

# Pathways to Pre-service Teachers' Professional Development: Insights from Teacher Autonomy

Zhengping Zeng

School of Foreign Languages  
Leshan Normal University  
Leshan, China  
e-mail: bzzhp888@126.com

**Abstract**—This paper aims to explore the pathways to develop pre-service teachers' professional competence from the insights of teacher autonomy. First, the concept of teacher autonomy and its stages of development are discussed. Then, a framework of pre-service teachers' professional development is proposed. At last, the author discusses the foundation, conditions, and tools of pre-service teachers' professional development, respectively.

**Keywords**—teacher education; teacher autonomy; pre-service teacher; professional development; teacher trainee

## I. INTRODUCTION

Teacher autonomy has changed considerably over years and continues to evolve, but it has been frequently referred to within the literature on learner autonomy. It was Street and Licata (1989) who first defined teacher autonomy as teacher's feelings of independence from the institution in making instructional decisions with the classroom. Pearson and Hall's (1993) definition of teacher autonomy is "the right of teachers to manage themselves and their job environment". Shaw (2002) viewed teacher autonomy as "the capacity to take control of one's own teaching". These definitions explain teacher autonomy to some extent, but they are too abstract to be applied by teachers to foster their own autonomy. Thus, many experts have probed deeply into its concept. Smith (2008) defined teacher autonomy as self directed professional action professional development, each of which has three sub-dimensions, namely, willingness, capacity, and freedom. Based on Smith's model, teacher autonomy can be viewed as teachers' willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of one's own teaching and learning. Studying the literature on teacher autonomy, the author defines pre-service teacher autonomy as "the awareness, capacity, and freedom to take charge of one's own teaching learning which entails teaching skills, knowledge, and attitude for oneself as a teacher, and in cooperation with others as a socially responsible person". Such a definition not only implies foundation of autonomy, degrees of autonomy, and autonomy-supportive intervention but also indicates autonomy can be developed in cooperation with others.

Teacher autonomy will help teachers' professional development. Over the past decades, a great deal of research

has been conducted on teachers' autonomous development. One of the common findings is that teachers go through different stages during the learning process. Zimmerman (2000) put forward the model of self-regulation which involves three major phases: forethought phase, performance phase, and self-reflection phase. Hoffman and Pearson (2000) theorized three levels of teacher learning, i.e. knowledge-for-practice, knowledge-in-practice, knowledge-from-practice. No matter what terms are used, both models suggest diachronic development. Such a diachronic development can still be adopted in pre-service teachers' learning to teach, as pre-service teachers always prepare their lessons based on theoretical knowledge, select their own teaching strategies from knowledge-in-practice, and move on by reflecting their teaching in their teaching practicum exercise.

## II. A FRAMEWORK FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

With the combination of teacher autonomy and teacher autonomous development, we can mentor pre-service teachers' professional development on three phases (forethought, performance and reflection) (figure 1).

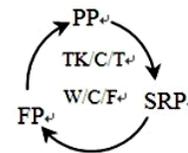


Figure 1. professional development of pre-service teachers

Keynotes: PP (Performance Phase); FP (Forethought Phase); SRP (Self-Reflection Phase); S (Structured); SS (Semi-Structured); US (Un-Structured); TK/C/T (Teacher Knowledge/Condition/Tool); W/C/F (Willingness/Capacity/Freedom)

At the three phases, pre-service teachers set a particular teacher learning goal in the domain of teacher knowledge (e.g. teaching approaches), select particular strategies to achieve that goal (e.g. planning, asking for help), and make a self-judgment on the progress, and make modification if necessary. At the level of willingness, the student teachers have the awareness to recognize themselves as future teachers, to learn some basic ideas about teacher autonomy development, to improve their teaching skills, to participate

in the teaching learning community. At the level of capacity, the student teachers can engage in the teaching learning community, implement teaching learning planning with particular effective strategies, and monitor the process within the social context. The level of freedom means that student teachers have the freedom to prescribe the best plan for their teaching learning, the freedom to develop considerable relationships. No matter at which phase there exists willingness, capacity and freedom, and there needs conditions, tools and teacher knowledge which will be discussed in the following sections in details.

In fact, the professional development of pre-service teachers is not a linear process but a hierarchical process (figure 2).

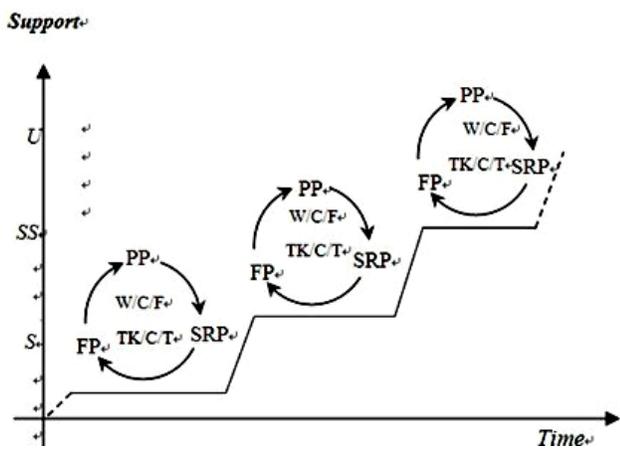


Figure 2. a hierarchical process of pre-service teachers' professional development

The repetition of circles implies the movement of professional development from lower level to higher level in a hierarchical process. The horizontal axis stands for autonomy support; vertical ordinate represents autonomy development over time. As the diagram shows, teachers' autonomous development undergoes a hierarchical process along with outward structured, semi-structured and unstructured support, and there are fluctuations in the degrees of student teachers' autonomy over time and from one area to another. While a plateau will be reached, at this moment, we need to move beyond the plateau. No matter at which level, the professional development undergoes three phases, the difference is that there are fluctuations in the degrees of teachers' autonomy over time and from one area to another.

In addition, autonomy doesn't mean independent development but cooperation with others. In the diagram, support is intended to create proper environments in which student teachers develop capacities for ongoing and self-critical reflection on their teaching learning. The structuring of support within such environments can vary considerably. Structure means the level of guide which is provided to pre-service teachers in order for them to learn teaching. In a structural system of autonomy complete guidance is given to the student teachers on how to enter the system and how to move through it. A semi-structural approach to autonomy

relies on the student teacher taking, at some stage, responsibility for choosing the materials and skills they want to work on. In an unstructured autonomy system the student teacher works with little or no guidance. That is, different degrees of support will be provided to create autonomy-supportive environments in which autonomy-supportive teachers use different autonomy-supportive instructional strategies to develop student teacher professionalism.

Observing the diagram, pre-service teachers' professional development can not be achieved without teacher knowledge, conditions, and tools. In the next section, the approaches in mentoring pre-service teachers' learning to teach will be explored.

### III. TEACHER KNOWLEDGE: A FOUNDATION OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Jack Richards (2010) proposed ten dimensions which seem to be at the core of expert teacher competence and performance in language teaching. Among the ten dimensions, most of them are under the domain of teacher knowledge. Therefore, teacher knowledge places an important role in teacher competence and performance. Obviously, the relationship between teacher knowledge and pre-service teachers' development are mutual, that is, teacher knowledge is a basic foundation of pre-service Teachers' professional development. Many researchers have explored teacher knowledge. Among the longest standing constructs of teacher knowledge is Shulman's (1987) model which includes pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), curriculum knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characters, knowledge of educational contexts, knowledge of educational goals, purposes, values, philosophy and history. Content knowledge is subject-matter knowledge or the "what" of teaching. In Shulman's view, pedagogical content knowledge is a form of practical knowledge that is used by teachers to guide their actions in highly contextualized classroom settings. This form of practical knowledge entails, among other things: (a) knowledge of how to structure and represent academic content for direct teaching to students; (b) knowledge of the common conceptions, misconceptions, and difficulties that students encounter when learning particular content; and (c) knowledge of the specific teaching strategies that can be used to address students' learning needs in particular classroom circumstances.

### IV. CONDITIONS FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

It is easy to figure that pre-service students' progress in professionalism is due simply to the fact that someone is motivated. Motivation is reasonably thought as an inner drive, impulse, emotion that moves one pre-service teacher to a particular action leading to professional development. Keller (1983, cited by Brown, H., 2001) defines motivation as "the choice people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid and the degree of effort they

will exert in that respect.” Thus, to motivate the pre-service teachers’ learning to teach, we can help pre-service teachers set their future goals and corresponding efforts they should exert. Goals could be both short-term and long-term goals, and effort could be both quantitative effort which means the time allocated to a strategy use and qualitative effort which refers to the energy spending in processing the learning material. The goals learners set are the standards by which they manage their behaviors, cognition, and motivation (Hagen & Weinstein, 1995). Setting realistic teaching learning goals which could not be too low or too high is of great important for student teachers to evaluate progress and make some changes if necessary. To approach the goals, the pre-service teachers can use some metacognitive strategies which include learning planning, setting goals, monitoring actions, and evaluating progress.

#### V. TOOLS TO PROMOTE PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS’ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To mentor pre-service teachers’ learning to teach, instructors can use three main tools such as portfolios, reflective journals, and learning community.

In constructing a portfolio, pre-service teachers can look at the pathways from studying to teach to learning to teach and reflect on how they can make some of their good work evident. Reading a portfolio makes the teacher learning process more transparent to pre-service teachers and supervisors and to foster the development of pre-service teacher autonomy. Seldin (2004) describes portfolios as “a collection of materials that document teaching performance,” bringing “together in one place information about a teacher’s significant teaching accomplishments”. Collections of materials, which can best represents pre-service teachers’ accomplishment as a TESOL professional, might include resume, language learning and teaching history, beliefs about teaching, lesson plans, professional plans, copies of degrees, certificates, honors, and awards, comments from classmates or supervisors, videos of teaching presentation and their own reflections, observations from peers’ lesson, questions and projects for next year, and so on. While collecting materials, the biggest mistakes pre-service teachers make is gathering too many materials and failing to decide what is valuable and why. Pre-service teachers can begin portfolios in several ways. A supervisor can simply ask pre-service teachers to identify three things that can highlight their ability and to list a few questions they have. After discussing what has been collected, the supervisor points out that these items could become the basis of a portfolio: what they are proud of, what they are confused about, and what they want to think more about solving (Murphey, Tim & Chen Lin, 2007). Another way to start a portfolio is for the supervisor to display past portfolios and invite pre-service teachers to look at them at the very beginning. As a tool to develop teacher autonomy, portfolios can give pre-service teachers the capacity to live their lives autonomously and provide a focus for ongoing teacher development.

Reflective journal is another good way to develop pre-service teachers’ learning to teach. Richards and Farrell

(2005) describe reflective journal as “an ongoing written account of observations, reflections, and other thoughts about teaching, usually in the form of a notebook, book, or electronic mode, which serves as a source of discussion, reflection, or evaluation”. It can help a pre-service teachers question, explore and analyze how they learn to teach and also provide a basis for dialogues with peers or mentors. For pre-service teachers, writing journals can serve as a way to facilitate their autonomous growth. For peers and mentors, reading and responding to journals can serve as means of encouraging reflective inquiry and can facilitate resolving problems. When pre-service teachers become reflective, they hold a critical attitude toward themselves, and challenge their espoused personal beliefs about language learning and teaching (Richards and Lockhart 1994). There are a lot of benefits of teaching journals, but how to keep a journal? The following procedures may help pre-service teachers who wish to keep a reflective journal to become autonomous. First, decide on your audience: yourself, a peer, and/or an instructor. Second, decide on your focus: a lesson, a technique/method, a theory, a question posed. Third, make entries on a regular basis (after a lesson, daily, or once a week). Fourth, review what you have written regularly - every 2 or 3 weeks (Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Ho & Richards, 1993).

Learning community’s goal is to provide pre-service teachers, who operate as autonomous agents, opportunities to engage in teacher learning and become more self-directed and responsible for their professional development. In such a community, they can develop practical knowledge of learning and teaching through constant engagement in the following activities to start work such as “identifying the language ability and difficulty”, “describing the language learning history” and “study plan”. Besides the above activities, pre-service teachers could participate in the following general activities to develop practical knowledge of learning and teaching in the learning community such as workshop, teaching video viewing, and maintaining portfolios and teaching journals mentioned above.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

With the insights from teacher autonomy, this paper has discussed the framework of pre-service teachers’ professional development. It is hoped that the framework might be useful to pre-service teachers in their pedagogical development. Through their willingness to struggle in engaging with social supporting forces, pre-service teachers can develop themselves autonomously with several tools such portfolios, writing journals and learning community.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper was supported by Research Project of Leshan Normal University (No. S1230).

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Street, M.S., and Licata, J.W. “Supervisor expertise: Resolving the dilemma between bureaucratic control and teacher autonomy”. *Planning and Changing*, vol. 20, pp. 97-107, 1989.

- [2] Pearson, L.C., and Hall, B.C. "Initial construct validation of the teaching autonomy scale". *Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 86, issue 3, pp. 172-177, 1993.
- [3] Shaw, J. "Team-teaching as negotiating autonomy and shared understandings of what we are doing". Symposium of the Scientific Commission on Learner Autonomy, 2002.
- [4] Smith, R. "Teacher-learner autonomy: Programme goals and student-teacher contrasts," in *Learner and Teacher Autonomy: concept, realities and responses*. Terry Lamb and Hayo Reinders, Eds. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 2008, pp. 83-101.
- [5] Zimmerman, B. J. "Attaining self-regulation: A social cognitive perspective," in *Handbook of self-regulation*, M. Boekaerts, P. R. Pintrich, M. Zeidner, Eds. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, pp. 13-39, 2000.
- [6] Hoffman, J. Pearson, P.D. "Reading Teacher Education in the Next Millennium: What your Grandmother's Teacher didn't know what your Granddaughter's Teacher should?" *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 35, pp. 28-44, 2000.
- [7] Richards, J. "Competence and-Performance in Language Teaching". *RELC Journal*, vol 41, pp.101-122, 2010.
- [8] Shulman, L. "Knowledge and teaching: Foundation of the new reform". *Harvard Education Review*, vol. 57 : 1-22, 1987.
- [9] Brown, H. D. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001.
- [10] Hagen, A. S., and Weinstein, C. E. "Achievement goals, self-regulating learning, and the role of classroom context," in *New directions for teaching and learning*. Ed. P. R. Pintrich. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995, pp.3-12.
- [11] Seldin, P. *The Teaching Portfolio*. Bolton, MA: Anker, 2004.
- [12] Murphey, Tim and Chen Lin. *Portfolio-based teacher development and appraisal with teacher performances standards*. Beijing: Foreign language teaching and research press, 2007.
- [13] Richards, J. and Thomas S. C. Farrell. *Professional Development for Language Teachers: Strategies for Teacher Learner*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- [14] Richards, J. C., and Lockhart, C. *Reflective Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- [15] Ho, B., and Richards, J. C. Reflective thinking through teacher journal writing: Myths and realities. *Prospect: A Journal of Australian TESOL*, vol. 8. pp7-24.