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Confucius, constructivism and the impact of continuing professional development on teachers of English in China

Viv Edwards and Daguo Li

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Abstract

In this article we explore issues around the sustainability and appropriateness of professional development for secondary teachers of English in China offered by overseas providers from the perspective of teachers who completed courses at the University of Reading between 2003 and 2010. We start by offering an overview of English teaching in China. We then describe the collection and analysis of interviews and focus groups discussions involving former participants, their teaching colleagues and senior management, as well as classroom observation. Evidence is presented for changes in teachers' philosophies of education directly attributable to participation in the courses; for improved teacher competencies (linguistic, cultural and pedagogical) in the classroom; and for the ways in which returnees are undertaking new roles and responsibilities which exploit their new understandings. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for both providers and sponsors of CPD for English language teachers. We conclude that the recognition of English as an essential element in the modernisation of China, together with the growing awareness of the weaknesses of traditional approaches to the teaching of the language, has opened up new spaces for dialogue concerning pedagogy and professional practice. It is clearly important, however, that new approaches to the teaching of English are presented in a way which allows teachers to decide which elements should be incorporated into their teaching and how.

1

Introduction

Competence in English is an essential element in the modernisation project in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Here, as indeed in many other countries, English is seen as facilitating economic, technological, educational and cultural exchange with other parts of the world. Much like the economy, English language learning in China is making the transition from liberalisation to globalisation (Zheng and Davison, 2008). New policies which underscore the relationship between modernisation and education have created many opportunities for the English language teaching industry as the so-called 'inner circle' countries (Kachru, 1985) compete for market share in materials development, the provision of expertise and also the training of teachers.

In this article, we look at just one of these issues – the continuing professional development (CPD) of English teachers – through the lens of our seven years' experience of providing three-month courses at the National Centre for Language and Literacy (NCLL) of the University of Reading for more than 500 teachers from the PRC. Our main interest, however, is not in evaluating changes in teacher knowledge or attitudes observed during the course of the programme, but rather in assessing the impact of participation on their return to China. Our aim, then, is to identify issues which will help us and other providers to deliver CPD which is both sustainable and fit for purpose.

Evaluation is a well-established element in most CPD programmes (Weir and Roberts, 1994), encouraging reflection on what trainers are trying to achieve, how far they are succeeding, and where improvement or change is needed. Yet within – and beyond – English Language Teaching (ELT), the focus in most cases is on the learning experiences of participants during professional development rather than on what happens afterwards. The international literature on teacher CPD (see, for instance, Harland and Kinder, 1997; Joyce and Showers, 1988; Day, 1999; Ingvarson et al., 2003) has often grappled with this issue and the picture which emerges is sometimes discouraging. There is ample evidence, for instance, of the failure of attempts to implement change (Fullan, 2001) and of the superficial nature of the gains achieved (Cooley, 1997). Guskey (2000: 32) reminds us that many teachers perceive CPD to be

irrelevant to their needs and of the fact that we still know relatively little about its impact. Hu (2005: 694) makes a similar point in relation to CPD for teachers in China:

Although there is some evidence attesting to the impact of individual in-service programs on professional growth ... the overall picture suggests, at best, only limited effects of formally organized in-service education on teachers' continuing development.

Like most providers, NCLL undertakes a comprehensive evaluation of all aspects of all courses. The programme for secondary teachers of English is based on what we believe to be a realistic assessment of needs and has always sought to incorporate feedback from participants. While this feedback has been consistently positive, we have also been mindful that we have very limited knowledge of the impact of this training on the teachers' return to China. Yan (2008: 587) underlines the importance of the sustainability of initiatives in CPD and of the need to 'help them become acclimatized to and firmly embedded in the local environment, evolve healthily and strongly, and further induce more fundamental changes'. Our decision to examine this issue in relation to our own courses reflects these concerns.

In order to provide the context for discussion, we offer a brief overview of English teaching in China and the recent educational reforms, and explain how we set about designing and collecting data for the study. We present evidence for changes in teachers' philosophies of education; for the application of improved competencies (linguistic, cultural and pedagogical); and for the ways in which participants have discharged new roles and responsibilities on their return. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for both providers and sponsors of CPD for English language teachers.

2

English teaching in China

English was first introduced as a compulsory subject in middle schools in China in 1902 and so the teaching of English in China is by no means a new development (Zheng and Davison, 2008). Although Russian emerged as the preferred foreign language during the early years of the PRC, its importance diminished following the breakdown in diplomatic relations with the former USSR in the early 1960s. Teaching of languages during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 was decentralised and sporadic but focused mainly on English, which has remained the most widely taught foreign language since that time. By the new millennium, close to 80 million secondary school students were studying the language (Hu, 2002). There is, therefore, huge demand for initial training and CPD. In 2002 an estimated 470,000 teachers were involved in the teaching of English at the secondary level (Wang, 2007); this number will have since risen substantially.

Rigid teaching methods, shortages of qualified teachers and examination-driven instruction have all been identified as obstacles to high quality ELT; dissatisfaction with the outcomes has led to far-reaching reform. Writers including Hu (2002), Wang (2007) and Zheng and Davison (2008) describe the profound changes that have taken place in recent decades. Emphasis has shifted over time from grammar translation and audio-lingual methods, to more functional-structural, communicative and task-based learning approaches. Syllabuses and textbooks currently incorporate an eclectic pedagogy which aims to accommodate both Chinese and international approaches. For instance, teachers are encouraged to actively develop the cognitive skills often associated with the west, such as reasoning, imagination and creativity, alongside the traditionally valued Chinese skills of observation and memorisation. However, as Hu (2002: 36) points out:

While [the more recent] textbooks have clear advantages over the more traditional ones... the big challenge for the educational authorities is to train a large contingent of teachers to use them effectively in a short time. Without adequate training, it is very likely that the new textbooks will be taught in old ways.

Since the implementation of the revised curriculum in 2005, there has been a growing expectation that teachers move from the traditional role of 'knowledge transmitter' to 'multirole educator'; from 'learning to use' to 'learning by using'. This transformation requires them to develop new skills 'for motivating learners in language learning... developing their learning strategies ... [and] designing more task-based, cooperative and problem-solving activities in order to make students the center of learning' (Wang, 2007: 101). In addition, they are expected to learn to use formative assessment, to adapt textbooks to meet the requirements of the curriculum and the needs of learners, and to use modern technology in their teaching. Fundamental to these new requirements is the need to improve their own English language proficiency.

CPD has been receiving high priority at national level for some time (MOE, 2000a, 2000b) and there is a growing awareness among teachers of the importance of career-long learning. There are currently three main providers: education colleges run by provincial and municipal educational authorities; tertiary teacher education and other institutions of higher learning; and overseas institutions and organisations. In some instances, the overseas provider has worked in collaboration with Chinese partners to deliver courses in China, as in the case of the Department for International Development (DfID) ELT projects which ran from the late 1970s to 2001 (Yan, 2008). On other occasions, delivery has taken place partly in China and partly in English speaking countries.

It was against this background that NCLL first started to develop three-month courses for teachers of English at the University of Reading in collaboration with the China Scholarship Council (CSC), a non-profit organisation affiliated to the Ministry of Education. Participants up to the age of 45 are selected by the CSC through a highly competitive process; places are either funded jointly by the CSC and the local education authorities or, in some cases, with a small contribution from the participating teachers' schools. The programme is based on the premise 'that professional learning is more likely to improve student learning outcomes if it increases teachers' understanding of the content they teach, how students learn that content and how to represent and convey that content in meaningful ways' (Ingvarson

et al., 2003). The courses form part of China's Great Western Development Strategy which targets six provinces (Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan and Yunnan), five autonomous regions (Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet and Xinjiang), and one municipality (Chongqing), which comes directly under central government control (see Figure 1). They should also be seen in the context of the 1986 nine-year Basic Education Law, which sets out to provide basic education in three phases: first, the richer seaboard areas, then the industrial hinterland, and finally the remote rural areas (Adamson and Morris, 1997). As Hu (2002) has indicated, considerable effort and resources are needed to improve the delivery of ELT in these areas in order to achieve equivalence with colleagues in more economically developed parts of China.

The NCLL approach is consistent with that of many other teacher education and professional development programmes. The focus in delivery is on constructivism rather than transmission: instruction is student centered, interactive, and inquiry oriented. The three-month courses have four components: language teaching methodology; a one-week school placement which allows participants to see many of the issues covered in the methodology component firsthand in actual classroom practice; English language development; and a social and cultural programme which, alongside life with British host families, exposes them to new experiences and allows them to apply newly acquired skills and knowledge.



Figure 1: Map of the Western provinces [Source: Gelb, C. and Chen, D. (n.d.)]

3

Methodology

We used case study as our framework, a blend of the ‘connoisseur’ approach which draws on researchers familiar with a subject or a programme to critically characterise and appraise it (the ‘insider’ perspective; see Weir and Roberts, 1994), and the client-centred approach which addresses concerns and issues of practitioners and other clients in a given setting (Stufflebeam and Webster, 1980).

Purposive sampling was used to identify schools representative of those sending participants on our programme. We had identified various factors at the outset which might influence the outcomes. It was possible, for instance, that there might be differences between schools in large municipalities and smaller cities and from one province to another. It would, therefore, be important to achieve a good mix and also a good geographical spread of case studies. An unexpected complication was the unrest in Xinjiang, which supplies in the region of 30 per cent of teachers for our courses, immediately prior to the fieldwork. Prudence dictated that this autonomous region should not be included. Fieldwork was ultimately conducted at four sites (Guiyang, Zunyi, Chongqing and Chengdu) in three provincial capitals or municipalities in Southwest China (Guizhou, Sichuan and Chongqing) in March 2010. School A in Zunyi and School B in Chongqing formed the main focus: here, we interviewed former participants, head teachers and heads of English departments and colleagues who had not participated in the Reading programme. In these and the other locations, (Guiyang and Chengdu), we also spoke to a wider range of other participants as well as educational administrators.

Our study was undertaken as part of a joint evaluation of our courses with the CSC. Our own interest related to the teachers in the schools; the CSC responsibility was for administrative aspects of teacher recruitment. This co-operation had both advantages and disadvantages. CSC arranged access to all schools, engaging in complex negotiations with

education authorities at provincial and district levels. We provided details of the schools we wished to involve and the people that we wanted to see within the time available. CSC then liaised with the schools and, wherever possible, timetabled meetings in response to our requests. This *modus operandi* allowed us to bypass the gatekeepers who would normally have been involved in permitting access to schools. As a result, we were able to achieve in the space of two weeks what might otherwise have taken many months. The disadvantages, of course, included the need to compromise on some aspects of the original research design, and the limited time available for reflection and follow up, reduced still further by the sometimes conflicting demands of CSC responsibilities in the evaluation.

We used three main methods of data collection (see Table 1). The first was open ended, semi-structured interviews with former participants in schools A and B, and with head teachers and heads of the English Department. The second was focus group discussions with two different groups: colleagues in the English Department in the A and B schools who had not taken part in the programme and a wide range of former participants from across the region who had responded to an invitation from CSC to join us in all four locations. Finally, we undertook a number of classroom observations of both former participants and non-participants. The aim, then, was to increase the validity of our findings by triangulating both the methods used – interviews, focus groups and observation – and the sources of information – participant and non-participant teachers and members of the senior management team. By drawing on these additional sources, the hope was to produce evidence which would either support or contradict the views expressed by teachers who had completed training.

Method	Number of interviews	Number of focus groups	Number of classroom observations
Former participants	10	5	5
Non-participants	0	2	2
Headteachers/ heads of section	10	0	0

Table 1: Data collection methods and participants

We were acutely aware of the disadvantages of our ‘insider’ status as researchers trying to evaluate a course that we played an important role in designing and delivering. People who had known and worked with us over a period of three months might well find it difficult to be frank in assessments of their experience. We took a range of measures to counteract these effects. Semi-structured interviews with the teachers in the Zunyi and Chongqing schools and focus group discussions with the teachers in the four schools in Chengdu were undertaken by a research assistant who had previously been a participant on the course but who was unknown to the teachers in the study, schools with teachers who had attended the same course having been deliberately excluded. Daguo Li was responsible for the interviews and focus group discussions with non-participants. He was, however, at the request of the CSC, jointly responsible, with colleagues from the CSC, for four of the five discussions with the wider groups of former participants. All data collection was undertaken by Chinese native speakers, thereby eliminating cultural issues that might have arisen in interviews either in English or with English speakers.

While we are conscious of the potential weaknesses of our data, the findings which we report below suggest a high level of reflection and critical awareness on the part of interviewees and focus group discussants, leading us to believe that attempts to reduce the effects of our insider status were successful.

Focus group discussions and interviews were transcribed and classroom observations were recorded using field notes. Data were then imported into NVivo8, a specialist software package for qualitative analysis. Analytical categories were allowed to emerge from, rather than being imposed on, the data.

4

Findings

The impact of the programmes on teachers' return to China can be grouped under three main headings: changes in philosophy, improvement in competencies, and new leadership roles. Each will be considered in turn.

Changes in philosophy

Hu (2005: 667) sums up what happens in Chinese classrooms in terms of an 'expository, teacher-centered pedagogical approach' where 'teachers are expected to be virtuosos of learning' whose priority is 'the selection, mediation, and transmission of authoritative knowledge'. Commentators on teaching and learning in China usually explain these expectations in terms of the deep-seated influence of Confucian philosophy on all aspects of Chinese social and cultural life. Confucianism provides a hierarchical structure which stresses mutual respect and harmony; its influence is particularly evident in the hierarchical relationships between students and teachers (Biggs 1994; Chan, 1999). Students owe respect to those who provide knowledge and the authority of teachers is such that only they – and not the students – should initiate interactions in class. Such expectations are, of course, at odds with the requirements of communicative language teaching.

The tutors on our programme operated according to very different principles; participants also witnessed a very different pattern of teacher–pupil relationships during their school placements. This exposure made a deep impression. As Li Yan observed:

The relationship between the [course participants] and the trainers was very equal. [The trainers] could kneel down to talk to you or answer your questions ... During teaching, students and the teacher should have more eye contact, maintain level eye contact, rather than make students look up at you. And the class ritual of asking all the students to stand up at the start of a lesson [as is the usual practice in schools in China] is not necessary in my view.

Participants raised a wide range of closely related issues, including student centredness, differentiation and enjoyment in learning, which flow from the philosophy which underpins both our programme and British education more generally. Many perceived these issues in terms of 'quality education', a concept

they had been introduced to in China but had only begun to fully understand following their exposure to education in the UK.

According to Collins and O'Brien (2003):

Student-centered instruction [SCI] is an instructional approach in which students influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning. This learning model places the student (learner) in the center of the learning process. The instructor provides students with opportunities to learn independently and from one another and coaches them in the skills they need to do so effectively.

'Student centredness' and 'active learning' are often used more or less interchangeably in western educational discourse; the effectiveness of this approach is well established (Michael, 2006). Some participants interpreted student-centred teaching in terms of a refusal to spoon-feed pupils. This understanding was apparent, for instance in Hou Meili's comment on her observation of a biology lesson:

The teacher didn't teach the things the students already knew but only focused on what the students did not know ... There were only about ten students in the class ... and they were not well behaved, but the teacher was able to conduct the lessons based on the needs of the students ... The teacher asked them to design a poster, writing down the various uses of the vitamin ... the students needed to write some of them down themselves and the teacher did not simply give the answer ... This greatly inspired me.

Zhang Huilin also expressed approval for this approach to teaching:

What impressed me most during the school placement was the shadowing experience, that is, following a student for a day. Their music lessons are totally different from those in China. Their music room is more like our computer room. For example, their students didn't just sit there listening to the teacher singing a song. They were composing by themselves ... Obviously what they were trying to do is to really develop students' basic composing skills and other practical skills. ... I feel we lag behind.

Differentiation has been an essential element in student-centred learning in the west for the last two decades. It allows for differences within a teaching group, and is designed to result in optimum learning outcomes for individual pupils (Battersby, 2002). This issue had clearly captured the imagination of course participants who commented on ways in which 'potential' in Chinese education was often defined in terms of examination outcomes. The British programme, in contrast, had alerted them to the importance of a broader understanding of potential. Li Mei commented on British children's experience of education in the following terms:

You may not like the education at school, for instance, in terms of knowledge, but you like acting. No problem, I will teach you how to perform. You like cooking: there is a dedicated food technology room and the teacher teaches you how to cook interesting food. You like innovation or mechanics, there are also such special skills rooms – you can make things and there is a teacher on site to guide you. I feel these are good for the development of students' individuality.

Similarly, in applying this new understanding to her own situation, Dai Han highlighted the importance of 'respecting students as individuals, as every student is different – their intelligence, their learning styles, and their methods of study are all different'.

One activity during the programme which had clearly made a strong impression involved drawing a pen. Predictably, the end products were very varied. Fan Daoming summed up what he had learned from this experience:

[The trainer] emphasised a key concept, that is, to look at the pen from different perspectives ... therefore, in terms of students, as a teacher, we should also look at things from their perspective, trying to be inclusive and encouraging ...

This approach was in marked contrast with what he considered to be normal practice in China. Reflecting on what he would have done prior to the course, Fan Daoming commented:

Before I would probably ignore these types of students, those who really did not want to learn. After I returned [from the UK], I felt there might actually be other reasons why these students did not want to study.

In a similar vein, Sun Lian remarked that the 'humanistic spirit of the Reading programme' had helped her to look at things from a different perspective.

The notion of learning for fun also attracted comment. Educational policy in the west increasingly stresses the importance of enjoyment in education, both as a right and as a support for learning (Lumby, 2010). The emphasis on learning as an enjoyable experience in the CPD programme and in schools had clearly made an impression on participants. This impression was reinforced by observation of family life. According to Lin Shuting:

I sometimes observed how the children of the home stay family and those in the neighbourhood learn. I felt then British children were as if living in paradise [compared with Chinese children]. After the comparison, I told myself I wanted to make sure my students wouldn't regard English learning as a kind of suffering.

Impact on practice

Expressions of approval for the constructivist thrust of much western education do not necessarily translate into changed practice. In the case of the Reading teachers, however, there was ample evidence that exposure to new ideas was influencing at least their self-reported approach to teaching on return; these reports were reinforced by classroom observation. Wan Ling, for instance, claimed that she no longer dominated classes to the same extent so that 'students did more and we teachers became a guide'. And according to Li Yan:

After I came back, I was nicer to my students and more approachable ... I was also careful in my use of words, for example, I would no longer tell them 'If you have questions, you should ask me, you should ask me for advice'; instead, I would say, 'If you have questions, you can raise them and we can discuss them'. So the students also felt they were closer to you ... and you could now discuss with them, consult them.

There was, similarly, evidence of greater differentiation and a willingness to support students in achieving their potential. As Shen Na explained:

Before I participated in the programme, when I tested my students on their vocabulary, I thought I was going to find out who didn't do the homework I had left and punish those who didn't do it. Now it's different, ... I remember ... [in Reading, the trainer] was preparing us for the assessment, asking us to imagine how we would answer the question, what would the question look like? I felt it was important to give us such a support or help before the assessment. So now in my own teaching, I give my students a lot of such support before their exams.

In a similar vein, Shen Na outlined her new approach to dictation:

I offer students two choices. They have the same material but with different words taken out. For the stronger students, I take out a word every four words; but for the weaker students, I take out a word every eight words ... I use this kind of activity to enable students to discuss among themselves, for example, the comparative and superlative forms of the adjectives.

Participants also expressed excitement about the student response to innovations. Typical comments included:

When I came back... I was teaching a unit called News Media. I asked my students to make a blackboard poster based on their own interests. They needed to collect their own materials. And the students did really well. They made a blackboard poster themselves and we put it up. It is still there and very beautiful.

[Hou Meili]

I asked the students to talk about an unforgettable experience ... They immediately got interested ... Once they are interested, you can achieve good results. Even if the weakest students did not understand, they would ask the students sitting next to them what the teacher had just said, or they would ask you directly what it was about. I felt that was very successful.

[Wan Dawei]

The gains reported for CPD in the wider literature include improved teacher confidence and self-efficacy or enhanced belief in their ability to make a difference to their pupils' learning; a greater commitment to changing practice; and willingness to try new approaches (EPPI, 2003). Such gains were evident in the self-reports of participants in the Reading programme, as summarised by Fan Daoming:

Before I went to the UK, I wasn't really sure about some of my teaching methods and strategies. After being in the UK ... I feel more confident about their theoretical foundation and practical relevance ... After the training, I feel I can do [what is required] so I am able to carry on more publicly without having to worry about anything. ... I made action plans in the UK. Since I came back, I have designed my lessons using the action plan as scaffolding, that is, I have no longer used the traditional lesson plans ... This is because I have found the theoretical support for myself and I have become more confident.

Improvement in competencies

Participants reported improved competencies in several areas of their professional development as teachers: proficiency in English, lesson planning and delivery, and cultural understanding.

Proficiency in English

Wang (1999; 2007) points to the great variation in the quality of teachers in terms of language proficiency and teaching ability. The low levels of proficiency in English attained by secondary school pupils have attracted considerable critical comment in China. Wei (2001), for instance, highlights the fragmentary knowledge of grammar and inadequate vocabulary of most children. The 2005 National Curriculum requires teachers to make considerable changes in their professional practice, from knowledge-based to competency-based teaching, and from transmitter of knowledge to facilitator of learning. However, unless teachers improve their own levels of proficiency in English, it is unrealistic to expect them to perform these new roles.

Participants in the Reading programme commented on their improvement in speaking and understanding English. They reported that input both on their own pronunciation and approaches to the teaching of pronunciation had greatly improved their intelligibility. By hearing authentic English speech in class, in their host families, in the community and on TV, as well as having opportunities to practice in a wide range of situations, their knowledge of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions had also increased. As Han Ding commented:

I feel that now you are in the country yourself, you hear both standard and non-standard pronunciations ... When I did not have lessons, I liked to watch football and seek opportunities to talk with people. The elderly British like to talk with others... I like this vivid, real, 'pure English', 'authentic English'.

Dai Han made a similar point:

I feel sure there was improvement because, at the start, I had to think in advance about what to say next, what comes first and what follows. But later on, no matter what, we speak as we like, not having to think too much. Even if it's just a word, once it's said, people could understand.

Wan Dawei summarised the benefits of a three-month stay thus:

What I feel most strongly is that my linguistics skills have improved. To be honest, before that I wasn't sure about many things. The three-month study has given me confidence in my own language... Before that I wasn't certain about some of what I said and did not feel confident about what I told my students... But now I am very confident and can explain what they are. The good thing is, when I feel more confident, I am better able to influence my students.

Lesson planning and delivery

There is a disjunction in the initial training of teachers in China between, on the one hand English language proficiency and knowledge about the language and, on the other, the pedagogical skills required to teach English. As Hu (2005: 674) points out:

The language skill courses are not generally concerned with how target language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and communication strategies can be developed in the secondary classroom; the language knowledge courses tend not to give any attention to how secondary students can best be helped to master specific language systems (e.g. pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary).

For this reason, the focus of the programme is not simply on improving participants' proficiency but also on extending their repertoire of teaching methods and there were strong indications that this approach has been successful.

We have already commented on more general changes related to the Confucian philosophy underpinning teaching in China. There was also evidence of change related more specifically to the teaching of English. All the participants highlighted the practical teaching techniques, skills and strategies that they had learned on the course. Examples of how they had been able to put this learning into practice included the use of active learning strategies, such as correction codes in student writing as a way of not only improving students' active learning, participation and autonomy, but also reducing teacher workload; mind maps in the learning of vocabulary; and songs and storytelling in order to engage and motivate students. Frequent reference was also made to project work and co-operative learning (e.g. group work) – clear indications of a significant move from the more traditional transmission model of teaching. Interestingly, participants such as Wei Wen

reported that this approach was effective not only with younger students but also with the more examination-oriented senior classes:

For example, a specific aspect of grammar: during revision, I can ask the students to form groups to discuss this first. If students do not understand any aspect of the grammar, they can learn from the stronger students, who can offer help to them. After the students have a better understanding by learning from each other, the teacher can then follow up.

Cultural understanding

Growing emphasis has been paid to cultural understanding in English for some time (Wang, 2007). One of the goals of the syllabuses introduced in 2000 to both junior and senior secondary schools, for instance, is to 'instill in students a respect for meritorious cultural traditions of other nations and an understanding of, as well as love for, Chinese culture' (Hu, 2005: 36). Significantly, lessons in the most recent textbooks are topic based, focusing not on linguistic structures but on culture-specific activities and introducing cross-cultural information (Hu, 2005: 39).

Participants stayed with host families, where they were able to observe daily routines, rituals around food and leisure activities. They reported a significant increase both in their cultural understanding and their ability to apply this understanding in the classroom. They were struck by what they perceived to be the courtesy of British drivers to pedestrians, British people's habit of queuing and their respect for their historical and cultural heritage. Travel in the UK and school placements also helped participants to build a much more sophisticated appreciation of British culture which increased their confidence in dealing with cultural issues in the textbooks they were using. Chen Shaohua summed up the significance of these experiences in the following terms:

With home stay, we were able... to see what their daily life is like, through observing, listening, learning, and experiencing. Then we also had a school placement, observing how the teachers teach and how the students behave, even to see how they use punishment... We also visited some sites... These are useful for cultural understanding and knowledge and skills... Almost all the reading materials we use relate to cultural background. So when we explain to the students, it's more accurate.

Wan Ling made a similar observation:

When you have had direct experience of British culture, you feel very confident in the classroom. When I talk about British culture, I feel it's easy and my students are very interested.

Lang Fangfang characterised her current teaching as more lively in relation to British culture, an observation with which many participants agreed:

In terms of teaching, ... it was very flat before, but now I feel it's very live or multidimensional. Here is a specific example: one unit in the textbook of Senior Two is about the British Isles. There is a map to go with the text. I had taught the unit before. Such a map is very flat even if it's downloaded from the internet, as it's very abstract even to myself. But after I stayed in the UK for three months, I can draw my own even with my eyes closed – piece of cake. Besides, when I taught that unit again, I tried to relate to culture and my own life experiences there. The students no longer found it boring; on the contrary, they felt it was very vivid.

As a result of studying and living for three months in the UK, some participants were able to reflect on their own culture and have developed a better awareness of the Chinese society and culture.

With their increased competencies in the English language, pedagogical practice and cultural awareness and understanding, the vast majority of the participants expressed a noticeable increase in self confidence in their professional life, which in many cases also seemed to have had a positive impact on their lives in general.

Constraints

The intellectual appreciation of the benefits of new approaches and new competencies, of course, can find itself in an uneasy tension with the structural demands of the workplace and, in particular, the examination system (Wu, 2001; Hu, 2005). The Gaokao or National College Entrance Examinations (NCEE) is widely recognised as a major obstacle against reform, particularly in the teaching of English. For many years, they have been characterised by multiple choice and blank filling, with a heavy emphasis on discrete-point knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and linguistic accuracy. Gradual transformation of the English test since the late 1990s has resulted in some lessening of pressure on teachers. However, this issue was identified by participants in our study as the greatest constraint on their ability to introduce innovation. As Wan Ling explained:

After being on the Reading programme, I feel I should emphasise communications more. But we are severely constrained by Gaokao –

teaching in China revolves round Gaokao, just like a conductor's baton. [For example,] if listening is not tested on Gaokao and we ask our students to practise listening and speaking every day, they don't want to do it. And their parents wouldn't be happy for us to do it that way either. So if we don't get good exam results, we won't be accepted by society. So we feel a bit confused sometimes.

Not all former participants, however, felt as negative. Many reported success in implementing the new ideas, methods and techniques, even at Senior Three when the pressure of examinations was looming. Han Ding, for instance, describes his use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in large classes in the following terms:

I demonstrated it in the class I just taught [referring to the lesson the researchers had observed slightly earlier]. Group work, ... pair work... I demonstrated all these to you... I think CLT is possible in large classes... [Some asked] can you still use CLT at Senior Three? I said why not? The essence of it is encouraging students to communicate and interact.

Other examples of new approaches being used with older students included techniques for motivating students and, for responding to writing and the use of activities during exam revision. Significantly, these initiatives did not involve blindly copying what they had learned; instead, they were integrated into current practices.

New leadership responsibilities

Participants have assumed a wide range of responsibilities since their return, with significant numbers becoming subject leaders, research project leaders, heads of department, key teachers, mentors for young teachers or leading figures in local English Associations; many have received awards in competitions for teachers at provincial, municipal and district levels. There is evidence that they have been a driving force in teaching reform, research and school management and development; they have also played an important role in teachers' professional development through various kinds of cascade training.

Cascade training

It should be acknowledged at the outset that the cascade model is by no means unproblematic: when those involved in the delivery of the training are not sufficiently experienced or have not yet achieved a full understanding of the relevant issues, their ability to replicate course content is inevitably limited and complex concepts can be reduced to overly simplistic dichotomies (Chisolm, 2004). However, given the urgency of the modernisation project, it is not surprising that the stakeholders – the CSC, the

local education authorities and individual schools – should expect that returning participants cascade the learning which has taken place in the UK.

School-based CPD in China has a long and respectable history (Lo, 1984). There is a strong tradition of sharing and collaboration, with teachers organised into teaching research groups composed either of all the teachers of a given subject in the school, or a sub-group of all the teachers of a subject for a given year group. Members of a teaching research group share a common workspace or room where teachers do their marking, discuss their teaching and their students and undertake collective curriculum and lesson planning. Observation of lessons is another common activity. Lessons take three forms: ordinary, demonstration and competition, and teachers are required to undertake a set number of observations. Teachers also present end of semester reports at group meetings where members reflect on aspects of their teaching. As Hu (2002: 681) points out, activities of this sort represent ‘a form of continuous, job-embedded professional development’. The receptiveness of teachers in Chinese schools, then, to the passing on of knowledge, skills and strategies is far greater than might be the case in many other settings.

Examples of many of the activities discussed above were offered by returning teachers. Sun Lian, for instance, commented: ‘I have always thought that a teacher should be good at reflecting on and reviewing their own teaching, not just simply be a teaching technician... We... should reflect, and also guide other teachers to reflect’. In a similar vein, Shen Na explained:

Every time we had a teaching and research activity, I would have a focussed topic. I would give out the University of Reading handouts to my colleagues and then we would discuss as a group their relevance for our own situation. We now have a teaching group, or a feedback group... I give about two public lessons every month... After the lessons, I explain what the theories are behind what I've done, and then my colleagues offer their comments and opinions.

Teachers who had not participated in the Reading programme confirmed that they had benefitted from their colleagues’ overseas-based CPD. Based on the lessons they had observed participants delivering on their return, they commented on their breadth of vision, confidence and the benefits of exposure to authentic language and culture. Such comments were offered in the context of their own desire to break out of the professional rut in which they found themselves. Ms Wu expressed her frustrations thus:

Our current teaching... is executed step by step based on what we have preplanned, very routinised.

So what is pressing for me is wanting to develop a new way of thinking, or a new model. At the end of the day there need to be changes for things, including language teaching. So I really need some new information, particularly from overseas. So far we have only been following local perspectives ...

The cascade training was not, however, limited to participants’ immediate colleagues. Participants drove and actively participated in various CPD activities beyond their own school. Considerable numbers had been involved in programmes for key teachers of English, organised by provincial, municipal and district level education authorities. In their role as leading members of local professional associations, many were also involved in CPD activities at county or township level, such as the ‘Bring-lessons-to-rural schools’ programme conducted by the Huanghuagang English Association.

It would seem, however, that the extent of this involvement was variable. Zhang Shengli, for instance, commented that, although she had benefitted in terms of her own professional development, she had reservations about the extent of her influence. Several participants expressed a strong desire for more organised follow-up activities which would ensure more effective circulation of knowledge, including workshops, and the formation of an association where returnee teachers could pool ideas and experiences.

Research

Reflections from a number of the participants confirmed the growing interest in empirical and action research which has previously been flagged by writers such as Hu (2002). Several had been involved in research projects on teaching reform before they went to the UK and had used the experience of their study abroad as a platform for research activities upon return. Some, for instance, have been actively involved in investigating the reform and practice of English language teaching in rural areas of Shaanxi province. Li Hongyan, a teacher trainer based at an Institute of Education, had identified various obstacles to the implementation of the 2005 curriculum standards and ways of helping teachers in rural areas by applying the theoretical understandings acquired during training. Sun Danye, for her part, had been involved in action research in her own school:

When I was studying there [at Reading]... my school was in the very early stages of exploring [project work], but there was a wide interest. At that time... I had no idea how to do it. During my study there [at Reading], ... the handouts suddenly gave me a lot of ideas... I felt, ah, project work is like this. When I came back, I mobilised all the [year groups] to participate in the projects in English...

Leadership roles

Participants also identified personal gains associated with successful completion of the course: several had been promoted to leadership roles including head of department and deputy director of studies. They were therefore able to play a more important role in curriculum decisions such as the setting of teaching objectives and the adaptation of materials, as well as in the collective planning of lessons. They were also able to organise and drive teaching and research activities, research groups, teaching competitions and English contests. Some were also able to make a significant contribution to the international dimension in the work of their school. The following accounts offered by head teachers on the value-added dimension of teachers on their return were typical:

Zhang Dazhi was an ordinary teacher when he went to Britain. But now he is the Head of our English Department. Sun Lian was already our Head of English Department when he went. But his experience of study in the UK, particularly the broadening of his international perspective, has been very useful... Since he came back, in addition to being outstanding in his own teaching, he has had more responsibility for educational research at our school and, more importantly, he has been invited to be a supervisor for Masters students at Sichuan Normal University. These are clear examples of the changes and the progress they have made since their return.

Ms Liang was sent out in 2006. When she returned from her three months' training, the school had clear and high expectations of her. First of all, from the perspective of management, when we had a reshuffle of our administrative team, we asked her to join the team. She is now the Deputy Director of Studies at our Dufu Campus... She is mainly responsible for the management of Senior One and Senior Two.

Impact on students

Teachers' own reflections, the comments of senior management and colleagues who have not participated in the Reading programme and our own classroom observation all attest to the impact of the overseas-based CPD on participants' classroom practices and professional development. Assessing the impact of this experience on students, however, is more difficult. As Goodall et al. (2006) point out: 'The vast majority of evaluation practice remains at the level of participant reaction and learning.

The impact on student learning is rarely evaluated and if done so, is rarely executed very effectively or well'. Our own study is no exception to this general trend: we would have required considerably more time and resources to investigate this issue. We were, however, able to collect indirect evidence of the positive effects on students.

Teachers offered many examples of students having been both impressed and motivated by the fact that they had spent time in the UK. Li Mei, for instance, reported that her teaching was now considered more authentic, citing the student who had observed: 'I could never have imagined that this lady with an Oriental face could teach us in this very westernised style!' The most frequent argument advanced by teachers for the effectiveness of their CPD, however, was improved examination results and performance in student competitions. The following comments were typical:

In our school, we have targets for first tier and second tier of the top universities. All 51 students in my top set were accepted by top universities ... For the next set, I had 22 more accepted than the target. If you want a typical example, take Liang Li in the top set. His parents said his best score in English before was 74 [out of 150]. He was in my Senior Two class when I took over. I applied the philosophies and ideas I learnt at Reading... He got 116 on the national university entrance exam and was accepted by Nankai University [one of the top universities in China].

When I came back, I organised my students to participate in the English Skills Competition of Guizhou province and all the top three prizes in Zunyi were in my class.

While teacher reports do not constitute reliable evidence of a positive impact on student outcomes, they do, of course, indicate perceptions that this is the case. It is also interesting to mention that, during the fieldwork, when we invited their comments on the 'indirect' influence on students, some participants corrected, insisting that they were reporting the 'direct' impact on their students.

5

Lessons to be learned

Our aim in this study was to move beyond the routine end of course evaluations to take a critical look at the actual impact of our courses on teachers' return to China. Based on our reading of the literature on CPD for teachers, we had been conscious that teachers might fail to see the relevance of our courses for their work (Guskey, 2000; Yan, 2008). In addition, where teacher educators and teachers work at 'cultural boundaries' (Roberts, 1998: 3), as is the case in any partnership between overseas providers and Chinese clients, there is a real danger that providers are constrained by their inability to see beyond the prism of their own experience. When we embarked upon this study, we were very mindful of the possible gap between our aspirations and the expectations of the teachers following the programme. In the event, our fears were unfounded. There was no evidence, for instance, of the teacher apathy or resistance widely documented in previous investigations of CPD (Guskey, 2000). Although the momentum for the programme was top down, participants were still enthusiastic about their experience up to seven years after their return. Non-participating colleagues also expressed a strong desire to broaden their outlook through similar programmes.

Our attempts to assess the impact of the programme can be summarised in two parts: first, in relation to individual teachers; second, in relation to colleagues in their own and other schools. On an individual level, participants' philosophies of life and learning had undergone significant change. They demonstrated a heightened awareness of the central role of students in teaching and learning. Their linguistic skills and ability to design and conduct lessons, and their cultural awareness and insight had improved significantly. As is often the case with effective CPD, their confidence had increased considerably and, consequently, they perceived their teaching to be more effective. These perceptions were confirmed by colleagues and the senior management of their schools and validated both by provincial and, occasionally, national rewards and by outstanding performances on the part of some of their students. Also, on the level of the individual, many of the returning teachers have now joined the senior management team, and are actively involved in the reform of teaching in their schools.

Perhaps one of the most surprising findings of our study was the enormous impact of the one-week school placement on participants: a large proportion of the reflections offered in interviews and focus group discussion referred to what they had observed in schools. The importance of the placement can no doubt be explained in terms of the opportunities it offered for situated learning, allowing teachers to make links between the content of their university-based learning and actual classroom practice. Our own experience then, reinforces the conclusion of Yan (2008: 597) and other writers that 'successful innovation depends on the generation of realistically grounded knowledge relating to specific social, political and cultural contexts'.

The other evidence of impact related to work with colleagues: disseminating effects were felt both within the participants' own school and beyond. Predictably, participants were able to play an important role in English language teaching in their own schools through mentoring or encouraging less experienced colleagues and leading teaching and research activities. Although overdependence on such shared learning can be problematic, the highly collaborative teaching culture within Chinese schools has provided fertile ground for new ideas. But participants have also been able to pass on their learning beyond their own schools, for example, through teacher training or other teaching and research activities at the municipal, provincial or even national levels. They clearly have a mission: by integrating new perspectives and techniques in their own practices, they see themselves as helping to implement the new curriculum in the western region.

This enthusiasm should not, of course, be taken to imply that teachers accepted new ideas uncritically. Nor would we wish to suggest that implementation of new approaches is unproblematic, particularly in an examination-driven education system where assessment has not kept pace with curriculum reform. Significantly, the common thread running through the experience of many participants, and reflecting the imperatives of the new curriculum, was the desire to integrate more recent international developments with more traditional practices. Of course, the extent to which returnees are influencing English language teaching is variable.

We acknowledge that those offering accounts of their practice are likely to give the best possible gloss on their achievements. The picture which emerges is, however, consistent: the overseas-based CPD has, directly and indirectly, made an impact on the practice of large numbers of teachers in schools in western China.

We are also very conscious that, while the data collected through interviews, focus groups and observation present a consistent and persuasive picture of the impact on actual teacher practice, assessments of the impact on student outcomes is well beyond the scope of the present study. The perceptions of participating and non-participating teachers, as well as head teachers and senior management, are that returnees are making a real difference in terms of student performance. It should be stressed, however, that these observations are impressionistic rather than objective; the measurement of student outcomes is a highly complex issue, especially when curriculum and assessment may be out of step.

The recognition of English as an essential element in the modernisation of China, together with the growing awareness of the weaknesses of traditional approaches to the teaching of the language has opened up new spaces for dialogue concerning pedagogy and professional practice. It is clearly important, however, that new approaches to the teaching of English are presented in a way which allows teachers to decide which elements should be incorporated into their teaching and how. The role of research in this process should not be underestimated. As Zheng and Davison (2008: 180) point out:

Most teaching programmes attach great attention to transmitting subject matter knowledge to teachers ... In future, training programmes should include more information about the latest pedagogic innovation and change and academic research both inside and outside China in order to help teachers to carry out more action research-based study so that they can explore their pedagogic spaces and reflect their beliefs and practices.

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