

Benchmarks of Instructional Leadership of Teachers in Transitioning to the New Normal of Selected Universities in China

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Abstract: Within the dynamic landscape of post-COVID education, this study delves into instructional leadership in the selected universities in Zhejiang Province, China, with a focus on the unique experiences and best practices of college English teachers. The qualitative methodology employed involves in-depth interviews with selected college English teachers. Through qualitative analysis, the study aims to explore the unique experiences of college teachers in transitioning to the new normal in terms of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The lessons learned could establish the benchmarks of instructional leadership of college teachers in transitioning to the new normal.

Keywords: Benchmark; Instructional Leadership; New Normal.

1. Introduction

Research on instructional leadership originated in the United States the middle of 20 century. The original subject of instructional leadership research was principals, which is defined as providing teachers with a productive and satisfying work environment and providing students with an environment that is suitable for their learning and their expectations. After the 1990s, research on instructional leadership began to teacher's instructional leadership, and the research content gradually expanded from "focusing on interpersonal relationship" to "teacher's leadership" and "teaching quality or overall education quality improvement" etc. (Li & Chang, 2023). Teacher's instructional leadership is vital for creating a positive learning environment, improving educational outcomes, and fostering professional growth. It not only benefits individual students but also contributes to the overall success and effectiveness of educational institutions. This study will explore the instructional leadership of college teachers, English teachers in particular, in the transitioning period which is defined as new normal in the study. To be specific, the transitioning period is from the pandemic period that implemented digital class to present that has implemented face to face class.

This study intends to explore instructional leadership in transitioning to the new normal of selected universities in Zhejiang Province, China. It will answer the following specific questions:

First, what are the unique experiences of the college teachers in transitioning to the new normal in terms of curriculum, instruction, and assessment?

Second, what are the best practices of the college teachers in curriculum, instruction, and assessment in transitioning to the new normal of selected universities?

2. Review of Related Literature and Studies

2.1. Instructional Leadership

The theory of instructional leadership originated from studies conducted in US schools in the 1980s, which offer substantial and diverse empirical evidence that instructional leadership has indirect but significant effects on student outcomes.

This substantial body of knowledge on instructional leadership mainly derives from the USA, the UK and New Zealand (e.g. Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Robinson et al., 2008). Qian, Walker, and Li (2017) created a model of instructional leadership with three dimensions: defining the school mission, managing the instructional program and developing the school learning climate.

Recently, research has further expanded the knowledge base on instructional leadership. On the other hand, Walker and Qian (2015) established that the knowledge base concerning Chinese principals' leadership in general and their instructional leadership in particular is small and relatively immature.

In China, the concept of instructional leadership was introduced more than several decades ago, and is widely used in Chinese literature. They revealed that 180 Chinese theses and journal articles on the theme of *jiaoxue lingdao* (instructional leadership) which are prescriptive and lack empirical evidence; and often elaborate on the responsibilities of instructional leaders and recommend strategies for adoption by principals. Moreover, Qian et al., (2017) proposed that as instructional leaders, principals should take the roles of curriculum executives, administrative managers and leaders of teaching and research. Qian et al., suggested that principals need to focus on optimizing school structure, building a school culture, modernizing the curriculum content and pedagogy and establishing a comprehensive curriculum framework. In other words, the types of instructional leadership that principals are expected to display, rather than

the types of instructional leaders they are. The prevailing exam-oriented culture also influences principals' methods of combining and prioritizing instructional-improvement strategies (Cahapay & Anoba, 2021). Qian et al., pointed out that these empirical studies provide insights into the work lives of Chinese school principals, but are not specifically focused on instructional leadership in China. Thus, Qian et al., focused on instructional leadership and explored principals' roles as instructional leaders in the current reform context, in which traditional expectations and newly introduced initiatives are intertwined. The model of Qian et al., inform and guide this case study on instructional leadership of English teachers in selected Universities in this post pandemic period.

2.2. Guiding Framework

This qualitative study hopes to explore the instructional leadership of the English teachers in transitioning to the new normal. Thus, this study can use a guiding framework only since it does not intend to test a theory or a hypothesis. This guiding framework may help in establishing the benchmark practices of the English teachers in curriculum, instruction, and assessment in college. Thus, the findings may not be generalizable since this study will include the unique experiences only of the English teachers which may not be applicable to other teachers and universities.

2.3. Definition of Terms

This section provides the definition of the key terms used in this research study. The following terms are defined academically and operationally to have a better understanding of the proposed study:

Assessment – assessment conducted throughout the educational process with a view to enhancing student learning; eliciting evidence about learning to close the gap between current and desired performance (so that action can be taken to close the gap); providing feedback to students; and involving students in the assessment and learning process.

Benchmark – the best practices of the English teachers established from their unique experiences in instructional leadership in transitioning to the new normal.

Curriculum – the curricular guide in English implemented during the pandemic and transition period.

Instruction – the mode of delivery of instruction such digital class or face to face class implemented during the pandemic and transition period.

New Normal – the transition period from the pandemic period that implemented digital class to present that has implemented face to face class.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Locale

This case study purposefully selected the three universities in Zhejiang Province, China to show different perspectives on the unique experiences in instructional leadership. Moreover, Merriam (1998 in Creswell, 2013) advocates a general approach to qualitative studies in the field of education. Thus, this study particularly focuses on the English Departments only: (1) College English Department in Y University in Zhejiang Province; (2) College English Department in S University in Zhejiang Province; (3) College English Department in D University in Zhejiang Province.

3.2. Sampling Method

This case study used purposive sampling since it delved into the unique experiences of the English teachers only from the three universities in Zhejiang Province, China.

The participants of this study included: (1) an English teacher for at least three-years from selected universities; (2) experienced teaching online during the pandemic and teaching face to face this new normal; (3) willing to participate in the interview. The profile was used as criteria to establish that they are qualified participants; but not as test factors since it is not necessary in a case study.

This case study particularly included the English Department only selected from the selected three universities in Zhejiang province where the aspects of instructional leadership: curriculum, instruction, and assessment are experienced by the college teachers and may establish their best practices in transitioning to the new normal. The findings of this study are subject to local variations and cannot necessarily be generalized (Qian et al., 2017).

The target sample size generally for a qualitative study as Creswell (2018) recommends is 30 participants. However, the actual sample size ($n = 13$) of the participants depended on those who qualified to the sampling criteria that may have the unique experiences to strongly establish the distinctiveness of the case, thus served as basis for benchmark practices; and those who consented to participate in the study.

3.3. Research Instrument

This case study used an open-ended questionnaire for the interview with selected English teachers from the English Department of the three selected universities in Zhejiang Province.

This questionnaire consists of two parts: Part 1 – Profile of the Respondents which is used as basis to qualify the participants according to the purpose of this study and criteria for sample inclusion but not as test factors; Part 2 – Interview Questions on the unique experiences of the English teachers as instructional leaders in transitioning to the new normal in terms of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

4. Results

This case study focuses primarily on exploring college English teachers' unique experiences and their best practices in transitioning to the new normal in terms of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

The qualitative analyses are based on the study's problem statement which aims to answer and discuss ideas regarding the following problems:

(1) Unique Experiences of the College Teachers in Transitioning to the New Normal

Curriculum:

The recurring themes "navigate adaptation", "take challenges in curriculum", "requirements in curriculum design and implementation", "make adjustment for different learning models", "keep flexible in curriculum", "ensure to align the educational goals with students learning needs", "embrace changes", "meet students' needs in curriculum development", "promote integration", "make clear about the focuses", and redesign curriculum" establish the unique experiences in curriculum of the English teachers in transitioning to the new normal.

Instruction:

The recurring themes "emphasize redesign (reestablish,

rebuild, reexam, restructure, refresh, revisit, reform) in instruction”, “promote flexibility in teaching and learning environment”, “foster student-centered learning communities”, “make adjustments in instruction”, “gain adaptability in educational delivery”, “use education technology/ tools”, “meet students’ needs”, “require uniqueness”, “pay more attention to promote relevant learning experiences”. establish the unique experiences in instruction of the English teachers in transitioning to the new normal.

Assessment:

The recurring themes “emphasize real time/ timely feedback”, “enhance more assessment practices”, “promote diversity in assessment”, “combine formative and summative assessment”, “redesign assessment”. establish the unique experiences in assessment of the English teachers in transitioning to the new normal.

(2) Best practices of the college teachers in transitioning to the new normal

Curriculum:

The recurring themes “promote interdisciplinary in language learning”, “keep flexible in course design”, “tailor education for diverse learners”, “emphasize student-centered

course design”, “establish clear and measurable learning objectives and outcome”. highlight the best practices in curriculum of the English teachers in transitioning to the new normal.

Instruction:

The recurring themes “promote student-centered classroom teaching”, “improve integration of digital technology”, “encourage diverse teaching methods”, and “support personalized instruction”. highlight the best practices in instruction of the English teachers in transitioning to the new normal.

Assessment:

The recurring themes “construct timely feedback for students”, “encourage self-assessment/ evaluation”, “combine formative and summative assessment”, and “apply rubrics grading”. highlight the best practices in assessment of the English teachers in transitioning to the new normal.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The lessons learned from the unique experiences and best practices of the English teachers in transitioning to the new normal are as follows:

Table 1. The lessons learned from the unique experiences and best practices of the English teachers in transitioning to the new normal

Participants	Lessons Learned
Participant 1—identify learning gaps	Identify gaps in learning in terms of clear learning objectives that are specific, measurable and align with standards Provide a roadmap for students’ expectations Students take ownership of their learning by setting goals for their own leaning experiences
Participant 2—focus on self-assessment	Focus more on self-study Should promote self-assessment and reflection among students Encourage to contemplate their learning process and outcome to identify their strength and improvements
Participant 3—incorporate moral education	Incorporating moral elements in the curriculum Combine moral elements into actual teaching Supplementary tasks with moral elements should be assigned appropriately, forming the in and out-of-class moral education pattern.
Participant 4—redesign curriculum	Redesign/ rethink curriculum scope/ overall course Revisit / adjust overall structure of the course Share course design to learn from other teachers Adapting English curriculum to outline format is a valuable learning experience
Participant 5—emphasize real-time and constructive feedback	Emphasizing real-time and constructive feedback (online and verbal, face-to-face) Ensure feedback is personalized, specific and actionable
Participant 6—promote interdisciplinary integration	Focus on integrating English with other subjects to create a more integrated learning experience Collaborate/ integrate projects with other disciplines to build broader understanding
Participant 7—provide personalized instruction	Provide personalized solution in assessing students Provide personalized guidance and support to help each student achieve the best learning result Encourage independent study Practice self-evaluation/ self-monitoring and reflection
Participant 8—enhance student-centered teaching	Emphasize student-centered approach to invoke students to actively participate in their learning process Implement cooperative learning, peer or teamwork and communication skills, collaborative projects
Participant 9—keep flexible in curriculum and teaching instruction	Focus on flexibility to quickly adapt to different teaching modes Design the course to be more flexible to allow for a smooth transition to different teaching modes To easily adjust the teaching content to meet the learning needs of students Use multiple assessments Flexibility of online courses without restrictions on time and space
Participant 10—require flexibility	Biggest requirement in curriculum is to be flexible Adjust to accommodate different teaching model to ensure that educational goals are achieved Adjust course schedule and content to cater students’ needs To be more flexible to cope with possible uncertainties Quickly adapt to various educational tools and platforms Implement different types of learning activities
Participant 11—develop diverse curriculum, teaching, and assessment	Develop a diverse curriculum- courses at different levels of difficulty to meet the needs and interests of different students Use diversified assessment methods to comprehensively assess students’ learning abilities
Participant 12—create module content	Chunking content into manageable modules
Participant 13—promote strategic integration of technology	To maximize students’ engagement and complement in-person teaching Leverage technology to create dynamic and interactive lessons for diverse learners Use technology more interestingly to arrange in-person interaction Apply virtual skills to f2f learning

Clearly, the lessons that can be learned from individual participant in transitioning to the new normal include identify leaning gaps, focus on self-assessment, incorporate moral education, redesign curriculum, emphasize real time and constructive feedback, promote interdisciplinary integration, provide personalized instruction, enhance student-centered teaching, keep flexible curriculum and teaching instruction, require flexibility, develop diverse curriculum teaching and assessment, create module content, and promote strategic integration of technology. These lessons learned establish the

benchmarks of instructional leadership of college teachers in transitioning to the new normal.

However, notably only participant 3 repeatedly and consistently emphasized moral education in curriculum, instruction and assessment as her unique experience and best practice in transitioning to the new normal. Participant 3 teaches a very important lesson to college teachers to incorporate moral elements in curriculum, instruction and assessment. She emulates the benchmarks of instructional leadership of teachers in transitioning to the new normal.

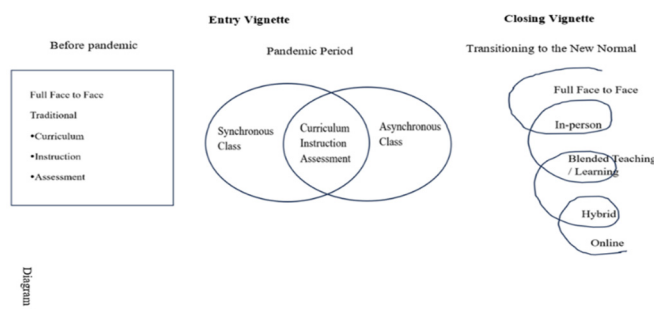


Fig 1. Vignette of the Benchmarks of Instructional leadership of college teachers in transitioning to the new normal

This study comes up with a vignette (as shown in Fig 1) that illustrated the benchmarks of instructional leadership in transitioning to the new normal. The entry vignette is a rectangle which is regular and closed, because before the pandemic teaching and learning in the university in China is conducted in full face-to-face, and teachers and students have become accustomed to this traditional teaching mode. However, in the pandemic period, teaching models have undergone great changes. The pandemic posed great challenge to the education and the traditional face-to-face teaching mode was no longer possible. Therefore, the online teaching was widely conducted, both in synchronous and asynchronous. Teachers had to redesign the curriculum, use technology, develop modular content etc., to ensure the online class can be delivered smoothly and effectively. Thus, the vignette become an intersection of two circles. When transitioning to the new normal, it's impossible to return to the traditional teaching mode, as the educators become more alert after the test of the pandemic. There are so many uncertainties in the future, so educators must be prepared anytime. They emphasize flexibility in education, advocate to use diverse teaching methods, promote student-centered teaching, leverage educational technology, provide personalized and real time feedback, balance formative and summative assessment, etc.

Therefore, the closing vignette becomes spiral, which is open and embracing change whenever necessary. Teachers as instructional leaders must follow the spiral direction that in transitioning to the new normal, classes are conducted in full face to face, yet they must anticipate or always be ready to shift from in – person to blended, hybrid or online anytime there is a need for it. This clearly show the portrait of an instructional leader this new normal who follows the spiral direction in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Based on the conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are presented:

1. That college teachers must incorporate moral education in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Moral education may help in the mental and spiritual supports to them who are the future of Chinese society. Moreover, Chinese traditional culture attaches great importance to moral education and emphasizes personal moral cultivation. In transitioning to the new normal, there are so many changes in the education field and moral education can establish order in chaos. It can help construct a more scientific and reasonable education system and cultivate outstanding talents with a sense of social responsibility and innovative spirit.

2. That college teachers must determine learning gap. In transitioning to the new normal, to maximize the learning efficiency, it is necessary for the teachers to decide the learning gap, to know the needs, interest, levels and

characteristics etc. of each student. By identifying learning, teachers can recognize students' difficulties and the spaces for improvement, ensuing that every student can enjoy high-quality education.

3. That administrators and teachers must emphasize flexibility as the most important requirement in curriculum development and implementation to meet the learning needs of students anytime of the uncertainties.

4. That college teachers must provide real-time and constructive feedback. Assessment is integral to teaching and provides real-time and constructive feedback is a great practice in assessment. It can help students understand their learning situation in time and guide them to adjust and improvement during the learning process. It can also motivate students to participate in the class and enhance their learning efficiency. Additionally, it can help achieve personalized teaching to best meet students' learning needs.

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