

CHAPTER TWO

A CONTEXTUALIZED REPORT ON THE IMPACT OF PRE-SERVICE TRAINING ON LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN TAIWAN

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Abstract

The beliefs and practices of contemporary language teachers who have undergone professional training are expected to reflect some of the major changes and developments that have been reported in the literature on language teaching and learning. To determine whether this is actually the case, a large-scale research project was initiated at the University of Waikato in New Zealand a decade ago. Twelve PhD students have conducted research involving over 1,200 teachers of five different languages in a number of different countries. Each of the research students has used a mixed method approach that combines questionnaire-based surveys with semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Their findings overall suggest that language teacher training has little impact on teacher beliefs and practices. This is clearly demonstrated in a study involving teachers of English in primary schools in Taiwan. Of the 166 teachers who took part in a widely-focused survey, 20 submitted videos of sample lessons for analysis and 10 participated in semi-structured interviews and completed a questionnaire focusing on language teacher training. None of these 10 teachers believed that their trainers understood the needs of young learners in Taiwan or that their training had any practical use in the classroom. The lessons submitted were strongly teacher-focused and translation-dominated, showing little impact of the main changes and developments that have taken place in the literature on language teaching and learning since the 1970s. This indicates a need for research that focuses directly on the nature and content of language teacher training programmes.

Introduction

The research in focus constitutes one small part of a larger research project (see further details below) involving teachers of a number of different languages. Its particular focus was on a sample of teachers of English in primary schools in Taiwan. The aim was to determine the extent to which the beliefs and practices of these teachers, all of whom had participated in pre-service training programmes, reflected some of the major changes and developments in the teaching of additional languages that have taken place since the mid-20th century and, conversely, the extent to which they reflected attitudes and practices that were widespread during the heyday of grammar translation and/or of audio-lingual theory. Any tendency towards the latter would suggest either that the training itself reflected attitudes and practices that have been largely discredited and are, in addition, out of line with the relevant national curriculum (which recommends a communicative orientation) or that the training programme had failed to have any substantial impact on the existing predispositions of trainees. Either way, it would suggest that there is a need for research that focuses directly on training programmes and those who provide them; this is of particular importance in view of the fact that, as Chu (2006) has argued, the quality of teacher training determines the quality of teaching and the quality of teaching is critical to successful learning.

Background

There have been a number of major changes and developments in the teaching of additional languages since the heyday of grammar translation, an approach to language teaching which emerged at the end of the 18th century. The two fundamental characteristics of grammar translation were a focus on grammar as the organizing principle of learning programmes and on translation as evidence of mastery of the target language (Neuner & Hunfeld, 2003). Grammar translation, often in modified form, is still used in many parts of the world (see, for example, Decke-Cornell & Küster, 2010; NeSmith 2012). This is possibly due, in part, to the minimal demands it places on teachers (Richards & Rogers, 2001). However, grammar translation had already been challenged in the late 19th century when advocates of what came to be referred to as the 'Reform Movement' began to develop an approach, referred to as the 'Direct Method', that prioritized oral interaction (Howatt, 1984). Some advocates of this approach recommended that the target language should be the primary

medium of instruction; others did not (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004). The reformists failed initially to make a significant impact on language teaching, partly because language teachers had little access to training (Decke-Cornill & Küster, 2010) and partly because of the inherent conservatism of public schools (Howatt, 2009). However, the development of behaviourism within psychology and of structuralism within linguistics later in time, provided the new approach with a theoretical rationale and, in the development of substitution drilling (Neuner & Hunfeld, 2003), with a specific teaching method. Even so, the major advances in language learning that had been expected did not materialize and enthusiasm began to wane (Decke-Cornill & Küster, 2010). At around the same time, both behaviourism and linguistic structuralism themselves were severely criticised and the notion of ‘communicative competence/competencies’ began to emerge and develop in a way that took account of the socially-embedded nature of linguistic communication and drew upon developments in pragmatics and discourse analysis. In association with this, the idea of developing an approach to language teaching that involved learners in meaningful and authentic communication began to emerge. ‘Communicative Language Teaching’ (CLT) was initially largely associated with an avoidance of any structural focus. Now, however, a weaker version in which structures are taught inductively is more common (Howatt, 1984).

Although the concept of CLT emerged in the West and has been promoted by the Council of Europe (2001), many educational authorities in other parts of the world, including the Taiwanese Ministry of Education, have developed national curricula that promote CLT in some form (Her, 2007). Even so, there is a growing body of evidence that indicates that many language teachers are wholly unfamiliar with it (NeSmith, 2012), misunderstand it (Karavas-Doukas, 1996), understand it in a general sense but are unable to put it into practice (Feryok, 2010), or simply reject it sometimes expressing the belief that it is impractical in real classrooms (Chia, 2003; Wilbur, 2007). There are many different possible reasons for this widespread lack of fit between national curriculum recommendations and teachers’ beliefs and practices. These include lack of preparation time (O’Donnell, 2005), the expectations of students and their parents and guardians (Borg, 2003; O’Donnell, 2005), the backwash effect of University entrance examinations (Brown & Wada, 1998; Butler & Iino, 2005; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; O’Donnell, 2005; Rapley, 2009; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004), and, in some cases, the tension between traditional cultural norms and approaches to education and the pressure to conform to Western models (Canagarajah, 1999 & 2005; Harumi, 2011; Ramirez &

Boli, 1987). While all of these things impact heavily on the methodological decisions made by language teachers, something that may be equally important, perhaps even more so in some cases, is the nature of the language teacher training that they have experienced.

There is widespread agreement among trainees that there is often no relationship, or a very weak one, between the theoretical instruction they receive in pre-service training programmes and the practical realities of teaching (Spada & Massey, 1992). Even so, some research does appear to indicate that pre-service training programmes can have a significant positive impact on teaching (Adams & Krockover, 1997), particularly in relation to the practicum component of such programmes (Smagorinsky, Cook & Johnson, 2003; Urmston, 2003). Where it does not, there is a range of possible reasons, including, for example, the fact that trainees' beliefs and practices may be strongly rooted in folk psychology (Lightbown & Spada, 1993) and/or may reflect their own experiences as language learners (Crandall, 2000; Holt Reynolds, 1992). In fact, some training programmes may actually reinforce beliefs and practices that have been largely discredited (NeSmith, 2012).

In 2005, English language became a compulsory subject from Grade 3 (age 9) across Taiwan. However, even before that date many elementary schools had already introduced English classes for children from Grade 3 and training institutions had already begun to prepare the teachers for the new teaching task ahead of them. In connection with this, a number of research projects were conducted in order to evaluate the efficacy of pre-service teacher training programmes in the lead-in period to full implementation of the new curriculum development. They did not present a highly positive picture. Thus, for example, Shih, Yeh and Chang (2000), who surveyed 756 trainees in the Primary School English Teacher (PSET) training programme at 17 institutions across Taiwan, found that although many of the participants expressed general satisfaction with overall course content, many also expressed concern about the lack of authentic teaching practice (that is, teaching practice that took place in real classrooms and involved real students). Furthermore, they believed that some trainers lacked relevant experience and understanding of the professional context in which they (the trainees) would be operating.

In a later project, Shih (2001) conducted a questionnaire-based survey of a further 234 trainees, conducting follow-up interviews with 28 of them. Overall, the trainees felt that they were not given appropriate guidance on aspects of English language teaching (ELT) and, like the trainees in the earlier project, believed that some trainers lacked relevant experience and understanding of what is involved in teaching English to young learners

(TEYL). Other research projects (for example, Chen & Liaw, 2001; Chu, 2006; Lou, 2003) report similar misgivings among trainees who have taken part in PSET training programmes.

The research reported here was conducted after the full implementation of the plan to introduce English to Taiwanese students in Grade 3. As in the case of the studies previously referred, it was underpinned by a focus on language teacher cognition, that is, on the interaction between the mental and the observable components of teacher behaviour (Clark & Peterson, 1986), or, more specifically, on “what language teachers think, know and believe – and . . . its relationship to teachers’ classroom practices” (Borg, 2006, p. 1). In particular, the focus was on the extent to which the training a sample of Taiwanese teachers have experienced has encouraged and helped them to accommodate to the national curriculum requirement for communicatively focused language teaching.

The Study

The present research represents one part of a larger long-term research project involving applied linguistics PhD students enrolled at the University of Waikato in New Zealand. In that research project, now in its 10th year, the focus has been on the teaching and learning of five different languages – English, French, German, Māori (the indigenous language of New Zealand) and Hawaiian (the indigenous language of Hawaii) - in a range of different educational settings in ten different countries/areas - the UK, Australia, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Taiwan, Hawaii, France, Japan, Korea, and Syria. To date, twelve PhD students have been involved, as have over 1,200 teacher participants. Each of the PhD students has used the same mixed methods approach in focusing on the teaching and learning of one particular language in one particular context. Each has sought to determine (a) the impact of language teacher training on language teachers, and (b) the extent to which the beliefs and classroom practices of the language teachers involved reflect changes and developments that have taken place in the teaching of additional languages since the heyday of grammar translation and, in particular, since the 1970s (see, for example, Fester, 2014; Her, 2007; Lin, 2010; NeSmith, 2012; Nock, 2014; Parchwitz, 2015; Umeda, 2014; Valax, 2011; Wang, 2008; Yu-Chang, 2007).

Research Methods

The research in focus here was conducted two years after the requirement to teach English from Grade 3 was introduced in Taiwan. The researcher used a mixed method approach, in which, questionnaire-based surveys were combined with semi-structured interviews and classroom observation (Wang, 2008). A sample of Taiwanese teachers who taught English to primary school students was surveyed using a questionnaire designed to elicit data about their professional background, training, beliefs about the teaching of English, preferences in relation to overall approach to teaching and teaching methods, and the types of teaching materials (including textbooks) used (Wang, 2008). Of the 166 teachers who took part in an initial survey, 20 (self-selected) submitted videos of sample lessons taught by them for analysis and 10 (self-selected) completed a second questionnaire that focused specifically on their language teacher training experiences and then participated in semi-structured interviews.

The decision to use semi-structured interviews as a data gathering tool was prompted by Spada and Massey's (1992) discussion of the problems associated with questionnaire responses and teacher recall, particularly their observation that initial questionnaire responses could be misleading. Although the teacher training-focused questionnaires contained memory enhancement lists to support and prompt teacher recall, the possibility of probing beyond the initial questionnaire data was considered important, allowing for the addition of a great deal of detail; hence, the development of a much more nuanced overall picture than would have been possible within the context of the limitations of a questionnaire.

Each of the ten teachers in the group, who completed the second questionnaire and took part in interviews, had between two and eight years of experience teaching English in Taiwan, all of them were females and they were officially recognized as being qualified in TEYL. Four of the group had completed the PSET training programme, each in a different location; three had completed a 4-year degree that included primary teacher training (with a TEYL specialization); two had a Primary Teaching Certificate (with a TEYL specialization), and one had completed a Local Government Training Program, which lasted one week. As part of the training-focused questionnaire, the teachers were asked to give responses to questions on issues such as:

- their qualifications and teaching experience;
- the training programmes in which they had participated;

- the content of their training programmes (including, for example, whether they had included text book selection, evaluation and use, analysis of the relevant national curriculum document, teaching observation, and a teaching practicum); and
- their perception of the impact and usefulness of their training.

In the interviews, further details about the nature of the training programmes experienced by the teachers were sought. If, for example, a research participant had indicated that the training programme she had undertaken contained a practicum, she was asked questions about exactly how the practicum was conducted and assessed.

The twenty teaching videos were reviewed in relation to a number of focus points, including the nature of the achievement objectives (if detectable), the extent of teacher talking time, the ways in which the target language and the students' native language (including translation) were used by both teachers and students, and types of tasks and activities in which the students were engaged. Six of the twenty lessons were transcribed and subjected to in-depth detailed analysis.

The lesson data were then reviewed in light of the data collected from questionnaires and interviews in order to determine the extent to which participants' stated beliefs appeared to be consistent with their actual classroom practices. The findings of the Taiwan-based research project in focus here are discussed in their own right below before being related to the findings of other studies that have constituted part of the larger research project.

Results and Discussion

Five of the interviewees reported that their pre-service training programmes had involved no teaching observation component and three of the remaining five noted that although they had observed other trainees teaching, they had not observed practicing teachers in a real classroom. So far as the teaching practicum is concerned, two of the interviewees indicated that no teaching practicum was included as part of their pre-service training. Of the remainder, three had been involved in teaching practice on only one occasion. In each of these cases, the interviewees reported that the teacher trainer was not present during their teaching practice sessions. Where there were follow-up reports on teaching practice, these were normally in oral form and the information provided, rather than being individualized, took the form of a series of general comments to the

class as a whole. An illustrative extract from one of the interviews is included below:

“I taught a real whole class only once during my pre-service training. That was at the end of the course: Teaching Observation and Teaching Practice. The whole course lasted only 36 hours and most of it was made up of lectures – talking about teaching practice, not doing it, so how could we have more time to practice teaching? I decided what to teach. There are no specific criteria. I taught and the feedback was just a mark without any other written comments.”

One explanation for this state of affairs may be, as one of the interviewees observed:

“Some of the trainers are university professors. They probably know something about theory, but they did not provide what we need to teach real classes.”

Whatever the reason, the fact that not all of the pre-service training courses attended by the participants included teaching observation and a practicum and the fact that both of these, where they were included, were not necessarily considered by the participants to have been of any real value is disturbing.

It was not only in the area of teaching observation and practice that the pre-service training programmes that the interviewees had participated in appear to have been less than satisfactory. When asked what they had learned about ways of introducing new concepts, none of the interviewees could provide examples beyond the translation of new terms and concepts into Chinese and/or the use of pictures and realia for new and generally concrete words. When asked what they had learned about grading the target language they used in class, six of the ten reported that they had been given no advice at all about this. The other four said that they had simply been given a handout that was intended to cover the area. As indicated by the following illustrative extract from one of the interviews, most of the interviewees, all of whom thought of themselves as highly proficient users of the target language, appeared to believe that it is not necessary for language teachers to grade their own use of the target language in class unless their own level of proficiency in the language is poor:

“I don’t think that language teachers need to be trained in classroom language if the teacher is good at English.”

Even if this were the case, the sample lessons provided were not such as to suggest that the teachers need have no concerns about their proficiency level as the following extracts from one of the lesson transcripts indicates:

Teacher: “You have to talking the sentence; Next turn will girls; Teacher will show you how teacher and student look like; I give each the number; Sky are blue.”

Whatever language teachers believe about their own target language proficiency, they are likely to agree that learners in the same class may sometimes vary widely in terms of their overall proficiency and specific competencies. Even so, all of the interviewees indicated that the only advice they had been given in their pre-service training programmes on the subject of dealing with this was that they should consider dividing their students into ‘co-operative learning groups’. Furthermore, while all of the interviewees had been made aware during their training that their learners may have different learning style preferences, none of them had been given advice about how to manage this within the classroom.

Only four of the interviewees claimed to have been taught anything about designing teaching materials during their pre-service training. When questioned further, none could give a single example of what they had been taught. In addition, although all ten of the interviewees indicated that they used textbooks, only two of them said that their pre-service training programmes had included advice on textbook selection and evaluation and none of them had been given any guidance on using and adapting textbook materials.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the interviewees was the interviewees’ responses to questions about teaching approach and methodology. While all ten of them claimed that there was a methodology component in their pre-service training programmes, it was clear that the substance of this part of their training had varied widely from programme to programme. However, whatever the actual content, none of them believed that this component had proved useful for their subsequent classroom practice. In addition, although the Taiwanese national curriculum documentation recommends CLT, only three of the interviewees reported having been introduced to CLT as part of their training programme and most of them thought that CLT simply meant using English as the medium of instruction in the classroom. Furthermore, although there are at least eleven references to the teaching of reading and writing in the relevant section of the national curriculum document, only three of the interviewees indicated that they had been taught anything

about the teaching of reading and writing in their training programmes and the majority's opinion was that learning about the teaching of reading and writing was unnecessary.

What emerged, overall, from the training-focused questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews was that none of the teachers involved believed that i) their pre-service training had any practical use, ii) their trainers understood the needs of young learners at primary level in Taiwan, and iii) there was a satisfactory balance between theory and practice in the training course they had undertaken. In view of this, it was not surprising to find that the sample lessons supplied for analysis were found to be problematic in many ways. They were largely teacher-dominated, with teacher talking time making up between 70% and 95% of class time and with translation, often accompanied by repetitive drilling, playing a central role. Instructions and explanations were generally lengthy and sometimes confusing. In all of the lessons, there was heavy reliance on translation and in the very few cases where students were asked to complete a task (tasks which almost never involved the communication of authentic information for a genuine purpose), there was generally insufficient time for them to engage properly with the work. In this context, the students often appeared to be confused and off-task (or in some cases actually asleep). In the words of one of the research participants:

“Communicative language teaching is very hard to implement because some of the teachers are not well trained and their language ability is questionable. I invited three other teachers in my school to join this interview. They refused because they think they are not well trained and their English is not good enough. They don't know how to teach English communicatively.”

Conclusion

The Taiwan-based study reported here was the first in a number of studies, each of which has used similar research methods to investigate the same or similar issues but with reference to the teaching of a range of languages (English, French, German, Māori and Hawaiian) in a range of different types of institution (pre-schools, primary and secondary schools and tertiary level institutions) in ten different countries/areas (the UK, Australia, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Taiwan, Hawaii, France, Japan, Korea, and Syria). In all cases, the majority of those research participants who had had training in language teaching regarded that training as being unsatisfactory in a number of important respects, noting, in particular, a lack of appropriate balance between theory and practice. Irrespective of

whether the teachers involved in the research had qualifications and training in the area of language teaching, and irrespective of the nature of the teaching resources available to them, the majority were found to teach in a way that involved some combination of aspects of grammar translation and audio-lingualism that focused on explanation of grammatical phenomena.

Neither language teacher training nor the huge amount of research on language teaching and learning that has taken place since the middle of the last century appear to be having more than a very marginal impact on the practices of language teachers. In fact, even in cases where, for example, teachers involved in the studies attempted to put into practice what they understood to be the principles underlying communicative language teaching, the result was often lessons that were both confused and confusing. What all of this suggests, is that there is an urgent need to re-conceptualize and re-focus language teacher training and to think carefully about the qualifications and expertise required of teacher trainers. While McDonough (2002, p. 134) has noted that “[just] as teachers have to learn to teach, so do supervisors have to learn their role”, Waters (2002, p. 225) has noted that “[there] appears to be strikingly little empirical research concerning the expertise of the teacher educator, both outside as well as within the language teaching field”. No attempts to make changes to teacher training programmes are, however, likely to have much positive impact on teaching in the absence of a much closer liaison among academic researchers, teacher trainers and language teaching professionals than has typically been the case in the past. Unfortunately, this is likely to prove difficult to achieve at a time when academic staff world-wide are evaluated largely on the basis of *research outputs* rather than *research outcomes* (in the form of, for example, demonstrable positive changes to professional practice).

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