Topsy-turvy training: An attempt to blend top-down and bottom-up approaches to in-service language teacher education in China

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Introduction

I recently worked on a four-week, in-service teacher education programme in China. It was a collaboration between a British and a Chinese university, funded by a Chinese philanthropist. This article shares some reflections on the project that may be useful for comparable initiatives. As it was the first joint venture between the two universities, the design was exploratory, and, I think, fairly unusual in how it attempted to incorporate both top-down training and bottom-up teacher research, two threads often seen as distinct. As I evidence below, success was limited with regard to the second of these.

Logistics

For the course, 67 tertiary-level English teachers from 26 different universities were selected from two of the lowest-income provinces in western China (a stipulation of the donor). Most taught either non-English or English majors, although 15 were pre-service teacher educators. All participants were flown to a large eastern city where the Chinese university was based, and where they remained in residence for the duration of the 4-week course.

The training team included me, two other teacher educators from the UK, and two from China. While collaboration was clearly intended, responsibility for the majority of the delivery of the course was timetabled to the UK educators.

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This seemed a missed opportunity for shared planning and delivery that may have resulted partly from an implicitly shared (and obviously mistaken) assumption that the 'English' trainers were the ELT experts (Phillipson, 1992), and partly from the fairly limited interaction possible between us before the course. If a week-long planning workshop, involving all five of us, had been possible well before the course started, it would have led to more collaboration, and greater awareness of aspects of Chinese pedagogy and culture that would have usefully informed the design of the project.

Design elements

As soon as we were recruited for the project, we (here I include the five teacher educators and the university project coordinators, who were also teacher education professionals) were able to influence the project 'shape', although not the essentially top-down nature implicit in its design and intentions. While there was a clear assumption from key stakeholders that the program should include some input on communicative language teaching (CLT) theory and practice, we also wanted to make the program both participatory, enabling the teachers to have some agency over what happened during the four weeks, and sustainable, providing participants with the skills to be able to draw upon the program to investigate their own teaching in a way that empowered them as practitioners and professionals later on. This led to what might be called 'blended' exploratory action research (EAR), involving four core elements:

1. Traditional training workshops

The majority of workshops involved aspects of teaching theory and practice, delivered from a broadly CLT-oriented perspective, reminiscent of more top-down teacher training programmes. Examples of workshop titles included 'Exploring methods and approaches'; 'Flipping your classroom'; and 'Using L1 to support learning'. These workshops were delivered interactively, including discussion tasks relating theory to practice and beliefs, use of participants' own coursebooks (which had been brought partly for this purpose upon our request) and frequent use of 'loop input' (Woodward, 2003) to exemplify certain practices.

2. Introduction to exploratory action research

We included an opportunity for the teachers to carry out their own classroom research as a result of the programme. The main text, chosen for its clarity and user-friendliness was Smith and Rebolledo (2018) Handbook for Exploratory Action Research (EAR see Figure 1). Two whole-day workshops were delivered on EAR, one on the second day and one during the final week of the course.

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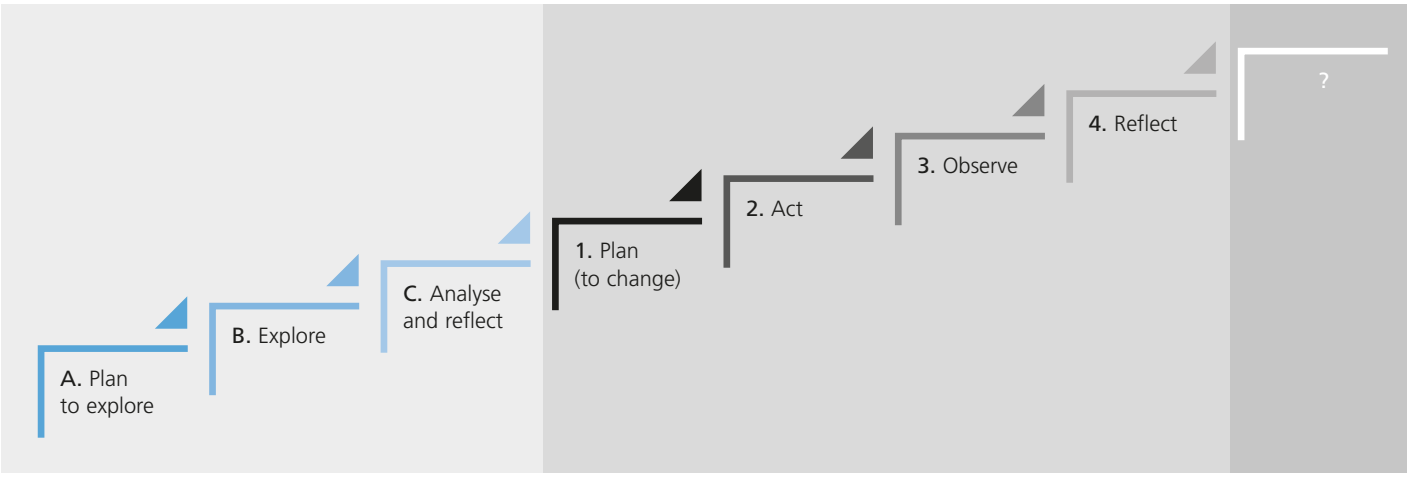

Figure 1. Steps of Exploratory Action Research, reproduced from Smith & Rebolledo with permission (2018, p. 25)

Two poster presentation sessions were also included at the ends of week 1, when the teachers shared their 'puzzles', 'problems' and initial exploratory research questions, and week 4, when they reported on their initial exploration and their intentions for the next stage of the project.

3. Group literature research

A common feature of teacher education programmes at the UK partner university constituted the third element of this programme, in which participating teachers were asked to work together in groups to conduct an exploratory literature review on a topic of interest, leading to a short, semi-academic essay. Teachers were encouraged to access both academic sources, such as peer-reviewed journals, and practical sources, such as websites and magazines for teachers, using the university's library and journal access privileges.

4. Microteaching

Finally, two opportunities for micro-peerteaching were provided in weeks 1 and 4 of the course. The teachers, in 3 groups, planned and delivered short, 20-minute lesson segments in teams of two, with some group members acting as students and others as observers who then provided feedback afterwards. Feedback groups were kept small (6-8 members), and involved reciprocal feedback (i.e., teaching teams A, B and C were all in the same feedback group, and gave feedback on each other's lessons only). Although this programme element involved the dangerously artificial scenario of teachers pretending to be students, it provided an opportunity, both for us the trainers (in week 1) to get a sense of what these teachers did in their own classrooms, and an opportunity (in week 4) for the teachers to demonstrate initial understanding of ideas explored on the course.

Combining exploratory action research with group research projects

While the above description summarises the 4 main elements initially envisaged, in our last meeting as trainers before the course began, one member of the team suggested we combine the second and third elements; EAR and group literature research. We agreed to try this combination, recognising that two potential benefits outweighed one potential disadvantage. The perceived advantages were:

1 An opportunity for teachers to conduct their first piece of practitioner research collaboratively, allowing for peer-teaching, a shared workload and experience (see Allwright's vision of practitioner research as a '"First Person Plural" Notion', 2005, p. 357), and the possibility that this might further build their practitioner community of practice;

2 The combination would serve as a bridge to link the second and third elements of the programme, allowing the teachers to explore the puzzles or problems identified in the first week through the literature research project, thereby linking the literature research directly to their own classroom practice.

The potential disadvantage was that it may be difficult for teachers to bring their own, individually identified puzzles and problems together into shared areas of interests appropriate to the groupwork project. We expected that some of the teachers would identify related puzzles (e.g. issues to do with learner motivation or the use of pairwork and groupwork, which tend to be common on exploratory practice and EAR projects: Hanks, 2017; Rebolledo et al., 2016), but also that others may identify quite specific personal puzzles that would not lend themselves to group research, thereby necessitating a compromise between their own interests and our expectation for teachers to do the literature research in groups.

Programme delivery

The programme was delivered largely as planned. Mid-course feedback led to two minor changes: Participants requested greater flexibility regarding roles for the second microteaching session, and there was a request for demonstration lessons, so several of the trainers micro-taught lessons to participants-as-students using participating teachers' coursebooks to demonstrate aspects of the content of the course (e.g., a lesson incorporating cooperative learning), followed by analysis and critique.

The decision to combine EAR and the group literature research was fairly successful in practice. The 67 teachers were separated into 3 groups for the EAR workshops. During the first workshop, the basic EAR model was introduced (as per Figure 1 above). After an initial activity that encouraged participants to share recent successes in their teaching, participants were able to identify personal puzzles and/or problems in their practice. Most were also able to identify shared themes among their puzzles, which led to the groupings for the literature research project. Groups sizes varied between 2 and 5 members. My groups' topics were:

1 motivation of non-English majors;

2 designing homework assignments;

3 methodology for teaching vocabulary;

4 distractions that learners experienced during lessons; and

5 an evaluation of the microteaching element of our course programme.

A minority (c.30%) had difficulty linking their puzzles to those of colleagues, and varying levels of compromise were reached, with some 'tweaking' their projects to find a common thread, and two preferring to abandon their own puzzles and join a group of their choice. While this loss of more personal interests was a shame, it seemed that all were happy to be able to research shared concerns in groups. The poster presentation session at the end of week 1 worked well. Although research questions varied in their appropriacy and feasibility, topics were clearly relevant – both to their own classrooms and the course content – and lent themselves well to both literature-based research, and to other exploratory research. For example, a number of the groups elected to develop or adapt exploratory questionnaires, administer them to their own learners remotely (via online administration) and analyse the responses, all within the middle two weeks of the course. Two groups received 250 and 450 responses respectively. Other research groups elected to interview their colleagues on the course, and one, innovatively elected to research the microteaching element of the course, analysing it from the perspective of its aims, and interviewing colleagues to identify advantages and disadvantages of the microteaching process.

Research papers were submitted at the end of week 3, and the 5 papers from my group were generally clear, appropriate in register and interesting to read. We decided to give only qualitative feedback on the papers, delivered through private tutorials with each group, avoiding the need to grade papers, which we felt would be inappropriate.

The second EAR workshop in week 4 introduced participants to the "action research phase" of EAR (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, p. 67-73). Participants were asked to consider the findings of their exploratory phase and to plan for potential action research projects based on their findings. At this stage, many naturally 're-personalised' their interests, with teachers in several groups choosing to plan slightly different action research phases, aligned to their initial puzzles/problems from week 1. They also planned for the second poster presentation; they were encouraged to present both the findings of their exploratory phase, and their potential action research plans.

While this planning went well, it also became evident that due to heavy workloads and other constraints, many would have difficulty carrying out this action research without both mentoring support from professionals experienced in action research, and support from line managers within their own institutions, for varying reasons, which are also challenges discussed by Allwright (2005), and Hanks (2017).

During the second poster presentation most groups presented interesting posters with feasible projects. Some were able to articulate how they would take their research forward. However, a minority of the groups presented posters that were less clear about their future intentions, indicative evidence that they would not continue with their projects after the course.

After the programme – a familiar tale

As is still too often the case on many single-shot training courses, I regret to say that the core stakeholders had not planned any follow-up support or impact assessment for the programme. While the teachers had developed strong personal links and seemed committed to making changes in their classrooms, upon completion of initial course evaluation questionnaires, participants returned to their contexts, and we to ours.

Somewhat unsatisfied with this, I subsequently requested, and gained permission to conduct a follow-up webinar seven months later. I contacted all 67 participants and asked how many would be willing to present at the webinar, making it clear that there was no obligation to do so, and they could present either on their action research projects, or on changes they'd made to their teaching since the programme. 30 responded, 12 interested in presenting, and 18 in attending as observers only. The final 2.5-hour webinar involved nine presentations (three were not able to present on the date in question), most focusing on changes made, and only three on research (of whom two presented on their action research, the other on a different project). Zoom video conferencing software (https://zoom.us/) was used, and worked well in both China and the UK, and the recorded webinar was shared in closed online groups in both China and the UK.

The two participants who presented on their action research both presented useful findings, although these were largely at the exploratory phase, one on improving students' engagement with story writing, and the other on investigating why students rarely speak in class. While both had tried out a number of potential solutions in their classes, they did so somewhat unsystematically (i.e. the AR phases were not clearly defined, with no data collection, analysis and reflection). Thus, while clearly useful for two dedicated teachers among 67 participants, this indicates that without systematic subsequent support, it cannot be realistically expected that teachers will follow through on EAR projects, an obvious, yet important finding.

Of those that presented on changes to their practice, a number of themes of interest that derived directly from the training programme were detectable in the remaining presentations:

- The principled use of technology in the classroom, including specific apps and websites chosen innovatively to solve specific problems that they faced;

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- A number had found the concept of the flipped classroom useful, both to organise and manage ambitious curricula, and to increase opportunities for interactive, learner-centred teaching during the lessons;
- Several discussed their experimentation with groupwork in the classroom since the program, including grouping strategies, increases in student-student interaction and the challenge of getting learners to interact in English during groupwork;
- Specific strategies for student interaction deriving from the training programme that were discussed included the use of jigsaw communication activities (mentioned by four), the use of communication games, such as 'Find Someone Who…', and the use of poster projects, involving collaboration in the preparation stage, and practice of formal speaking skills in the presentation stage;
- Several felt that they had succeeded in engaging their learners more in English language learning, through foci on topics of interest to the learners and their needs, the use of games in the classroom, and the use of positive feedback/reinforcement strategies introduced on the course.

Conclusion

This project involved a fairly innovative blend of traditional top-down training (non-negotiable and mandated by key stakeholders) and more participatory, participant-led research (introduced later by the training team), demonstrating that while it is probably impossible to transform top-down initiatives into bottom-up ones, by including some of these elements, teachers can be given some agency during the course, and opportunity afterwards. However, it also provides further evidence (see, e.g., Guskey, 2002) that without follow-up support, while impact on teaching practice may occur (here only self-reported), the likelihood of ownership and follow-through with regard to teacher research elements is, unsurprisingly, very low.

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Article Watch

Below are brief summaries of relevant articles from other journals.

ELTEd Journal, *vol. 21, 2018. www.elted.net*

'How does a virtual community of practice (COP) for teacher trainers impact on their professional practice', by S. Leather, pp. 1-8. This article reports strong evidence that the COP set up to support the Iranian Teacher Trainer Project and provide the participants with continuous professional development had significant impact on the participants' training practice in terms of practical day-to-day design, planning, and delivery of training sessions. Findings suggest that a COP is particularly successful when used as an adjunct to face-to-face courses or as part of a long term project, or both.

ELT Journal, *vol. 73/1, January 2019. https://academic.oup.com/eltj*

'Investigating reflection in written assignments on CELTA courses', by L. MacKenzie, pp. 11-20. This article reports a study analysing reflective assignments from full-time CELTA candidates in order

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