

A Self-Narrative Study on Self-Directed Professional Development of a High School English Intern Teacher

Liping Wu

*Institute of Foreign Languages, Gannan Normal University, Ganzhou, China
945240872@qq.com*

Abstract: *Teachers are the mainstay of education. Teacher's self-directed professional development can give full play to the main role of teachers in professional development. In recent years, more and more voices have emphasized the effectiveness of self-directed learning theory for teachers' professional development, but very little literature has presented the specific process of teachers' self-directed professional development. This paper uses a self-narrative research method to present the specific process of the author's year-long self-directed learning, revealing the dilemmas and challenges of teachers' self-directed learning, as well as the growth trajectory of actively seeking countermeasures to solve real-world problems and thus improve her research capacity. This paper has also put forward the dynamic developmental model of self-directed learning.*

Keywords: *Self-Directed Learning, Teacher Professional Development, Self-Narrative Study*

1. Introduction

The current research on teachers' professional development is fruitful, mainly focusing on the connotation, stages, approaches, and influencing factors of teachers' professional development. Teacher professional development training guided by the principle of "seeking progress while maintaining stability" has also gained proficiency. Graduating from university, trainee teachers began their transition from pre-service education to working life (in-service education stage). However, during these two stages, "curriculum orientation" and "school task orientation" define the main content of teacher development, and under this standardized path, what has been ignored is the uniqueness of teachers.

Self-directed learning originated from adult education and was characterized by autonomy, flexibility, and development, etc. In 1975, Knowles, the father of adult education in the United States, defined self-directed learning in his monograph *Self-Directed Learning* as "a process in which an individual initiates activities by himself or with the help of others, in which the learner self-diagnoses learning needs, formulates learning goals, determines the resources needed for learning, selects and implements appropriate learning strategies, and evaluates learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975)." Self-directed learning with full attention to the characteristics of individual's uniqueness can well make up for the ignorance of teachers' uniqueness.

In order to explore the specific process of self-directed learning, the author conducted a year-long self-directed learning with the goal of "experiencing the research process and improving research capacity". This paper uses a self-narrative research method to present the specific process of the author's learning, revealing the dilemmas and challenges of self-directed learning, and the growth trajectory of the author who actively seeks countermeasures to solve real-world problems aiming at improving her research skills.

2. Research Method

Most research on teacher's self-directed professional development attaches importance to the shortcomings of traditional teacher professional development models and the rationality of self-directed professional development. Self-narrative research has advantages in revealing the process of self-directed learning and how teachers feel during that process. The use of self-narrative research can present the specific process of self-directed learning for teachers and help readers feel the confusion and challenges in the process of self-directed learning. This can provide some insights for teachers who

wish to improve their professionalism through self-directed learning.

2.1 Overview of Research Methodology

Different from other qualitative research methods such as case study and narrative inquiry, the researcher in self-narrative research takes himself as the research resource as well as the research tool. The main source of data is also from the researcher, and it is mainly presented in the form of narrative. Self-narrative research emphasizes the interaction between individuals and groups and the sociocultural environment on which they live. Instead of avoiding subjective disputes deliberately, it frankly shows researcher's self-experience and reflection, and pays attention to the social context in which these experiences occur (Yang Luxin, 2018).

2.2 Data Collection & Analysis

The data for this study was collected throughout the author's internship at xx Middle School in Ganzhou and as an English teacher at xx High School (from May 2020 to July 2021), which lasted about one year.

In order to make this study more authentic and reliable, the author uses a variety of data sources to collect data, and refined the data thematically accordingly. The data sources of this study mainly include: (1) a one-year reflective diary of the author's; (2) summary record of communication and conversation with tutors, classmates and students; (3) note taking in the learning process; (4) the author's research achievements: relevant paper and project.

2.3 Background Information of the Researcher

After four years of undergraduate study in English Education, I successfully enrolled in a Master's degree in English Education in 2019. During the four years of undergraduate study, in addition to completing the course arrangement, I obtained two professional certificates, received some scholarships, and gained some experience in serving as a student leader. However, when I look back on my research experience, I find that there is a gap in my research: I have not published any dissertation, I have not participated in any project, and I do not even know how a journal paper or a project is produced. Classroom teaching and teaching research are complementary and symbiotic relationships: teaching without research is shallow, research without teaching is empty. The shortage in scientific research capacity makes me worry about my teaching career.

In late December 2019, the 2019 novel coronavirus emerged from Wuhan, China, and resulted in a formidable outbreak in many cities in China and expanded globally. Students all stayed at home, while the home quarantine period would give me more time to think and study. It was during this time that self-directed learning theory came to my attention when I read a thesis. I frantically searched the Internet for relevant research in this area, and research on self-directed teacher professional development came to my attention accordingly. As I marveled at the power of self-directed learning theory, the idea of conducting self-directed development on "experiencing the research process and improving research skills" took root in my mind.

In June 2020, with the idea of conducting a self-directed study, I began a year-long action research project to explore the specific process of self-directed professional development.

3. Three Stages of Practicing the "Self-Directed Learning"

As far as the goal and achievement of practicing "self-directed learning" is concerned, my actions are mainly divided into three stages: "exploration stage", "practical stage" and "reflection stage". In the exploration stage, I found the research direction based on my own interests, and determined the research perspective by exploring the theoretical knowledge. In the practical stage, I determine the learning objective according to the actual situation, and adopt a variety of ways to achieve the goal. In the reflection stage, I successfully published my first thesis by reviewing the whole self-directed learning process, and carried out the further self-directed learning plan. In these three stages of "exploration stage", "practical stage" and "reflection stage", I have experienced different kinds of difficulties, and also experienced unprecedented gains in the process of coping with challenges and adjusting learning programs. In order to present the specific process of self-directed learning more intuitively, I will review these three different stages of practicing self-directed learning and reveal the

process of a senior high school English intern teacher's self-growth through self-directed learning in the first person.

3.1 Exploration Stage

The process of contact with new areas is a process from scratch for individuals. Therefore, how to clarify the research direction and find a perspective for in-depth research is the main challenge at this stage.

3.1.1 Discovering research directions from interests

There was a time when I was passionate about the field of preschool education. It is because I think that among all school education preschool education is decisive for a child's development. Driven by my interest, I began to explore the professional knowledge of preschool education: reading professional books, listening to professional lectures, observing professional courses, and attending the summer camp of preschool education in Peking Normal University... I was so fulfilled and happy. I shared this learning experience with my teachers and classmates in class and received higher praise. This gave me great encouragement and helped me find confidence in my study.

“This learning mission was initiated by myself, determining the specific learning goals based on my interests, making the concrete learning plan, and finding relevant resources. I have never had such a deep experience as I do now: learning is my own business, and learning can turn out to be like this.” (Reflection Journal 20200506)

While reading literature, the theory of self-directed learning came to my attention. And compared to my own learning process in preschool education, isn't this exactly the process of learning that the theory describes? Could I also base the self-directed learning activities I wanted on this process? In one class, I raised my doubts with Mr. Z. He confirmed my idea and suggested that the topic should be focused on my professional discipline, which would be the only way to reflect the disciplinary character of the study.

3.1.2 Strengthen theoretical knowledge and identify research perspectives

All research should not be started blindly. It is important to understand the current status and shortcomings of related research before embarking on a study, and to identify knowable perspectives from which to continue the research. By searching and reading literature, I found that:

“There is a difference between self-directed learning and what we often refer to as self-learning. Current research on self-directed learning has focused on its connotations and models, and some studies have found the effectiveness of self-directed learning in the field of adult education by observing others' self-directed learning. Yet few researchers have shown what the learning process is like for self-directed learners and what problems they are likely to encounter.” (Reflection on literature reading 200517)

Through theoretical inquiry and in-depth understanding of the current state of research on the topic, I identified the perspective I wanted to study in depth: to present the real process of self-directed learning in the first-person perspective, using myself as the research object.

3.2 Practical Stage

The most distinctive feature of self-directed learning is that learners determine their own learning goals based on their specific situation and needs, and in the process of achieving their goals they need to make their own plans, make full use of all resources, and monitor and evaluate their own learning.

3.2.1 Goal Setting

“The goal should not be set too large which will be beyond one's research capabilities, or it will be a long way to achieve the goal. The goal should not be set too small either which cannot achieve the purpose of enhancing the ability.” (Reflection Journal 20200809)

Through self-reflection I realized that I lacked facility in doing research. What procedures does a journal paper go through to be produced? What skills are required for the generation of paper?

“Research is like crossing a river by feeling the stones; you only know the depth of river when you have tried it. The generation of an article needs to go through: 1) deciding direction (combined with interests or practical problems); 2) searching literature based on

literature; 3) reading literature and taking notes on your thinking; 4) selecting and condensing the topic, reflecting on the practice and writing the article. The most important thing for the research process is persistence.” (Notes for the lecture “Condensation of topic selection and project design for foreign language research” 20201104)

My university organized the postgraduate innovation fund project application work at those days. I decided to seize this opportunity in order to exercise my research ability and explore the specific process of self-directed learning.

3.2.2 Goal Attainment

“As the initiator of the project, I have to have a more comprehensive understanding of the research direction in order to better lead the team members. I am now only sure of the general direction of the research, but I am so confused about the other details.” (Reflection Journal 20200521)

It was with great trepidation that I started the project application process. From finding peers with common research interests to discussing with the group members, I simply did not close my eyes during that month.

In the first workshop, I shared the research results and discussed my research ideas and main doubts with the team. There were full of sharp questions from my peers that I had not even thought about. What is the significance of the study? What is the research context? How to conduct the research? We answered each other’s questions, so that the research shortcomings were gradually exposed. Before the end of the meeting, we assigned tasks according to the results of the discussion to determine the objectives of the next workshop.

“Many hands make light work. The group members had different perspectives and asked questions from multiple perspectives. By doing so, we were able to gain a more holistic understanding of the factors that need to be considered in a study.” (Workshop Reflection 20200527)

Combining the workshop questions, I searched the relevant literature on a large scale again, and solved the problems one by one, and finally finished the project application before the deadline. After sending the proposal to my supervisor, I was very happy and thought I could finally sleep well.

The next day, I received my supervisor’s suggestions on the proposal.

“Your perspective of research is valuable, but there are two things to be careful of. One is that there are multiple sentences can’t be read smoothly. On the other hand, your research results haven’t indicated the general direction, making the study hollow.” (Tutor Guidance on Project application 20200607)

According to the suggestions given by my tutor, I reworked the declaration, trying to concretize the path of the research results. A few days later, the results of the college review came out, and my project “Exploring the Professional Development Path of High School English Teachers in the Context of the New Curriculum - Based on Self-directed Learning Perspective” was recommended as a provincial project.

3.3 Reflection Stage

The success of this project was only the first step in the research experience. In this process, through self-directed learning, I precisely analyze what problems I need to solve and what resources I need to find in each part of the process, and experience the transformation from determining the direction of the selected topic to the formation of the research design, and realize the transformation from being incapable of scientific research to understanding the process of research.

3.3.1 Learner: the controller of the learning

In the self-directed learning process, learners need to set appropriate goals, develop learning plans, and integrate all learning resources to achieve their learning goals based on their actual situation and needs. The learner, as the controller in the self-directed learning process, is vulnerable to multiple interior factors during the self-directed learning process.

The maintenance of learning motivation. I had thoughts of giving up when I encountered difficulties in the learning process and tried to put myself in my comfort zone. Driven by the internal motivation of

“I want to learn, I want to improve”, I was able to adjust my mindset and find my way back to learning. Motivation for learning reflects the psychological process of the learner to maintain learning behavior, and the motivation for learning generated from within the learner can better motivate the learner to face difficulties and improve the learner’s persistence in learning.

Information literacy enhancement. In the context of information technology, we can easily get the information we need, but how can we quickly identify, acquire, and process the information we want in the face of a network full of various information? At the beginning, my learning process was hindered by the lack of a suitable platform for accessing literature, and then my time was wasted due to the incapability of identifying high-quality literature. Through continuous reflection and summarization during the learning process, my information literacy has been improved and I have now accumulated procedural knowledge in retrieving, identifying, and acquiring key documents.

3.3.2 Facilitators: Enablers of Learning

Although self-directed learning is a spontaneous learning activity initiated by the learner, it is inseparable from the facilitator of learning. The attitude and the knowledge or skills acquired by the facilitator has different effects on the learners. In the process of self-directed learning, students’ questions, peer cooperation and teachers’ guidance all contribute to my learning. Learning can avoid many detours if it is based on the crystallization of collective wisdom. Only then can learning goals be achieved accurately and efficiently.

3.3.3 Resources: Booster of Learning

To complete the project application, we obtained guidance on writing the project application through online searches and courses; consulted professional books to understand the difference between the purpose of the study and the research objectives; and used interviews and questionnaires to understand the current status of teachers’ professional development. These relevant or acquired and needed resources are boosters for achieving the learning objectives.

4. Discussion

Combining the experience of the first round of self-directed learning and reflecting on the main problems that emerged in the process, the author carried out the second round of self-directed learning with the goal of “paper analysis”. In the second round of self-directed learning, the author enriched the basic theory of language testing and output a journal paper entitled “A study of the content validity of English listening test questions in Jiangxi province from 2016 to 2021 over time”, which has received the acceptance notice. Through the comparison of the first and second rounds, I found that the efficiency and proficiency of the second round of self-directed learning was significantly better than the first round. This shows that self-directed learning can be improved through training.

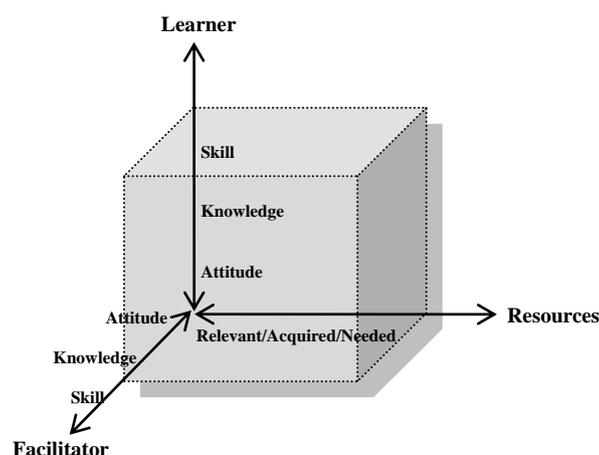


Figure 1: A dynamic developmental model of self-directed learning

The author describes the dynamic development process of the three stages of self-directed learning in terms of learner, resources, and facilitators (Figure 1). The effect of self-directed learning, i.e., the

volume of the model's rectangle (i.e., the shaded part), is influenced by three main factors: the learner, the resources, and the facilitators. The learner's attitude, knowledge and skills are the decisive factors, and only the larger the value of the vertical axis, the more likely the learner is to make full use of the resources and facilitators in order to maximize the effect of self-directed learning.

5. Conclusion

Self-directed learning allows learners to set specific goals for improvement based on their own situation and to solve problems that they need to solve. Through self-directed learning, teachers can improve their teaching efficiency and self-confidence; through self-directed learning, teachers can update their knowledge; through self-directed learning, teachers can have an aptitude for self-directed learning thus can set a good example for their students, and then guide students to become a self-directed learner.

Acknowledgement

*Supported by Postgraduate Innovation Special Fund Project in Jiangxi Province in 2020 (No.YC2020-S616)

References

- [1] Brown, Daniel L., et al. "Self-directed professional development: the pursuit of affective learning." *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* 65.3 (2001): 240-246.
- [2] Chen Xiaoxin. *On self-directed learning and teacher professional development [J]. Primary and Secondary School Teacher Training*, 2011, {4}(01):11-13.
- [3] Govender, Rosaline. "Practices of self-directed professional development of teachers in South African public schools." *World academy of science, engineering and technology (online)* (2015).
- [4] Knowles, Malcolm S. "Self-directed learning: a guide for learners and teachers." (1975).
- [5] Li Guangping, Yu Yang. *Self-directed learning and teachers' professional development[J]. Foreign Education Research*, 2005,{4}(06):42-46.
- [6] Louws, Monika & Meirink, Jacobiene & Veen, Klaas & Driel, Jan. (2017). *Teachers' self-directed learning and teaching experience: What, how, and why teachers want to learn. Teaching and Teacher Education*. 66. 171-183. 10.1016/j.tate.2017.04.004.
- [7] Luo Xinghuan, You Rui. A review of domestic research on adult self-directed learning between 2005 and 2016[J]. *China Adult Education*,2018,{4}(04):8-12.
- [8] Meng, Kathy. "A research on self-directed professional development of a teacher of TESOL in Chinese context." *Proceedings of International Conference on Global Economy, Finance and Humanities Research*. 2014.
- [9] Xu Jun. *Self-directed learning: an effective way of rural teachers' professional development[J]. Teacher Education Research*,2009,21(03):17-22.
- [10] Yang Luxing. *From researcher to teacher educator: A self-narrative study[J]. Foreign Language and Foreign Language Teaching*, 2018, (04): 54-64+148.
- [11] Yuan Yue, Fang Ming. *Analysis on the professional development of university teachers based on self-orientation [J]. China Adult Education*, 2018,{4}(13):140-143.
- [12] Zhang Wenjuan. *Applying production-oriented approach to college English teaching: A self-narrative study[J]. Chinese Foreign Language*, 2020, 17(01): 60-67.