

Teachers of English in Taiwanese primary schools reflect on their in-service training

Wei Pei Wang and Winifred Crombie

Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages,
900, Min-Tzu 1st Road, Sanming District Kaohsiung, 807
Taiwan

Te Pua Wānanga ki te Ao
The School of Maori and Pacific Development
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato
University of Waikato

[wpwang@mail.wtuc.edu.tw; crombie@waikato.ac.nz]

Abstract

We report here on the responses of a sample of ten teachers in primary/ elementary schools in Taiwan to that part of a survey (based on a written questionnaire and semi-structured interview) that related to their experiences of in-service training provision in the teaching of English. Most of the in-service training that this sample of teachers had been exposed to was in the form of one-off workshops (offered by textbook publishers, local government and cram schools). Responses to these workshops were mixed. The most negative responses related to workshops provided by publishers and those provided by local government that focused on policy issues. The most positive responses related to workshops taught by practicing teachers, workshops that sometimes covered areas that appear to have been neglected in pre-service training.

Introduction

In order to fully implement its policy of introducing the teaching of English at Form 3 of primary schooling (when children are age 9 on average), the Taiwanese government needs to increase the pool of those qualified to teach English to young learners. To determine how successful Taiwan has been in providing appropriate training for teachers of English in primary schools, it would be necessary to conduct a full review of current training requirements and training provisions to supplement the existing literature. This is something that would require Ministry of Education support and a high level of funding. Even so, indicative studies can have a value in setting the agenda for more comprehensive research. We therefore decided to conduct a survey that, although limited in scope, would provide an indication of the effectiveness of the training programs available to teachers of English in Taiwan (Wang, 2008b). The survey was in two parts: *Part 1* related to pre-service training; *Part 2* related to in-service training. *Part 1* has been reported elsewhere (Wang, 2008a). Our aim here is to report on *Part 2*.

Most of the existing research literature on the teaching of English at primary/ elementary level in Taiwan relates to the views and practices of teachers and/ or the impact of pre-service training on their views and practices. Although some of that literature identifies problems relating to pre-service training provision, problems that may be being addressed in various ways in in-service training provision, little attention appears to have been given to date to in-service training provision.

Review of selected literature on the teaching of English at primary/ elementary level in Taiwan

Much of the literature on the teaching of English in primary/ elementary level in Taiwan relates to the beliefs and practices of teachers. Thus, for example, Chiu and

He (2004) explored, through classroom observation and face-to-face interview, the different beliefs in relation to the teaching of English to young learners in primary school of one homeroom teacher and one specialist English teacher. In line with a proposal by Duke (1987), six different aspects of their teaching practice were observed and analysed: *planning, instruction, classroom management, progress monitoring, clinical assistance, and care giving*. Although the homeroom teacher had less confidence in her teaching of English, she was found to have better classroom management skills, to monitor the progress of her students more closely, and to take greater responsibility for their learning. She also had fewer difficulties in caring for the students and in using appropriate teaching aids.

Chu (2000) conducted a study of the attitudes towards communicative language teaching of 34 prospective English teachers with a high level of proficiency in English before and after the six week (120 hour) methodology component¹ of a pre-service training program for teachers of young learners of English held at National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology. The results indicated that although attitudes did change, with trainees being more positive about communicative language teaching at the end of this part of the program, traditional beliefs about teaching were still in evidence, with methods such as the audio-lingual method (in which there is an emphasis on structure drilling) continuing to be highly favoured. Furthermore, the trainees continued to prefer a teacher-centred approach to a learner-centred one.

Research relating to the nationwide *Primary School English Teacher Training Program* (PSETTP) run in different institutions under the auspices of the Taiwan Ministry of Education between summer 1999 and spring 2000 has been conducted by Chen and Liaw (2001), Shih et al. (1999) and Shih (2001).

Shih et al. (1999) were charged by the Taiwan Ministry of Education with collecting feedback on the PSETTP. Using questionnaires and interviews, they conducted a survey involving 756 trainees who had attended the program in 17 different universities. Their focus was on curriculum design, course content, teaching strategies, learning achievements, administrative support, and facilities. In general, the participants reported that they were satisfied with the overall curriculum design and content but felt that the program was too short, lacking adequate authentic teaching practice and observation. Furthermore, trainees who had attended the program in some institutions reported that tutors appeared to be unfamiliar with teaching techniques appropriate for young learners and also appeared to be inadequately or inappropriately qualified.

Shih (2001) also investigated aspects of the PSETTP, using a combination of questionnaire-based survey (234 trainees) and interview (28 trainees). Questions focused on the background of trainees, their motives for joining the program, and their career plans. Of the 234 participants in the questionnaire-based survey, 156 had had some experience of teaching English prior to joining the program. Although more than sixty per cent of those interviewed wanted to teach in primary schools, many² chose, following the program, to teach elsewhere (in, for example, private language institutions) because they did not want to teach subjects other than English. Some of the trainees reported that their trainers did not appear to be familiar with the learning context of primary schools or with theories and techniques relevant to the teaching of young learners. Some reported that teaching practice had not been supervised by English language teachers. Overall, the trainees felt that they were not given

appropriate guidance and assistance in English language teaching. One part of the questionnaire focused on definitions of language, language learning, language teaching and teaching materials. Following training, interviewees appeared to be more aware of language as a complex system (as opposed to a simple system made up of sounds, words and grammar), less convinced of the value of drilling and memorisation, and less convinced that language skills needed to be sequenced, with listening and speaking preceding reading and writing.

Chen and Liaw (2001) conducted a questionnaire-based survey of 57 participants in a PSETTP training program conducted at Tunghai University from fall 2000 to spring 2001, the overall aim being to explore ways in which the program affected the beliefs of the trainees and their actual classroom practices. At the end of the program, trainees were more aware of the complexity of language as a system and less convinced of the value of drilling and memorisation and of the need to focus exclusively on listening and speaking before introducing reading and writing.

Lou (2003) conducted a study relating to a four-year primary EFL pre-service teacher training program established in a teachers' college in 2000. A combination of interviews and analysis of trainee journals was used to investigate the perspectives of trainees (both those who had not taught before the program and those who had) on the nature and content of the program. Both pre-service and practicing teachers reported that they felt that theory and practice were not adequately integrated in the program and both groups were also uncertain about the value of formal training in contributing to their teaching practice. Those with teaching experience emphasised the value of experiential learning in the construction of teacher knowledge; those without teaching experience emphasised the value of the practical application of theoretical knowledge.

Chu (2006) investigated the perceptions of 87 trainees attending a TEFL program in a private teachers' college and 67 trainees attending a training program in two public training colleges in Taiwan. Both groups reported that although they believed that they had gained some valuable teaching skills, they also believed that the programs lacked effective integration of the courses offered and that the courses themselves lacked variety.

Using a self-evaluation questionnaire, Bulter (2004) asked EFL teachers in Korea, Taiwan and Japan to assess their own English language proficiency in the four skill areas and to indicate what they believed the minimum proficiency requirements were for teaching at primary school level. The majority of those involved in the study indicated that they believed their own proficiency level to be below the minimum desirable level.

Hsieh (2004) conducted a questionnaire-based survey of the learning and practices of 15 trainees at the end of an internship involving teaching English for a 30 minute morning session for one semester to 3rd and 4th grade students. The internship was found to have a positive impact on classroom management and lesson timing and, generally, on putting theory into practice. In connection with this study, it is interesting to note that Ur (2001, p. 8), in relation to a study that did not relate specifically to Taiwan, notes that although pre-service courses, however good, "cannot normally produce fully competent practitioners who can immediately vie with their experienced colleagues in expertise", in the absence of effective pre-service courses, teachers are likely to perpetuate the way in which they were taught or the

way in which colleagues teach, having “little opportunity to encounter new ideas, to benefit from progress made in the field by other professionals, researchers and thinkers, or to develop personal theories of action through systematic study and experiment”. It follows from this that the in-service provision available to teachers should be considered to be an important part of the overall training provision.

The survey

A survey of a sample of teachers of English at primary/ elementary school level was conducted (Wang, 2008b). The survey was based on a self-completion questionnaire and semi-structured telephone interviews, the aim of the latter being to gain a more in-depth understanding of the questionnaire responses. The questionnaire and semi-structured interviews focused on the nature of the pre- and in-service training that these teachers had experienced and their views about that training. In-service training was included because in addition to, or as an alternative to attending pre-service training courses, a large number of teachers of English in Taiwanese primary schools attend in-service courses and offerings of various kinds by a range of providers, including local government, teachers’ colleges, private training institutions and textbook publishers. These in-service courses/ offerings vary widely in terms of both content and quality. However, in that they play a part in the training of teachers, and in that most research to date focuses on pre-service training, it was felt to be important to include them in any discussion of the training provided. So far as the survey related to these courses/ offerings, the underlying research question was:

What sort of in-service training provision has been made available to those teachers of English at primary/ elementary school level in Taiwan who participated in the survey and how satisfied are they with that training?

The research instruments

The self-completion questionnaire (in English) was designed to determine what qualifications and teaching experience participants had, what training in the teaching of English they had undergone, what was included in that training and how useful they considered it to have been. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part, including four questions, related to qualifications and experience; the second part included 32 questions, some with more than one part. This part related to the content of any training (both pre-service and in-service) in the teaching of English participants had had. All of the questions were closed.

A draft of the questionnaire was developed and trialled. Three teachers of English in Taiwanese primary schools were involved in the trialling of the questionnaire. They were asked to attempt to complete it and to comment on the time it took and any problems they experienced. As a result of their feedback, a revised version of the questionnaire was produced in which some of the terminology used in the original version was simplified and in which questions about qualifications and training were expressed more clearly.

The interviews conducted as part of the research reported here can be described as semi-structured. Although they included a number of focus questions that related to questions included in the self-completion questionnaire that had already been completed by the participants, these questions were not presented in any particular order, often being included where they were relevant to the teachers’ own discourse.

The teachers were also urged to raise any issues that they wanted to discuss in the general area of language teacher education.

The overall aim of the semi-structured interviews was to follow up on the information that participants provided in their questionnaire responses, gaining further information and opinion. Thus, the semi-structured interviews, conducted by telephone in Chinese, provided a useful means of “checking out the consistency” of the data obtained from the questionnaire responses (Patton, 1990, p. 464) and of yielding additional or revised information (Punch, 2005, p. 174), “[enabling] the interviewer to clarify topics or questions and to ask respondents to extend, elaborate, add to, provide detail for, clarify or qualify their response, thereby addressing richness, depth of response, comprehensiveness and honesty . . . some of the hallmarks of successful interviewing” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2004, p. 278). All of the interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded and transcribed. The use of Chinese, the language in which all of the interviewees could communicate most comfortably, had the effect of putting the interviewees at their ease and increased their capacity to communicate more in-depth information and opinion. It was decided to conduct interviews, “an important method of data collection [that] is common practice in survey research” (Cohen et al, 2004, pp. 290-291) by telephone, because the cost of travelling from New Zealand to Taiwan and then travelling to different parts of Taiwan was prohibitive.

The research participants

Email messages were sent to teachers and teaching college staff in Taiwan. These messages outlined the aims and nature of the study and asked whether the recipients (or primary school teachers of English known to them) might be willing to take part in the research. Twenty three possible participants were identified in this way. In each case, the potential participants were contacted by telephone. The aims and nature of the research were outlined. It was explained that participation was entirely voluntary and that the identity of participants would not be revealed in the reporting of the research. Of the 23 who initially indicated that they might be willing to participate, 13 withdrew at this stage. This left 10 participants. All of them were homeroom primary school teachers with responsibility for teaching English who had had some training in the teaching of English and who are regarded by the Ministry of Education as being qualified to teach English in primary/ elementary schools.

All of the participants in this survey had taught English in Taiwanese primary schools for between two and eight years at the point when the survey was conducted. Four (participants A, B, C & D) are graduates of a Primary School English Teacher Training Program (PSETTP) (1999 – 2000); three (E, F & G) have completed a four year degree (majoring in English) that included training in primary school teaching, one component of which was the teaching of English. Two (H & I) are graduates who majored in English and have completed a primary level teaching Certificate that included a component on teaching English. One (J) is a graduate who majored in English and who has completed a local government training program in the teaching of English (lasting for one week).

Introducing the data relating to in-service provision

With the exception of respondents F and H, all of those involved in the survey said that they had received some form of in-service training in the teaching of English. The training providers are indicated in *Table 1* below.

Table 1: Sources of in-service training provision

| Provider | Respondent |
|--|---------------------|
| Local Government Education Bureau | A, B, D, E, G, I, J |
| Cram school | A, B, D, E, G |
| Publisher | E, I, J |
| British educational institution (30 hour workshop) | C |

With the exception of the workshop run by a British training establishment (attended by respondent C), the in-service training to which reference is made here took the form of separate workshops lasting for between one and three hours. Respondents commented that the workshops provided by publishers were little more than publicity and marketing tools and made no real contribution to their teaching. Responses to the workshops provided by cram schools, which tended to focus on activity design, were mixed, respondents pointing out that quality and usefulness was very variable. Responses to workshops provided by local government were also mixed. Where the focus was on government policy, the response was generally negative, with respondents feeling that the information communicated was generally neither new nor useful; where the focus was on teaching, responses were more positive, particularly where these workshops were led by practicing teachers who were able to share their own experiences.

The most positive response was to a 30 hour workshop provided by a British training establishment. The respondent who attended this workshop said that it provided exactly the type of training that was needed. Although theory was included, the emphasis was on practice and there were opportunities to share good practice with tutors and other trainees. She indicated that the workshop had included language analysis, the teaching of the four skills in an integrated way, error correction, ways of coping with students with different proficiency levels and learning styles, advice about classroom management, classroom language and about the setting up and timing of activities, teaching observation and teaching practice. She also noted that there was a particularly useful component on observing and evaluating learners' progress. She commented on the importance of sessions in which there had been a focus on valuing, and responding effectively to the different ways in which students learn, noting that she had learned about the ways in which different students responded to different types of activity. She said that she had been given specific advice about timing different activities and different lesson stages and about varying activities, using some activities specifically to get the attention of students. She noted that throughout the duration of the workshop, tutors had demonstrated how to select and use appropriate classroom language. She added that she had particularly appreciated the opportunity to observe teaching and commented on the value of a session in which the tutor had taught French to the trainees in order to demonstrate the types of difficulty students were likely to experience. Although trainees had only one opportunity to teach as part of the course, this was nevertheless thought of as a valuable experience because of the quality of feedback provided. Overall, she considered that this one week course had been of more practical use than the whole of the two year pre-service training program she had experienced.

Participants commented positively on workshops that had dealt with reading and drama (local government and cram schools), and observed that they had appreciated

opportunities to share successful teaching experiences and strategies with other teachers (local government, cram schools and British training establishment).

There was a generally negative response to sessions on assessment and the teaching of pronunciation. The focus of most sessions on assessment appears to have been on paper and pen tests although portfolio assessment and task-based assessment (to which there was a more positive response) appears to have been included in at least two local government workshops. Respondents noted that sessions on teaching pronunciation were generally theoretical rather than practical. However, at least one of these sessions (involving the use of flash cards) appears to have been met with a very positive response. Areas covered in in-service courses are indicated in Table 2 below

Table 2: Areas covered in in-service courses

| Area | Local government | Cram schools | Publishers | British training establishment |
|---|------------------|--------------|------------|--------------------------------|
| Advice about coping with different levels of proficiency | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Advice about coping with different learning styles | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Language analysis | | | | ✓ |
| Advice about correcting learner errors | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Advice about concept checking | | | ✓ | |
| Advice about setting up and timing activities | | | | ✓ |
| Advice about classroom language | | | | ✓ |
| Advice about classroom management | | | | ✓ |
| Teaching language through drama | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Task design | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Teaching pronunciation | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Assessment | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| Designing teaching aids | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Teaching reading and writing | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Teaching the 4 skills in an integrated way | | | | ✓ |
| Tutor demonstrated how to teach specific things to a class of real students | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Teaching observation | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Teaching practice | | | | ✓ |
| <i>Assessed</i> teaching practice | | | | ✓ |

Discussion

A number of sources of in-service training are available to teachers in the form generally of one-off workshops offered by cram schools (usually only for their own employees), local government and textbook publishers. Although these workshops, with the exception of those offered by textbook publishers and those offered by local government that focused on policy, were often considered useful by participants in this survey, particularly where they were taught by practicing teachers, and although they sometimes covered areas that appear to have been neglected in pre-service training, such as coping with learners with differing levels of proficiency, it was not felt that they could make up for the perceived deficiencies of pre-service training. Furthermore, since these workshops varied widely in quality, survey participants, all of whom reported having very busy working lives, were not generally highly motivated to attend those that were optional. However, the participant who had attended a one week workshop offered by a British training establishment believed that it had had a very positive impact on her teaching and would recommend a course of this type (lasting longer if possible) to all teachers of English in Taiwanese primary schools, believing that such a course would not only help them to become more effective teachers, but also help them to select more appropriate textbooks for their students and to work more efficiently, thus saving time in the long run.

Conclusion

The data presented here suggest that in-service training provision, particularly where it is provided by practicing teachers, can make a valuable contribution to the knowledge, skills and understanding of language teachers but that it is unlikely in most cases to make up for the absence of pre-service training or for any deficiencies in pre-service training.

Endnotes

1. Following the guidelines set up by the Ministry of Education.
2. The percentage is not indicated in the research report.

References

- Butler, Y. G. (2004). What level of English proficiency do elementary school teachers need to attain to teach EFL? Case studies from Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(2), 245-278.
- Chen, C. L., & Liaw, M. L. (2001). The effects of elementary school English teacher education programs on pre-service teachers. In *Selected Papers from the Tenth International Symposium on English Teaching* (pp.27-39). Taipei: The Crane Publishing Company.
- Chiu, C. M., & He, T. H. (2004). Impact of English homeroom and subject teachers' beliefs on EFL teaching in a Taiwanese elementary school. In *The Proceedings of 2004 International Conference and Workshop on TEFL & Applied Linguistics* (pp. 194-203). Taipei: The Crane Publishing Company.

- Chu, S. C. (2000). Elementary school teachers' attitudes toward English teaching methodologies. In *Selected Papers from the Tenth International Symposium on English Teaching* (pp. 367-379). Taipei: the Crane Publishing Company.
- Chu, S. C. (2006). English teacher preparation programs: Teacher college vs. private college. In *Proceedings of the 23rd International Conference on English Teaching and Learning in the Republic of China* (pp. 243-258). Taipei: Kuan Tang International Private.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2004). *Research methods in education* (5th ed.). London; New York: Routledge.
- Duke, D. (1987). *School leadership and instructional improvement*. New York: Random House.
- Hsieh, L. T. (2004). An effective internship: Teaching English in elementary school. *Selected Papers from the Thirteenth International Symposium on English Teaching* (pp. 392-402). Taipei: The Crane Publishing Company.
- Lou, W. H. (2003). *A study of one EFL pre-service program in Taiwan*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, Canada.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. London: Sage Publications.
- Punch, K. F. (2005). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. London: Sage Publications.
- Shih, Y. H. (2001). Evaluation of the MOE primary school English teacher training program. *English Teaching and Learning*, 26(1), 86-107.
- Shih, Y. H., Chou, C. T., Chen, S. C., Chu, H. M., Chen, C. Y., & Yeh, H. N. (1999). 國民小學英語教學及評量模式研究. [The study of primary and junior high school English teaching and assessment model]. Retrieved April 15, 2007, from [http://info.stu.edu.tw/attachfile/upload/file/8114/95\(1\)](http://info.stu.edu.tw/attachfile/upload/file/8114/95(1))
- Ur, P. (2001). *A course in language teaching: Practice & theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wang, W. P. (2008a). Teachers of English in Taiwanese Primary Schools: Some perceptions of the relevance and value of pre-service training programs. *Proceedings of 5th Cross-Strait Conference on Foreign Language Instruction* (pp.67-102). Kaohsiung, Taiwan: Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages.
- Wang, W. P. (2008b). *Teaching English to young learners in Taiwan: Issues relating to teaching, teacher education, teaching materials and teacher perspectives..* Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.