Assessing the Impact of 240-Credit-Hour Programme for Urban Primary School Teachers of English in China

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Abstract

This action research explores a 240-credit-hour training programme in urban Chinese primary school educational settings. A survey of 90 primary school teachers of English was conducted via classroom observation and questionnaires focusing on their reflection on the training programme. Analyses of variance were applied by comparison and contrast. Results illustrate that the programme is of help but the improvement of it needs being discussed.

Keywords: assess, urban primary school teachers of English, training programme

1. Introduction

China started to implement a new standard curriculum for English in primary schools in 2003. It is seen by educational administrators as important for the professional development (PD) of primary English teaching staff. Each level of government has paid considerable attention to improving the PD of in-service teachers of English, to regulating PD schemes in an institutional context, and to organising cascade training in the new curriculum for all primary school teachers of English. Since 2003, it has been a requirement for all primary school teachers to engage in a minimum of 240 credit hours of PD. The basic programme, of 240 credit hours, has been designed to provide teachers with an understanding of (1) linguistics relevant to English language learning, (2) recent developments in the theory and practice of English language teaching, particularly "task-based language teaching" and the learner-centred classroom. The 240-credit-hour programme (hereafter, "the Programme") also aims (3) to raise participants' proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, (4) to develop their intercultural communicative competence, and (5) their practical skills in areas such as classroom management and the design of syllabi and courses. Meanwhile, as part of the Programme, primary school teachers of English have also been encouraged to improve their teaching in various ways. For example, the "mentor-novice model" has been widely adopted as a way to improve teachers' skills with regard to ideological education and pedagogical practice while ideological education involves taking on stipulated attitudes and conforming to set moral standards (Scheerens, 2010). Most of primary school teachers of English who have involved in the Programme had the chance to participate in classroom observation visits to other schools. They have been promoted to develop as researchers as well, and are organized and sponsored by their schools to attend workshops and seminars national-wide. The main aim in this paper is to investigate to which extent the Programme has been successful in achieving its objectives.

The trainers in the Programme are referred to as "Jiaoyanyuan" (teaching and research fellows) and work for the local education commission. They are regarded frequently by both local educational administrators and trainee teachers as the "key people for the success of education reform" (Lin, 2012). One of their duties is to organise the Programme for teachers in their district. The vast majority of the Jiaoyanyuan have all completed a one-year PGCE (Professional Graduate Certificate in Education) programme in a university in the UK. With respect to the Programme, they play three roles: teacher, researcher, and administrator. The Programme brings with it its own structures, roles, activities, and responsibilities for the trainee teachers. Aside from creating opportunities for learning and professional development, it aims to make the necessities for continuous improvement irreversible.

Against this background, in this paper I report the main findings of a four-year study (2008-2012) intended to monitor and evaluate the Programme for teachers of English at 30 urban primary schools in Jiangsu Province. These schools are all located in the downtown area of one of the major cities in the province, and they are all

subject to conditions of context, including various practical constraints, that must be taken into account in order to look beyond the Programme itself.

Ninety urban primary school teachers of English from Nanjing, Jiangsu, China participated in the research. One group of 45 had completed the Programme and a second group of 45 teachers had not yet been involved in the Programme. The specific aim of the research project was to gather evidence about the extent to which the teaching practices of the 45 trained teachers had altered.

2. Participants and Methodology

A questionnaire was given out and responses were collected and analysed. The questionnaire focuses on the contents of the Programme. I collected pertinent data by observing the 60 teachers teaching in their regular classrooms. Most of the lessons were videoed to enable subsequent analysis. During the visits to the teachers' schools, I interviewed the teachers as well as with some of their colleagues and pupils, primarily in order to gain a better understanding of situational constraints on the teachers' methods of teaching English.

Fifty female teachers took part, 61% of whom had 5 or more years teaching experience, along with 40 male teachers, 20% of whom had more than five years' teaching experience (It is commonplace to talk over the imbalanced proportion between male and female teachers in primary schools in China.) The study started with the collection of quantitative data through the questionnaire. Fortunately, a 100% response rate was achieved. It is worth mentioning that the questionnaire was only sent to all those who had completed the Programme. Interviews were carried out in both Chinese and English according to the language proficiency of the interviewees.

During the school visits, 40 periods of lessons were observed and videoed. 20 lessons were given by former trainees and 20 lessons were given by the teachers who have not completed the Programme for purposes of comparison. The 40 periods of classes taught the same module from the textbook entitled *New Standard English* Book (III) composed by Sino-UK textbook writers.

3. Key Findings

3.1 Classroom Observation

The trained teachers spent less time in their classes explaining points of grammar and vocabulary to the pupils–i.e., less than one third of the trained teachers include this feature compared to about one half in the case of the untrained teachers. As it happens, the proportion of class time devoted to this activity varies enormously between the lessons sampled--from complete absence to 94% of the scans in one of the more traditional of the untrained. Additionally, the focus of teaching remained on grammar and reading, and the English classroom is primarily teacher-centred in the case of the teachers who have not been involved in the Programme.

As for the use of Chinese in the classroom, the difference between the untrained and the trained groups was slight, just 24% of video time for the trained compared to 18% for the untrained. This indicates that using English as the medium of instruction in the classroom is still a problem for urban primary school teachers of English.
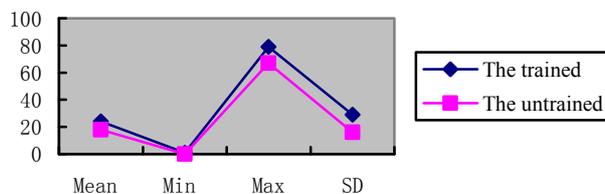

Figure 1. Using mother tongue: Mandarin Chinese (%)

Rote learning is barely in evidence in either of the two groups. This was unexpected given that it is commonly reported that teachers require pupils to learn short texts by heart for homework and then demand in a following lesson that pupils then recite these texts from memory or that they take them down accurately in dictation. However, as this is mainly a homework task it is perhaps not surprising that direct checking in class should not in general take up a great deal of time.
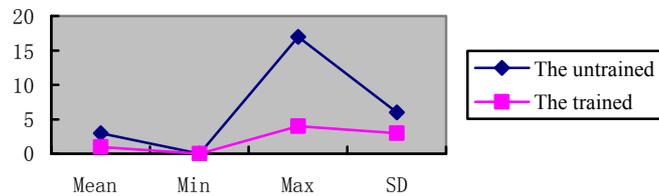
Figure 2. Rote (%)

The two groups of teachers showed little difference in the use of reading aloud, with the trained teachers showing an average of 28% in comparison about 28.6% for the untrained teachers.

As for "personalization", the trained and the untrained groups are almost identical, 12% and 10% respectively. The use of personalization is slightly greater in the trained group. The low percentage reflects that in the observed lessons less use of personalization. Nine of the ten of the untrained group of teachers lie in the respect.
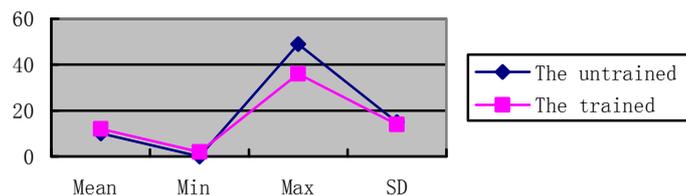

Figure 3. Personalization (%)

The amount of student-to-teachers and student-student interaction observed was roughly the same for both groups, with some occurring in about a third of the scans. This similarity does; however, conceal a difference between the two in terms of the 40-45 pupils per class engaged in interaction during the scan. That is, student-to-student interactions in the classes of the trained teachers tended to involve more students at the same time. Interestingly this partly accounts for the greater amount of student speaking time seen in the classes of the trained teachers.
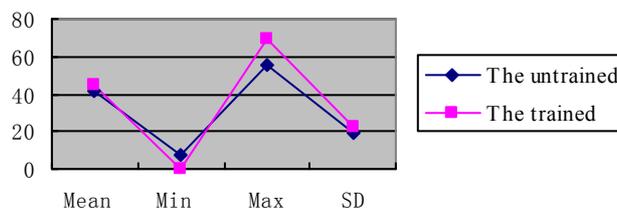

Figure 4. Interaction (%)

Finally a composite score is created by aggregating the separate measures into one summary index. For this purpose, as explained earlier, the scores for explanation, mother tongue, rote and reading aloud are adjusted so that they then illustrate the number of scans in which no explanation, no use of mother tongue, no rote and no reading aloud is in evidence. The resulting totals are then expressed as a percentage of the possible maximum score taking into account the total number of valid observations. Examination of the correlations between the various items on the overall scale revealed moderate correlations between most. Rote and reading aloud proved

poor items, however, showing little or no correlation with other items and total score. From this survey of the results obtained from the observation schedule several points emerge. Looking principally at the two primary school groups illustrates certain differences emerging fairly clearly between these two groups. The trained in the sampled displays a tendency to spend less time on explaining points of grammar and vocabulary to their pupils than their colleagues. At the same time they are much more likely to give their pupils the opportunity to practise using English through talking with each other. They maintain active pupils' involvement. They have come to realize the learner-centress as a characteristic of expert teachers (Borg, 2006). This goes together with a shift in the pedagogical paradigm from teaching as "transmission of knowledge" to teaching that "activates" the learner. However teacher-centred traditional English teaching methods still can not be abandoned by both the trained and untrained. It seems that they hold conflicting beliefs of teaching: "traditionalistic" and "progressive" (Van Driel et al., 2007; Tondeur et al., 2008).

The trained group is also more likely to supplement the standard textbook with resources. Lack of resource to support the change is a critical problem (Hu, 2002; Wu, 2001; Zheng & Davison, 2008) for the urban school teacher of English. Beyond this, however, such differences as do exist become less clear and what is often more striking is the wide variations between lessons regardless of group, as can be seen in the case of the use of mother tongue. The fact is that a number of the untrained group relied even less upon the use of Chinese than the trained colleagues. One rather surprising finding was the relatively small amount of role play to be found in the trained group both absolutely and in comparison with the untrained group, together with the complete absence of information gap activities and the virtual absence of games. Such activities feature prominently in many of the final reports written by trainees on the Programme, together with the use of pair work and group work. However, the former activities, unlike the latter, seem to have had a less lasting impact on subsequent teaching. Personalisation, which can be achieved by linking the content of lessons to the pupils' lives and by involving pupils in developing or choosing the content of lessons (Dornyei, 2001), seems to suffer a somewhat similar fate. The fact that rote learning was so little in evidence despite its widespread use brings us to one final point which needs to be mentioned and that is the extent to which the forty lessons were unrepresentative of normal, everyday lessons as the result of the presence of observers and the videoing equipment.

There is certain to have been some change, but assessing its extent is naturally very difficult. Here as elsewhere in the study, there seems to be much variability. One observer reported suspecting that one class observed had been rehearsed the previous day in anticipation of the arrival of the team. There was also evidence in one or two cases where pair work was observed that pupils were in fact unfamiliar with its use.

3.2 The Questionnaire

When given the opportunity to respond to an open-ended question on what they now feel were the most useful things they learned from the Programme, 90% of the respondents said that it had improved their teaching in terms of methodology. As one wrote of the task-based English teaching, "Methodology is of great value to me, because it has changed my teaching ideas greatly". Many illustrated their point by mentioning how they were trying to expand their repertoire of methods and techniques by including pair work, group work, role play, and warm-up exercises, though some added that they "find it hard to carry them out".

Thirty-one respondents mentioned that the most important thing they had achieved during their training was improvement in their English proficiency. In the words of one trainee, "They gave us good training in speaking, reading and writing, so that we teachers now feel more confident than before in the classroom". Although 40 more respondents answered this question by mentioning improved teaching than mentioned improved English proficiency, an earlier question was whether improvement in their English or greater knowledge of new teaching methods had proved most useful to them; and the great majority responded that they found both to be equally useful. It could be that respondents' answers to each of these two questions were influence by their contexts, that is, by the particular questions that had come before. Whatever the reason may be, there is evidence here that one must be cautious about drawing firm conclusions from information gathered by means of a questionnaire, even when that information seems at first to be clear cut.

Compared with the trainees' ideas about the advantages to be gained from the Programme before they started, there has been a growth in awareness about the benefits it provides in terms of improving teaching methods, whichever measure of current feelings on this point is taken. Some seemed to have the impression that language improvement was the main purpose of the Programme and that methodology was unlikely to feature on it. In the words of one trainee, "We are in great need of advanced English teaching methods, although it's not within your work range."

Despite the relatively low ranking of the Intercultural Communication course when compared to other courses

such as ones on Methodology, Integrated English, Applied Linguistics, and English for Academic Purposes, some found this element of the Programme particularly valuable, with 12 respondents (26.7%) taking the opportunity to express their appreciation for the opportunity to learn more about Anglophone cultures.

Asked for their criticisms of the Programme and suggestions for change, 33 respondents favoured introducing the use of local schools to allow trainees to try out the new methods to which they have been introduced through teaching practice and to observe demonstration classes in the schoolroom. 20 respondents also expressed the view that the content of the methodology of the Programme would have been of more help if it had been more practical in terms of being directly addressed to solving day-to-day teaching problems faced in the primary schools such as how to cope with large classes and the problems posed by the kinds of tests and contests.

Nine respondents wished they had had more training in listening and speaking as they felt this remained their weak point. Some suggestions for additional programmes were made, with 20 respondents calling for training in the advanced use of computers and ICT skills, the lack of which has, in fact, been made good.

4. Discussion and Interpretation

4.1 Managing These Changes Is a Slow Process

The process of carrying out the study reported here was essentially a learning experience for both the researcher of the paper and the teachers involved in the research. Through its learning outcomes, it consolidated the process of implementing the change required by the new standard curriculum for primary schools teachers of English.

While a clear majority of respondents report having benefitted from the Programme in terms of learning of or becoming better acquainted with task-based language teaching, it remains to be seen to what extent they have introduced this into their teaching. The trained teachers were asked to give an estimate of the extent to which their teaching had changed following the Programme. Respondents were also given the opportunity to comment in response to a more open question asking them to compare their teaching now with how they used to teach before the Programme and to say whether it had changed much, giving details of how it had changed or to say why it had not. Of the 45 respondents, 24 were ones who said how their teaching had changed while 21 were ones who said it had not changed much. The specific changes mentioned range over a wide area, but generally they reflect a change towards more student-centred teaching and the use of techniques that enhance pupils' interest in learning English and give them more of a chance to practise using English in class. For example, the technique most frequently cited as an innovation in the respondents' concerning is pair work and group work, which is mentioned by 27.8% of the respondents. Smaller numbers of teachers mentioned changes in such areas as their manner of teaching reading. They use of techniques to develop skimming and scanning. They also use of pre-reading activities and while-reading activities and post-reading activities to alert pupils to ways of inferring the meanings of new words and phrases from the context. They consider more carefully than before/when preparing new lessons (sequencing activities and introducing greater variety into them were given as examples). Additionally, three teachers mentioned that their teaching had improved as a result of their feeling more confident and freer in using English in class.

The responses show that a number of teachers felt that their pupils' level of English proficiency is too low for them to be able to use the new methods or they felt that level differs too much from one student to another within the same class. Others found resistance from pupils used to the grammar translation method and who expect the teacher to talk all the time, while still other teachers complained that their pupils are uninterested in English in general or in oral practice in particular or are simply uncooperative. Some teachers said they would have employed new ways of teaching if they had been given higher proficiency (i.e., "junior school") classes to teach rather than primary school classes. The sheer number of 45-50 pupils in a class also plays a part as a restraining factor.

Lack of support or opposition from school leaders also plays a role. This arises sometimes from the authorities' lack of subject knowledge or different understandings of the goal of language learning between the authorities and teachers. As one respondent remarks, "School authorities do not care whether your methods are new or useful, but whether more pupils can have high scores". This means that teachers face what another respondent describes as "confrontation between possible new teaching methods and old test-oriented' ones." In fact, the concern shown by school authorities, pupils and pupils' parents about getting high scores in English tests is the restraining factor mentioned by the largest number of respondents. This has led some local and regional authorities to order their teachers to abandon additional oral and listening practice, for fear that including in would leave less time to focus on the essentials required by the exam. The pressure resulting from a tight teaching schedule means that new methods were felt to take up too much time of the some teachers' themselves.

Additionally, a fairly large number of the trained teachers covering 98% see the textbook as unsuitable for new ways of teaching. At the same time, it is difficult for teachers to develop suitable materials themselves, for there is a shortage both of tangibles such as reference materials, CDs, and MP3s and of time to find and prepare them. As one teacher lamented, too much time is given up to meetings, marking pupils' work, filling and submitting progress reports of various kinds, and to the duty of taking care of a class to leave time in which to mange the change.

Encouragingly, 22 of the respondents expressed the desire for their pupils to talk in English more often. This figure serves, however, as a useful benchmark against which to judge the relative strength of support for other changes, for it is not the individual figures which are of interest here, but the pattern which holds between them which reflects the relative priorities of respondents. The desire for greater use of English is followed closely by a desire to be in a position to be able to use more pair or group work (90%), have pupils talk about their own views and experiences (81%), use materials other than the textbook (77%), and use role play (77%). As for what respondents would like less of, for 92% it was use Chinese in class, for 62% it was time spend on explaining grammar and vocabulary, and for 53% it was time spend on rote learning. But not that the last two percentages suggest that there are fairly large numbers of respondents were satisfied with the status quo. As for reading aloud, the trained respondents appear divided in terms of whether they regard this as a good thing or not, with respondents being divided fairly evenly between those who want less those who want more and those who are satisfied with the present situation.

Correlation analysis of the preferences in comparison with the respondents' estimates of the amount of time they spend now on these activities as given in reply to the immediately preceding question reflects this division of opinion about reading aloud. In other words, there is evidence of a tendency for those who use reading aloud frequently to wish to use it more, and for those who use it little to wish to use it even less. No such association holds in the case of the other practices and preferences, nor was there any sign of negative associations such that those using a practice little wished to use it more while those currently using it a lot were content with the amount of time spent on it or wanted to use it even more.

4.2 Major Barriers

At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were given a list of ten factors and asked which of them made it difficult for them to teach in the way they would prefer. These factors were suggested to me by what I had discovered to be the case in some of the schools of former trainees that I visited. Respondents were also given the opportunity to the list adding any other constraint not mentioned. While the factors mentioned give some idea of how widely the various constraints are felt, they do not illustrate their relative importance in influencing teaching decisions. Respondents were therefore also asked to say which three of the constraints they had identified exercised the strongest influence. The results are shown in Figure 5 below. Amongst the factors cited by the respondents are limited resources and materials, examination, textbooks and large classes being used are experienced as the most pressing. Other factors play a part too and may in individual cases outweigh the ones just mentioned, but it is clear that constraints in the areas mentioned in Figure 5 is likely to have the widest and deepest influence over teaching practices. Indeed, several of the factors are partially related, with, for example, some lack of support for methods by pupils and others being traceable to anxieties about the effectiveness of these methods with regard to the existing examinations.
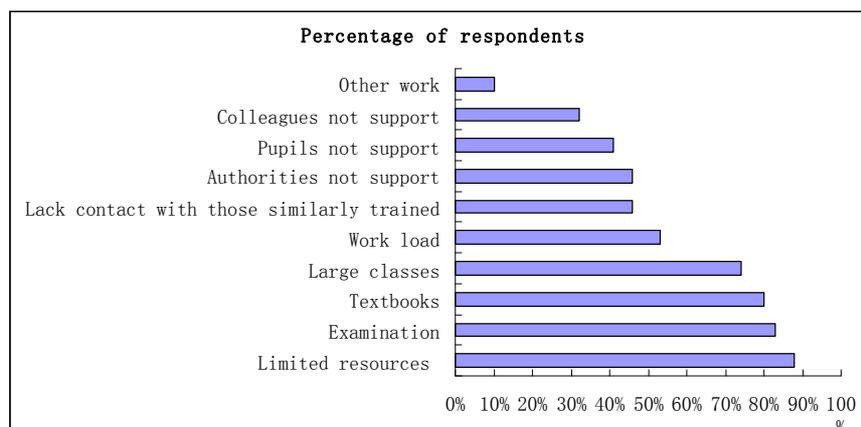

Figure 5. Factors inhibiting the change

Research in urban primary school English teacher development is in its infancy. The curriculum planning process for the Programme followed a largely top-down approach, with the educational officials playing a central role. It is they who have been responsible for the decisions about curriculum changes. Changes are not finalized only after the approval of the teachers as end-users. Their role in the curriculum process was neglected completely. Accordingly, respondents were also asked to comment on whether they share ideas on improving methods of teaching with their colleagues. About three-quarters of the trained made comments indicating that they seldom or never shared ideas about teaching with their colleagues, with a great variety of reasons being given such as teachers' lack of interest, busyness, teachers interested only in exam results, teachers used to traditional methods, teachers having no understanding of new methods and teachers being demotivated because of low pay.

5. Conclusion

The research analyses the effectiveness by reflecting urban primary school English teachers' achievements in their actual urban school context. It looks into the contextual factors, the constraints and the perceptions of the trained compared with those who have not completed the Programme. The half (53.3%) of the trained involved in the research have changed their professional skills ranging from the substantial to the imperceptible such as teaching skills, critical thinking and research skills. But almost all would like to adopt approaches learned on the Programme to a greater extent than they have, but feel restrained from doing so by circumstances in which they find themselves. If the trained and untrained are weighed one against the other in terms of the amount of change in teaching practices they have initiated, it could be said that the former are in a somewhat more favourable position than the later, being faced fewer barriers to adopting new teaching methods.

The research also indicates an emerging awareness that the urban primary school English teacher professionalism requires much more than teaching skills. Construct such as teachers' practical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and personal theories of teaching are now established components of the understanding of teacher cognition (Golombek, 2009). The limitation of the study is that the overall rational needs analysis should indentify deficiencies or gaps of the teachers' attainment compared with the requirement.

In order to further bettering the Programme that is truly effective for the English teacher development in urban primary schools in China, it is necessary to establish clear statements based on both action research and empirical research. It is also useful for the local educational commission to establish local professional standards that define the quality and professional competencies for their profession, since different teaching contexts hence present different notions of the process of English language teaching (Zeichner & Grant, 1981).

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