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Challenges of Chinese EFL Lecturers Attending Online Professional Development in Ningxia: Barriers and Solutions

Ling-di Kong*

School of Education and Modern Languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia
School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Beifang University of Nationalities, China

Mohd Kasri B. Saidon

School of Education and Modern Languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

Khaliza binti Saidin

School of Education and Modern Languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

Abstract: Rapid development of information technology provides a favorable and high-quality platform for teachers' online professional development. However, due to some factors, some teachers are unable to attend their OPD courses successfully and effectively. Therefore, the research objective of this study was to assess the challenges of Chinese EFL lecturers attending online professional development (OPD). The participants consist of 100 EFL lecturers from 3 universities in Ningxia. The instrument for data collection used for the study was 20-item questionnaire. The researchers adopted the Cronbach Alpha method to determine the reliability of the instrument. A reliability index of 0.81 was obtained. Two research questions were structured and data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. Findings revealed that, over workload and shortage of time are among the barriers of OPD for EFL lecturers. It was also recommended that less workload and adequate technical support would improve lecturers' professional development in universities.

Keywords: Online; Professional Development; Lecturers; Internet; Barrier; Solution.

1. Introduction

With the rapid advancement of information and communication technology (ICT), an effective technological support for efficient communication is realized by the integration of learning resources, discussion, message taking, and others (Elmabruk, 2009). Similarly, ICT creates a favorable platform for teachers who like to continue professional development in the sense of knowledge acquisition, communication and innovation.

In China, continuing professional development policies for teachers are known as continued education policies (Cheng, 2003). Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2001) declares that the opportunities for teachers' professional development are "available to overall teachers, giving priority to excellent backbone teachers, offering academic training based on teachers' needs". Since teachers have to obtain qualification certificate, it is a compulsory requirement for all the teachers to carry on regular in-service training.

For the sake of compensating the weakness of conventional mode, online professional development (OPD) seems to be one of the possible solutions for providing high-quality professional development programs for every teacher who wants to distinguish himself/herself as the professional teacher. Subsequently, OPD programs intend to deliver such training in order to overcome some limitations of the normal face-to-face delivery of professional development (Ren Lichun *et al.*, 2014; Song, 2013). In 2007, the establishment of Higher Education Institutions Teacher Online Training Center (HEITOTC) in Beijing reveals that teacher training in China officially entered into the Internet era (Wang, 2011). Based on teachers' development needs, HEITOTC attempts to improve teachers' ethics level and teaching ability as its goal. Online courses are carried out on the basis of asynchronous and synchronous online training. Teachers are optional to select their needed courses and learn autonomously, as well as participate in online tutoring and some exchanging activities.

Alwadie (2011) discussed that it is essential to identify and understand the barriers to e-learning and ways to overcome them as seen by the learners. Doing research on the issues impeding the use of ICT in teacher professional development can assist the stakeholders to overcome these obstacles and receive successful online courses in the promotion of their professional development (Bingimlas, 2009). Focusing on Chinese teachers' professional development dilemma and its improvement, Shi Yingbo and Wang Weidong (2017) analyzed ten years (2006-2015) research results, and finally pinpoint several influential factors related to teachers' OPD, including poor competence on ICT, hesitating at doing effective network autonomous learning among numerous learning resources, high cost, less hardware, and scarce of timely communication. By doing meta-analysis of the related articles, Bingimlas (2009) found that teachers have strong aspiration for the integration of ICT into education, but encounter several obstacles.

Confidence, competence as well as accessibility are the major perceived barriers. Resistance to change and negative attitude is another barrier for teachers to accept OPD. According to Hagan (2013) empirical study, four main barriers to participation in OPD is categorized, including situational barriers, dispositional barriers, institutional barriers, and technological barrier. However, to investigate the potential of implementing OPD courses, Alsadoon (2009) found that the main obstacles that affect faculty members from attending OPD courses is shortage of time and high workload. Research findings from a quantitative study of registered nurses show that technical problems are the greatest barriers.

In summary, barriers that prevent teachers from involving in OPD programs may vary from one situation to another. Therefore, to investigate barriers which based on the factors related to IT skills and attitude toward OPD are quite necessary to be studied in Chinese context.

2. Research Objective

The research objective was to assess the challenges of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia: Specifically, the study focus on:

- (i) Identify the barriers of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia.
- (ii) Determine the solutions of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia.

3. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- (i) What are the barriers of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia?
- (ii) What are the solutions of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia?

4. Methodology

The study employed quantitative research using survey approach. The researchers adopted this design since it is the most appropriate method of obtaining factual and behavioral information from selected samples (Olowoselu *et al.*, 2016a). The participants of the study comprises of 100 Chinese EFL lecturers that constituted the sample since they are few in numbers. An instrument titled *Chinese EFL Lecturers OPD Barriers and Solutions Questionnaire* was used for the study. The questionnaire was validated by three experts in the School of Education and Modern Languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia. The researchers adopted the Cronbach Alpha method to determine the reliability of the instrument. A reliability index of 0.81 was obtained. The questionnaire was administered and all copies were completed and returned for analysis. A five points Likert rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA=5), Agree (A=4), Undecided (U=3), Disagree (D=2) and Strongly Disagree (SD=1) was used for the items. Two research questions were answered using the descriptive statistic of mean and standard deviation. An item with a mean score of 2.50 and above was agreed, while item with a mean score of less than 2.49 was not agreed.

5. Results

Research Question 1: What are the barriers of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia?

As shown in Table 1, all the 10 items were having their mean values ranging from 2.74 to 3.64 which were above the cut of point of 2.50. This indicated that the respondents perceived that all the items were barriers of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia. The table further outlined standard deviation of the items ranging from 0.27 to 0.36, which means that the respondents' opinions were very close based on their responses.

Table-1. Mean rating and standard deviation (SD) of barriers of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia.

S/N	Items	Mean	SD
1.	Lack of the required equipment.	2.74	0.27
2.	Existence of some side effects of using the Internet.	3.24	0.32
3.	Academic over load.	3.27	0.33
4.	Lack of confidence in using the computer for OPD.	3.22	0.31
5.	Lack of confidence in using the Internet for OPD.	3.24	0.32
6.	Less technical support.	3.54	0.35
7.	Lack of computer skills.	3.36	0.34
8.	Lack of Internet skills.	3.28	0.33
9.	Negative social attitude toward OPD.	2.89	0.29
10.	Lack of awareness of the importance of OPD.	3.64	0.36

Research Question 2: What are the proposed solutions of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia?

As presented in Table 2, all the 10 items with mean values ranging from 2.82 to 3.57 were above the cut of point of 2.50. This indicated that the respondents posited all items as solutions of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia. The table also shows close index of variability of all items which ranged from 0.28 to 0.36 standard deviation. This means that respondents were coherent in their opinions based on their responses.

Table-2. Mean rating and standard deviation of solutions of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia?

S/N	Items	Mean	SD
1.	Provision of the adequate required equipment.	3.49	0.35
2.	Training on Internet skills.	3.34	0.33
3.	Flexibility in academic load.	3.47	0.34
4.	More training in using the computer for professional development.	3.57	0.36
5.	More training in using the Internet for professional development.	3.47	0.34
6.	More technical support.	3.24	0.32
7.	Adequate knowledge on computer skills.	3.46	0.34
8.	Adequate knowledge on Internet skills.	3.38	0.33
9.	Positive social attitude toward OPD.	3.24	0.32
10.	Orientation of the importance of OPD.	2.82	0.28

6. Discussion of Findings

The findings revealed that there are some barriers impeding Chinese EFL lecturers' participation of OPD, while there are also solutions to smooth the obstacles. The implication is that the experience of the respondents significantly influenced their opinions on the items since lecturers were part of OPD training program in Ningxia.

Certainly, the result was valid on the basis that it supported the finding of [Shi Yingbo and Wang Weidong \(2017\)](#) who found several factors as barriers to OPD of teachers. This also means that, side effect of using computer and the Internet, such as radiation, addiction on surfing, and negative social attitude toward OPD are challenges to Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia.

Finding also revealed that shortage of time and over work load were barriers of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia. This finding agrees with the finding of [Alsadoon \(2009\)](#) who found over workload of lecturers and shortage of time to have significant effect on OPD of teachers. This means that work load of lecturers is a barrier on their OPD due to lack of time. This finding also supported the finding of [Hagan \(2013\)](#) whose finding revealed that lack of convenient time is a barrier to OPD of teachers in schools.

Similarity, finding has also shown that adequate training of computer skills with more technical support were among the solutions of Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia. This finding strongly agrees with the finding of [Olowoselu et al. \(2016b\)](#) as their found computer skill to have positive significant effect on professional development of teachers in schools.

Finding revealed that, adequate knowledge of the Internet and positive social attitude toward internet usage are solution of OPD of lecturers. This result has justified the finding of [Bingimlas \(2009\)](#) who reported significant positive effect on the use of information technology for professional development of teachers in schools. This finding also agrees with the findings of [Song \(2013\)](#) who concluded that training skills on the Internet is vital to lecturers' OPD in schools.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

In accordance with the research findings, workload, attitude and IT skills are the main elements challenging Chinese EFL lecturers attending OPD in Ningxia. Therefore, it can be recommended that Chinese EFL lecturers should keep on increasing computer literate and improving their Internet skills. Meanwhile, more technical support should be provided either by inside or outside of the universities. Besides, the administrative of university ought to reduce workload to the lecturers. To foster lecturers' positive attitudes toward OPD, lecturers should read more about the benefits of the Internet and technology especially as they closely relate to teaching and learning.

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