

THE CHALLENGES IN TRAINING PRE SERVICE MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Ever since 2014, the programme called Excellent Middle School English Teachers has been implemented by the China Ministry of Education to improve English teaching quality of the pre service English teachers so they become equipped to be excellent teachers at their future employment settings which are the middle schools. However, at present, training of pre service middle school English teachers in China is unable to fully meet the requirements to produce excellent English teachers. The focus of this paper is to shed light on the problems and difficulties faced by the trainers in ensuring that the pre service English teachers meet the standards set by the Ministry in terms of the teaching objectives, curriculum, pedagogy and teaching practice. Recommendations were made to help pre-service teachers become future excellent teachers.

Keywords:

Middle school English teacher; Excellent teacher; Teacher education

INTRODUCTION

Training teachers to become excellent is an important prerequisite for the development of quality education. In 2014, the China Ministry of Education issued the directive on the Implementation of the Excellent Teacher Training Plan. This marked a new stage of development for China's teacher education. China has initiated the implementation of the Excellent Teacher Training Plan to vigorously revitalize teacher education in order to improve professionalism, innovation ability and comprehensive quality of teachers (Zhao, 2019).

The purpose of this programme is to promote the reform of education and teaching, improve the quality of teacher training, and actively innovate the talent training model of teacher education (Ministry of Education, 2014).

At present, there are a large number of English teachers in middle schools in China, but their comprehensive quality is far from satisfactory, and it is difficult to meet the development needs of English teaching reform (Chen & Cai, 2019). As the major source of middle school English teachers, education model of English major students in teacher universities and colleges urgently needs to be reformed, so as to fundamentally improve the comprehensive quality of English major students (Weng, 2019).

THE CHALLENGES IN TRAINING PRE SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS

In recent years, more and more attention has been paid to middle school teacher training, so the general comprehensive ability of English major graduates from teacher universities and colleges is acceptable (Wang, 2019). However, there is a gap between the present situation and standards of excellent teachers in the following aspects:

The Teaching Objectives

Teaching objectives are very important for college and university education. For teacher universities and colleges, one of the objectives is to promote the students' ability to become a qualified teacher

since middle school English teachers mainly come from graduates of English major students in teacher universities and colleges (Wang, 2019). However, at present, the English major students of teacher universities in China are still not very clear about their own talent training goals. The training objectives of English majors in many teacher colleges and universities are still the same as those of ordinary colleges and universities, and the general comprehensive training are still the main teaching objectives with listening, speaking, grammar, reading, writing, translation and so on are the main teaching contents, which are difficult to meet the needs of the comprehensive ability and quality improvement of English teachers in quasi middle schools (Wang, Guo & Zhan, 2019).

In this situation, students often have problems with unclear learning goals. English major students have faced two major tasks since they entered the school, namely, learning English and how to teach English, but these two tasks have been in a relationship of opposition and separation for a long time. For most of the English major students, their aim in studying at school is to obtain certificates and diplomas, and there is no strong motivation to learn. In addition, many students in teacher colleges and universities do not pay much attention to the cultivation of their teaching skills, methods, teaching and scientific research ability and comprehensive humanistic quality (Xiong & Zhang, 2019). Besides, students do not agree with teachers' identity and responsibility. Therefore, students are not motivated to study throughout the university stage, and their professional knowledge and comprehensive ability are insufficient (Xiong & Zhang, 2019).

The Curriculum

According to the standards of middle school teaching, the curriculum content of teacher universities and colleges must focus on basic, scientific, and practical, and the curriculum structure reflects the organic combination of general education, discipline professional education, and teacher education. The proportion of theoretical courses and practical courses, compulsory courses and elective courses in undergraduate teacher universities and colleges is reasonable, and the credit ratio is appropriate (Xu, 2019). However, some teacher colleges and universities have similar English major courses with ordinary colleges and universities. General education courses, English teacher education courses, and educational practice courses have relatively low proportions, and the content of the courses is not interactive and comprehensive. Students are struggling to meet the credit requirements of various levels of examinations. They have little time and energy to acquire subject knowledge in the fields of humanities, arts, science, and society, resulting in narrow scope of their knowledge (Xu, 2019). Because of the obvious division of faculties, the procedures required for English major students in teacher universities and colleges to take courses in other faculties are more complicated. The combination of various factors made it difficult for students to cultivate a wide range of hobbies, accumulate extensive knowledge, and form a multicultural perspective.

The proportion of teacher education courses is also seriously inadequate, making it difficult to highlight the characteristics and professionalism of teacher education, and it is not conducive to the realization of the education-oriented, practice-oriented, lifelong learning concept stipulated by the Ministry of Education (2014). This resulted in insufficient student teaching theories. In addition, colleges and universities and local education administration agencies lack interactive communication. At the time of continuous development and reform of middle school English teaching, some teacher universities and colleges fail to update curriculum settings and teaching content in a timely manner (Zhang & Zhang, 2019). As a result, students do not understand the actual situation and new teaching conceptual method, and the pre-service education they received is difficult to meet the needs of middle school English teaching and reform.

From the perspective of practical courses, the English major students in teacher colleges and universities generally emphasize too much on the teaching of education theory and basic knowledge of English rather than the improvement of students' teaching ability and the practical effect of the knowledge they have learned. The proportion of practical courses is relatively small, and the length

of practice is insufficient, resulting in students' weak ability to solve practical problems in education and insufficient teaching experience (Wang, Tang, & Mao, 2019).

Pedagogy

As a professional training institution for middle school English teachers, the English major students of teacher colleges and universities should have higher educational academic standards and stronger teacher education advantages than the English major students of ordinary colleges (Lu, 2019). However, most of the educational courses in teacher colleges and universities are based on abstract and categorical theoretical teaching of pedagogy, educational psychology, and teaching methods. It is difficult to arouse students' desire to study (Wang & Lun, 2019). Most of the lectures given by teachers are "chalk and talk", lack of interaction, and it is difficult for students to truly absorb, think, use and reflect on what they have learned (Wang & Lun, 2019).

Most English teachers in colleges and universities have no experience in middle school teaching, and they have not grasped the training requirements of middle school English teachers very well (Ling, 2019). Moreover, the English major students of some teacher colleges and universities do not have strict and standardized standards, and the teachers cannot accurately grasp the teaching goals and requirements of the curriculum content. The teaching content is inconsistent with the requirements of middle school English teachers. As a result, the knowledge and ability structure of graduates cannot be applied to actual teaching at work. The teaching content is not updated fast enough and it is severely out of touch with the current middle school English teaching (Wang, Li, & Qi, 2019). It is not easy for students to obtain real and effective study guidance. After graduation, it is very difficult for them to be an excellent teacher.

In addition, the teaching of English professional knowledge and pedagogical theories have not reached an effective fusion. Teachers in each subject teach separately. It is difficult to combine systematic language teaching and teaching practices. They can only adopt a rigid teaching model full of classrooms, and it is difficult to use a scientific and effective method to pass English knowledge to students in the class.

Teaching Practice

The aim of training English major students in teacher colleges and universities is to provide qualified middle school teachers for schools in regional areas and even the whole country. In order to meet this demand, the trainers of the English major students must ensure that students undergo professional teaching practice and educational practice that are organically integrated (Zhang, 2019). Educational apprenticeship, educational practice, and educational research are integrated, covering teacher moral experience, teaching practice, class management practice, and teaching and research practice. In addition, it is organically linked with other educational links. The total educational practice time is not less than one semester. However, the reality is that most of the teacher colleges and universities focus on theoretical teaching instead of practical learning (Wang, 2019).

Educational practice has higher requirements for instructors. Most of the instructors attach importance to the teaching of educational methods and theories, and cannot provide high-quality practical guidance. In addition, most of the content of educational practice is still at the stage of teaching and observation, and it is not deep enough in the aspects of lesson preparation, teaching, class management, and after-school study and reflection (Wang, 2019). As a result, students' educational practice is still limited to the study of subject knowledge. Being exposed to only to theories made it difficult for students to develop innovative teaching methods.

STRATEGIES FOR TRAINING PRE SERVICE MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHERS

In order to solve the above mentioned problems and provide better education for the future middle school teacher, the English major students of teacher colleges and universities should avoid blindly following the direction of other universities, make full use of their educational advantages and characteristics, so as to innovate the training mode which can nurture high-quality English education talents.

Cooperation with Middle Schools

Double tutor system means the pairing of one tutor from teacher universities or colleges and another tutor from middle schools (Hu, 2019). According to the excellent teacher training mechanism jointly operated by the Ministry of Education, the double tutor system is implemented to maximize the role of excellent middle school English teachers in the cultivation of excellent English teachers.

According to this mode, teacher colleges and universities provide students with expert professors in their professional fields and middle school teachers in the practice teaching. The training mode of double tutor system not only focuses on the theoretical training of disciplines in the school, but also emphasizes the training of students' teaching ability outside the school, so as to improve their ability of independent teaching, curriculum design and development, and teaching research (Li, & Li, 2019).

The middle school tutors mainly guide the students in teaching practice such as educational probation, educational practice and teaching and research aspects of middle school teaching reform, get the students familiar with the middle school English classroom, show students the changes of middle school English classroom teaching after the new curriculum reform, and gives students the chance to observe the classroom teaching skills of excellent teachers. At the same time, the universities and colleges also invite middle school tutors to deliver a series of English education lectures and share personal education and teaching experience with the students.

Adjusting Training Objectives

In 2018, the Ministry of education and other five departments issued the action plan for the revitalization of Teacher Education (2018-2022), which clarified the top-level design of teacher education at the national level (Tong, 2019).

First of all, under the overall requirements of the national teacher training, colleges and universities should adjust the personnel training objectives according to the school conditions (Ye & Chen, 2019). The guiding ideology and goal of running a university play an important role in training high-quality teachers. In the new era, teacher education should fully and clearly point to the training objectives of teachers in secondary schools, primary schools, kindergartens, secondary vocational schools and special education schools. According to the actual requirements of education in the new era, cultivation aim for students in teacher colleges and universities should be teachers with both academic and practical applications.

In addition, cooperation mechanism should be established among the government, universities and primary and secondary schools, so as to effectively promote the new mode of cooperative teacher education among university, local government, primary and secondary schools (Yang, 2019). The evaluation of teacher education is extended to the post teaching stage, and the effective improvement of students' performance and quality in teaching is regarded as an important index of the evaluation of teacher education training quality.

Last but not least, the training objective of the excellent teacher program is based on the practice orientation, adhere to the teacher's professional orientation, so as to cultivate graduates with higher humanistic quality and innovation spirit, solid professional knowledge, advanced educational thoughts and ideas, and good morality. Besides, graduates are supposed to have

comprehensive teacher skills, outstanding educational and teaching practice ability, and serve the future excellent teachers of primary and secondary school basic education reform.

Improving the Curriculum

For teacher colleges and universities, a curriculum system should be set up with proper proportion, reasonable structure, and deep integration of theory and practice of public basic courses, subject professional courses, and teacher education courses (Chen & Zeng, 2019). In addition, teacher colleges and universities are supposed to get rid of the old-fashioned curriculum structure system of pedagogy, psychology and subject teaching methods, set up modular, selective and practical teacher education courses, and improve the overall teaching practice ability and comprehensive quality of students. The public basic course is a series of courses which carries out vocational development planning, employment guidance and mental health education, while English subject course is a series of courses centered on Advanced English, including English language, literature, culture and other aspects of knowledge, together with English listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation and other aspects of good skills training. The teacher education course is a series of courses centered on English teaching theory, which studies the basic theory of language teaching, the main schools of language teaching, the research of middle school English teaching and so on, and carries out the training of good skills in preparing lessons, teaching, speaking lessons, evaluating lessons.

Educational practice curriculum includes explicit curriculum and implicit curriculum. The former refers to the traditional practice courses such as teaching practice, educational practice, graduation thesis, etc., while the latter refers to various teacher education practice activities and competitions, such as English calligraphy competition and teacher skills competition (Chen, Ye, Zhou, 2019).

Teacher colleges and universities should strengthen the link of educational practice, strengthen the training of the basic vocational skills of normal students, strengthen the educational probation, and provide more opportunities to observe the lectures of famous teachers. The educational practice of normal students in primary and secondary schools and kindergartens should not be less than one semester.

Updating the Pedagogy

Teaching content and methods of teacher colleges and universities also need updating. Firstly, teaching content should be enriched. The tradition of foreign language education advocates that “foreign language” is “skills plus disciplines”, namely, the unity of language skills and subject knowledge (Gao, 2019). It emphasizes the application of foreign languages and the independence of disciplines. In fact, English knowledge has a wide range and strong relevance. Teachers should pay attention to students’ English cultural literacy when teaching, and try to expand the accumulation and extension of language and cultural knowledge, help students transform from passive acceptance of knowledge to active learning, and build a comprehensive English knowledge and culture system. Secondly, the teaching methods needs to be improved. The main task of English teaching in middle schools is to stimulate and maintain students’ interest in learning (Wang & Lun, 2019). Therefore, English teachers in teacher colleges and universities and universities should pay special attention to students’ learning experience and the combination with middle school English teaching practice, to stimulate students’ learning initiative and creativity, and to integrate teachers, students, teaching materials and environmental elements to create a relaxed, free and interesting educational context (Gao, 2019).

Flipped class and situational teaching can make up for the shortcomings of traditional teaching methods by creating a good learning environment for students, so as to enhance the interest and practicality of learning, stimulate students’ interest in learning, enable students to actively explore knowledge and get involved in extracurricular information to optimize the teaching effect. In addition to classroom teaching, English corners and English competitions can be organized for

students to promote learning through competitions so that students can improve their quality in a competitive environment.

Strengthening the Teaching Practice

The practical accomplishment of teachers is the basic accomplishment needed to complete the education work, which is a combination of professional knowledge, action wisdom and moral accomplishment. These qualities are not separated in the actual education and teaching work of teachers, but rather highly integrated. Therefore, the cultivation of excellent teachers is not to assemble all kinds of knowledge, skills and concepts, but to create a complete person, and to achieve the integrated promotion of professional knowledge, action wisdom and teachers' moral cultivation (Chen, Ye, Zhou, 2019). In order for a pre service teacher to carry out the experiential learning of educational practice, educational practice should focus on promoting the cultivation of teachers with comprehensive practical literacy, and truly let the teaching practice teacher adapts to the educational teaching practice with an active attitude, and effectively interact with the practice, so as to achieve the effect of practice.

In the process of educational practice, students are supposed to participate directly in the teaching and management of primary and secondary schools, experience the role of teachers and form professional identity, so as to better understand professional knowledge, develop professional ability and improve ethics of students. This is a real experience process, a kind of situational learning. In the real situation of education and teaching, the pre service teachers interact with their own activities to produce learning. In this kind of situational learning, the adaptability of the pre service teachers to the working environment and the initiative of learning are very important. Otherwise, even if the teaching practice teachers have mastered a lot of education and teaching theories, they will still be at a loss when facing the real work tasks and cannot carry out the applicable theories they have learned before.

Strengthening the Capability of Trainers

Trainers or teachers of English major in teachers' colleges and universities must have the ability of teaching, scientific research and the integrated ability in guiding the students in the pre service cultivation and post service development (Chen, Ye, Zhou, 2019).

First of all, in order to provide students with efficient practical guidance, teachers themselves must be familiar with the professional and education curriculum standards of middle school English, the teaching content of middle school English, and could effectively link their teaching content with that of the middle school teaching, so as to avoid the overlap or disconnection of the teaching content of the two stages.

Secondly, the talent introduction mechanism should be improved. On the one hand, teacher colleges and universities can invite experts from other colleges and universities to work collaboratively with the staff. On the other hand, the training of staff is also necessary (Zhang, 2019). Colleges and universities are supposed to encourage their staff to apply for visiting scholar programme home and abroad. Teachers colleges and universities in the same region can also strengthen inter school cooperation, form a teacher education community, and share resources.

In addition, excellent primary and secondary school teachers and researchers can be selected as to provide all-round, timely and effective practical guidance for students from teacher colleges and universities, so as to realize the promotion of professional knowledge and teaching skills of the students.

CONCLUSION

With the development of social economy, the quality requirements of English teachers have been greatly improved (Hu, 2019). English majors' students in teacher colleges and universities are faced with both good development opportunities and intense challenges. Therefore, they must have a strong sense of mission and urgency (Hu, 2019). Efforts should be made to improve the quality of talent training, focusing on the cultivation of excellent middle school English teachers, and the construction of major teaching links for the cultivation of excellent teachers should be strengthened in order to meet the needs of basic education for high-quality English teachers.

China is currently in a critical period of social and economic development and transformation (Wang, 2019). More and more excellent teachers are needed to further improve the education in middle schools. As the source of middle school English teachers, English major students in teacher universities and colleges shoulder the responsibility of becoming future excellent teachers (Zhang, 2019). The quality of graduates is directly related to the comprehensive quality of middle school English teachers (Li & Li, 2019). Therefore, only by comprehensively reforming the training objectives, curriculum settings, teaching content and methods, and teacher team building, can the quality of teacher education meet the requirements of excellent teacher training.

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