially important as teachers also pointed out a ‘lack of professional guidance’ that could support their efforts to put their learning into practice.
- **Affective factors:** Responses revealed negative feelings – such as of ‘loneliness and helplessness’, stress, falling behind times, failing to settle down to learn or persist in learning, or a lack of experience, energy or good memory – emanating from extended involvement in online training. Some respondents said they had a ‘lack of experience’ or ‘lack of energy’ to concentrate online, and in some cases ‘eye tiredness’ was a major challenge. This was the case with older teachers whose responses suggested that OCPD highlighted a ‘mismatch between age growth and the development of new things’, while some respondents reported ‘poor self-discipline, [and the inability to] finish watching’ trainers online. The affective constraints require a reconceptualisation of OCPD that takes into account the diverse abilities and realities of teachers. When planning and implementing OCPD events, it may be necessary to seek a more detailed knowledge of trainee teachers in their contexts. Such work should include understanding teachers’ present and possible affective constraints related to their OCPD processes.

The findings presented here illustrate that teachers may encounter challenges before, during and after online CPD activities. This concerns not only teachers themselves and the activities per se but also contextual factors (e.g. from related policies to teachers' workload and equipment support), in addition to teachers' needs for application, psychological and developmental support.

4.4. Most used digital platforms for CPD

In Question 4, respondents were asked what digital platforms they currently used for professional development. As previously presented in Table 2, a total of 2,699 teachers responded to the question and they named over 45 digital platforms they currently used for their CPD. Of these, six of the platforms were mentioned by over 50 teachers and another three by less than 50 but more than ten teachers. The responses are summarised in Table 8.

Table 8: Top digital PD platforms teachers currently used (Q4)

	CEAIE (N=125)		S-Star (N=2574)		Total (N=2699)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Tencent Meeting	114	91.2	1911	74.2	2025	75
Ding Talk	80	64	1825	70.9	1905	70.6
WeChat	5	4	260	10.1	265	9.8
Zoom	5	4	98	3.8	103	3.8
Official platforms*	4	3.2	88	3.4	92	3.4
SeeWo	1	0.8	84	3.3	85	3.1
QQ	0	0	42	1.6	42	1.6
ClassIn	1	0.8	23	0.9	24	0.9
Xiao'e	0	0	15	0.6	15	0.6

* Digital platforms developed by education authorities of different levels.

As Table 8 shows, the most used platforms included Tencent Meeting (75 per cent) and Ding Talk (71 per cent). The other platforms – including WeChat, Zoom and SeeWo, as well as official platforms developed by national and local education authorities – ranked very low. As previously noted in section 4.1.2 above, education authorities built on earlier efforts to integrate and provide free online teaching and CPD resources for teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic (MOE, 2020; Xinhua, 2020).



Digital platforms for resources included the National Public Service Platform for Education Resources (directly administrated by the Ministry of Education and run by its National Centre for Educational Technology) and similar local official (government), platforms such as those titled ‘education cloud’, ‘smart education platform’, ‘education service platform’, etc. Having over 45 digital platforms named in the responses showcases part of the general picture for online learning and training in China. However, a significant limitation of surveying such a list of digital platforms is that it is not possible to identify the different ways in which respondents used the different platforms for different aspects of their professional development. It may be suggested that these platforms are not necessarily in competition and that teachers’ choice of platform is determined by the specific purpose for which they are using it at a particular time, or indeed the platform mandated by their institution.

4.5. Digital learning and training and professional development

In Question 5, respondents were asked to choose one or two of the platforms they had noted in Question 4 and illustrate what they learned from the platform(s) and how this was useful in their practice and professional development. A total of 1,582 teachers provided short answers, from which four themes emerged.

- Online CPD platforms offer opportunities and rich resources for professional learning. These include opportunities for language development – ‘I like attending online English courses through zoom, including one on one English lessons and English online courses. It helped me a lot with my English learning’; innovative ideas and teaching practices – ‘I attended webinars through Tencent Meeting or Ding Talk to get to know the latest educational ideas and ways of practice.’ Digital platforms also offer teachers a range of ‘model’ practical lessons to learn from – ‘I have seen many teachers’ videos on the platform of Smart Primary and Secondary Schools, and I really learned a lot. I can choose my own courses to follow and sample lessons of every grade to observe, which is very convenient and practical’ as well as a pool of teaching resources and materials – ‘On the National Public Service Platform for Education Resources, I cannot only search for learning materials, but also many excellent lesson plans to learn for my own teaching. This greatly helps improve my work efficiency.’ Again, as in Question 3 (section 4.3), responses here suggest the importance of relevance to teachers’ needs and contextual realities, in both the provision of OCPD training and teaching resources.
- Respondents particularly valued the opportunity these platforms offered them to interact with like-minded colleagues and engage with people outside their schools, for example to ‘communicate with teachers who are excellent [and] listen to expert lectures.’ Such interaction opportunities through Tencent Meeting, as an illustrative example, ‘make it possible for a group of English teachers to discuss on various problems and challenges we might be confronted with during our teaching. Plus, we can have all sorts of lectures to help professional teachers to learn from each other, even without considering the linguistic things and other factors related.’ These interaction opportunities are available through ‘meetings with [like-minded] workmates’ and ‘regional teaching research activities’ organised by district or county education authorities through their affiliated researchers and teacher mentors in English language teaching.
- Besides benefits for teachers’ own learning, responses also highlighted the perception that digital platforms with functions designed for online teaching (e.g. Ding Talk) are convenient to use, and those platforms with rich teaching resources (e.g. official platforms and WeChat) are helpful for daily teaching because they are ‘More convenient and fast [and] Easy to master’ and some teachers were already using these platforms to ‘design some listening and reading activities for the students to do in their free time and helped to improve their [students’] learning.’

Despite the heavy focus on two platforms, it also emerged from responses that for some teachers the platform was not as important as the content and nature of professional learning it offered them. In fact, one respondent explained that ‘I think the key thing is the content that I learn. Platforms is not important for me.’ Another participant explained that:

I often use Tencent Meeting to attend online lea[r]ning. For most of times I just listen to the lectures in a very big meeting room, and I seldom 'talk'. I do learn something from the lectures, but I don't think it's enough for me. Especially when I'm going to use some of the strategies I learnt. I'm not a very positive person and I prefer to talk in a smaller group with someone I am familiar with. (PC30)

The response suggests that teachers may ‘accept’ the passive transmission approach as manifested by CPD lectures, but they still have their preferred ways to learn that are more consistent with their personalities. As illustrated by the above quotes, individual teachers might have different online learning and training experiences and hence different perceptions of digital platforms and online PD activities. This highlights the complexity of inquiring into teachers’ digital learning and training and professional development. Individual differences, such as teachers’ own personal development needs and particular personalities, are necessary to take into consideration when designing and developing a training course for them.

5. Findings from Phase Two

As explained in section 3, Phase Two of this project was guided by an intervention – an exploratory action research (EAR) training and mentoring programme. The outcomes of this programme included presentations (see <https://www.britishcouncil.cn/en/teach/JulyWebinar>) and final research reports submitted by the five participants who successfully completed the programme (See Appendices 5a to 5e). Table 9 presents an overview of the participants’ presentations and reports.

Table 9: Phase Two participants and their programme outcomes

Name	Institution	Years of experience	Highest qualification	Title of presentation and report
Cassie	Primary school	1 year	BA	Improving my vocabulary teaching for 2nd grade students
Daisy	Primary school	11 years	MA	How can assessment help my students with their English learning?
Jedlena	Junior high school	1 year	MA	N/A
Faye	Junior high school	10 years	BA	How to motivate my students [to] be active in class?
Summer	Junior high school	10 years	BA	How can I engage all my students in group work?
Rachel	Junior high school	16 years	BA	My story of working with disruptive students

In this part of the report, findings from the focus groups held with all six participating teachers at the end of the programme are presented, and insights from their reflective accounts in their webinar presentations are drawn. The findings are presented based on the broad areas covered in the interview and generally reflect their experiences of the programme.

5.1. Initial expectations and programme experience

It was confirmed from all six participants that they had applied to join the programme voluntarily. They had access to the call through a variety of channels: three of them – Cassie, Daisy and Rachel – received the British Council China recruitment message from their colleagues and mentors or through seeing the message reposted via WeChat groups by researchers in their city and provincial education departments. The other three – Summer, Faye and Jedlena – were among five teachers from the same school who were encouraged by their school leadership to apply for the programme. They all applied of their own will to join the project, although two of their colleagues who initially applied withdrew early on in the programme. Probing further, all participants denied being externally mandated or even encouraged to join the programme beyond seeing the information in their professional forums and volunteering to join. Their motivation to join the programme was two-fold – to ‘learn some teaching strategies’ (Jedlena) or to improve their research skills: ‘I’m not very good at doing research, so I hoped that I can learn something about that’ (Rachel).

After engaging in the project, the teachers began to change their perceptions of the project. They realised that in the project they were given the responsibility to find out new ways of teaching for themselves, rather than being taught what to do. They valued the opportunity to focus on improving their own classroom practices in their own contexts rather than doing academic research. For instance, Rachel had initially planned an academic research project on the topic of teaching writing through the process approach, and afterwards changed her research focus to explore how to work with ‘noisy’ students in her class, inspired by the examples she observed in the project webinars. She remarked in the focus group interview: ‘Forget academic research. [...] I just do this one [EAR] and it helps my teaching directly.’ Another teacher notes:

During the process, I learned that this project helped me find out by myself how to do research, and helped me to have a chance to really think about or reflect on my class, the problems in my class, or the problem in my teaching I think this is very important. It is more important than just giving us some teaching strategies. (Daisy)

5.2. Practicality and relevance of the programme

As will be highlighted below (see section 5.6) teachers had initial challenges with the first training session on this programme because they found it theoretical. This is partly, it may be argued, because their initial expectations on joining the programme were not immediately met and they had to adjust to a different kind of CPD that put the responsibility for identifying and researching their own classroom puzzles on them. Once they had navigated the first session, teachers generally found the mentoring components of the programme to be practical as they were supported to take up the responsibility to understand and improve their own practices in their own contexts, rather than being taught or lectured to do something far from their actual classrooms as in other training they had experienced. Cassie, for example, recalled and compared her previous training with the mentoring programme:

Yeah, we have a lot of training, but the training in my province, we usually watch some sample classes, or we just listen to some speeches, so we didn't have opportunities, I didn't have opportunities to do such a practical research before, so this is my first time to do my own classroom research. So, we didn't do my own research in the past training. That is the biggest difference. (Cassie)

She further explained why she found doing her own research relevant and helpful to her and her students:

Doing my own research can help me, um, I will have my own experience and feeling about how to improve myself. If I just watch the video, I can learn from other teachers, uh, [but] it would not help me in my actual class, because some research is useful for their students, but not my own student. (Cassie)

The participating teachers also noted that giving a presentation at the end of the mentoring programme was different from their previous research training, which led to both academic and practical outcomes:

I found that this research [programme] is more practical, and helpful, which can improve my teaching. This time there is a group report, which we didn't have the presentation before. (Jedlena)

Overall, the participating teachers considered the mentoring programme to be practical and helpful in developing their ability to investigate their own classroom issues and finding their own solutions. As Cassie remarked: 'this research [programme] helped me a lot because it was very practical. It aimed to help us to solve some practical problems'. Jedlena compared the programme with those she was involved in before and noted, 'Before I participated in some research in my college, but not as this. It's different between them. It used to be academic before, but now I know to do research to improve [my] teaching.'

5.3. The benefits of one-to-one (personalised) mentoring

The programme consisted of group mentoring and individual mentoring processes. Group mentoring included meetings (e.g. webinars, presentation practice sessions) for all the teachers, and group meetings with teachers led by the lead researcher. Individual mentoring was done through email and WeChat (text or video chat) communications between a teacher and her mentor. Despite the mentoring programme being online, the teachers reported that it felt like face-to-face because one-to-one mentoring support was provided:

This training is, for me, just like one-on-one and face-to-face, not like other training, the trainer there, and a lot of trainees there, but [this programme] for me, is just like face-to-face, because I could feel that you devote your time to the project, and you listen to us, and you're so patient to the teachers. It's just like personalized, because we talk about our own questions, and you give us all suggestions to our own questions and to each of us. [When] our mentors give us suggestions, that's just like, step by step, holding our hands to go ahead, and working together as a team. Yeah, I could feel the power of the teamwork. (Rachel)

Comparing the mentoring programme and the training she had received before, a teacher explicitly noted that the practical and one-to-one mentoring features made this programme unforgettable:

I think a very big difference between the former training and experience of this research is that during the former training experience, just like what [teacher name] said, I just watch an English class, and then listen to a lecture, and listen to how, maybe analyse the teaching content, the teaching techniques, something like this, but this research, just like [teacher name] said, is one on one, that means you have to be responsible for yourself, for your research, and for your students. The former training experience is just when you listen, you finish, just finish. Maybe you will forget them, but I think this research project, will impress us much, much more. (Daisy)



Besides being ‘unforgettable’, the mentoring programme also inspired the teachers to take further actions to improve themselves and their teaching, making ‘sustainable professional development’ (Zhang, 2021) more likely.

5.4. Learning gains and transformative changes

All the teachers acknowledged that they had learned a lot and found the mentoring project ‘really useful’ (Daisy) and ‘rewarding’ (Rachel). They felt happy for having engaged in the project. Faye commented ‘It was a wonderful journey for me’. In this section, the report presents both findings from the focus group and teachers’ reflective comments during their presentation at the final webinar, organised by British Council China, with the view of highlighting ways in which this research training and mentoring was perceived by teachers to have informed their practices and professional experiences.

5.4.1. Gaining research skills

The teachers acknowledged that through the programme, they gained experience and skills in classroom research to improve their own practices:

I’ve learned a lot about doing research ... I’ve really learned a lot from my research journey. And just like [what] I shared before, I have now a new understanding about group work, and in the future teaching I will apply what I learned in this research to teaching. (Summer)

In this project, I have learned what EAR is, the ways to collect data and how to analyze the data and how to interpret the findings. It is of great significance and I’m sure it will influence my future career ... I can say, I got how to fish [in this programme], but there’s still a long way to fish well, to get big fish, maybe, because I just mentioned that I still need to put into practice. I think that’s important. (Daisy, Webinar reflections)

I’ve gained a lot of experience, um, for example, I’ve learned a lot of skills, especially the skills for doing teaching research.’ (Cassie)

The perspectives expressed above were also captured in teachers' reflections within their webinar presentations. For example, one teacher expanded on this by explaining the benefits of engaging in classroom research to her own classroom experiences:

Through the project, I've learned that doing classroom research can be helpful to improve my teaching practice. This gives me the opportunities to learning it which is something I have never done before. Students are able to be active if we as teachers encourage them and act according to their needs. I am able to see a change in my students which motivate me to continue working like this. (Faye)

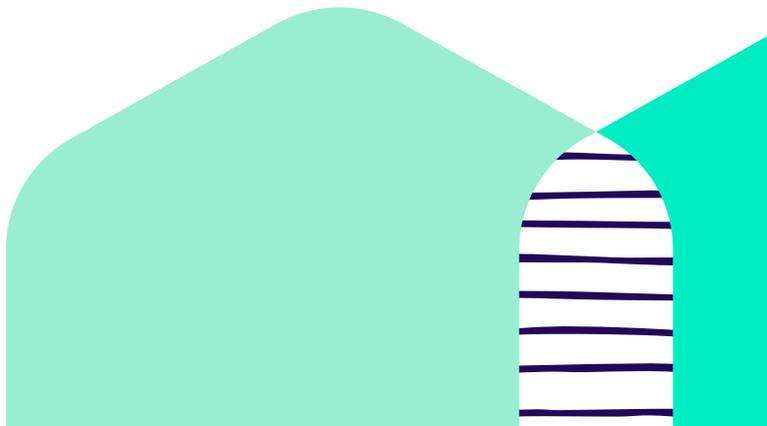
5.4.2. Understanding and learning from students

Another key gain expressed by teachers was in relation to the understanding of their students and the importance of engaging with students in dealing with teaching and learning challenges. For example, the teachers stated that through the programme they had learned that when they faced a problem in their teaching they could reflect on their own teaching and communicate with their students, rather than turning to experts from outside who may not be immediately available or may not understand their specific classroom context:

I ... learn that when I face a problem, I should, I cannot only talk about it with experts, like all of you [mentors], and also I should listen to my students, listen to what they said about this problem and worked out the way with the students together to solve the problem. (Summer)

It's an opportunity to observe, to talk with my students, which helps me know more about what my students think and want, and I also get a better understanding of doing classroom research. (Daisy)

The most important thing I have learned is that when we teach, we must know what students are interested in and what they need. During my research project, I have come to know my students better than before. (Faye)





In addition to acknowledging working with students as a way to solve teaching problems, the teachers noted how an improved understanding of their students as a result of the programme had helped them build better rapport as well as enabling a dispensation to dialogue and an opportunity to learn from their students:

After this research, I also learn how to get some suggestion from my students and I also learn it is important to know my students' ideas [...] Classroom is a kind of corporation with students, so as a teacher, I have to know my shortcoming from my students' point of view. (Cassie)

I have shared this whole story with my students too and listened to them for further reflection and action plans in order to better improve the teaching and learning in our class. Even though my students are still disruptive, they are quiet sometimes, and throughout the whole project, I have gained closer relationship with them and better mutual understanding with them. (Rachel)

Overall, the teachers acknowledged that the mentoring project helped them 'see things differently' (Rachel), in relation to the problems or puzzles that arose in their practices, the theory–practice relationship, the teachers themselves and other stakeholders (such as students as noted above):

The problems, the puzzles, in my classroom, always made me unhappy, even angry, especially, for example, the disruptive students. Sometimes I really become angry in class. But now when I see it as a puzzle, as an opportunity for me to do research, to learn more about my students and about me, and about how to help them, and when I see it differently, I don't feel angry anymore. I would like to thank my students for their cooperation, and I mean for their cooperation in this project [...] and so we become partners to work together in this project. So, so, um, [the project] help me to see things really differently and not like what I did before, so angry but to see it as an opportunity to improve. Um, don't see problems as just problems, but see it as an opportunity to improve. (Rachel)

During our final presentation, and the Q and A, a teacher asked me to give more examples [...] so it made me realize that theories or researches ... or all the academic things will just be empty top without, um, the real classroom. So, I think in the future that I will try to put it into practice. I think that's very important. (Daisy)

Daisy further claimed that participating in the programme helped her to be more self-critical of her classroom practice and, as a result, she could already identify some of her shortcomings without being told by an external person. She argued that rural teachers with limited access to professional support might benefit from learning to develop good practices in their context and depend less on external sources for their professional support. She also suggested that it would be worth extending the programme to more teachers in such contexts:

[...] this project is really good so that I wonder if it can be opened to, um, a wider group of teachers, or to a wider range of places, especially to the teachers or areas with lower or poor teaching resources. I think that will be good for them. (Daisy)

5.4.3. Improved classroom practice

An outcome of teachers' improved understanding and readiness to learn from their students seems to have been an improvement in their classroom practices. Participating in the research mentoring programme helped them to generate good practice in collaboration with their students. Teachers also acknowledged transformative change in their classrooms emanating from a better understanding of their students. Cassie, for example, said 'After I did this research, I feel my student are happier in my class because we do other things we didn't do before, for example tPR [Total physical response], and we sing more songs. They are much happier than before.' Faye, for her part, suggested that she had developed a better understanding of her students and their needs: 'After the research, I think they [students] know I know what they really need, and they are also very interested in the English class now. So, I am able to make them actively participate in class.'

In her reflection at the end of her webinar presentation, Cassie shared two key pedagogic principles that she had learned from her research:

First, children, they play to learn, touch to learn and feel to learn. As a teacher, I can give my students more sensory experience. For example when I teach some new words about animal I can not only show them the picture of the animal, but also play the animal sounds for them. Those different sensory experience can attract students' attention and help student to remember the words. And when the next time they have similar or same experience, those words will cross students' mind. Second, allow some Chinese in the class. When a student cannot understand the teacher, they will lose their interest and confidence in English class, which is very negative in English learning. (Cassie)

Through participating in the research mentoring programme, Cassie had herself developed these two key principles – the value of sensory experiences and the place of L1 in the L2 classroom – simply by engaging in a systematic process of exploring her own classroom practices and engaging in reflective action with her students.

5.4.4. Self-realisation and developing sense of agency

As illustrated above, through the mentoring project, there were conceptual changes (in terms of better understanding of their students as well as knowledge and skills of how to generate good practice in context with students) among the teachers themselves as well as practical change in their classrooms (in terms of more student-focused teaching). The teachers had a deeper understanding of, and knew better how to approach, puzzles or problems in their practices, articulated in the following excerpt:

I have learned that if we have any problem, we can communicate and talk with others; both the colleagues and the students can help us. We can use different ways to solve problems. We can first communicate with others, and then we can do some research about it, and do the survey, and third, we can think about ourselves. (Faye)



For some of the teachers, conceptual change also included some things beyond the classroom. For example, Jedlena, who did not complete the expected outcomes of the programme but who participated till the end, noted that:

after this research training, I think, I love this [teaching] job even more, because of your help. I was afraid because I do not have any teaching experience, but now I think I am confident to start building my own knowledge in my classes. (Jedlena)

Another teacher remarked:

Also it is the first time for me to do a teaching research and to do a presentation. Um, but through the whole process, I am becoming more confident to, to do more research and, uh, share my ideas with other teachers. Also, it develops my ability to deal with the classroom challenge by working with my students. (Summer, webinar reflections)

Rachel also very eloquently and authoritatively captured her self-realisation of the importance of not depending on her own assumptions, as was previously the case, at the end of her webinar presentation:

Then, I got to know myself better through this project. The first and most important thing I learned in this project was that I had wrong assumptions about my teaching! I had never realized that or thought about that! Usually, when I met a teaching problem, I would think, oh, the reason should be like this, then I took actions to solve it. If it worked, it was okay. If it didn't work, I would think out another solution and jump into action again. I seldom stopped and thought about it, asked myself questions, asked my students questions and listened to my students. In fact, students are the learners, they are the most reliable people to answer our questions! And they learn best in their own ways! So, ask questions, listen to them, and work with them! Understand the puzzle fully, then, look for ways to help students. Be critical and reflective! (Rachel)

The imperatives at the end of Rachel's reflections suggest an authoritative teacher who is confident with her ideas because they are rooted in her own research and endorsed via the positive changes she is noticing in her classroom.

5.5. Benefits of online mentoring

The mentoring programme was entirely online, and Tencent Meeting was used for all group and individual meetings. Asked if they were happy with the Tencent Meeting platform, the teachers responded positively and noted that they found it familiar and convenient. Cassie articulated:

We always use Tencent when we have online meetings in our school, so I think it's convenient because we can share our screens. Everyone can give their own presentation. (Cassie)

Asked further about the difference between online and face-to-face training, Summer added:

Our teachers are from different provinces, from different schools, so online training can get us together in a very convenient way ... I think I will be more nervous when we have to meet face to face. (Summer)

The above illustrative extracts from the focus group showed that the teachers were familiar with online training and aware of its advantages, but it did not necessarily mean that they liked all online training programmes. Asked if they had had online training before, the teachers responded that they had done a lot of online training. However, they explained that for most mandatory online training (required by education authorities) they would just ‘turn it on and then leave the laptop or the mobile phone there’. This explanation resonates with data from survey data about issues with the relevance and quality of online CPD provision presented in section 4.3 above. This is even more so because these teachers acknowledged that where OCPD provision was engaging and relevant to their immediate classroom teaching, they listened carefully and even paused to take notes for some of the training. In the mentoring programme, however, the teachers were more engaged, as Rachel articulated:

I followed every one [training session], and for some of them I didn't quite understand, I watched the recording again, and I took some notes. (Rachel)

The teachers’ mixed responses to online training indicated that teachers did not decide their preference of a programme only by judging whether it was on- or offline. As illustrated above, the mentoring programme was entirely online, but the teachers felt it was more like a face-to-face programme, which suggests that the teachers may prefer an on- and offline blended programme with practical, relevant and one-to-one mentoring features. As Rachel explicitly noted, ‘If we talk about ideal training, I would like both online and face-to-face’.

5.6. Challenges encountered and support systems

The teachers met various challenges and difficulties during the project. Time pressure was one of the biggest challenges the teachers noted, an issue that was articulated by many teachers in the baseline survey (see section 4.3.). In the three months of this project, the participating teachers had to find time out of their already very full daily schedule to attend the required project learning (e.g. online meetings and webinars) and conduct research into their own classrooms. Most of the teachers were not only English teachers but also classroom teachers responsible for moral education and administrative affairs for a specific class of students. Some of them were also young mothers at home. As one teacher explained:

I think the balance among my daily work, my family and the work for the research, was the biggest challenge for me, and during the process, the spirit of all fellow teachers encouraged me a lot. I wanted to give up for so many times, but finally I did it. (Summer)



Given the multiple responsibilities teachers, and particularly female teachers with family responsibilities, might have within and beyond their work, it was not unexpected that three of the teachers withdrew from the project once they discovered that despite their initial enthusiasm, the realities of their daily activities did not permit them the space to engage fully in the programme. Despite this, six of the nine who initially applied to join the programme did not give up; they supported each other and managed to attend all group and some individual mentoring sessions to the end, with five being able to complete their research and prepare and give a public presentation. In addition to writing out a research report. Their mutual support and resilience are captured in the following excerpt from Faye: ‘... many times I wanted to give up, especially [when] two teachers gave up and I wanted to give up, but Summer said to me, don't give up, and let's go together.’ Daisy, for instance, also noted that she saw Rachel as her role model: ‘So during the research, I really think [Rachel] impressed me a lot [...] I know her passion in the class classroom. I think I should learn from her.’ Some of their motivation to stay on the programme also came from their mentors, as suggested by Summer: ‘During all the process Harry and Vincent helped me a lot and encouraged me a lot. And every time I wanted to give up and you encouraged me a lot.’ This underlines the fact that the role of mentors in teacher education has been shown to be of vital importance. An example of this comes from De Costa, Ojha and Zang (2022) who demonstrated how mentors play an important role in helping teachers localise materials and pedagogic practices, engage in reflexivity and work collaboratively in teams in China and Nepal.

Besides time pressure and workload, there were other challenges the teachers had to overcome within the project. Daisy, for example, noted that the biggest challenge for her was ‘to find a research focus and developing research questions. I think that’s a very a big challenge for me because my topic was a little bit big’. She wanted to narrow down her area of focus but did not know how: ‘It really confused me for a long time’. After communicating with the mentors and reading sources suggested by her mentor, Daisy managed to reach a topic and research questions she felt satisfied with. She articulated how she achieved it :

As a primary school English teacher, we are busy in the whole daytime, so I did this research, during off-work time in the evenings, so I read some references. I also searched [references] online. I think the research questions do not just sit there and wait for you. I think you need to really, um, observe your class, or think about your class, your students. I think that's important. (Daisy)

The teachers also acknowledged the crucial role of the continuous mentor support they had received at all stages of the programme rather than just at the beginning of their research. This included support to narrow the scope of, and refine, their research focus, identify research questions, as well as ongoing opportunities to be challenged by their mentors to find different ways of interpreting the issues they were dealing with in their research projects. Rachel noted that she was supported in the middle of her research when she could not find colleagues to observe her class and at the final stage when she worried that she had not yet done enough for her research and wanted to collect more data. She commented that mentor support was ‘really helpful to make me think of what was realistic and still valuable for my research process’.

Besides the support from mentors and their peers on the project, the teachers also received support and help from their colleagues and family members, as Daisy noted: ‘I’ve also gained a lot of help and supervision from mentors, and also from my colleagues, our staff here [in her school]’. When asked whether she received family support, Summer articulated her three-year-old daughter’s encouragement: ‘she said that, Mommy, you are so great that you can speak English’. For Summer, participating in this project offered her an opportunity to communicate with mentors and colleagues in English at home. This meant that she could also impress her daughter, something she argued was a strong motivation.

5.7. Teacher suggestions for future CPD provision

Despite positive comments on the practicality of the research mentoring programme mentioned in section 5.1, participants pointed out that there were components of the programme, particularly the research training sessions, that needed improvement. For example, the teachers noted that the webinar at the beginning of the programme was not very practical and could have turned them off:

At the beginning, we just talked about the theory about exploratory action research, right? And we didn't talk about what we actually did. So I think maybe, such kind of very academic webinar will scare some teachers, so for me, I will doubt myself, can I do that? [...] but at the end, I know it is very useful and practical research, but I didn't know it at the beginning, so I think you can improve in the beginning.
(Cassie)

There were further suggestions on how to make the mentoring programme more practical from the very beginning – to make theoretical input more relevant to their teaching and research practices, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

Daisy: *During this research we learned many ways or methods to collect data. It seems like the order is, you learn how to do the research, and then you do the research, but I wonder if it is OK that we do a research, and then from our research we summarise methods, or ways, and that's more suitable, or focused to this research. I don't know how to say it more clearly. I'm not sure whether you get what I mean.*

Researcher: *So when you've completed a part of your research, then we can start analysing your research and identifying what went right, what you might improve. Is that what you mean?*

Daisy: *Yes, because some teachers are doing reading, or some teachers are doing writing problems, so maybe, then, there are more focused methods to the different research problems.*

While there was general agreement that the initial training session was theoretical, it could be argued that the teachers' expectations expressed in section 5.1 might have prevented them from engaging with the content of the session, which was mainly developed around examples of classroom research from a variety of contexts, including examples by Chinese teachers. It does seem that they came with the expectation to learn about classroom teaching strategies but found that the session was not aligned with these expectations. Whatever the case, the excerpt above suggests significant consideration should be given to designing the first research training webinars around teachers' pragmatic attempts at investigating an aspect of their practice.



Another suggestion for future research mentoring was captured in reflections on how they learn. During the focus group interview, the teachers also articulated how they learned in the programme. Rachel explained that learning happened when she started to ask questions and got answers from the mentors:

I have to say that I really started to learn in our project when I began to ask questions, and Harry began to answer my questions. That was the first time I began to really learn something in this project, and I really found out, oh, this project is precious. Because at first webinar, I took notes and I learned a lot, but I think that was not me. That that was not so related to me [...] I learned some knowledge, but not related to my own self. But when I started to ask questions, oh, I started to learn, because you answered my questions and pointed out my weakness, and then I began to learn. (Rachel)

The teachers also reported that they needed, and they learned better from, examples:

Faye: *[...] I saw a questionnaire [example] from WeChat [group of the programme], and then I know what I should do.*

Harry: *All right, so some of those examples were good.*

Faye: *For doing the research, we need to see some examples of it, and then we will know how to do it. After reading the questionnaire from WeChat, I know, [it's] just a piece of cake. It's not that difficult.*

One example might not be enough. Rachel, for instance, recalled her frustration when she tried but could not access more examples: 'When I prepared for the presentation, I wanted to get more from other teachers from the file you sent us, but I couldn't'. For Rachel and other teachers, they did not just need examples such as samples of data collection tools, as Faye noted above, but also those from role models; that is to say, examples of other teachers reporting on their research for them to follow:

And in fact, during the whole project, you showed us a lot of cases from other countries, especially the African teachers, so for me I could feel the African teachers' passion in teaching, and I could feel that, yeah, everybody met some problems, so I'm not alone. (Rachel)

These reflections point to the importance of dialogic engagement with teachers as well as the need to provide them with examples of other teachers from other contexts in addition to their own, providing multiple examples of research experiences. Going forward, the research experiences of these teachers, as recorded in their presentations online and their research report, might constitute a useful resource for other teachers learning to research their classrooms in China.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

In this section, key findings presented above are discussed, and implications and recommendations for future work on online CPD in the Chinese context are drawn. To better align these with the goals of the research component of the NODE project, a summary of key findings from both phases of the research is first presented. This research project was guided by three research questions (see section 2), with the first question focusing on teachers' current engagement with digital CPD, the second on accessibility and usability of digital CPD opportunities, and the third on their impact on the teachers' classroom practices and professional growth.

6.1. Key findings

In relation to the first research question, the findings showed that a vast majority of teachers surveyed (76.5 per cent) were engaged in digital CPD. The findings presented in section 4.2 suggest that when considering CPD activities, the medium (online or face-to-face) was not so much an issue for teachers as were other motivating factors. The most important motives presented in the survey data were intrinsic, including teachers' need for professional excellence (improvement of professional knowledge, skills and expertise – 51.5 per cent of CEAIE respondents and 44 per cent of S-Star respondents) and personal growth (self-improvement – 29.3 per cent of CEAIE respondents and 31.9 per cent of S-Star respondents), both of which represent their own personal interest and enthusiasm. A smaller proportion of the teachers (16.2 per cent for CEAIE teachers and 18.7 per cent of S-Star teachers) expressed extrinsic factors (administrative requirements) as their motivation for attending online CPD. In sections 4.3 and 5.6, the research team presented a range of challenges that teachers encounter during their engagement with digital CPD. These challenges show that their engagement is influenced by factors other than just accessibility and usability of digital platforms. In fact, teachers were familiar with a range of digital platforms (see section 4.4), although the data showed that some were more preferred, or at least more used, than others. Although it is possible that different platforms serve different purposes, and that teachers' preference for one digital platform over another might be influenced by how and why they use them, the number of respondents choosing a particular digital platform cannot be ignored completely. In fact, the high mention of Tencent Meeting and Ding Talk by the respondents suggests that many more teachers are familiar with these platforms than others. Phase Two participants further claimed that Tencent Meeting was convenient for them because they were familiar with it in their schools, and they could watch recordings repeatedly, something that is not possible with face-to-face CPD. In this regard, online CPD providers looking to support teachers in China might want to consider using these platforms in the first instance to avoid a situation where CPD is affected by challenges in learning how to use new platforms. This is even more the case given that the data also reported language proficiency challenges exacerbated by the digital space being a barrier to their engagement in digital CPD (see 4.3).



Logistical issues such as time pressure, heavy workload and multiple responsibilities, particularly for female teachers (see 5.6) were also reported as challenges to engagement in digital CPD, as were more practical issues such as the quality and practicality of digital training affecting teachers' participation. Survey responses suggest that teachers may 'accept' the passive transmission approach as manifested in CPD lectures, but they still have their preferred ways that are more consistent with their personalities and learning needs.

The need for CPD that provides teachers with realistic materials and activities, which are practical and directly useable in teachers' classrooms and which recognise varied contextual realities across China, has been highlighted by Borg et al. (2022) The findings of this study provide even more evidence that beyond the platform used for CPD, teachers engage better with training and CPD opportunities that help them directly address their classroom conundrums. Further evidence of this was in the teachers' perspectives on their experiences in the classroom research training and mentoring programme. Practicality and relevance to the teachers' immediate classroom needs were noted as key features of the mentoring programme. Teachers also valued the personalised digital mentoring, suggesting that it blurred the barriers of digital space, making them feel as if it was a face-to-face encounter (Rachel, section 5.3).

Another key finding of this study was in relation to how access to digital professional development impacts on teachers' classroom practices (RQ3). Data from 1,582 (56 per cent) survey respondents shows that through engagement with digital spaces, teachers found resources for their own language development and for their classroom practice; they found opportunities to interact with like-minded and inspiring teachers beyond their institutional contexts (see 4.5). Phase Two of this project provided us further insights into teachers' classroom practices through their exploratory research projects. As findings presented in section 5.4 show, in addition to learning research skills (5.4.1), teachers reported better rapport with and understanding of learning processes from their students (5.4.2), improved classroom practice (5.4.3), as well as their own self-realisation and a developing sense of agency (5.4.4). Their improved classroom practices were further highlighted in their accounts of the changes made to their teaching as a result of their engagement in research with their students (see <https://www.britishcouncil.cn/en/teach/JulyWebinar>).

In reflecting on these changes, teachers showed how the evidence-base for their practices had been developed, positioning themselves not just as reflective practitioners but also as generators of pedagogical knowledge in context. This is consistent with the argument that 'localised mentoring practices and contextualised teacher education ... can enhance the potential of teachers and result in the development of thought leadership, which is essential for sustainable teacher development' (Kuchah & Salama, p213).

6.2. Recommendations

On the basis of the findings presented and discussed above, the following recommendations for reconfiguring the way forward for sustainable digital teacher professional development in China are offered.

1. Digital platforms are no doubt an asset for teacher professional development in China, and there are existing platforms with which teachers are already familiar. While it is understood that technology will continue to evolve, it is important that digital CPD providers are aware of the platforms that teachers are currently familiar with so that they can use these rather than introducing new platforms that might add to the cognitive burden of teachers and impede their subject content and pedagogic knowledge development. It is particularly important that foreign providers of OCPD are aware of local platforms, as what is construed as a 'global platform', and the generic norms of online CPD prevalent in the West, might not be applicable in China. For example, platforms such as Zoom are not often utilised locally, and free accounts are not currently available in China. Besides, many foreign platforms often do not provide language support in a way that local platforms developed with the Chinese English language teacher in mind might do. It may, for example, be worth looking at the platforms that schools currently use for teaching and learning and exploring these options for digital CPD offers and delivery so that teachers' digital learning spaces are consistent with their day-to-day digital teaching spaces.
2. Consider teachers' real and emerging needs and involve them in decisions about the content and delivery of programmes. Chinese teachers are less concerned about the medium of their CPD (digital or face-to-face) as they are about the method and materials used. As shown in this study, teachers need hands-on practical resources and activities that can directly inform their classroom practices, rather than theoretical discussions that might not be immediately relevant for their job. Consideration needs to be given to existing differences in teachers' language proficiency levels, their pedagogic knowledge and the levels (e.g. primary, secondary, etc.) in which they teach, in order to design more focused and relevant CPD packages for more teachers.
3. Consider diversifying digital CPD provision with the view of supporting teachers to develop knowledge and skills for the classroom, while at the same time harnessing their ability to generate their own knowledge and critical understanding of language education in their context. Government digital platforms, such as Smart Education of China, that provide free learning, teaching and CPD resources can be very useful for novice teachers, but they may not be useful for developing teachers as thought leaders and knowledge producers. In this study, a form of classroom research mentoring – exploratory action research – is proposed as a possible alternative to top-down theory-led training. As the evidence presented in section 5 shows, this can be a powerful way of developing student – teacher collaboration, leading to improved classroom interaction, shared ownership of learning and teacher agency. There is, however, the issue of how classroom research mentoring might be developed to support large numbers of teachers at scale in a country like China. To support this, the research team recommend a cascading model that initially supports a pool of local mentors through experiential



online training and expert mentoring via a combination of synchronous and asynchronous modes. The sustainability and eventual upscaling of classroom research mentoring could be enhanced by collecting teachers' research presentations and reports (such as those from the programme trialled in this study) into an open access digital repository which teachers could be encouraged to explore.

4. In relation to (and as an extension of) recommendation 3, it is worth exploring a combination of group and one-to-one school- or community of practice based mentoring that provides teachers with step-by-step support, while respecting their agency. This can be through self-paced or self-directed online programmes that recognise CPD as a lifelong process, rather than a collection of occasional training episodes. This would require upscaling an improved version of the content processes of the programme trialled in this study. Such a programme could include pre-prepared recordings of key presentations with accompanying resources and embedded tasks for teachers to complete. These, together with the repository of presentations and reports mentioned in recommendation 3, would serve as digitally hosted artefacts for future reference. Resources included in the repository could be either in teachers' L1 or in English and could include subtitles so that they are accessible to teachers with low language proficiency as well as those with certain disabilities or impairments. In this upscaled CoP-based model, mentors would have both academic and pastoral roles in sustaining teacher motivation. It is therefore important to develop, in the mentor training mentioned above, a reciprocal approach to mentoring that provides space for reflexivity between mentor and mentee, as this can potentially play a transformative role in teacher development (Kuchah & Salama, 2022). Besides this, establishing a community of practitioners and working together on exploring aspects of their practice can help them support, motivate and inspire each other (as shown in section 5.6) and create long-term bonds that help sustain their professional learning.
5. Education authorities and employers at national and local levels need to consider making OCPD part of a comprehensive formal offer of time and resource allocation for teachers to engage digitally. Particular attention needs to be paid to the CPD of primary-level teachers in rural communities, given that a high proportion of respondents who had not participated in OCPD in the previous two years were primary school teachers (405 out of 590), and 63.5 per cent of them were from rural areas. It is also important to bear in mind that while classroom research processes, such as exploratory action research, can be embedded into teachers' daily classroom practices, training to become a classroom researcher requires time commitments that may be impractical for busy teachers struggling to complete a syllabus and prepare students for high-stakes exams. Additionally, allocating dedicated time for online CPD provision is challenging given that teachers' time commitments to digital CPD may not be as visible as they are for in-person CPD, which often requires teachers to be away from their workplace. Consideration of how this could be arranged in each context is necessary. Authorities also need to consider offering official accreditation (see also Borg et al., 2022) for engagement in and completion of classroom research (assessed through a published report and resources in the repository), whether through on- or offline means.
6. The research team also recommend that classroom research should be treated in a similar way to existing teaching competitions that support competitive comparison across regions. This could include a collaborative dimension, with teachers encouraged to work together on joint classroom research projects as part of a community of practice. This is particularly important as an extrinsic form of motivation that could strongly complement the existing intrinsic motives expressed in section 4.2.

7. Limitations

This study should be understood in the light of the following two limitations.

First, the sample sizes for both phases of this study are not only too small to warrant a generalisation of the findings but also are based on data from participants accessed through convenient sampling via online modes only. As reported earlier (section 3) the Phase One baseline survey responses were obtained from teachers attending a British Council China NODE project, as well as through the broader British Council China and the research team members' networks in China. Collecting data through an online survey means that the perspectives of teachers who do not regularly access digital spaces, as well as those who are not readily accessible by the British Council, are not represented in the study. Furthermore, the open-ended nature of the questionnaire allowed for responses that needed follow-up interviews to probe further into respondents' perspectives. Unfortunately, despite attempts to contact teachers after the initial analysis of the survey data, none of the teachers contacted responded to our invitation to interview, despite initially providing their contact details in their survey responses for this purpose. As a result, issues that the research team would have wanted to pursue (e.g. gendered experiences and language proficiency challenges) are not fully explored in this report.

Second, the nature of the intervention in Phase Two of this study made it difficult to ensure complete anonymity of the participants. They were made aware of the expectations of the programme (see Appendix 1), including the fact that they would be required to give an online presentation and write a research report for publication before they consented to participate. Given the small number of teachers involved, the lack of anonymity and the fact that participants were interviewed by their own mentors (which is recognised as an ethical issue despite the collegiality and sense of community developed throughout the programme), it is culturally unlikely that the teachers would be too critical of the research mentoring programme. Therefore, it is likely that there were other challenges and suggestions beyond those presented in sections 5.6 and 5.7 respectively that were not raised by these teachers.



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Appendices



Appendix 1: Mentoring programme invitation and application form

Elsewhere: National Online Digital Development of English Teachers (NODE)
Exploratory Action Research Mentoring Programme
27 March – 30 June 2023

中国英语教师专业能力建设项目(NODE)
探索性行动研究指导项目
2023年3月27日-- 6月30日

The British Council China is recruiting 12 Chinese primary and secondary English language teachers to support their professional development by creating a classroom research project. You'll be mentored by a renowned group of international and Chinese teacher researchers.

If you are keen to solve a problem or a puzzle in your classroom, would like expert advice and can commit 10–11 weeks from March to May 2023 in conducting your own classroom research with your students and/or colleagues, please sign up for this exciting project.

This does not need a high English proficiency level, but you will need to be able to understand and communicate with the international mentor in webinars and one-to-one mentoring. Your report could be written in Chinese or English, as you prefer.

英国文化教育协会中国办公室现正在中国招募12名中小学英语教师，通过创建一个课堂教学研究项目来支持这些教师的专业发展。作为项目参与者，您将得到由国内外知名教师研究员组成的专家小组的指导。

如果您急需解决自己课堂教学中的一个问题或难题、希望寻求专业知识的建议，并且能在2023年3至5月之间投入10-11周的时间，对自己的真实课堂教学和学生（以及/或者联合其他教师同行）开展相关的研究，欢迎您报名参加这一激动人心的项目。

参与者无需精通英文，但您需要具备相应水平，能在导师开展的在线研讨会以及一对一指导中充分交流。您可以根据自己的喜好选择中文或英文撰写项目报告或论文。

Benefits and learning outcomes for the teachers

By the end of the project, you'll have:

- 1) had the opportunity to work closely with a group of international and Chinese research mentors
- 2) had solid experience with exploratory action research, and better understanding of related research methods.
- 3) become an expert in your classroom context, being able to identify a problem and find solutions without being told by others
- 4) been able to embed the research approach in your classroom practice as part of your normal work without designing extra lessons
- 5) a PowerPoint presentation of your research and be able to share the learning with your peers
- 6) an edited research paper of approximately 1,500–2,000 words that is publishable
- 7) a British Council certificate to recognise your research experience and achievement
- 8) had a chance to develop your experience and skills as a practitioner and researcher.

在这个项目结束时，您将

- 1) 有机会与国内外的研究员导师紧密合作；
- 2) 在探索性行动研究方面拥有扎实的经验，并提升对相关研究方法的认识了解；
- 3) 成为自己课堂教学的专家，无需他人提醒，能够自主发现问题并找到解决方案；
- 4) 能够将研究方法有机地与自己的课堂教学实践相结合，作为自己常规工作的一部分，而无需设计额外的教学课；
- 5) 拥有一份有关自己研究的Power Point演示文稿，并能与同伴分享其中的收获；
- 6) 拥有一份篇幅约1,500-2,000字、经过编辑并可以用于发表的研究论文；
- 7) 获得一份英国文化教育协会颁发的证书，作为对您本次研究经验和成就的认可；
- 8) 有机会拓展作为一线教学实践者和研究人员的经验和技能。



Timeline

Application deadline:

17.00 Wednesday 22 March 2023

Classroom research timeframe:

Monday 27 March – 19 May 2023 (7 weeks)

Report writing and presentation:

Complete by Friday 30 June 2023 (6 weeks)

时间安排

申请截止日期:

2023年3月22日星期三17:00

课堂教学研究的时间范围:

2023年3月27日星期一至5月19日星期五 (7周)

报告撰写和展示:

2023年6月30日星期五前完成 (6周)

Application form

Please submit your application to Elsie Shi at elt@britishcouncil.org.cn by 17.00 Wednesday 22 March 2023. Subject line of the application email: please write 'NODE Action Research Mentoring Project – Application'

Name	
Your role and the grade that you are teaching (e.g. Teacher/Grade 5)	
School	
District/Township, City, Province	
Gender	
An initial problem or a puzzle that you hope to solve	
Your signing of commitment of time from 27 March to 30 June (signature)	
Your mobile phone	
Your email address	

申请表

请于2023年3月22日17.00前提交以下报名信息至Elsie Shi elt@britishcouncil.org.cn.

邮件主题，请注明：NODE Action Research Mentoring Project – Application

姓名	
您的角色以及目前所教年级 (例如：教师 / 五年级)	
您所在的学校	
您所在的省、市、区/县、镇	
您的性别	
您希望解决的一个问题或难题	
请签名确认3月27日-6月30日期间 将投入项目所需的时间 (签名)	
您的手机号码	
您的电子邮箱	

Appendix 2: Survey of digital learning and professional development

Dear Colleague

In order to understand how Chinese schoolteachers might be better supported, we are investigating the relationship between digital training, professional development and classroom practices. The term 'digital training' here refers to a range of online opportunities for professional development, including online courses, webinars, conferences and other online resources related to teaching English.

Please fill in your responses to the questions below. **We particularly encourage you to provide extensive details to question 5.** The information you provide in this survey will be used for research purposes only and we shall ensure strict confidentiality and anonymity.

NODE Project Research Team

Please tell us about yourself.

Gender: male / female

Years of teaching: 0–3 years / 4–9 years / 10–15 years / 16–20 years / 21+ years

Educational qualification: Doctorate / Master's degree / Bachelor's degree / Associate degree / Others

What level of students do you teach? Primary school / Junior high school / Senior high school

Where is your school located?

Province:

City / Prefecture:

Where is your school situated? Urban / Rural

1. In the last two years, have you been involved in any online professional development activities?

Yes / No

2. If yes, what are the two top reasons for your involvement in online professional development?

Reason 1. _____

Reason 2. _____

3. What are the two top challenges in your online learning/training?

Challenge 1. _____

Challenge 2. _____

4. Which digital platforms do you currently use for your professional development?

Zoom / Tencent Meeting / Ding Talk / Other platforms:



5. Please choose one or two of the platforms you have listed in 4 above. For each, give one example of what you learned from the platform(s), and how this was useful in your practice and professional development. Please write as much as possible.

We would like to continue this study with you through interviews and classroom observations at a later stage. If you would be willing to take part in later parts of the study, please give your contact information below:

Preferred Name: _____

Email address: _____

Appendix 3: The open-ended questionnaire (bilingual, CEAI version)

数字化学习与专业发展调查

(Survey of digital learning and professional development)

尊敬的各位参训老师：

欢迎您参加中国英语教师专业能力建设(NODE)项目！作为项目监测评估的一部分，研究团队将分阶段研究数字化培训和您的专业发展以及课堂实践之间的关系。数字化培训这里指的是各类在线专业发展机会，包括网络课程、线上研讨、网络会议以及其他英语教学相关的在线资源。

请回答以下问卷问题。其中**第5题尤其希望您能尽可能地详尽回答。**

您在本问卷所提供的信息仅作参考用途，我们将严格遵循研究保密与匿名原则。

Dear Participants:

Welcome you taking part in the National Online Digital Development of English Teachers (NODE) project. As part of the project monitoring and evaluation, the research team would be investigating the relationship between digital training, your professional development and your classroom practices through a number of research phases. The term 'digital training' here refers to a range of online opportunities for professional development, including online courses, webinars, conferences and other online resources related to teaching English.

Please fill in your responses to the questions below. You are encouraged to provide extensive details to question 5.

The information you provide in this survey will be used for research purposes only and we shall ensure strict confidentiality and anonymity.

请告诉我们您的基本信息：

Please tell us about yourself:

性别 Gender: 男 male 女 female

教龄 Years of teaching: 0-3年 0-3 years 4-9年 4-9 years 10-15年 10-15 years
 16-20年 16-20 years 21年以上 21+ years

最高学历(学位) Educational qualification:

博士研究生 Doctorate 硕士研究生 Master's Degree 本科学士 Bachelor's Degree
 专科 Associate Degree 其他 others

所教学生层次 What level of students do you teach:

小学 Primary school 初中 Junior high school 高中 Senior high school

学校所在地 Where is your school located:

省份 Province: _____ 地级市(州) City/Prefecture: _____

学校所在环境 Where is your school situated:

城区 Urban 乡镇 Rural

1. 在最近两年内，您是否有参加过在线专业发展活动？

In the last 2 years, have you been involved in any online professional development activities?

有 Yes 无 No

2. 如果有，您参加在线专业发展活动最主要的两个原因是什么？

If yes, what are the two top reasons for your involvement in online professional development?

原因1. Reason 1. _____

原因2. Reason 2. _____

3. 在参加在线学习或培训的过程中，您遇到的两个最大的挑战是什么？

What are the two top challenges in your online learning/training?

挑战1. Challenge 1. _____

挑战2. Challenge 2. _____

4. 为了您的专业发展，您目前使用的数字平台有哪些？【多选题】

Which digital platforms do you currently use for your professional development?

Zoom平台 Zoom

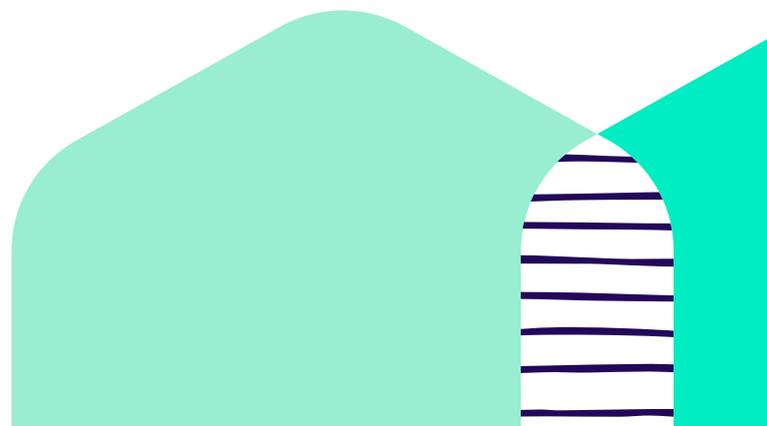
腾讯会议 Tencent Meeting

钉钉 Ding Talk

其他更多平台 Other platforms: _____

5. 在您对问题4的回答中，选择一个或两个数字平台，一个平台举一个例子，说明您从该平台学到什么，该平台对您的教学实践和专业发展有何帮助。**请尽可能详尽描述。**

Please choose one or two of the platforms you have listed in 4 above. For each, give one example of what you learned from the platform(s), and how this was useful in your practice and professional development. Please write as much as possible.



Appendix 4: Focus group interview guide

Following are the four main questions discussed during the interview:

- A. We have all participated in the NODE classroom research project, but in our own different contexts. Could you very briefly describe your personal experience?
- Why did you participate?
 - What did you expect to get out of the project?
 - What did you gain from the project?
- B. Did you meet with any difficulties or problems in the process? If yes, how did you manage them?
- Why were there such difficulties or problems?
 - What support did you get?
- C. Compared with your past training experience, how different or how similar is the NODE mentoring project?
- What previous training? What about? What involved?
 - Online training? Online mentoring?
 - Top reasons for online learning/training?
 - Top challenges for online learning/training?
 - What digital platforms used? What best? Any examples?
- D. What suggestions do you have for organising teacher training programmes/projects so that teachers can be better supported?
- Online or offline?
 - What support? Whose support?

The focus group interview was video-recorded with the participants' consent, and extracted findings reported below.

Appendix 5: Final reports by the five mentoring programme participants

Appendix 5a: Participant report 1 (Cassie, primary school teacher) Improving my vocabulary teaching for my 2nd Grade students

My teaching context

I work in a public primary school in Foshan City, Guangdong Province. I am a novice teacher teaching 2nd Grade students. My students, they only have 3 English lessons a week, 40 minutes for each class. And they are about 7 or 8 years old. They are very young and active. It's very hard for them to concentrate on the class. A few students can not remember the words they learn in the last class. Before I got into this research, I noticed very few students engaged in my classroom activities and respond to my exercise in my vocabulary class. So I want to explore how to teach my vocabulary more effectively in my class.

What I did

In order to work better with my students in my vocabulary class, I chose these four questions to work with in my action research:

01. What difficulties do my students face in the English class?
02. What can help my students learn new words in class?
- 03 How do my students feel in my class?
04. What strategies I can apply to help my students use new words in class?

To understand the challenge my students faced in my vocabulary class, I design an open-ended questionnaire based on these four questions I am interested in. All my 35 students participate in the questionnaire anonymously.

What I learned

From the answer they wrote on the questionnaire, I learned three things. First, they mentioned they wants more songs, games and body language in class. That is to say, they wants me to apply more songs, games and TPR when I teach vocabulary. Here, TPR means a foreign language teaching method in when teacher asks students do something in Foreign language and students must act with their body movements. Second, my students agreed that making sentences can really help them to master and use new words. Actually, I did ask my students to make sentences, they were unwilling to do that. So, I discussed with my mentor Harry. My mentor asked me to reflect the way I asked my students to make sentences. Before I did this research , I just gave the pictures to ask students to make sentences which is not fun enough. That's the reason why they were unwilling to make sentences in my class. After discussion, I found I can apply my flashy performance to make my students feel interesting to make sentences. More Chinese. My students said I speak too much English in class and they felt anxious to listen so much English because it is hard for them to understand my English instruction.

What I tried and wanted to try

After data collection and discussion with my mentor. I decided to apply three things in my class: TPR, Chinese instruction explanation and fun way to make sentences. What I just tried out is TPR. TPR can engage more students to follow the teacher's instruction and help them to understand and remember the words. Even though students who easily distracted do action following the students around them. And body experience also impressed students so that they would not easily forget the words. I also apply more Chinese instruction in my class so that my student can understand me better. Nowadays many private schools and educational institutions advocate all English class. It is good idea to students in English. However, it is unsuitable for my forty-students class which is a large class in a public school especially for those young and active students. When I apply more Chinese explanation and instruction my student would quickly understand me so that we can focus more on our target language points. TPR and Chinese instruction are what I just tried out in my vocabulary class and I can hear more laugh in my class and more students remember what they learned in the last class. I hope I can try more fun way to make sentence in my future practice.

My reflections

First, children play to learn, touch to learn and feel to learn. I can give students more sensory experience. For example, when I teach words about animals are not only show them the pictures of animals but also play the animal sounds for my students. Different sensory experience can attract and help my students to remember the words easily. When they have the same experience next time, these words would come to their mind.

Second, allow some Chinese in class. I should use more Chinese instruction to help young learners understand the me better. When students cannot understand teacher they would lose their interests and confidence in English class. That is very negative for English learning.

Third, suggestions from students are important. I can know more about the class from students' view. Students' idea can make me know the deficiency I can promote on my own teaching.

Appendix 5b: Participant report 2 (Daisy, primary school teacher)

How can assessment help my students with their English learning?

Teaching context

I'm an English teacher from Primary School Attached to Huazhong University of Science and Technology (HUST). It is located in Wuhan, Hubei Province, in the central part of China. The school is under the direct management of the university. And I have been teaching English in this school for more than ten years since my graduation from college.

I teach pupils of three classes from Grade Five to Grade Six, with each class of more than fifty pupils. They have been learning English from Grade Three and now we have four English classes per week. Most of the parents are the teaching staff of the university. Therefore, some of my students who have a short foreign study experience can speak English very well. In my class I divide the children into several groups, with each group of four to six members. They have basic awareness of cooperative learning and most group members work along well with each other.

Research questions

In my English class, I often use 'Good job' or 'Wonderful' such colloquial words to encourage my students or to evaluate their performance on the task. We mainly have two kinds of assessment methods, group points and performance brochure. When students finish tasks, they can get points for their group. When they behave well in groups, they can get a seal on the brochure as well. However, sometimes my students are too eager to get points that they focus more on the group points ranking than doing the task itself. Therefore, these kinds of assessment do not seem to really evaluate their learning effect in class.

In 2022, China's Ministry of Education published the 'Compulsory English Curriculum Standards', which advocates 'teaching-learning-assessment alignment'. My understanding is that teaching, learning and assessment should be regarded as a whole. This sparked my thinking. In order to figure out how the three elements work in my class, I developed the following questions:

1. How does current assessment help my students' learning?
2. How do I improve the way of aligning my teaching to assessment?
3. Are there any strategies to design lessons so that teaching and learning can be aligned with the assessment?

My action

To answer my exploratory research questions, I tried to use different possible sources of information and data. For the first question, I collected classroom observation of my students' groupwork performance and their responses to the questionnaire after class. To answer the second question, I wrote my own teaching reflections after class. To answer the third question, I practice my own lesson plans as well.

First, I invited two of my colleagues to observe my class. One observes my students' group work performance with assessment standards. The other focuses on the numbers of my students raising hands and answering questions. So that I can get a close insight of my students' performance on tasks. It will also help me know how my students behave under clear assessment standards.

After class, I asked 20 of my students (in different levels) to complete a questionnaire on their opinions of assessment. Such as, 'I know what assessment is.' 'Teacher's praise doesn't work for me.' 'Assessment helps me learn actively.' 'I'd like to do group tasks so that my group can get more points.' 'I also want to know what my classmates think of my performance.' 'Assessment standards help me know how to do clearly.' And I also asked them to answer the same three questions like 'What is assessment in class?' 'Do you want to know what your teacher and classmates think of your performance in class?' 'What kind of assessment in class do you prefer?' Their responses help me understand what they have known about assessment and what they really think about it.

What's more, I wrote my teaching reflections to review and reanalyze the assessment in my class and I also read some references about assessment. I tried to write lesson plans and design assessment standards in a unit. For example, in our textbook, there is a unit called 'I love reading'. In this unit, I designed several activities. One of the tasks in Lesson 1 is a speech of talking about the fun things in a book. We have 3 standards to finish this task. Level A is the top standard. That is, my students who can describe the fun things in a creative, reasonable and logic way. In the speech, they are able to show their love for reading from different points of view. In Level B, they only need to finish the task with complete sentences and describe the fun things they learn in the book. But level C refers to my students who need help to finish the task.

What I found

I found something really useful and helpful from what I did. First, I found that assessment help my students learn actively. They care about what I think of their performance and they really want to do it well. Second, my students are willing to finish group tasks so that their group can get more points. And clear assessment standards help my students participate more in group tasks. Third, most of my students want to get feedback from me and their classmates. They want to know what their classmates or friends think about their performance in class because they think peers' feedback help them do better next time. Fourth, I also found that designing assessment activities in continuous lessons help my students' better understanding of the whole unit. For instance, let's still take a look at the unit 'I love reading'. In lesson 1, the assessment activity is to do the speech of 'Fun in the book'. In lesson 2, my students take part in a practice radio programme to guess the book title according to what they described. In lesson 3, they introduce their favourite books. The assessment standards are different according to different lessons but they have internal relations as a whole. It will help my students better understand the unit content.

These findings indicate that teaching, learning and assessment cannot be separated. My students learn what I want them to learn and my teaching ensures that they learn it well while assessments reveal how well they have learned. In this way, the three elements align closely and they reinforce each other.

What I will do next

What I found gave me great encouragement and it leads me the way of next move. In my future teaching, I think I'll put my findings into teaching practice. I will provide my students with timely feedback and let assessment be the motivation of their English learning. Provide clearer assessment standards to make sure my students know well how to do the task. Use different assessment methods, such as mutual assessment in teamwork, not just feedback from me. Design continuous assessment activities in a unit when writing lesson plans.

My reflections

In the process of doing the research, I've gained a lot from it. I do have some time to read and get a deeper understanding of Compulsory English Curriculum Standards. Meanwhile, this project offered me an opportunity to observe, to talk with my students, which helps me know more about what my students think and want. And I also get a better understanding of doing classroom research. In this project, I've learned what exploratory action research is, the ways to collect data, how to analyze the data and how to interpret the findings.

Through the research, I've discovered that doing research is a scientific and systematic project which requires continuous learning awareness and ability. It has offered me an opportunity to find problems in the real class and reexamine my education and teaching process. These are all thanks to the opportunity given to me by the British Council and the guidance of my mentors. It is of great significance to me and I'm sure it will definitely influence my future teaching career.

Appendix 5c: Participant report 3 (Faye, junior high school teacher)

How to motivate my students to be active in class?

I teach in the Affiliated Foreign Language Middle School of Xinzhou Teachers University. I teach two different classes of the students in grade eight. There are about 50 students in each class. Each learning group consists of 6 group members. We have 5 English classes per week.

Research questions

The students in my classes have the same contexts and work within the same educational system. However, many students in one of my classes didn't seem to actively participate in class and lacked motivation to put up their hands and answer questions. And I wanted to know the reason why and how to motivate my students to be active in class.

What I did

I chose three questions to my students to work with during the exploratory research process.

1. Why can't you focus attention in English class?
2. How to be active in English class?
3. What can teachers do to help students increase their participation in English class?

From the questionnaires, we can see that forty students were afraid of making mistakes and being laughed by others and seventeen of them couldn't focus their attention in class because of their poor pronunciation. They weren't able to totally understand the teacher's instructions or express themselves clearly. One of my students said: 'I like to play games with my classmates and I can get into a relaxed mood. Working in groups helped me a lot. Because we could find solutions together and someone could explain to us when we didn't understand something immediately.' They also told me that singing a song or playing games were the activities they liked most. Working in groups also helped a lot. As for teachers, they proposed teachers should give them more opportunities to express themselves.

What I found

Through questionnaires, one to one interview with my students and keeping a reflective teaching journal, I found that game-based teaching and group work activities are effective for increasing my students' participation and confidence in class.

How my teaching changed

Based on the findings, I explored and chose the suitable teaching methods to help my students to be active in class. I chose a passage from our textbook. It is a story about teamwork. I designed the class based on students' needs and decided to start the class with a song We Will Rock You. Then students worked in groups of six to read the article, got the meaning of the passage, wrote down main ideas of each paragraph, discussed the questions and chose their favorite characters to role play the passage. Meanwhile, they could write down their own lines to help them role play better. When they are ready, they could put up their hands and show themselves to all the other students in turn. If students behaved well, they could get points for their group or I would give them some small gifts for praise.

By the end of the class, I observed several changes. The first one was that my students actually did the activities and I could observe many hands up to participate in the lesson. There is an old saying: 'Tell me and I will forget; show me and I might remember; involve me and I will understand.' Group work is an activity that can involve almost every student. In addition, the consistent group practice carried out in the class was useful in improving their confidence. They could choose what they are interested in and show what they are really good at. Some active group members could also affect the degree of others' participation in the classroom interactions. At the same time, I knew encouragement was effective in helping learning take place. Students' confidence will be increased through teachers' praise. From the students' smiling faces and standard pronunciation, I knew they felt motivated and more successful. In terms of my teaching, I became more flexible and patient with the students and provided them more support.

Reflection

Through this project, I have learned that doing classroom research can be helpful to improve my teaching practice. This gave me the opportunity to know my students' learning needs, which is something I had never done before. Students are able to be active if we, as teachers, implement strategies according to their needs. I am able to see a change which motivate me to continue working like this. Furthermore, this action research made me aware that sharing problems with others can bring solutions. 'Sharing is caring' is what I believe in now, since discussing my problems with others enriched my knowledge and I also found solutions. Small issues faced during teaching on a daily basis can be resolved by working with my colleagues, as they understand the students and the system. Through peer observation, we exchanged ideas and had long discussions on the topic of my research. This helped me a lot and enlightened my insights.

Appendix 5d: Participant report 4 (Summer, junior high school teacher)

How can I engage all my students in group work?

I teach in the Affiliated Foreign Language Middle School of Xinzhou Teachers University, which is located at the foot of Mount Wutai. My students are aged from 12 to 15 and I teach 2 classes of students in Grade 8.

What problems I had

There are about 50 students in each class. Usually, they are divided into 8–12 groups with 4–6 in each, but these students are in different levels in English learning. So sometimes some of them are reluctant to participate in group work to cooperate with other group members to finish their group work tasks. As a result, my problem is that how I can make all my students engage in group work.

What I did first

In order for me to understand better what was happening to my students, I decided to start by exploring the reasons behind their lack of engagement in group work. First, I asked 3 questions to myself.

- ① What is my understanding of group work?
- ② Why do I think group work is useful?
- ③ How do I design groupwork?

Meanwhile, I made a questionnaire to 10 colleagues in different subjects in Chinese to ask them 20 questions to know what their understanding of group work is, how they designed group work in class, what problems they faced and how they dealt with these problems. Also, I made a questionnaire to a class with 46 students and asked them 12 questions. The first 5 questions asked in what kind of activity they can contribute. The activities consisted of the activity of reading, the activity of grammar, the activity of compositions and the activity of listening, in which teachers use group work to organize teaching more frequently. The other 7 questions as follows are the factors that influenced the participation.

Questions about factors that influence the participation	agree	indifferent	disagree
6.Group-work helps me to be positive and improves my learning initiative	41	4	1
7.The type of the group-work organization affect my degree of participation	17	5	24
8.The topic affect the degree of my participation	22	3	21
9.Who are the group members affects the degree of my participation	19	3	25
10.The difficulty level affects the degree of my participation	18	8	20
11.My own internal problems such as the physical condition, characters, the mood that day etc. that affect the degree of my participation	20	5	21
12.Previous knowledge affects the degree of my participation	38	2	6

What I found

According to the analysis of students' and teachers' responses to the questionnaires, I found that both teachers and students are familiar with group work and like group work most among all the teaching organizational forms, because they think if the group work is designed reasonably, it can help students to be more positive and also improves their learning initiative. However, there is a common problem that sometimes students do have trouble in engaging the discussion although they are really eager to engage in. Besides, I found that it is much more difficult for students to engage themselves in the discussion about grammar. What's more, not knowing well about previous knowledge limits students' participation.

What I did next

As a result, I designed a group work in which I guided students to cooperate with group members to summarize some key aspects of Simple Past Tense and put it in use after reviewing that of Simple Present Tense.

First, I gave each group a sheet on which they could see the key aspects of Simple Present Tense and a short passage My Day that put the tense in use.

Then, we together reviewed the meaning, structure and time of Simple Present Tense and appreciated the passage to check whether the three aspects are put in use correctly.

Next, students worked in groups and summarized the key aspects of Simple Past Tense and showed what they have found one by one.

After that, they finished a short passage My Day Yesterday individually to put the key aspects they summarized in use.

Finally, they appreciated each of their work in groups. They took turns to charge the correct use of each aspect of the tense when appreciating.

During the group work, I noticed every group member engaged in the discussion to cooperate to finish the task. Each of them contributed something and managed the target knowledge in this class.

What I learned

From the experience, I learned how to help my students improve the ability to engage in group work. It means if group work activities are suitable for students in different levels, they will be confident to express themselves and to cooperate with others better. Also, as a teacher, I learned what I can do to help students cooperate with each other efficiently. On the one hand, when creating a group work, I should list sub-tasks under the main topic for students in different levels. On the other hand, I should make sure students managed enough previous knowledge before the target group work.

My reflections

It is the first time for me to do research and presentation. Through the whole process, I become more confident to do more research and share my ideas with other teachers. More importantly, I develop my ability to deal with classroom challenges by working with students. In other words, when I meet problems in class in the future, I can not only ask the experts for help, but also be able to find out the answers by myself.

Appendix 5e: Participant report 5 (Rachel, junior high school teacher)

My story of working with disruptive students

My name is Qiu Liangjie, in my story of working with disruptive students, I'll first give a brief introduction of the context, then talk about the problem I faced, what I did for it, what I did next, what I will do in my future teaching and what I gained from this project, and finally, I'll give thanks to my dear mentors and colleagues in this project.

My English name is Rachel. I was born, am living and working here in Shaoguan, a beautiful mountainous city in the northmost part of Guangdong Province in China. I am now an English teacher for the 7th graders in Guangdong Beijiang Experimental School, a private school with about 3000 students aged from 12 to 18.

My students are from different primary schools in Shaoguan. They are enrolled by computer allocation. Some of them are good at English while some are very weak English learners. They are very active and energetic kids at the age of 12 and 13. Their learning habits and classroom behavior need to be taught and regulated by the joint effort of all teachers in our daily teaching and learning process.

I teach 10 classes in Grade 7 this term and there are 50 students in each class. I meet them once a week to have Oral English lessons with them. In my opinion, oral English lessons are relaxing and interesting for students, and students will like them and work well with the teachers. However, to my surprise and disappointment, I find that students are really disruptive in class and I have to stop several times during the lesson to discipline them. But then, they would be noisy again soon.

So I asked myself, 'Why are my students so disruptive in class? How can I make them less disruptive? How can I work with these disruptive students?'

At first, I thought that was because my lessons were not interesting enough to engage all of the students or most of the students. To solve this problem, I should work harder to improve my own teaching skills and look for more ways to get students involved in class like adding more interesting elements like songs and games in my teaching, so that students would be able to focus on the lesson and be less disruptive in it.

So in this project, I asked my mentor, 'My students are disruptive in class. How can I improve my teaching?' My mentor stared at me online, looking quite puzzled. 'Rachel, is your puzzle why your students are disruptive or is your puzzle how to improve teaching?' He asked. I thought they were effect and cause: If I can improve my teaching, then, my students will be concentrated on the lesson and the disruptive problem will be solved. But then I learned that they were not cause and effect, instead, they were two totally different questions! I put them together as cause and effect just because of my own assumption! My puzzle is in fact: Why are my students disruptive in class?

What were my students' ideas about this puzzle? What problems were they facing? How could I help them? I've got no idea! Then I chose one of the most disruptive classes, Class 12 to do research on. I walked into the classroom and tried to listen to my students' idea and work with them. I told them that they were disruptive in class, this terribly affected our teaching and learning in class and I wanted to know why they were so disruptive in class so that we could work together to solve this problem, create a better learning environment, communicate better and help them learn better.

I wanted my students to help me to better understand them and this problem. I honestly and sincerely invited them to write down their answers to these three questions: 1) Why are you disruptive in class? 2) Why do you think your classmates are disruptive in class? 3) Give me some suggestions to solve this problem. I asked them to honestly share their ideas with me, with no names on their notes.

I got 49 pieces of notes from the 50 students. Then I put their answers together and tried to analyse them. I found they talked about 4 main reasons for the disruptive problem and gave suggestions to me and their classmates.

To my surprise, for the reasons, only one student mentioned that the teacher is not strict enough. Only 4 students mentioned that the lesson is boring. This was shocking for me because it was quite different from my assumption!

Most students mentioned reasons about themselves, especially this one: they talked in class and made noise because they wanted to solve some problems immediately, for example, when they were not sure about the answers to the teacher's questions.

As for the suggestions students gave me, I tried some of them in my class. For example, I named the students who were disruptive in class, after class, I talked with the students that were disruptive in class and asked them to write a review. For some students, it worked! But for some other students, it didn't work very well. I also tried this suggestion: When students are disruptive, teachers don't talk, let students talk. It didn't work well in my class either because students could feel that I was angry at that time and stopped to let them talk. So they would stop talking too. But then, when I went on teaching, they would be noisy again.

What do my students talk about in class? When do they often make noise? They make noise when there is something funny in my PPT [PowerPoint]? Who are the noise makers? I wanted to know more about it, so I invited my colleagues to help observe my class. It was a pity that they were so busy that nobody was able to come to my class.

Then I invited the whole class to have our oral English lesson in the recording classroom in our school. It's a classroom with cameras all around and the whole class can be recorded. It's usually used for Open Lessons. I wanted to record the whole class so as to observe it by myself and see if I can find the answers to my questions.

I didn't tell my students the reason why we were in the recording room to have a lesson that day, which I planned to do after I got some data from it, because I would like them to behave as they normally did in their own classroom and I was afraid that if I told them I wanted observe how they were disruptive in class, they would behave differently. However, it seemed that my students had already known it was a special classroom and their behavior and performance would be recorded. They behaved excellently during the whole lesson! Nobody was disruptive in it. For some of the students who wanted to make noise, their classmates reminded them and stopped them at once. Then the whole class went on so smoothly that I finally got a little disappointed because I couldn't get much data about the disruptive problem!

With the help and encouragement from my mentors, I became happy again! I felt happy for my students because they could be quiet, really quiet in class! When they knew they are observed, they would behave much better. This gives me new ideas about my future teaching: walk around the classroom more often, have eye-contact with my students, making them realize that they are observed closely by the teacher in their normal classroom too, distribute questions around the classroom, appoint students who might be distracted.

I have shared this whole story with my students too and listened to them for further reflection and action plans in order to better improve the teaching and learning in our class. Even though my students are still disruptive, they are quiet sometimes, and throughout the whole project, I have gained closer relationship with them and better mutual understanding with them.

Then, I got to know myself better through this project. Firstly and most shockingly, I learned that I had wrong assumptions about my teaching! I had never realized that or thought about that! Usually, when I met a teaching problem, I would think the reason should be like this, then I took actions to solve it. If it worked, it was okay. If it didn't work, I would think out another solution and jump into action again. I seldom stopped and thought about it, asked myself questions, asked my students questions and listened to my students. As our mentors reminded us, students are the learners, they are the most reliable people to answer our questions! And they learn best in their own ways! So, ask questions, listen to our students and work with them! Understand the puzzle fully, then, look for ways to help students. Be critical and reflective! During the project, I learned a lot from our webinars, lectures, videos and files, at first, I was so ambitious that I wanted to try most of the ways to help solve my puzzle, for example, colleagues' observation of the class, students' focus group, questionnaires, etc. However, I met a lot of difficulties trying them out, then I realized I am limited and couldn't do so many things at a time.

As for doing a research, it may not totally solve the problem we're facing, but it definitely provides great opportunities for us to know ourselves and our students better.

Finally, I'd like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude for the British Council and our dear mentors Dr. Harry Kuchah and Dr. Ronggan Zhang. I have been deeply impressed by our mentors' professionalism, their dedication to the whole project, their inspiring teaching and comments and their support to all of us. Thank you, our dear mentors, thank you, our dear colleagues in this project!



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