

WHEN EFL TEACHERS INQUIRE IN A TEACHER STUDY GROUP

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ABSTRACT

This research project explored the shared learning that took place over one year among non-native English graduate students engaged in a voluntary teacher inquiry group formed to encourage the professional development of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers. The study aimed to examine and document how the group interaction patterns fostered professional development and enhanced the understanding of language teaching and learning theories. The researchers have analysed the data using hermeneutic-reconstructive analysis, which involves the articulation of implicit features of meaning, such as meaning fields and validity claims, into explicit forms. As a result, a cyclical pattern was discovered that characterised the group dynamics. This pattern mirrored findings published as 'the inquiry cycle' (Harste, Short and Burke, 1988). This interaction patterns demonstrated how teaching philosophies and practices mostly initiated in the western countries can best be reshaped and negotiated in cross-cultural EFL teaching.

Purpose of the Study

This research project explored shared learning over one year among non-native English graduate students in a voluntary inquiry group formed to encourage the professional development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. Specially, this study investigated the issues derived from the group in terms of: (i) the new insights and knowledge EFL teachers have acquired about English learning and teaching in US graduate programs; (ii) how they planned to use and support the implementation of that knowledge in their home countries; and (iii) whether the pedagogic principles promoted in some US university faculties are automatically applicable in other educational contexts with diverse cultural traditions. The study aimed to examine and document how the group interaction patterns fostered professional development and enhanced the understanding of language teaching and learning theories across different cultural contexts. The study illuminated the most salient issues involved in transferring teaching theories and practices originating in Western cultures to the EFL contexts. The study on the voluntary group aimed to empower EFL teachers in their professional development and to establish a collaborative learning community for non-native English teachers coming from different

socio-cultural contexts. This research intended to investigate how this model of teacher inquiry group provided opportunities for EFL teacher learners to discuss topics, raise issues, project mediation of competing knowledge, and further examine underlying teaching assumptions through collaborative reflection. By working together collaboratively in this group, these EFL teachers constructed meanings based on what they have learned in the Language Education program and together envisioned how to transport this knowledge in the cross-cultural contexts. The study of a cross-cultural teacher inquiry group provided the basis for developing a much needed practical model of continuous professional development for ongoing English education reform in Asian countries. This study has its significance on its theoretical and practical levels concerning teachers' professional development. EFL teachers' professional development is still in its embryonic stage. The importance of bringing a group of English teachers together to formulate a 'thought collective' (Fleck, 1935: 39) group cannot be over-emphasised. The collaborative inquiry with teachers from different teaching contexts will further promote teachers' understanding of how to make interactive communication possible in their own English classrooms.

Literature Review

Teacher study groups provide an effective framework for teachers to take ownership in strengthening and navigating their own learning, practice, and growth. Self-directed and lifelong learning ensures that practitioners become more competent (Azaretto, 1990; Cervero, 1988; Houle, 1980; Doran, 1994). Professional development should be self-directed so that the teachers hold the control over their long-term learning and growth (Cervero, 1990). What is ultimately important is that individuals possess a sense of ownership, and are responsible for their own learning and able to develop a collegial culture in which teachers meet their own needs (Brookfield, 1984; Knox, 1986, Doran, 1994). Personal inquiry and exploration are controlled from inside by the membership and collaborative direction of the focus is owned by each member. Each member shares a sense of equality and responsibility.

Collaborative inquiries are the essence of teacher study groups. It has long been argued that learning and knowledge are socially constructed. Dewey (1938) claimed that "all human experience is ultimately social: it involves contact and communication" (p. 38). The notion of collaborative community is similar to what Fleck (1935) described as "thought collective," which means "a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction" (p.39). Inquiry groups aim to promote professional growth so that learning and teaching practices

become rich and generative experiences for each participant. The process of being involved in a collaborative group and negotiating meanings is central to the goal of transferring practical knowledge to EFL contexts. Study groups aim to build up a sense of community learning that makes use of group members' inquiry, knowledge, and reflection as vehicles to improve instruction and professional development.

Many researchers have reported promising results of initiating and participating in teacher study groups. Unia contends that her experiences in a teacher study group helped her "sustain and further develop changes" (1990: 131) in her pedagogy. Meyer (1998) regards the study group as a forum for teachers to substantiate their passions of teaching and learning. Watson and Stevenson's (1989), participants in a support group for Whole Language teachers, strongly believe that "those involved in professional change need to receive encouragement, approval, advice, and sound information about their new professional adventure" (1989: 121). Clair's study (1998) reports that the teachers tend to work with one another to outgrow themselves and they favour teacher study group as the professional development format. Lewison (1995) organised a teacher study group for K-5 elementary school outside of Los Angeles area and concluded the effectiveness of the teacher study group as follows: teachers' changes in classroom practice, changes in beliefs about literacy learning, and changes in teachers' expectations for students. Besides, in the beginning teachers viewed the group as a way to associate with and learn from experienced teachers. The teachers in the group made a distinction between this experience with previous training experiences and claimed that the safe and non-threatening atmosphere of study group allowed them to share and to categorise the process as 'teacher friendly' (Lewison, 1995). To date, this persuasive body of research on teacher study groups, however, has focused exclusively on communities of English speaking teachers, rather than on non-native speaking EFL teachers' professional development. As graduate students and teacher learners projecting learning onto rapidly transforming EFL contexts, this study intended to fill the void in the literature in investigating the processes that nurture EFL teacher learners in their graduate studies, so that they could transform the theories into relevant practice.

Methods

Participants and Context

The group members were six graduate students pursuing their degrees in a U.S. graduate program (five for Ph.D. and one for Masters) during the time of this study and would soon return to their home countries to teach English as a Foreign Lan-

guage in diverse environments, from elementary school to college levels. Five of the participants were from Taiwan and one from Korea. This group consisted of both experienced and novice teacher learners whose teaching experience ranged from one to seven years. Group participants played dual roles as non-native English speaking graduate students and future EFL teachers. My role in this teacher study group was as a participant observer, following Borg and Gall's (1983) observation that, "by being actively involved in the situation that the researcher is observing, the researcher often gains insights and develops interpersonal relationships that are virtually impossible to achieve through any other method" (p. 26). Pseudonyms were adopted for each participant other than the researcher.

The group was naturally formed outside a graduate course where these six participants recognised our common experiences and common differences from the rest of the group—native-English-speaking in-service teachers. Experiencing both empowerment and frustrations in the graduate course and realising that their voices could be strengthened in a sub-group armed with similar concerns, struggles, goals, purposes, cultural backgrounds, and language ability, the group decided to meet weekly as a formal group to dialogue with one another for one year. The group meetings lasted four to five hours on a weekly basis. The group members negotiated the topics each wanted to discuss and decided which articles or books to assign as reading for each week. The six group members alternated leading discussions, writing summaries of discussion, and sending them to group members via email.

Data Collection

A total of 54 hours were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim because Stubbs (1988) claims that "transcribing conversation into the visual medium is a useful estrangement device, which can show up complex aspects of conversational coherence which pass us by as real-time conversationalists or observers" and "... through which the strangeness of an obstinately familiar world can be detected" (p. 20). Other resources for this study included audio tapes and transcriptions of participant interviews, regular email dialogues among group members, and minutes of the study group sessions.

Data Analysis and Theoretical Tool

The data analysis was ongoing, using hermeneutic-reconstructive analysis, which involves the articulation of implicit features of meaning, such as meaning fields and validity claims, into explicit forms. This method of hermeneutic-reconstructive analysis involves unpacking the complexity of meaning and culture (Carspecken, 1996).

From the beginning and throughout the study, data analysis took place alongside data collection to allow questions to be refined and new avenues of inquiry to be developed. Comparison from one meeting to another as well as across different sources of data was made to present a whole picture of this study.

The researcher read through the transcribed data several times and reflected on the patterns that emerged in the process of inquiry throughout the year. It was discovered through the analysis how our teacher inquiry group moved through an inquiry process similar in form to the inquiry cycle, which emerged in our group's processes for meaning negotiation. The inquiry cycle was proposed by Harste *et al.* (1988) as a theoretical framework for making decisions about reading and writing programs (Figure 1), and later for the whole curriculum (Short and Burke, 1991). The terms 'authoring cycle,' 'inquiry cycle,' and 'learning cycle' are used interchangeably in the literature (Harste *et al.*, 1988).

In this model, if classroom teachers provide learners with frequent opportunities to engage in the inquiry cycle process in reading and writing, eventually learners will produce final individual authoring products to share with

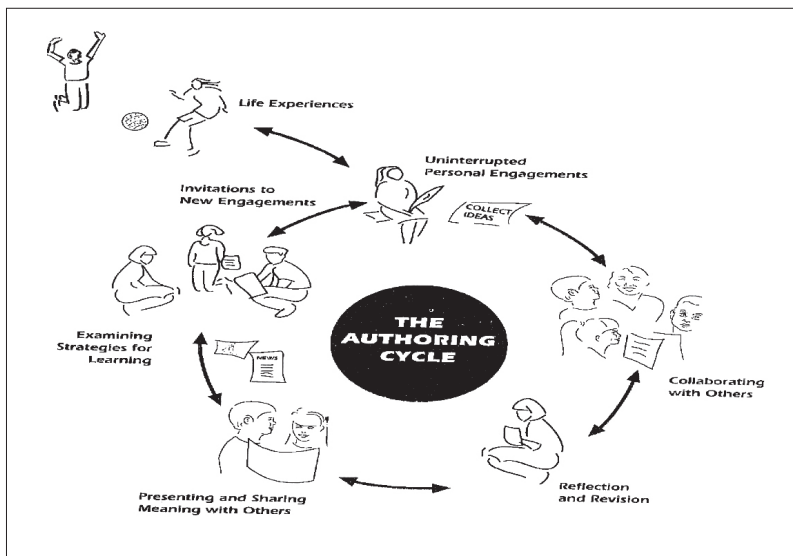


Figure 1: Authoring Cycle (Harste *et al.*, 1988)

their peers. Short *et al.* (1996) suggest that the inquiry cycle was not just about reading and writing, but more about learning and inquiry in a deeper level. They have long advocated that education is inquiry and involves multiple ways-of-knowing. They described the inquiry process as follows:

1. Building from the known through voice and connection;
2. Taking time to find questions for inquiry through observation, conversation, and selection;
3. Gaining new perspectives through collaboration, investigation, and transmediation;
4. Attending to difference through tension, revision, and unity;
5. Sharing what was learned through transformation and presentation;
6. Planning new inquiries through reflection and reflexivity; and
7. Taking thoughtful new action through invitation and reposition. (Figure 2) (p. 52).

Short (1996) explains, “the arrows in the cycle go both ways, indicating that there is continual movement back and forth between the different aspects of the inquiry process, rather than a specific sequence or hierarchical order” (p. 17).

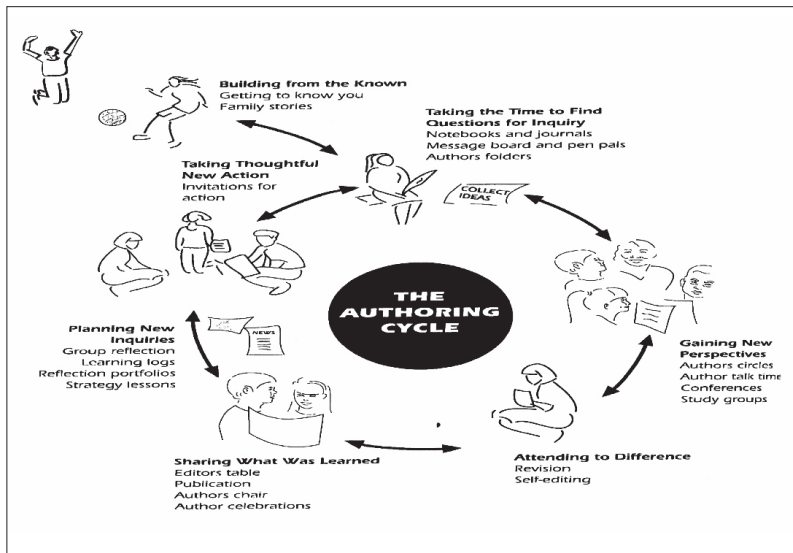


Figure 2: The Authoring Cycle (Short *et al.*, 1996)

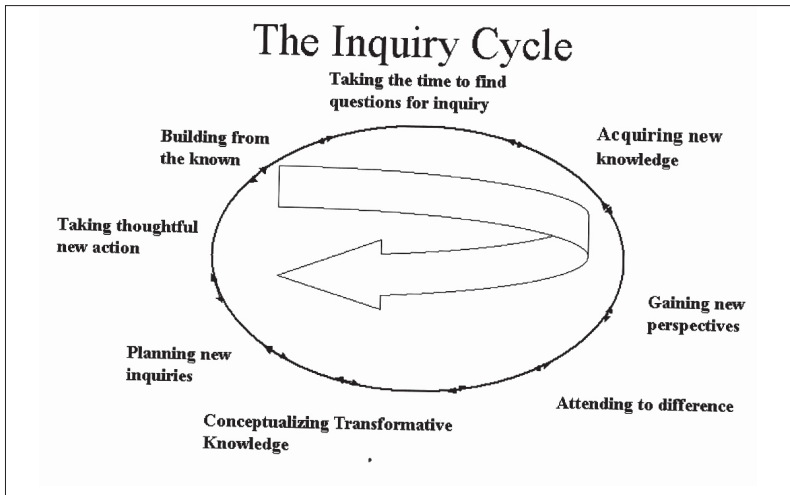


Figure 3 : The Emergent Inquiry Cycle

Examining the data from our teacher inquiry group carefully and reviewing the patterns that emerged during discussions of the recurring themes, it was evident that the group went through the inquiry cycle as a whole and within topic discussions as well. The next section will illustrate how the inquiry cycle served as an emerging pattern from the data and how our group went through this cycle when discussing topics in particular, and in engaging in a one-year inquiry process in general. The inquiry cycle which served as a theoretical framework was modified to better represent the group interaction dynamics. This inquiry cycle that emerged ‘naturally’ and without planning in our group process, will be explained below. The new emergent cycle (Figure 3) occurred several times in our group as the group took up different topics and moved through them. The researcher will first describe the emergent inquiry cycle in general, and provide an illustration of it with respect to the topic, inquiry-based curriculum, broadly discussed by the group.

Findings

Building from the Known Through Voice and Connection

Learning is a process that learners could be engaged in by connecting the unknown to the known. “Up close and personal” ought to be education’s new motto’ (Short *et al.*, 1996: 320). The cycle started with valuing our previous knowledge in light of

our compelling concerns as EFL learners and teachers so that our inquiry group could draw on our learning and teaching experiences and relate the new knowledge we were acquiring in the U.S. graduate school to our personal concerns. We all came to the group with a rich repertoire of language learning and teaching, so our experiences and differences set up the ongoing conversation and reflection. Making good use of our past schemata, we came together to reflect on our learning and teaching experiences that served as our base from which we could explore more. Our past experiences legitimised our current experiences as learners and teachers. The inquiry group format allowed members to find time for conversations as we “wander[ed] and wonder[ed],” (Short *et al.*, 1996: 320) building on what we were learning from each other and starting from there.

Taking Time to Find Questions for Inquiry through Observation, Conversation, and Selection

Although we had very crowded schedules as graduate students, we never failed to meet during the time we had set aside each week to engage in our EFL teacher inquiry group and share our interests, concerns, tensions, and struggles. As international students, we felt professionally excluded, due not only to our lack of experiences of U.S. schooling, but also to our distinct, non-native concerns that differed from those of the English-native-speaking intellectual community. In this forum, we came to co-construct our new knowledge by sharing with other members what we were learning by taking graduate courses, reading professional articles, and observing U.S. classrooms. We were turning over the new learning experience in our minds and tried to make sense out of them together as a group. We drew on each other’s knowledge to envision the whole picture of how language should be learned and taught, while continually considering and challenging each other’s teaching assumptions.

We collaborated with each other to make plans for our discussion topics and group meeting activities. As time went on, we re-negotiated our original plans and made them more personal and meaningful for our needs as EFL teachers. We constantly reviewed our concerns and revisited the lingering questions to rethink those issues. Through conversation, we felt the freedom to vent our frustrations and concretise our concerns, share our curiosities, and pose questions to each other. We connected what we knew about our home countries’ systems to our new knowledge and explored where the new knowledge could be situated.

*Acquiring New Knowledge through Meaning Negotiation, Problem Posing,
and Information Co-constructing*

Our group's own cycle emerged with this stage that turned out to be additional to the formal 'inquiry cycle.' This stage was added to this model to better reflect our group dynamics. As we learned new knowledge in a graduate program in the US, we were absorbing the new teaching theories and philosophy at a rapid speed and trying to internalise them in order to make the best use of them. This teacher inquiry group functioned as a colloquium for us to openly state what we understood concerning the new theories and philosophy we were acquiring. We were in the phase of fully apprehending them by negotiating meanings with other group members, posing more questions and concerns for further discussions, sharing what we currently understood, and, as a result, co-constructing the new knowledge in the group.

We examined our understanding of this new knowledge by connecting what we experienced about inquiry-based curriculum. First, we concretised inquiry-based curriculum by relating it to our learning in our college years and also our current graduate studies. Then we critiqued to what extent these classes were 'open' and 'loose' enough to have inquiry-based curricula. We conceptualised this idea by identifying a course in which the inquiry-based spirit prevailed.

*Gaining New Perspectives through Collaboration, Investigation,
and Transmediation*

In the discussion group, we found it safe to share what we truly believed and provided each other an avenue to assess different perspectives from various angles. In intensive dialogue, listening attentively to different voices and surpassing our current understanding, we gained new insights. Stimulated by these new perspectives, we gradually learned how to articulate our teaching beliefs. In this supportive community, by critiquing and challenging each other, and recursively moving back to previous stages of the cycle, we continually re-negotiated our knowledge. In the process of intellectual give-and-take, we investigated our beliefs and accessed new ideas. New perspectives inspired us to outgrow our previous selves as learners and teachers.

We posed questions which we were eager to pursue on a deeper level. We shared our diverse learning experiences, reflected on and challenged the underlying assumptions of how each of us had learned and taught in the past. Through the inquiry process, it was unavoidable to encounter confusions, tensions, surprises, and struggles. Most importantly, we offered each other corrective suggestions and proposals and encouraged each other so as not to give in to the temptation of

adopting new ideas too early. Approaching and absorbing the new knowledge from multiple perspectives expanded our perceptions and worldviews.

Attending to Difference through Tension, Revision, and Unity

There were two ways in which we attended to differences arising from tension, revision, and unity. First, as a group, we attended to diverse understanding of an issue or a new knowledge and respected other people's different interpretations and perspectives. We carefully examined our understanding and brought more evidence or outside resources to further our comprehension of each position. Tensions sometimes arose from expressing the different understanding of knowledge, an issue, or an incident; or from the sharing of our multiple experiences of teaching and learning. The anomalies we perceived in each other's experiences motivated us to look more deeply at an issue while the democratic nature of the community maintained unity. Diverse voices propelled us to continue revising our thinking and approaching new epistemological development.

On the other hand, we took time to observe and investigate the differences between U.S. settings and our home countries and worked collaboratively to determine how best to digest the new knowledge and further transform that knowledge into our cross-cultural contexts. We critically tested the knowledge by posing very compelling questions, requiring us to carefully examine the social-cultural differences between U.S. and our home contexts, for example, in terms of how readily students would voice their opinions. It was inevitable for us to face the challenges and dilemmas when transferring knowledge; however, we came to this inquiry group to be more prepared for these difficulties.

Conceptualising Transformative Knowledge

In this stage, 'sharing what was learned' did not exactly apply to our group dynamics. The original step 'Sharing what was learned: inquiry presentation¹' was naturally modified to 'Conceptualising transformative knowledge' since our group was inquiring collaboratively rather than individually. Thus, we will present at this stage how our group gradually moved from our previous stances to new understanding and continually modified and adjusted our knowledge to better fit our native contexts. Knowledge was transformed internally through reflection, conversation, and sharing. As a result, we furthered our current epistemologies concerning language teaching and learning in a supportive community.

While discussing our different understanding of inquiry-based curriculum, we started to gain new perspectives. The "thought collective" (Fleck, 1935: 39) helped

Table 1: Conceptualising the Inquiry-based Curriculum

What we used to believe/question	Potential understanding/movements
We have a very rigid curriculum so we cannot do IBC.	❖ We should work collaboratively with other language teachers. Language should be taught holistically instead of chunking time into different periods of listening, speaking, reading, and writing classes.
We have periods of time for certain subjects so IBC cannot work.	❖ In EFL settings, certain periods could be open for personal inquiry. Teachers could allow students to explore their individual inquiries without limiting the scope. However, teachers should explicitly tell students what they expect to evaluate.
How could students inquire if they only have limited English?	<p>❖ Li-Ting suggested that the teacher could allow for 15-20 minutes at the end for L1 time. Students could express freely using L1.</p> <p>❖ For beginners, they are burdened with learning vocabulary, or decoding skills. Learners at higher levels could do personal inquiry. For us, English is just a subject rather than a tool that we could use for inquiry.</p>
What is inquiry-based curriculum?	❖ Learners could engage for a long period of time in their inquiry, like the whole morning or the whole day.
What should teachers do in an IBC classroom?	❖ Teachers have individual conferences with students and offer help or suggestions. Students could plan their own curriculum with teachers' advice. Teachers and students could sign a contract of agreement on the plan.

Language classes are chunked into pieces of periods, such as speech, listening, novel reading, or writing.

Inquiry-based curriculum provides diversified education.

- ❖ Teachers should do invitations before students start their personal inquiry.
- ❖ We should collaborate with different language-skill teachers to engage our students in an on-going, integrated, meaningful curriculum.
- ❖ Learners should be encouraged to go beyond their inquiry within certain areas so that they won't be limited by their scope of knowledge.

us to expand our own understanding of inquiry-based curriculum (IBC) from a variety of angles. We moved from what we used to believe/question individually to a potential new understanding as a group. Table 1 summarises the shift.

Planning New Inquiries through Reflection and Reflexivity

Reflection as an internal process and reflexivity as a collaborative process worked together to generate new inquiries. While assimilating the new concepts in our field, we carefully examined the EFL contexts and together anticipated what would and would not work in our home countries. Involved in critical reflection, we together anticipated and strategised ways to deconstruct some barriers, encouraged each other by providing alternatives, and initiated some invitations to each other in the group or to people outside of the group. As a result, we generated more inquiries that would take our conceptions further. The meaning negotiation phase made it possible for us to make sense out of the new knowledge and ponder its potential utilisation in our contexts. In group discussions, one issue tended to raise another, propelling our inquiry towards a clear comprehension of EFL pedagogy.

After defining the inquiry-based curriculum, we planned more inquiries to help us approach potential teaching ideas and classroom practices. Group members discussed how to guide the inquiry-based curriculum and how to set up invitations before students explored their inquiries, as shown in the following excerpt:

Ru-Fang: I also wonder how a teacher should guide the students and start invitations in this kind of curriculum. Don't you think invitations should go before it? I don't think kids will start to inquire something spontaneously. So I wonder how the teacher starts the invitations for students in the beginning.

Hui-Chin: Teachers should definitely offer enough resources or directions; otherwise, they will be so lost (GM).

This excerpt challenged inquiry-based curriculum in such a way that learners needed to be guided in exploring multiple possibilities before they jumped into their inquiries. It also raised the dilemma we often had, ‘how much free space should we give our students?’ If we opened the door big enough for them, would they really have the capability to go for their choices? We argued that if not provided with enough guidance, students would not be sure where they were heading for their inquiries. Bringing in past teaching and learning experiences, we began to project how inquiry-based curriculum would work in our contexts since our learners were educated in the way of receiving knowledge directly from the teachers. When children were taught that there was a single correct answer in our systems, how would we guide them to seek for other alternatives and go for their genuine inquiry? It became a hard task for us as EFL teachers to find the fine line. Before opening the door for them to explore their inquiries, we need to give the keys of adequate guidance and rich resources for their engagement in their inquiries. Rich resources and good preparation by the teacher were crucial for students to pursue their inquiries. It is imperative to recognise the potential problems in our own contexts when projecting how to implement new knowledge.

Taking Thoughtful New Action through Invitation and Repositioning

Our group constantly repositioned ourselves in the journey of professional growth. We were growing as learners as well as teachers, so our identities were evolving in relation to our interactions with the world and existing knowledge systems. Although we could not take thoughtful actions immediately in actual classrooms, we were taking the actions in our own professional learning process, inviting other group members to try new ideas, and enthusiastically planning what our language classrooms would look like. We shared and challenged ourselves to consider what actions we planned to take, as soon as we returned home, based on our collaborative inquiry in the group. Our ongoing inquiry focused on how our collaboration in a transformative inquiry group would continue to support our teaching and continual learning.

After intensive discussion, Ru-Fang said she would hold individual conferences with students when she went back home for teaching. She recognised the significance of consultation with individuals. It demonstrated that she valued the learning process over the product and that our conversations had raised her consciousness to emphasise the process of student’ engagement in the inquiry process instead of evaluating the final product.

Li-Ting proposed that she would invite other teachers to collaborate on planning an inquiry-based curriculum in which students could engage in an ongoing project and language could be integrated together as a whole. Li-Ting stated, “I wonder if we as teachers could work together to understand what every student is doing. I think I will try to work with other teachers. But I don’t know if it will work well.” Li-Ting started to envision the likelihood of inviting other teachers who teach other language skills to plan the curriculum together and thus make it more integrated as a whole. However, she doubted the possibility of making it work, “I think for colleges in Taiwan, maybe it won’t be the case.” She raised the issue of college teachers’ isolation. She anticipated the challenges to disrupt the taken-for-granted curriculum plan by inviting other colleagues to work together as a team. The study group allowed each of us to reflect on the knowledge we were currently learning, carefully examine the home country contexts, and further predict the potential challenges. Later on, Moon agreed with Li-Ting, “Curriculum should go this way. I don’t see the point of taking them apart. Students should use English to inquire about their interests instead of focusing on the language skills themselves.” The discussion challenged the underlying assumption beyond language curriculum in Taiwan and Korea and questioned why language was divided into different pieces. Learning from other perspectives of how a language curriculum should be, we questioned our existing curriculum and planned thoughtful actions when teaching English at home.

In the discussion, we often expressed our uncertainty, uneasiness, and doubts regarding transferring the new knowledge into our home countries. We were not sure what the pure inquiry-based curriculum would be like either in the U.S. setting or our future classrooms. On one hand, we were afraid we did not understand it well enough to adopt it; on the other hand, we were concerned about carefully evaluating our cross-cultural differences before implementing any new knowledge. The following excerpt illustrates how group members repositioned ourselves and acknowledged our professionalism of being classroom teachers by assuring each other that we should consider the cross-cultural differences carefully before implementation.

Li-Ting: Like what I said, if school is 100 % inquiry-based, students do not need to go to school

[All laugh]

Li-Ting: Don’t you think? School is set up the way like you learn most at school. When you go out, you do something else. I always think that those pro-

fessor or theorists set up high ideas and big visions. So I also argue how pure you could go or how far you could go should depend on your own educational contexts.

All said: Right, that is right!

Hui-Chin: I think only we as teachers know what exactly works best for our class. If you want to follow everything which is pure, it doesn't work for our class because of the different socio-cultural differences. What would you choose? Would you choose to follow pure philosophy or would you choose what works best for your class?

Li-Ting: Look at Dr. Harste's class, do you think it is pure enough? NO! We still have to read certain books but you could approach your own project whatever you want

Hui-Chin: Yes, still there is a format or direction for us to follow

Li-Ting: There is certain readings you have to cover, certain times you have to hand in your paper. You cannot say I am still inquiring about the course, so I cannot hand in the assignment.

[All laugh]. (GM)

Tensions arose through discussions between theory and practice, and the ideal and reality. In our conversation, each of us at different times over the year voiced our uneasiness with implementing the new knowledge in a *pure* form in our own contexts. The more we came to understand the pure theory, the more hesitant we became to adopt it. Li-Ting responded to our uncertainty by arguing that teachers should integrate the social-cultural and the contextualised factors into our curriculum implementation and make professional decisions in our own classrooms. We agreed to the fact that as long as we understood the theory well enough, we as EFL classroom teachers could be confident in making the judgment of what would work best for our students instead of being trapped in pure theory.

In sum, we explored our inquiries, examined our past learning and teaching experiences, gained new perspectives through sharing, came to a new unity by examining our existing assumptions and acquired theories, attended to different understanding by referencing our own experiences or outside resources. The inquiry cycle in this way served as a professional development framework. Because the present study was an exploration of the professional development of participants in the inquiry group, the inquiry cycle turned out to be representative of the group dynamics.

Conclusion

As the pattern of group dynamics emerged, it naturally manifested a version of the inquiry cycle. The modifications of the original model suggest the group's extensive participation in that cycle over different topics and my close attention to the resulting data. Because there was natural similarity between the inquiry cycle and our professional development, there was no need to impose the inquiry cycle as an analytical tool. Rather, my own reconstructions from the data resulted in a pattern that closely matched this cycle. This study illustrated how the inquiry cycle could be utilised for framing professional development. The process of undergoing the recursive stages in a fashion similar to the inquiry cycle manifested the foundational group interaction patterns. Thus, the inquiry cycle could imply professional development and support for teachers involved in the process illustrated by the characteristics of the inquiry cycle. This model provided the teacher education programs with a theoretical framework to cradle the growth in inquiry groups.

As we ourselves experienced an inquiry-based learning group for our own learning, we realised that we were gaining autonomy over our learning and finding its relevance to our future teaching. Through the frame of inquiry-based curriculum, our personal inquiries as EFL teachers progressively transformed our knowledge as we continually asked various questions and engaged with like-thinking colleagues. Little (1993) claims that inquiry-based professional development demonstrates the best practice. The ongoing inquiry-based professional development model prevented us from simply replicating the new knowledge in practice; instead, it allowed us to practise collaborative reflection with the group.

Coming from different countries, we continually battled the competing forces of our native contexts and the teaching theories generated from Western philosophy. I believe that right from the beginning, the practices of reflection and inquiry should have been encouraged as an integral part of graduate training. This group provided us with the opportunity to practise collaborative reflection and explore together our evolving inquiries. This inquiry group also prepared us as EFL teachers who were detached from teaching practices to make connections to real-life classroom situations and related our personal experiences to the theories we were acquiring. Chances were given for participants in the group to take turns proposing topics, mediating discussions, or offering invitations. Graduate students who previously devoted all their time to isolated work for academic accomplishment now had the opportunity to share openly and collectively. van Lier (1996) states, "Neither intelligence, skill, knowledge nor understandings are locked inside individuals; rather, they are acquired in social interaction and spread around in our social and

physical environment” (p. 8). Hence, the teacher inquiry group became a social forum through which members shared different perspectives and resources, learned to articulate individual takes on issues, and brainstormed collectively possible solutions to our problems and dilemmas.

New theories and knowledge can invigorate us to renovate our profession, but only if we can contextualise the knowledge in our own settings and co-construct it to advance our understanding, will changes take place. Our devotion to the inquiry group resonated with the notion in Rardin *et al.* (1988), “The inner act by which a person [became] receptive to new information and assimilate[d] it in such a way that he/she [was] able to operate out of it [was] the act of ownership and commitment to new meaning and values” (p. 154). In the course of one year, our knowledge base was not only advanced through meaning negotiating, but also through attending to differences and sharing perspectives. More importantly, we were encouraged to reflect on who we were, where we came from, where we were then, what we knew and believed concerning language learning and teaching, what our students’ needs were, who our students would be, and why our teachers used their particular pedagogies. We negotiated meanings concerning the knowledge pertinent to us and took full responsibility over our own learning, and we continued to develop perpetual inquiries. We stepped outside of our unexamined assumptions and together took a critical stance while reflecting on our past and current experiences.

As a result, we were empowered in many different ways. First, we began to envision the possibility of translating what we acquired here in a teacher education program to our future contexts. We started to critically reflect on the process of progressing through our teacher education program and to express what we believed and shared our learning and teaching experiences out of a desperate desire. Gradually, we gained strength and support from the group conversations and affirmed each other’s roles as graduate students and future teachers. Our voices contributed to the collective power that revived each of us. According to van Lier (1996), sharing voices enables one to reject the concept that power comes from somewhere outside the self and to perceive empowerment in the reflective instead of the receptive form. Moreover, when teacher education programs support collaborative reflection and learning and validate individual responsibility and inquiries, teacher learners are more likely to think like practising classroom teachers and make decisions for themselves as if they were in actual classrooms.

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(Footnotes)

- ¹ This stage, "Sharing what was learned: inquiry presentation" entailed allowing learners in the inquiry cycle to present their findings from their personal inquiry in the end.