

Students Teaching Teachers - Can It work? A Teacher Training Project in Rural China

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the possibility of students taking on a training role in their service learning subject in order to serve teachers. The approach of students teaching teachers has many challenges, including whether teachers would value this type of professional development. In this paper-presentation, we will give an example of a service learning subject which provides language workshops for in-service English teachers in rural China. Feedback from service recipients and students will be reported and discussed which will be of interest to service learning subject leaders, teachers and researchers interested in knowing more about this approach. This paper serves as an exploratory study into the value of placing university students in training roles for in-service teachers.

Key Words: English teaching, teacher development, China, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Serving the Community through English Language Teaching is a service learning subject offered by the English Language Centre (ELC) at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). This subject provides our students with the opportunity to teach English to primary age children at various service points, including Dabu County, Guangdong, China. While both the children and PolyU tutors appreciated the learning/teaching experience, it was proposed that in order to sustain long term impact of the project, professional training needs to be provided to local English subject teachers. With the support of our partner organizations in Dabu, in summer 2016 we offered a speaking workshop for teachers of Dabu County.

The unique contribution of the speaking workshop is to offer a different approach to teacher development in China which targets teachers' language skills by developing pronunciation, fluency and confidence in speaking. In-service primary English subject teachers, especially those in less developed areas in rural China, are often not subject-trained and might not be proficient speakers of the language themselves. They have few opportunities to speak English and this is where university students can make an impact. PolyU has an international pool of proficient English speakers among its students. They can be best used to serve the Dabu teachers in need of authentic English speaking practice.

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Eight PolyU students were assigned to serve as Teaching Assistants (TAs) at the speaking workshop. Among them, two were international students, two studied overseas and one studied in an international school. The rest were local students. Prior to the service, these students were coached to develop workshop materials based around pronunciation and fluency activities. During the service, an ELC lecturer acted as facilitator, mainly to formalize the training experience and reduce the potential 'loss of face' of teachers feeling that they were being trained by unqualified students. TAs delivered the activities in small groups for teacher members and provided individualized attention and support.

When planning the workshop, pitching the students as TAs was seen as a crucial element to selling the idea to teachers. The one-day workshop was conducted entirely in English and delivered to three groups of in-service primary school teachers.

1.1 Research questions

1. Do the teachers/workshop participants value this type of professional development opportunity?
2. Did teachers feel that they developed their language skills and confidence of using English?
3. To what extent did the TAs feel they made a positive impact on the English teachers?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In-service training in China has tended to either focus on knowledge of the curriculum or practical methods for teaching (Li & Baldauf, 2011). University professors often conduct training which is commonly lecture-based and held in Chinese. The approach to knowledge and skills is one of dissemination, where they are seen as objective entities passed down from expert to novice (Zhong & Wu, 2004). An additional approach which has gained some momentum recently is school-led professional development which includes lesson observation, co-lesson planning and reflection (Wong & Tsui, 2007). This approach is grounded in reflective practice and the day-to-day practical needs of teachers.

The element missing in the two approaches briefly described above is the development of the language skills of teachers. The language level of rural primary school English teachers tends to be low and teaching in English is often reduced to a small repertoire of stock phrases. Numerous reasons can be cited for the low level of these teachers but one explanation is that many of the teachers were trained in other disciplines and were transferred to English teaching due to the lack of qualified teachers in this subject (Ping, 2013).

There is some backing to support the integration of speaking skills into in-service teacher training programmes in China. Chen and Goh's (2011) study of university EFL teachers in China revealed that over two-thirds of these teachers would want to see training programmes which aimed to improve their own oral proficiency. In a study of 300 primary school English teachers based in rural areas of China, Ping (2013) highlights the constraining factor of limited language skills and the need for refresher courses for in-service English teachers. In terms of confidence, Liu (2007) suggests that EFL teachers in

China may be anxious about their own language ability because they have not reached an advanced level of linguistic proficiency.

METHODS

A multi-method approach was used employing qualitative and quantitative data including:

1. A questionnaire completed by 75 attending teachers using a 4-point Likert scale. The questionnaire included comment boxes for deeper responses.
2. Students' post-service reflections, analyzed for themes relating to the research questions.
3. Observation notes from two ELC lecturers, analyzed for relevant data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Valuing the workshops

In terms of valuing this type of professional development opportunity, the teachers were in overwhelming support with 71 out of 75 (94.7%) responses indicating 'agree strongly' to the statement '*The speaking workshop provided me with a valuable learning experience*'. Comments provided by teachers about this item were either about their own language development or the opportunity to speak English:

"The speaking workshop gave us an environment to practice English"

"There is [usually] little time to speak to the friends from around the world"

Other comments were about the value of using English during classes and gaining teaching ideas:

"English learning cannot be separated from the language environment" "I felt more inspired to use English in my own classes"

"Since the speaking workshop, I think that is a better way of teaching"

Observation notes highlight that the majority of teachers did take the opportunity to speak in English. Some teachers commented that they had not spoken English since university and appreciated this opportunity.

4.2 Development of English skills

The vast majority (86.7%; n=65) of the teachers 'strongly agreed' that the workshop had developed their English skills and ten respondents 'agreed' to this statement. This is a positive result considering the length of the workshop. There is some acknowledgment that improvement in English skills is difficult to attain in the short term with one teacher suggesting that "*pronunciation skills are difficult to change*".

Three teachers disagreed with the statement '*Having TAs in the class helped me to speak English*'. Some teachers had difficulty with very basic utterances in English and it may be that these teachers found the workshop difficult and prefer a traditional training classroom conducted in Chinese.

From observation, teachers who took the opportunity to speak and had a basic command of English showed an increase in speaking confidence as the workshops progressed. The experience seemed to stimulate their interest in speaking English.

4.3 TAs view on impact

From their reflections, TAs felt that they did have an impact on teachers, especially in terms of teaching methodology. One TA wrote:

“At the end, some teachers told me they have never taught English this way before and it was solely textbook and CD based but this workshop has inspired her to change her teaching methods a bit. As a TA that was the most rewarding feeling ever to see that we are able to impact their teaching style and even perspective that English teaching can be made fun”

Another perspective was that the project did not have much impact in the short term but could impact the teachers over the long term if more groups of TAs hold future speaking workshops.

“It is obvious that we could not do a lot for them in this short service learning trip since we are only the first group of TAs. However, I believe that we have built a strong foundation for the future groups of TAs so that the impact in Dabu can be sustained”

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to answer whether students could serve teachers as part of a service learning subject. From the data set, it can be seen that teachers did indeed value the workshops and the opportunity to enhance their English skills through interacting with TAs. There was minimal evidence to suggest that using students was unpopular or ineffective and this might be in the design of the programme which uses students as TAs, rather than main trainer. Longitudinal studies can be conducted in future to investigate the long term impact of our workshop on teachers and their students.

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