

Narrative Inquiry on the Content and Influencing Factors of Excellent English Teachers' Practical Knowledge

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Abstract - Excellent English teachers' practical knowledge mainly includes educational beliefs, reflective knowledge, and general teaching methods. Its construction is influenced by internal factors such as personality characteristics, learning experience, reflection on one's own practice in teaching career and accumulation of teaching experience, and external factors such as vocational training, resources in teachers' self-learning experience, role model, peer evaluation and student evaluation. Taking an excellent English teacher with 38 years of teaching experience as the object, this research analyzes the composition of her practical knowledge as well as the main factors affecting the construction of her practical knowledge by using the research method of educational narrative, aiming at providing a reference for the professional development of English teachers.

Keywords — excellent English teacher, practical knowledge, narrative inquiry, content, influencing factors.

I. INTRODUCTION

In January 2018, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council promulgated the Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of Teaching Staff Construction in the New Era (hereinafter referred to as "Opinions"), pointing out that it was necessary to make great efforts to improve the content of teacher training, make it closely related to the front-line practice of education and teaching, organize and carry out high-quality teacher training, and let teachers devote themselves to teaching, so as to really improve the teaching level.

For a long time, teachers in China mainly receive highly concise theoretical knowledge such as pedagogical knowledge and educational psychology knowledge in training, and the part involving teachers' practical teaching is far from enough, which makes it difficult for some teachers to combine the theory they have learned with teaching practice in actual teaching. Practical knowledge, on the other

hand, is teachers' understanding of education and teaching through their own actions, which builds a bridge between theory and practice. Excellent teachers are typical representatives of the teacher community, so it is necessary to explore the educational significance of their practical knowledge. By fully exploring the practical knowledge of excellent teachers, it can not only play the guiding role of theory but also organically combine it with teachers' education and teaching practice, thus further enriching the content of teachers' professional development.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on teachers' practical knowledge can be traced back to Elbaz's (1981) research on the conceptualization of teachers' roles, in which he pointed out that teachers possess a special kind of knowledge in a unique way. In the follow-up study, he summed up that teachers' practical knowledge includes self-knowledge, curriculum knowledge, teaching knowledge, subject knowledge, and environmental knowledge (Elbaz, 1983). About the content of teacher's practical knowledge, Hossein and other researchers found that primary school exemplary teachers in an educational reform context possessed eight categories of practical knowledge: subject-matter, pedagogical, learners, classroom management, learning environment, curriculum, school environment, and self (Chaharbashloo & Gholami & Aliasgari & Talebzadeh & Mousapour, 2020). As for how to help teachers to construct such kind of knowledge, Francis (1995) recommended a reflective journal after studying pre-service teacher's practical knowledge. Driel, Beijaard, and Verloop (2001) mentioned that learning in networks, peer coaching, collaborative action research, and the use of cases were potentially powerful strategies for long-term professional development. In the research of Zhu and Xu (2014), who explored strategies, such as imitation and innovation, analyzed how lexical teaching influenced the development of pre-service English teachers' practical knowledge.

According to the previous literature research, it is found that the current research on teachers' practical knowledge



content by international scholars lacks the comprehensiveness of the research object, and the research content mainly focuses on practical knowledge content and how to help teachers to develop their practical knowledge. In terms of influencing factors, the research on the influence of teachers' personal learning experience and students' factors on the construction of practical knowledge is still insufficient, which is, therefore, in need of further research.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

Narrative research has focused on how individuals assign meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell (Moen, 2006). The "practical knowledge" of teachers is the activity of teachers as educational practitioners to discover and dig into the "meaning" of their own practice and experience (Zhong, 2004). In addition, teachers will play the roles of main objects when combining the educational narrative research methods with the research of teachers' practical knowledge. It can be found that the two are in agreement with each other. Through educational narrative inquiry, researchers can understand, explain and reconstruct the concept, behavior, and experience of teachers' education and teaching, capture, refine and present teachers' practical knowledge. In the process of interaction with researchers, teachers will also deconstruct and reconstruct the content of their own practical knowledge (Zhang & Zhang, 2020).

A. Research Questions

What contents are included in the practical knowledge of excellent English teachers?

What factors affect the construction process of the practical knowledge content of excellent English teachers?

B. Research Object

The excellent teacher selected in this research is mainly based on the following two aspects: the awards of teaching contest and teaching experience. According to the purpose of the research, Ms. Yang, who can provide a great amount of information, was selected as the case study object. She has 38 years of teaching experience in China, during which she has had a long teaching experience in elementary school, junior high school, and senior high school, and now teaches college English in a university of Sichuan province.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

a) Data Collection: In-depth interviews were used to understand Ms. Yang's learning experience, teaching experience, and professional growth experience. The author has conducted a formal interview and several informal interviews with her. The formal interview lasted about one hour, whose materials are collected by recording to ensure the accuracy of information.

b) Data Analysis: In this research, the collected materials were analyzed from bottom to top. First of all, the records collected by recording were converted into text materials in time. Then the transcribed materials were analyzed, and meaningful words along with paragraphs were classified in

the text information. After repeating the above steps many times, the data was presented and interpreted.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Ms. Yang's Stories

Ms. Yang was born in southwest China in the 1960s. Since 1982, she has been teaching English at different levels for 38 years in different schools. In 1982, after graduating as a normal student in a technical secondary school, Ms. Yang worked as an English teacher in a middle school located in her hometown and then moved to other middle schools and primary schools. In the meanwhile, Ms. Yang received further education in her spare time and then obtained college and undergraduate degrees by self-study. Now she is an associate professor in a university, mainly teaching college English courses.

B. The Contents in the Practical Knowledge of Excellent English Teachers

Through the analysis of collected materials, it can be seen that Yang's practical knowledge mainly includes three types of contents: educational belief, reflective knowledge, and general teaching method knowledge. At the same time, these contents influence and interrelate with each other. They also work together as a whole in education and teaching activities. The following parts will further explain the contents of this kind of knowledge and its educational significance in detail.

a) Belief in Education: The teachers' educational belief is embodied in: What kind of education should students receive? What are the specific contents of "good" education? How should we implement and evaluate "good" education? What is the purpose of education? What's your opinion on the teaching profession? Teachers' beliefs are values accumulated in teachers' personal minds, which usually dominate teachers' behaviors as an unconscious empirical hypothesis (Chen, 2003). In the interviews, Ms. Yang repeatedly stressed that teachers should teach while learning and her career deeply reflected the idea of "learning while teaching." In the process of learning, English teachers get great assistance from others to teach students better, especially those who are with a poor foundation, and to choose learning strategies appropriate for students better. If teachers only teach without studying for a long time, their educational ideas and teaching methods will lag behind, which means those teachers can't keep up with the pace of the new curriculum reform, resulting in the disconnection between teachers' teaching and students' learning needs and the actual needs of society for talents. In the long-term teaching practice, Ms. Yang not only actively participated in the training courses provided by various schools but also obtained an undergraduate degree through self-study on weekends and holidays. Moreover, Ms. Yang has adhered to the habit of reading in the morning for decades. Therefore, educational belief is one of the important contents of practical knowledge of excellent English teachers.

b) Reflective Knowledge: Teachers' "intentional" actions in daily study and work reflect teachers' knowledge of critical reflection. Besides, the specific meaning of reflection is to review previous studies and work, which will be critically analyzed afterward. Teachers' reflection is a kind of practice-oriented one, which is manifested as "reflection on practice, reflection in practice and reflection for practice" (Chen, 2003). Ms. Yang has always insisted on reflection after class and recorded the time allocation during classes, the connection of different teaching parts, the degree of students' mastery, students' engagement, reflection, and the situation of answering questions in each class. For novice teachers, Ms. Yang argues that reflection is particularly important, and long-term reflection will greatly help to improve the teachers' teaching competence.

c) Knowledge of General Teaching Methods: General teaching method knowledge refers to the teachers' universal principles and strategies on students' learning, teaching, classroom management, and organization, which are not limited to specific disciplines (Jiang, 2003). In daily work and study, Ms. Yang summed up the following English teaching strategies by continuous practice and reflection.

Teaching Strategies of "Digging Deep into Textbooks": In the process of preparing lessons and teaching, Ms. Yang pays much attention to excavating the ideological content of teaching materials to improve students' core qualities of English subjects such as thinking quality and cultural character. In the interviews, she pointed out that every article has its ideological content, especially in the current teaching materials. For example, in English reading involving the relationship between parents and children, it is necessary to extract the ideological content in the textbook, such as how to deal with the relationship between parents and children, how to respect the elderly, and how to make cultural comparisons between Chinese and Western children and parents. When mentioning patriotism, teachers should guide students by combining their own experiences, some stories, and movie clips, and compare the national systems and policies of China and the West based on some major social crises such as the COVID-19 epidemic, so as to ignite the inner flame of students' love for their motherland. In addition, teachers should be good at observing in the process of education and teaching, finding out the students' subtle emotional changes as well as their needs in time, properly grasping the educational opportunity, combining with the current situation, and linking with the teaching content, in order to take targeted educational measures, thus achieving ideal educational effects finally (Wang, 2015).

Teaching Strategies to Stimulate Students' Learning Enthusiasm: Some students' English learning motivation level is low in China. For this problem, Ms. Yang advocates teachers stimulate students' enthusiasm for active learning through ingenious questions and examples in class. She also points out that whether teachers are outside or in class, their classroom questions and example sentences should be

combined with vivid examples that students are interested in and familiar with. For example, when talking about tense or third-person singular, many students know that "he and is" and "she and does" are collocated. However, when "your father" as a subject appears in a sentence, they often use "do" instead because they mistakenly regard "your" as the second person. When it comes to this kind of mistake, the teachers can try to use people around students as examples, such as one's uncle or one's headteacher, to collocate with "does." Then students will master them in a vivid way. Ms. Yang teaches English in various vivid ways, enumerating examples close to students' daily life and their interests, which facilitates students to impress the learning content in their minds, unconsciously improving students' attention, and thus improving students' language ability as well as learning ability.

Teaching Strategy of Teaching Students in Accordance with Their Actual Level: Ms. Yang is good at applying the teaching strategies in accordance with her students' actual level during her long-term teaching practice. For instance, students' dialects always have negative transfer, which impedes the development of students' English pronunciation, especially for students who speak local dialects in Sichuan districts. In order to solve this problem, it is necessary for teachers to give students an oral test one by one and then correct the problems after finding them out so as to correct the pronunciation in accordance with their levels. For students in different grades, this strategy should also be adopted. For students in lower grades, teachers need to give priority to imitation, while students in higher grades will be able to be trained and improved by properly combining pronunciation organs and pronunciation principles. For students at different levels in the same class, students with poor foundation need to feel the happiness of success in the teaching process, such as doing some simple exercises and answering easier questions in class. Applying the teaching strategy of teaching students in accordance with their level can achieve better results in the transformation of underachieved students to better ones.

C. Influencing Factors in the Construction of Practical Knowledge of Excellent English Teachers

By the narrative study of Ms. Yang, it is found that the construction of her practical knowledge content is mainly influenced by the following internal and external factors.

a) Internal Factors: Internal factors mainly include teachers' personality characteristics, learning experience, reflection on practice in a teaching career, accumulation of teaching experience, etc., which play an important role in the process of building Ms. Yang's practical knowledge. During the whole interview, Miss Yang left the impression of being approachable and amiable, which should derive from her long-term caring about and being patient with students. Secondly, Ms. Yang kept the habit of reading in the morning and exercise for many years and used weekends and holidays

to study. This kind of strong willpower is an indispensable quality to become an excellent teacher. When talking about her personal learning experience, Ms. Yang has reiterated that her self-study experience has had a profound impact on her teaching career, especially in helping the underachieved students and helping students lay a good foundation in English, which has prompted her to form various effective teaching methods. Besides, Ms. Yang also pays much attention to her reflection. After each public class in her teaching career, she will actively listen to the evaluation from experts and peers. Combining other people's evaluations, she practices repeatedly teaching to improve her professional competence. She also lays emphasis on collecting students' feedback and assessment after classes and then reflects on them, to some degree, enriching her teaching experience and contributing to the formation and internalization of her practical knowledge.

b) D External Factors: External factors contain vocational training, resources in teachers' self-learning experience, role models, peer evaluation, and student evaluation. In the interview, Ms. Yang said that whether she teaches in a middle school or a university, she actively strives for opportunities, participates in various types of training, and applies the new knowledge, new ideas, and new methods learned from training to teaching practice, which plays an important role in constructing her practical knowledge. In her self-study experience, she also mentioned that she had been helped by an excellent local middle school English teacher and regarded this teacher as a model, who not only helped her improve English but also promoted her professional development. Furthermore, Ms. Yang highlights and values the evaluation from peers or students and constantly optimizes her teaching based on their suggestions, which has surely promoted her professional development.

It is worth noting that the internal factors and external factors do not act independently in the process of constructing Ms. Yang's practical knowledge but interact with each other and act together on the content construction of her practical knowledge.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study adopts the method of educational narrative research to analyze the content of practical knowledge of an excellent English teacher and various factors that influence the construction process. The result shows that Ms. Yang's practical knowledge includes educational beliefs, reflective knowledge, and knowledge of general teaching methods, while the knowledge of general teaching methods also includes teaching strategies of "digging deep into teaching materials," stimulating students' learning enthusiasm and teaching students in accordance with their aptitude. The

construction of practical knowledge is influenced by internal and external factors. This points out the direction for the professional development of English teachers, especially for novice teachers. At the same time, it also provides a reference for the professional development of teachers in other disciplines. However, due to the failure to collect data in real classroom observation, the content of teachers' practical knowledge cannot be fully analyzed. At the same time, there is no long-term follow-up investigation, and the analysis of influencing factors is not comprehensive enough. It is expected that future research can prolong the research cycle, adopt more research methods to collect data, and employ empirical studies to present more comprehensive results.

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