

Cultivation of Primary School English Teachers' Key Competencies in the Pre-service Period

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Keywords: Primary School English Teachers; Key Competency; Pre-Service Period

Abstract: Primary school English teachers should be equipped with a series of skills, attitudes and knowledge to meet the requirements of students' development in primary schools. These series of qualities, summarized as teachers' key competencies, need to be cultivated and fostered since the pre-service period. The current study tries to explore the key competencies of primary school English teachers with the view of providing feedback and guidance for education of pre-service teachers in colleges and universities.

1. Introduction

Since its proposal by the *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) in their report *Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society* in the 2003, key competency becomes a hot word for educators and researchers. Key competencies are mostly understood as the key skills of the 21st century, indicating a series of combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes [1]. *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO) defined in the 1990s a series of abilities necessary for the future society including learn to be, learn to do, learn to know, learn to live together, etc. which are in line with the essence of key competencies.

Teachers' abilities lay foundations for school education and student development [2]. Teachers' professional development is a dynamic process and key competencies are the most necessities of teacher professionalization [3]. Searching the key word *primary school English teachers key competencies* in China National Knowledge Internet, one of the largest database in China, only five articles focused on this topic. The five articles were published in 2017 (2) and 2018 (3) respectively indicating a new trend in the academic research. 20 articles could be indexed with the key word *primary school English key competencies* which means a little more research in China currently focus on the development of students' key competencies in primary schools compared with research from the perspectives of teachers. These 20 articles are also newly published ones ranging from 2017 to 2019.

The current study aims to explore teachers' key competencies in primary school English teaching. Two major research questions are addressed in the study: 1. What are the key competencies of primary school English teachers? 2. How to cultivate primary school English teachers' key competencies in the pre-service period?

2. Methodology

To answer the two major questions, a qualitative methodology of case study was adopted. Case study is the study within a real-life, contemporary context or setting. It aims at an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases. Four primary school English teachers in Shanghai, China were enrolled in the current case study.

2.1 Sample Selection

Respondents of the current study are four primary school English teachers from one primary school in Shanghai, China. Among the four teachers, three are undergraduates and one is postgraduate. Two of them have 3 years of teaching experience, one with 7 years and the other one with 31 years of teaching experience. Each of them teaches 3 classes with around 40 students in each class.

2.2 Data Collection

Since this study was an attempt to understand primary school English teachers' key competencies, individual in-depth interview was the main source of data collection. The interview protocol for this study consisted of open-ended, semi-structured questions designed to initiate conversation with the participants. The interview questions clustered around the research questions set for this study. The interview was conducted in Chinese and was tape-recorded with the consent of the participants. In addition, the interviewer took notes of the important points through the interview process.

2.3 Data Analysis

For the data analysis, after the interview, all the conversations were transcribed verbatim. The interview transcript was reviewed carefully and coded to identify all the themes emerged from it. All the emerging themes were organized around the research questions established for this study.

3. Findings and Discussions

Four major themes emerged from the interview concerning primary school English teachers' key competencies are teachers' specialized knowledge about the English subject, teachers' teaching ideas and teaching methods; teachers' learning abilities and teachers' competencies in educating students.

3.1 Theme 1: Teachers' Specialized Knowledge of the Subject

Primary school English teacher plays a critical role in beginning learners' English learning. Their knowledge and skills of English subject affects students' acquisition to a large extent. To lower graders in primary schools, teachers' phonological levels matters a lot. Therefore, teachers should be proficient in English language pronunciations, intonations, etc. Inaccurate pronunciation will mislead students and lead to bad learning results.

3.2 Theme 2: Teachers' Teaching Ideas and Teaching Methods

Teachers should follow the guidance of the latest theories and apply theories in teaching practices. Meanwhile, teachers need to know basic teaching methods and teaching skills. English teachers in primary schools should also have the capacity to carry out teaching and researching activities. They need to learn to do research based on their teaching practices.

3.3 Theme 3: Teachers' Learning Abilities

Teachers should be lifelong learners and have sustainable learning abilities. Sustainable learning is not limited to specialized subject knowledge, it is more related with teachers' abilities to learn cross-disciplinary knowledge and skills. Teachers' familiarization and application of educational information ranks one of the tops among teachers' skills in the modern world. Teaching in and out of class is putting forward higher and higher requirements for teachers, therefore, teachers should keep receiving information and updating individual abilities.

3.4 Theme 4: Teachers' Competencies in Educating Students

Teaching students knowledge and skills is only partially the mission of education. A more important function of education is to educate and to cultivate students. Teachers should care about students' psychological and moral development beyond their classroom teaching. Teachers should

love students and educate them to be a whole person.

English Curriculum Standard of Compulsory Education (2017) prescribes that English curriculum in primary schools should be both humanistic and instrumental. Students should acquire language knowledge and skills, learning strategies, and emotional and cultural attitudes through learning. Corresponding to students' five core competencies as mentioned, teachers' key competencies are generalized by Chinese scholars as solid language knowledge foundations, sufficient English subject knowledge, proficient teaching skills, good humanistic qualities, etc. [3-4] Teaching skills are further illustrated as teaching cognition abilities, teaching design abilities, teaching operation abilities, teaching assessment abilities and teaching research abilities [3]. Analyses of the four themes emerged from the current study show that English language knowledge is perceived by all the primary school English teachers participated as the most basic competency. Based on that, teachers should also be familiar with teaching theories and skills, keep learning and hold positive attitudes towards educating students from varied perspectives.

Currently in China, curriculum system for students majored in primary school education in colleges and universities is to some extent problematic. The curriculum is designed to teach students more about theories than practical skills. Students get isolated knowledge about teaching and have little experience in real teaching situations. Meanwhile, curriculum design does not change with social and educational development in a short period of time [1]. Therefore, changes are advocated to get graduates majored in primary school education more fit for social and job requirements.

Teachers' professional development is a dynamic process. To cultivate teachers' key competencies, a series of actions need to be implemented to realize the full development of teachers. First, integrate pre-service education with in-service training and practice; second, enable teachers to interact practice with their reflection-in-action; third, develop a cooperative mode in which governments, universities and primary schools develop teachers in coordination.

Colleges and universities play important roles in pre-service education. Well-designed curriculum helps students get better prepared for future job market. First, increase the proportion of courses aimed at skills training. Too many theories can hardly help students build teaching skills necessary for the job. Currently, only about 30% of students' credits go to courses or practices related with practical skills. Second, colleges and universities should form the long-acting mechanism that experienced teachers in primary school English subject enter college classrooms to instruct students. By providing students with knowledge about English subject and guidance to practical skills, college students can acquire knowledge and skills necessary for the teaching jobs. Third, colleges and universities should provide students with courses to enhance their critical thinking, research abilities and educational techniques. Students should also have knowledge in multiply subjects. Fourth, students should participate in courses to understand the psychological and behavioral characteristics of primary school students. Therefore, the future teachers can understand their students and to teach based on their real needs and abilities.

4. Conclusion

Colleges and universities should cultivate high quality graduates who have strong professional key competencies to meet the expectation of the society, which is to help produce excellent primary school teachers with creativity and multicultural communication ability [5]. Based on the English subject specialties, the key competencies of primary school English teachers contain love for educational profession, systematic educational thinking skills, good personal qualities and strong practical abilities. Pre-service primary school English teachers should know both theories and skills, and understand primary school students' development rules. They should have more opportunities to practice teaching during their study in colleges and universities and they need to know what real classroom teaching look like by getting instructions from in-service primary school English teachers.

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