

Professional Development Needs of Novice English Teachers in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The professional development of novice English teachers in higher education is critical yet fraught with challenges, including bridging theory and practice, managing diverse student needs, and balancing teaching with research. This study systematically examines their multifaceted needs, focusing on pedagogical adaptability, research capability cultivation, and professional identity construction. Key findings reveal institutional support gaps, such as fragmented training programs, research-teaching imbalances, and insufficient mentorship. To address these, the study proposes holistic training, balanced support systems, and sustained mentorship to enhance teaching effectiveness and career sustainability. By aligning these strategies with global educational standards, the research aims to empower novice teachers, ultimately improving the quality of English language education in higher education.

KEYWORDS

novice English teachers; higher education; professional development

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The professional development of novice English teachers in higher education has emerged as a critical issue in contemporary language education, particularly amid globalization and curriculum reform demands. Novice teachers, defined as those with 0–5 years of teaching experience, often face challenges in bridging theoretical knowledge and classroom practice, such as managing diverse student needs, designing effective pedagogical strategies, and balancing teaching with research responsibilities. For instance, Liu&Jiang (2012) highlight that 80% of novice EFL teachers in Chinese universities identify “lack of teaching experience” as a primary barrier to effective instruction, while Zhuang (2019) notes that heavy teaching loads and insufficient mentoring leave many novices struggling to develop systematic teaching skills.

Moreover, the gap between novice teachers’ enthusiasm for growth and the limited institutional support systems has been well-documented. Chen(2007) emphasizes that without targeted training, novices often rely on imitating traditional teaching methods, leading to ineffective learner-centered practices. Meanwhile, studies on cognitive apprenticeship theory suggest that structured guidance from experienced mentors and reflective practice are crucial for novices to acquire tacit knowledge and metacognitive skills. However, existing research disproportionately focuses on general teacher development or K-12 contexts, with limited insights into the unique challenges faced by novices in higher education settings, such as integrating academic research with pedagogical innovation and addressing the advanced language proficiency demands of university students.

1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study aims to systematically explore the professional development needs of novice English teachers in higher education, addressing gaps in existing research that predominantly focuses on general teacher development or K-12 contexts. By examining their challenges—such as pedagogical adaptability, research capability cultivation, and professional identity construction—the study seeks to highlight the unique demands of university-level teaching. It underscores the critical role of institutional support, including holistic training programs, balanced research-teaching frameworks, and sustained mentorship, in fostering novice teachers’ growth.

The significance lies in its potential to inform policy and practice, offering actionable strategies to enhance teaching effectiveness and career sustainability. By aligning these strategies with global educational standards, the study contributes to improving the quality of English language education in higher education, ultimately benefiting both educators and students. References such as Liu&Jiang(2012) and Zhuang (2019) further validate the urgency of addressing these needs.

2 Theoretical Orientation and Literature Review

2.1 Concept Definition

2.1.1 Higher Education

Higher education, often regarded as the final stage of formal education, transcends basic literacy and vocational training to provide in-depth, specialized knowledge and advanced skills. At its core, it encompasses post-secondary educational institutions such as universities, colleges, and professional schools, where students pursue undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. These institutions not only offer courses in traditional academic disciplines like humanities, sciences, and social sciences but also in professional fields such as medicine, law, engineering, and business.

Higher education is characterized by its emphasis on intellectual development, critical thinking, and research capabilities. It aims to cultivate graduates who can contribute to the advancement of knowledge in their respective fields, solve complex problems, and engage in lifelong learning. In the context of English language teaching, higher education institutions play a crucial role in equipping students with advanced language proficiency, intercultural communication skills, and the ability to use English effectively in academic and professional settings. For novice English teachers, understanding the unique demands and characteristics of higher education is essential for tailoring their teaching methods, curriculum design, and professional development strategies to meet the needs of university-level learners.

2.1.2 Novice English Teachers

In the realm of higher education, novice English teachers are typically defined as those who are in the early stages of their teaching careers, usually within the first three years of entering the profession. This group encompasses educators who have recently transitioned from pre-service training or other professional backgrounds into academic English teaching positions at universities or colleges. These teachers often possess a solid foundation in English language knowledge, either through academic degrees in English literature, linguistics, or TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), but may lack the practical teaching experience required to navigate the complex dynamics of higher education classrooms.

Novice English teachers may also be characterized by their limited exposure to the diverse teaching contexts, student populations, and institutional requirements specific to higher education. They are still in the process of developing their teaching identities, refining their instructional strategies, and understanding the nuances of curriculum design, assessment, and classroom management at the tertiary level. While they bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas influenced by contemporary language teaching theories, they often face challenges in translating these theoretical concepts into effective teaching practices in real-world academic settings.

2.1.3 Professional Development Needs of Novice English Teachers

The professional development needs of novice English teachers in higher education encompass the skills, knowledge, and competencies required to transition from pre-service training to effective in-service practice in tertiary settings. These needs are multifaceted, integrating language-specific expertise and broader educational capabilities.

Novices must refine their English language proficiency, including grammar, vocabulary, and discourse analysis, while staying abreast of trends like digital tool integration and global Englishes in teaching methodologies. They also need tailored classroom management skills to address university students' diverse backgrounds and autonomous learning expectations, along with competencies in academic writing guidance, critical thinking cultivation, and cross-cultural communication facilitation, which are central to higher education contexts.

Beyond technical skills, novice teachers require a growth mindset and resilience to navigate challenges such as heavy workloads, balancing research and teaching, and meeting institutional standards. Strategies for self-reflection, continuous learning, and professional networking are essential to build sustainability in their careers. Ultimately, these dynamic needs aim to develop competent, confident educators who can foster student academic success and drive innovation in university English language education, aligning with the evolving demands of global higher education.

2.2 Theoretical Basis

2.2.1 The Theory of Teacher Professional Development Stages

The theory of teacher professional development stages is pivotal for analyzing the needs of novice English teachers in higher education. Fuller's Concerns-Based Theory highlights that novice teachers often focus on survival, struggling with adapting to the academic environment, classroom management, and seeking acceptance. Berliner's Expertise Development Theory categorizes teachers into five levels, noting that novices lack experience in instructional design and

evaluation, underscoring the importance of knowledge and skill accumulation for growth. Steffy's Career Development Model positions novice teachers in the preparatory stage, where building confidence and forming a teaching style are crucial. These theories collectively clarify that novice English teachers face adaptation challenges, require systematic skill enhancement, and need support in establishing professional identities. They lay a theoretical groundwork for understanding development needs and creating targeted training strategies.

2.2.2 Social and cultural theory

Social and cultural theory, introduced by Lev Vygotsky, posits that learning is inherently social and cultural. Language, as both a communication and cognitive tool, shapes thinking and learning. For novice English teachers in higher education, this theory offers a crucial framework to understand their professional development needs.

Learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the gap between independent capabilities and what can be achieved with support. Novice teachers entering higher education often struggle and require guidance from experienced colleagues, participation in teaching communities, and access to educational resources. Through interactions with mentors and peers, they internalize teaching strategies, curriculum design, and classroom management, thus expanding their ZPD.

The theory also emphasizes cultural tools like teaching materials, tech platforms, and institutional norms. In higher education, English teaching is influenced by global and local cultural contexts. Novice teachers must adapt to these tools, effectively use resources, and conform to institutional teaching cultures and evaluation systems for professional growth. Additionally, social interaction in professional learning communities helps them co-construct teaching knowledge and develop professional identities.

2.2.3 Cognitive Apprenticeship Theory

Cognitive apprenticeship theory, stemming from constructivism, focuses on transferring tacit knowledge and cognitive strategies via social interactions between experts and novices in real-world settings. Proposed by Collins, Brown, and Newman (1989), it extends traditional apprenticeship to cognitive learning, enabling learners to acquire problem-solving, metacognitive skills, and domain knowledge through guided engagement.

The theory features six key elements. Modeling involves experienced educators demonstrating teaching practices, allowing novices to observe and adapt strategies to their styles. Coaching and scaffolding provide tailored guidance, with support gradually reduced as novices grow competent. Articulation and reflection prompt novice teachers to express thoughts, discuss challenges, and refine their understanding through peer and mentor interactions. Finally, exploration encourages experimentation with new teaching methods, fostering innovation and the development of individual teaching identities.

Overall, cognitive apprenticeship theory offers a holistic framework for novice English teachers' professional development in higher education, guiding the design of effective professional programs to boost their teaching expertise and confidence.

2.3 Literature Review

2.3.1 Professional Knowledge Needs of Novice English Teachers

Previous studies have shown that novice English teachers in higher education face challenges in subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. Richards and Farrell (2005) pointed out that new teachers often lack in-depth understanding of English language theories and effective ways to convey knowledge to students. They need systematic training to integrate language knowledge with teaching methods. Freeman (1989) proposed a teacher training, development, and decision-making model, emphasizing that language teacher education should focus on developing teachers' practical knowledge and decision-making abilities. This model provides a theoretical framework for understanding the professional development of novice English teachers, suggesting that their development is not only about mastering teaching techniques but also about forming professional judgment.

2.3.2 Teaching Skills and Competence Requirements

Regarding teaching skills, Hattie (2009) emphasized the importance of classroom management, instructional design, and assessment skills for novice teachers. In the context of English teaching in higher education, Shulman (1986)'s concept of pedagogical content knowledge further reveals that novice teachers should develop the ability to transform complex English knowledge into teachable content suitable for college students.

Studies by Zeichner (1996) indicated that novice teachers encounter stress from adapting to the academic

environment, handling student diversity, and meeting institutional requirements. Mentoring programs and collaborative teaching are considered effective support mechanisms (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). However, research on how these support systems specifically address the needs of novice English teachers in higher education remains limited.

Existing research has mainly focused on general teacher development or English teachers in basic education. There is a lack of in-depth exploration of the unique professional development needs of novice English teachers in higher education, especially in aspects such as integrating academic research with teaching, and meeting the diverse learning demands of college students. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the specific professional development needs of this group.

3 Key Professional Development Needs

3.1 Teaching method adaptability

Teaching method adaptability stands as a critical professional development need for novice English teachers in higher education, requiring them to tailor instructional approaches to the complexities of university-level learning environments. Unlike K-12 settings, tertiary education demands strategies that align with students' advanced language proficiency and foster autonomous, critical thinking. Novice teachers must master dynamic methods such as problem-based learning (PBL), flipped classrooms, and seminar-style discussions to engage learners in analytical tasks. They also need to integrate digital tools (e. g., online collaboration platforms, language learning apps) to enhance interactive and technology-mediated instruction, reflecting global trends in education.

Adaptability further involves balancing content specialization with student-centered design, such as adjusting materials for diverse majors (e. g., engineering, business) while maintaining linguistic rigor. For instance, instructors teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) must customize lessons to incorporate discipline-specific terminology and real-world case studies. Additionally, novice teachers should learn to assess and refine their methods through reflective practice, such as peer observation and student feedback, to address gaps between theoretical knowledge and classroom dynamics. This adaptability ensures that teaching remains relevant, engaging, and effective in nurturing university students' academic and professional competencies.

3.2 Cultivation of scientific research capabilities

Cultivation of scientific research capabilities is a critical professional development need for novice English teachers in higher education. Novices often struggle to balance teaching responsibilities with research demands, lacking systematic training in academic inquiry, literature review, and empirical methodology. In university settings, where research productivity is central to career advancement, these teachers need guidance to identify relevant research topics aligned with English language education trends, such as technology-enhanced learning or intercultural pedagogy. They require support in designing research projects, collecting and analyzing data, and publishing findings in peer-reviewed journals. Additionally, integrating research into teaching practice is essential for fostering evidence-based methodologies. For example, action research can help novices address classroom challenges while contributing to disciplinary knowledge. Mentorship from experienced researchers and participation in academic networks or workshops are vital to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills in research. By strengthening their research capabilities, novice teachers not only enhance their academic profiles but also bring innovative, research-informed approaches to the classroom, enriching teaching quality and advancing the field's theoretical and practical frontiers.

3.3 Construction of Professional Identity

The construction of professional identity is a critical yet complex process for novice English teachers in higher education, as it involves aligning personal beliefs with the demands of academic roles and institutional expectations. Novices often grapple with defining their roles beyond language instructors, such as integrating researcher-practitioner identities. This transition requires navigating tensions between traditional teaching norms and innovative pedagogies, such as student-centered approaches or technology-enhanced learning, while adapting to the scholarly environment of universities.

Key challenges include developing confidence in balancing teaching, research, and service responsibilities, as well as establishing credibility among students and peers. For example, novice teachers may struggle to reconcile their pre-service training with the reality of classroom dynamics, particularly when addressing diverse student needs or designing advanced curriculum. Research highlights that mentorship and collaborative professional networks play pivotal roles in this process, offering opportunities to observe expert practices, receive feedback, and refine teaching philosophies.

Successful identity formation enables novices to perceive themselves as competent members of the academic

community, fostering resilience against burnout and enhancing commitment to long-term professional growth. This process is foundational for sustaining motivation and effectiveness in higher education settings, where the integration of scholarship and pedagogy is central to career advancement.

4 Institutional Support Gaps

Novice English teachers in higher education often encounter significant gaps in institutional support, which hinder their professional growth. First, many universities offer fragmented training programs that focus on isolated skills (e.g., short workshops on digital tools) rather than systematic, long-term guidance. These fragmented initiatives fail to address the interconnected challenges of curriculum design, classroom management, and research integration, leaving novices overwhelmed by disjointed advice instead of cohesive professional development frameworks.

Second, there is a prevalent institutional tendency to prioritize research over teaching support. Universities often allocate more resources to scholarly publication and grant acquisition, while teaching-focused training—such as peer observation programs or pedagogical innovation workshops—receives limited funding or attention. This imbalance creates a dilemma for novices, who face pressure to meet research quotas while struggling to refine foundational teaching skills, leading to uneven professional development and potential burnout.

Third, the lack of long-term mentorship mechanisms exacerbates these challenges. Many institutions provide short-term or ad-hoc mentoring, if any, rather than structured, sustained partnerships with experienced educators. Novices benefit profoundly from ongoing mentorship that offers personalized feedback, helps navigate institutional norms, and models effective teaching-research balance. Without such support, they may struggle to translate theoretical knowledge into practice, adapt to student-centered methodologies, or develop resilience against systemic pressures.

5 Recommendations

To address the professional development needs of novice English teachers in higher education, institutions and policymakers should prioritize three interconnected strategies:

5.1 Designing Holistic Training Programs

Institutions must replace fragmented workshops with systemic training that integrates pedagogy, research, and technology. For example, structured programs could combine modular courses on learner-centered design, digital tool integration, and academic writing support, delivered over semesters rather than isolated sessions. These programs should emphasize reflective practice, such as peer observation circles and teaching portfolios, to help novices contextualize theoretical knowledge in real classroom scenarios.

5.2 Balancing Research and Teaching Support

Universities should reallocate resources to recognize teaching excellence alongside research. This could include establishing teaching innovation grants, dedicated pedagogical mentorship, and peer review systems that value classroom innovation equally with scholarly output. For instance, creating incentives for collaborative teaching-research projects (e.g., action research on curriculum design) can help novices develop dual competencies without compromising research productivity.

5.3 Implementing Long-Term Mentorship Systems

Institutions should institute mandatory, year-long mentorship programs pairing novices with experienced educators. These partnerships should focus on personalized guidance in lesson planning, classroom management, and career navigation, supported by regular feedback sessions and joint participation in professional communities. Research highlights that sustained mentorship reduces early-career attrition and fosters confidence in balancing multiple responsibilities.

6 Conclusion

The professional development of novice English teachers in higher education is a multifaceted journey marked by unique challenges, including gaps in systemic institutional support, the tension between research and teaching demands,

and the complexity of constructing a robust professional identity. Studies highlight their urgent needs for integrated training, balanced research-teaching support, and sustained mentorship to bridge theoretical knowledge and practical classroom competence. Without targeted interventions, novices may struggle to adapt to the diverse expectations of university teaching, such as fostering critical thinking and cross-cultural communication skills. By prioritizing holistic support systems that address both technical competencies and psychological resilience, institutions can empower these teachers to evolve into innovative, research-informed educators. This not only enhances individual career trajectories but also elevates the quality of English language education in higher education, ensuring alignment with global educational standards and student-centered pedagogical goals.

Funding

Addressing these gaps—by designing integrated training systems, rebalancing support toward teaching excellence, and establishing enduring mentorship programs—is critical to fostering novice teachers' competence and sustainability in higher education.

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