

Brief report on the “6 months later... What has changed?” Exploratory Webinar for the Warwick / Shanghai Jiao Tong ELT Professional Development Programme

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Introduction

The webinar took place on 16 March 2019, 4:00-6:30pm (Chinese time), with the following aims:

- To find out how participants from the programme had fared over the intervening six months:
 - What changes, if any, had they made to their teaching?
 - What challenges, if any, had they found when trying out ideas/activities/methods learnt during the programme?
- To keep the ‘discussion’ and community of practice going that the programme generated.
- To provide useful formative feedback to the trainers, and to the two universities, to inform future projects.

Nine participants presented, all voluntarily, as follows:

1. Carolyn 潘欣 Changes since the course
2. Mae 吴靓媛 My action research, and its impact
3. Della 李向群 My recent research (inspired by the course)
4. Alice 段袁冰 Changes since the course
5. Ben 胡健康 My action research and changes since the course
6. Yang 杨秀岚 Changes since the course
7. Shanna 杨翔鸥 My visit to the UK, and changes since
8. Jackie 陈嘉成 Changes since the course
9. Lidi 李迪 My visits to the UK, and changes since (recorded 1 week earlier)

One other planned presenter, who couldn’t attend for work reasons, Ruby 阁敏, sent a summary document on her changes, the content of which is also shared below.

Between 20 and 25 participants were present throughout the seminar, including Jason Anderson and Penny Mosavian from the training side, the presenters and a number of the other participants from the programme. Approximately 40% of the programme participants observed at least part of the webinar. Given that it was a voluntary event, and that many of the participants are very busy at this time of year, this was a reasonable turnout.

The webinar was recorded, both in the UK, and in China, for those participants and members of staff from both universities who could not attend to watch at a later date. It can be accessed at either of the following non-public locations:

In China: <https://pan.baidu.com/s/1QCeKmdcUTQDbKggyq6lgRQ> [copy & paste: access code: sih5]

Outside China (YouTube unlisted): <https://youtu.be/qDRpMpsE810> and <https://youtu.be/lWzg3fimuTY>

The presentations

1. Carolyn's 潘欣 presentation

Since the workshop, Carolyn has continued planning towards the action research project that she originally developed during the workshop. In her lessons, she feels she is now focusing much more on increasing opportunities for language practice in her large classrooms, something she did not focus on before. She has tried using both jigsaw activities, and groupwork. After initially trying random groups, she has found it more successful to get students to create their own groups, including a range of ability levels. She now reports that she uses groupwork every lesson. She noted that she was somewhat surprised to learn that her students now love games, and provided an example of a questioning game that she uses. She has also started using a lot of websites in her lessons, as well as a specific app to facilitate speaking practice, called 'Fif', that students can make use of outside of class time. She has also focused on her questioning strategies, as well as improving her testing materials, both of which she feels she has benefited from during the programme.

2. Della's 李向群 presentation

Since the workshop, as well as making regular use of groupwork, Della has been working hard on her own research project, specific to the needs of her learners (preservice teachers). Her research project has focused on the challenges of writing lesson plans experienced by preservice teachers, and involved text analysis, questionnaire and interview stages to understand more about the challenges that trainee teachers face, and where they need support. She focused on 3 particular areas of challenge:

1. coverage of teaching objectives in the plan;
2. language preparation relating to the objectives;
3. scaffolding activities.

One of the most significant findings was the observation that trainees very rarely self-check their lesson plans after completing them with regard to expected content in all three areas. This has led her to develop more specific resources and training strategies to support them more effectively, including, for example, a self-check table that the trainees can use when they have completed their lesson plans to ensure that they cover all of the important points. Della hopes to take this research forward to publication stage, and is open to suggestions of potential journals for publication.

3. Mae's 吳靚媛 presentation

Since the workshop, Mae has continued working on her exploratory action research project, focusing on improving students' engagement with short story writing, and also encouraging them to transform these stories into drama activities. Like many of the teachers who participated in the programme, Mae has noticed a lack of motivation among her students, so she developed a questionnaire to explore this, and analysed the findings. She noted 3 common areas where students hoped to improve, including their writing ability, their critical thinking skills, and their confidence when writing. Her research focused on both traditional folktale stories from students' ethnic backgrounds (she teaches English and Translation majors of different ethnic groups (Bai 白族, Hani 哈尼族, Yi 彝族 students, for example), and on traditional classics from English literature (e.g. Moby Dick, Hamlet). Although her research is still ongoing, she feels that students have become more active to express themselves, although confidence could still improve further.

4. Alice's 段袁冰 presentation

Alice teaches large groups of non-English majors, among whom she typically notes low ability levels and low levels of motivation. Many of her students perceive that they only need to pass the Practical English Test at level A. As a result, she observes that many of her learners are very passive, and they prefer to listen, rather than responding to teacher questions or invitations to speak. Since the professional development programme, she has found a number of activity types that she learnt on it working particularly well in her classrooms. These include Find Someone Who..., Jigsaw activities and the use of cooperative learning grouping strategies, both Home Groups and Expert Groups, with 4 to 5 students per group seeming to be the optimum, in line with the cooperative learning literature. She has also found that during these groupwork activities, students use a combination of languages flexibly, and although she encourages them to use English as much as possible, she also encourages mother tongue expression where students still do not feel confident enough to use English, a recommendation that was also made during the programme.

5. Ben's 胡健康 Presentation

Ben began his presentation by discussing a fundamental change that has happened in his teaching recently, which the professional development programme has helped with. When he began teaching, his focus was mainly on his own proficiency in English, and his belief that improving this improved his ability as a teacher. However, more recently, his focus has turned to the students, and his role in facilitating their learning. One strategy that he has taken away from the programme that he feels has helped greatly is the concept of the Flipped Classroom. Since then, he has found that his students are willing and able to complete vocabulary work and reading texts before class, noting down questions and “puzzles” that they had faced while doing so. Lesson time is devoted to helping students with these puzzles, often getting them to work together in groups, followed by presentations. He is found that flipping the classroom saves a great deal of time, and enables him to focus on the more challenging critical thinking skills that students need to develop in class.

Ben has also continued to focus on his action research project from the programme, which posed an exploratory question: “Why don’t students speak up in class?”, either asking questions or expressing their ideas. He has experimented with various types of collaborative learning, including random groupings, small groups and larger groups. He has found larger groups more convenient for students to give presentations. He has also experimented with student nomination strategies, and has felt that using the roll (register) to nominate students randomly has often put them on the spot, and caused embarrassment when they were not able to respond appropriately. One innovative alternative strategy that he has developed himself is, rather than putting them on the spot, he gets them to write down their ideas/responses, to exchange with other students in the class, who then read out the responses and provide positive feedback. His literature reading in relation to this has also provided some useful solutions, such as highlighting the importance of “wait time” for students to respond.

6. Yang's 杨秀岚 Presentation

Yang works with preservice English language teachers, focusing specifically on the development of their English language pronunciation, and the theory of phonetics and phonology. Her curriculum is at times technical, and I remember when we met during the course, she talked at length about how she had struggled to make it more interactive and engaging. Since the program, Yang feels she has

succeeded in making her classes much more student-centred and increasing learner participation, both in and after classes. She mentioned a number of specific ways in which she has succeeded in doing this, some of which derived directly from what she learnt on the course, and some of which have come from her own exploration and innovation, including:

1. the use of name cards to help her to remember the names (and the related needs) of the students in her large classes;
2. the use of a social media group on WeChat to share materials with her students;
3. the use of groupwork, in which she assigns specific, rotating roles to group members (chief executive officer, chief creative officer, secretary, and reporter);
4. the use of a specific website ‘Correction network’ (<http://www.pigai.org/index.php>), which helps students to improve their pronunciation;
5. the use of Flipped Classroom strategies.

7. Shanna’s 杨翔鸥 Presentation

Shanna reported on a number of aspects of her teaching that has undergone changes as a result both of the professional development programme and her opportunity to visit Warwick University later in 2018. She began by noting that her teaching has shifted from “teaching the textbook” to “teaching the learners”, something that she found she had learnt during her observations at the University of Warwick, where she had learnt about how to make homework more integrated with class work, how to design lessons deliberately and creatively, and also how to develop her professionalism as a language teacher. She presented on three areas where her teaching has changed since the visit and the programme:

1. Gamifying textbooks
2. Using technology more often in the classroom
3. Adding additional content beyond that provided by her coursebook

Like a number of the presenters, she has found a number of technological resources have helped her teaching, including using C-test (learnt from one of the teaching fellows at Warwick), which had increased students’ engagements greatly. She also mentioned another useful resource, Ketangpai 课堂派, a useful tool for We-Chat-based classroom flipping strategies, particularly useful for replacing hard-copy handouts in her classes of up to 160 students. She also uses a number of websites to add additional, especially listening, materials to those she had used previously, focusing on quality, rather than quantity when choosing this additional content. Shanna is also continuing to work on the action research project that she developed during the programme, focusing on coherence in writing composition.

8. Jackie’s 陈嘉成 Presentation

Jackie feels that he has benefited greatly from the programme, specifically from a number of resource books that were shared, and from which communicative and cooperative learning strategies were used on the course. He particularly found a range of speaking games extremely useful, and, like others, has had success using jigsaw reading activities in his classroom. He has developed a number of classroom resources to facilitate cooperative learning, including nomination sticks, and random grouping sticks, as well as colourful boards for board games. He showed an example of a cooperative activity that he had involved his students in, the creation of group posters, “Good Room Mate Posters”, in which students worked together on projects to develop both their awareness of the qualities of a good roommate at university, and also their English language ability - the posters included passages in English. He has also been hard at work developing his own translingual resource book of 50 songs, which he is interested in getting published.

9. Lidi's 李迪 Presentation

Like Shanna, Lidi had also visited Warwick University later in 2018, and chose to present on both the professional development programme and the visit to the University of Warwick. Lidi teaches English to Fine Arts majors, who like many of the participants' students, don't have much interest in learning English, and like Alice, she has found that they tend to be very passive. Prior to the course she had made very little use of groupwork, and had not focused on engaging the students on topics of their own interest. She found her visit to the University of Warwick interesting and stimulating, and was impressed by the facilities there, the small class sizes (6-8 students), as well as many of the sights she had seen during her visit. She noticed that the teachers do not rely on the textbooks very much, unlike in China, and tend to create lessons specific to the learners' needs, with lots of speaking and listening skills practice. She was particularly impressed by a course on academic essay writing that made extensive use of past students' writing scripts, focusing on both the strengths and weaknesses of these real examples.

One idea she found useful during the Shanghai professional development programme (like Jackie) was getting the students to collaborate on poster creation and presentation projects, and she showed example photos from a project in which they had focused on their dreams for the future, including both text and images on colourful posters. She used this as an example of how her teaching has shifted from what she wants to teach, to what they want to learn, and noted that potentially as a result of this, the scores that she had received from students in their end of term evaluation was much higher than before. Comments included observations, such as "Lidi's class is very interesting", "I don't feel English is so boring", and her teaching is "more flexible." While during group work students do use a mixture of languages, Lidi is flexible towards this, and she encourages them to make mistakes and to try in English whenever possible, and makes sure nobody laughs at mistakes made when students use English.

10. Ruby's 阮敏 changes

Ruby was not able to present, due to work commitments arising at the last minute. However, she sent a document discussing her changes, from which the following extract is taken:

"After attending the training, I have changed a lot in my consciousness. Previously, I mainly thought about the content of the lecture before the lecture, but now I think more about the design of classroom teaching activities and how to make students accept the content I want to teach. In the new semester, I teach a junior English major course, History of English Literature and Selected Readings, which mainly includes the historical background and literary characteristics of each period, the introduction of the writer's life, and the excerpts of the main literary works. Because the content of the course is too much and difficult, I often talk more in class and students do less. But I still try some activities that students participate in, such as group discussion, poetry recitation, and Jigsaw's way to let students read some selected articles. Compared with the past, I pay more attention to the validity of the test. At the end of the term, I spent a lot of time on the examination paper. I designed many types of questions, including objective and subjective ones. The final examination results can objectively reflect the students' learning and my teaching. Generally speaking, after participating in the training, I have made great achievements and progress in all aspects. However, due to the balance of scientific research, administrative management and family, the energy invested in teaching is limited, and the thinking and practice of teaching are not deep enough. I hope to have the opportunity to participate in the activities organized by you in the future."

Common themes in the presentations

Several themes of interest that derived directly from the professional development programme can be detected in the participants' presentations:

1. the principled use of technology in the classroom, including specific apps and websites chosen innovatively to solve specific problems that they face;
2. closely related to the previous point, a number of participants have found the concept of the flipped classroom useful in their teaching, both to organise and manage ambitious curricula, and to provide opportunities for more interactive, learner-centred teaching during the lessons;
3. several of the participants discussed at length their experimentation with groupwork in the classroom since the program, including grouping strategies and solutions, and how the groups have facilitated more interaction and speaking;
4. specific strategies for student interaction deriving directly from the training programme that were discussed included the use of jigsaw communication activities (mentioned by four of the ten), the use of communication games, such as Find Someone Who..., and the use of poster projects, involving collaboration in the preparation stage, and formal speaking skills in the presentation stage;
5. several participants felt that they had had success 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, all of which were linked directly or indirectly to the experience and input on the training programme.

It is also notable that a number of participants have continued their action research projects as initially developed during the Professional Development Programme. Some are developing them as planned, others are making small changes, and others (e.g. Della and Jackie) have taken more ambitious projects further to the point of publication.

Conclusion

The presentations provided were engaging, thought-provoking, and well-planned, and demonstrated clearly the commitment of these participants to continue learning and developing in their own classrooms, drawing on what they had learnt from the project, sometimes implementing it as suggested, sometimes critically appropriating from it, and sometimes developing alternative solutions to their problems, drawing at least in part on the Exploratory Action Research element of the development programme. There is no doubt that these participants have gained from participation in the project. It would be interesting to learn more about the remaining 63 participants: What changes—if any—have they made, and what challenges have they faced?

Many thanks to all who presented, and all who observed.

16th March 2019