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Training Training-Room Skills

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TRAINING TRAINING-ROOM SKILLS

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Introduction

A process-oriented approach to training teachers in ELT teaching methods is nowadays commonplace. To operate such an approach, the teacher trainer needs to be able to handle the skills involved in, *inter alia*, introducing a teacher training session, conducting awareness-raising, providing input, setting up, monitoring and rounding off small-group activities, feeding back on participants' ideas and concluding the session. In other words, just as the ELT teacher needs to master a repertoire of classroom skills for handling ELT activities, so the teacher trainer needs to acquire a knowledge of the training-room skills involved in such teacher training procedures

Both classroom language teaching and training-room teacher training can be seen as consisting of parallel sets of facilitating skills, of course, and at this level of analysis there is thus an underlying potential for transfer from one to the other, a point which we will return to later. However, training room skills also differ significantly from classroom skills in terms of a) the subject-matter involved (i.e., language teaching vs. language itself) and b) the nature of the audience (i.e., teachers vs. learners). In our experience, thus, there is usually a need for trainers to be oriented to training room skills, just as teachers need to be introduced to classroom teaching skills.

What are the skills in question, however, and how might trainers be helped to begin to acquire them? There is no shortage of guidance in the teacher training literature about how to put a process-oriented teacher training approach into practice, in the form of examples of activities and advice about procedures (see, e.g., Doff (1988), Ellis (1990), Wallace (1991), Woodward (1991, 1992), Parrott (1993), Tanner and Green (1998)). Nevertheless, there does not appear to be a readily-accessible taxonomy of the skills involved, of a kind that might guide the selection of content for this aspect of a trainer training programme. Likewise, in the trainer training literature, there do not appear to be any accounts of how to train teacher trainers in such skills. McGrath (1997) contains many important trainer training papers, but none directly concerned with this aspect. Malderez and Bodoczky (1999) also provides valuable guidance about trainer training, but its focus is mainly on the skills involved in school-based teaching practice observation and follow-up counselling, rather than training-room-based skills.

This article therefore attempts to throw some light on how teacher trainers can be trained to handle the training-room skills aspect of putting a process-based approach to ELT methodology training into practice, by describing a course which was designed for this purpose, as part of an ELT development project. The training situation is first of all outlined, and then the nature of the content and training methods used in the trainer training course are presented.

The training situation

The context of the course was the Philippines English Language Teaching (PELT) Project, during its externally-funded phase, from 1995 - 1999. The focus of this project is

on up-dating the teaching methods of state-sector, secondary school English teachers in 7 out of the 13 educational regions of the Philippines.

The project teacher training programme is made up of two main components: a two-week "seminar" (course), and a closely-related School-based Follow-up Development Activity (SFDA) (see Waters and Vilches, 2000). The seminar is delivered by PELT Project trainers, whereas the SFDA is monitored and supported mainly by school ELT managers (heads of department, etc.). We concentrate here on the preparation of the trainers for handling the seminar part of the programme.

This teacher training seminar consists of a series of six main teacher training sessions, the first five of which are concerned with providing training in a number of aspects of ELT methodology, such as the teaching of grammar. For each session there are teacher training materials and a session outline, consisting of notes for the trainer on the main stages of the session, their aims, the associated activities, the approximate timings and so on.

All these sessions have a similar basic structure. They begin with an "awareness-raising" stage, concerned with drawing out participants' ideas about the area of teaching in question; this is followed by a concept-building phase, in which additional ideas are introduced, illustrated and/or tried out, and critically evaluated; in the next phase, participants attempt to apply the ideas for themselves; in the following phase, the results are presented and evaluated; and the session ends with an overall, wrap-up stage.

Thus, for example, the main stages for the session on the teaching of grammar are as follows:

Stage 1: Awareness-raising (plenary/small groups)

The session is briefly introduced, and then participants are given a sample lesson, embodying the prevailing local grammar teaching approach[1]. In small groups, they analyse it in terms of its advantages and disadvantages and discuss the results with the trainer.

Stage 2: Concept-building (plenary)

The trainer provides a short input on alternative criteria for designing grammar lessons, derived from recent thinking and practice about grammar teaching.

Stage3: Analysis & evaluation (plenary/small groups)

Participants are given another sample grammar teaching lesson[2], based on the criteria just outlined, which they analyse and evaluate in small groups in order to identify the

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[1] A transcript of an actual lesson, which was observed during the teacher training seminar design process, is used for this purpose.
[2] This lesson is taken from an existing, alternative local ELT textbook.

underlying principles and practical procedures involved.   The results are then discussed in plenary with the trainer.

Stage 4: Application (small groups)

In small groups, participants design grammar lessons of their own, in the light of the preceding examples and discussions, monitored and supported as necessary by the trainers.

Stage 5: Presentation and Feedback (plenary)

Participants present their ideas to and receive feedback from each other, and the trainer.

Stage 6: Wrap-up (plenary)

The trainer conducts a brief round-up, in order to integrate the various main learning points which have emerged in the course of the session as a whole.

Towards a taxonomy of training-room skills

The majority of the teacher trainers who were selected to conduct training sessions of this kind were English language teachers who had had very little (if any) previous experience of being trainers. Thus, in order to orient them, a project trainer training programme was devised. The preparation the trainers underwent via this programme consisted of the following main stages:

a) as trainees, experiencing the project teacher training seminar;
b) as trainees, trying out the teacher training seminar ideas within their own teaching situations;
c) as trainers, adding to their knowledge of the seminar content;
d) as trainers, gaining experience in handling the seminar training methods.

It is the fourth of these aspects of the trainer training programme which is the focus of what follows.

In order to determine the content of this part of the trainer training programme, we analysed the teacher training seminar sessions (such as the one outlined above) in order to identify the kinds of training room skills involved. This was done first of all in terms of main skill areas, and then, for each area, in terms of the composite sub-skills. Thus, as shown in Fig. 1 below, for the main skill area of "questioning", the sub-skills identified begin with those related to preparing and choosing questions (nos. 1. – 6.) and then move on to those related to question delivery (nos. 7. – 9.), and finally to dealing with interactive aspects of questioning (nos. 10. – 13.).

A. QUESTIONING

1. planning the questions to be asked
2. writing out the key questions
3. wording questions appropriately
4. asking concise and specific questions
5. using participants' existing knowledge
6. asking relevant questions
7. asking questions in a logical order
8. varying the manner of asking questions
9. asking questions in a non-threatening manner
10. allowing enough time for participants to think
11. rephrasing questions for clarification
12. following-up on participants ' answers
13. acknowledging the participants and their answers

Fig. 1 <u>A training-room skill area and its related sub-skills</u>

<u>Appendix A</u> below contains our full list of main and sub-skills. The seven main areas into which this list is divided can be mapped on to the seminar session example outlined earlier, as follows:

- Questioning skills are needed right from the outset, in order to elicit participants' views about the sample lessons (i.e., in Stages 1 and 3[3]), and, potentially, throughout the rest of the session whenever there is a need to check understanding, probe ideas further, seek clarification and so on.

- Provision of input (Stage 2) obviously needs to begin with thorough planning and rehearsal, thus the inclusion of the skills in part B of the list. However, the actual delivery of the input itself requires additional skills, thus the related set included in part C of the taxonomy.

- Parts D - F of the list concern the wide range of skills involved in successfully managing the mainly small-group and task-based approach which most of the rest of the session (Stages 4 - 5) involves. Thus, these three sets of skills are intended to help the trainers make sure they can successfully set up, monitor and deal with the processing of outcomes of teacher training activities of this kind.

- Finally, part G of the taxonomy deals with the main skills needed for the final, synthesising stage of the session (Stage 6).

<u>Training the skills</u>

Having established this taxonomy as the basis for the part of the trainer training programme in question, we proceeded to give our trainers practice in each of the sets of skills it contains, via a series of trainer training sessions focusing, firstly, on each of them in turn, and then later, on how to handle them in integrated combinations, via peer teacher

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[3] The numbers here refer to the session outline on p. 1 – 2 above.

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training practice using the target teacher training materials and activities for each of the seminar sessions[4]. The following example, concerning questioning skills, and illustrated in the form of the trainer training session outline, was typical of the first of these kinds of practice:

<div align="center">Questioning Skills[5]</div>

1. Questions in teacher training

In plenary, ask the trainers to think of reasons why it is important to ask questions in teacher training.

Try to elicit responses such as:

- to check understanding
- to involve participants
- to deepen understanding
- to discover what participants already know/don't know etc.
- to stimulate thinking (critical/creative/logical)
- to stimulate further questions on the part of the participants, etc.

Point out that, just as in ELT, questions have a very important role to play in the training process, so it is essential that trainers gain skill in handling them.

2. Characteristics of good questions

2.1 In small groups, get trainers to make questions for "Crossroads" teaching materials[6], as teachers.

2.2 Collect the sets of questions for later review and follow-up, as appropriate.

2.3 Plenary. Ask the trainers what they were trying to achieve/avoid when they framed their "Crossroads" questions. What are the characteristics of good questions? (i.e. how can we frame questions to do what we want them to do?)

Try to elicit answers such as:

- worded appropriately
- clearly-worded
- brief

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[4] An account of the procedures used for the second type of session is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.

[5] Please note that this session was concerned mainly with a) question-asking (vs. question-answering, which was dealt with in a later session), and b) the background thinking leading to the framing of questions (vs. the "nitty-gritty" of delivery, e.g. pace, tone of voice, etc., which were likewise dealt with in a separate session). There were approximately 60 trainers involved in the course. The session length was 2.5 hours.

[6] This was a unit of material which the participants had already used, but for a different purpose, when they had taken part as trainees in the Project teacher training seminar. This meant that they were using material that was reasonably similar to the kind actually used in the teacher training seminar they were being prepared to handle, but at the same time, because it was being used in a different way, their task was not simply an imitative one.

- not too complex
- probe/target anticipated areas of misunderstanding/difficulty
- help to clarify by referring back to more basic level
- ones you have thought about the answers to
- encourage thinking
- precise
- help participants/students to reason logically
- build on previous questions/existing understanding
- simple/basic to more complex/advanced
- pertinent
- not too taxing on memory, etc.

3. <u>Peer-training Task</u>

3.1 Form three groups, one in each corner of room, made up of "Hobbies" (A), "Food Intake" (B) and "Connectors"[7] (C) trainers respectively. Then subdivide further into an A1 and an A2 group, a B1 and a B2 group etc. Tell them to remember their group number.

3.2 Form 10 groups of 6, each made up of 1 member of each of the 6 groups (i.e., comprising 2 "Hobbies" trainers, 2 "Food Intake" trainers, and 2 "Connectors" trainers).

3.3 Explain that the trainers should imagine they have just finished giving input in the project teacher training seminar on the four parts of the Integrated Language Work (ILW) Model[8]. The participants (trainees) have been looking at all the three sets of materials in terms of identifying the parts of the model in them. Now they are going to check on the answers.

3.4 The A1's (i.e., "Hobbies") ask questions to check understanding by the B's and C's in their groups of their material in terms of the task (i.e., identifying the ILW components). The A2's act as observers, by writing down the questions asked by A1's. This process continues for 5 minutes.

3.5 Then the A2's share the questions with the rest of their groups, and the groups critically review them (5 minutes).

3.6 The process is then repeated, with B1's asking the questions for their material ("Food Intake"), the B2's writing down the questions, then the review, and so on. Then likewise for the C's.

3.7 Trainer trainers first of all demonstrate the activity, using just a few sample questions for part of one of the units of materials.

3.8 Check whether everything is clear by asking the trainers what they should do first, next etc., then have them begin.

3.9 Plenary follow-up discussion questions (after all of above completed):

- which kinds of Qs were easier to ask?

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[7] These are the names of units of materials which the participants had already used (see footnote 6 above).

[8] A theoretical framework for analysing the structure of units of teaching materials, which the trainers had been introduced to in the prior teacher training seminar.

- which kinds were more difficult? why?
- what further questions would you want to ask yourself about asking questions, in the light of this experience?

Fig. 2: Trainer training session on questioning skills

The purpose of part 1 of this session was to increase awareness about the importance and value of teacher trainers' questions, especially in terms of the variety of roles they can play.

Part 2 was intended to follow on from this by encouraging the participants to identify and reflect on some of the skills involved in good questioning, via consciousness-raising about what this aspect of ELT involves. It was decided to use ELT rather than teacher training questions for this purpose, as it was felt that, at this stage, participants would be able to frame appropriate questions more readily via an ELT-based frame of reference than a teacher training one. We also hoped that this approach would help the participants to see how they might carry over the principles of sound ELT practice to teacher training, and thus make them feel more confident about already possessing some of the expertise required for their future roles as teacher trainers.

In part 3, the participants take part in a simulation of a teacher training seminar session stage which involves a good deal of questioning by the "trainer". This activity was designed so as to provide practice opportunities for all the participants, via rotation of roles (see step 3.6 above), and deliberately takes place within the relatively sheltered context of a small group of peers, in order to boost confidence. A reflective element was also included, by the use of observers (see step 3.4) and the review process described in step 3.5.

Finally, a plenary round-up activity was conducted by the trainer trainers, in order to further re-inforce the main learning points of the session, trouble-shoot loose ends, and encourage further reflection and potential learning.

As already mentioned, a similar approach was used in order to provide training in each of the other main skill areas in Appendix A.   Feedback on the course was very positive, and the results of our observations of the trainers' performance in the teacher training seminars they have subsequently run, as well as the comments of the seminar participants, have likewise been very encouraging (Vilches, 2001).

Conclusion

In this article, we have tried to shed some light on the design of the training-room skills element in ELT trainer training programmes. We feel that the taxonomy of skills that we have devised as a by-product of this process is a reasonably generic one, given the current widespread use of teacher training procedures of the kind that it relates to. We therefore hope that such an inventory will be of value to others working in parallel situations

elsewhere. We also hope that the example we have provided of a set of activities for training teacher trainers in these skills will be useful in a similar way.

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Bio-data

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APPENDIX

<u>A taxonomy of training-room skills</u>[9]

A. QUESTIONING

1. planning the questions to be asked
2. writing out the key questions
3. wording questions appropriately
4. asking concise and specific questions
5. using participants' existing knowledge
6. asking relevant questions
7. asking questions in a logical order
8. varying the manner of asking questions
9. asking questions in a non-threatening manner
10. allowing enough time for participants to think
11. rephrasing questions for clarification
12. following-up on participants ' answers
13. acknowledging the participants and their answers

B. PREPARATION AND DELIVERY

1. gaining sufficient understanding of the topic
2. preparing notes
3. practising or rehearsing
4. recording oneself
5. getting feedback from others
6. making sure one can be seen by the participants
7. speaking in a clear and well-modulated voice
8. maintaining eye contact
9. using natural and communicative gestures

C. PROVIDING INPUT

1. stating the objectives and/or focus of the session
2. using visuals and other aids appropriately
3. using handouts appropriately
4. using appropriate language (not too technical)
5. including only essential information

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[9] In addition to guiding the selection of content for this part of the trainer training programme, this list was given to the trainers at the end of the course for post-programme self-development purposes.   This was done by attaching a grid to the list, and asking the trainers to rate themselves from time to time in terms of each of the items in the inventory, according to the following categories:

- I can do this well; it comes naturally
- I try to do this, but I need more practice
- I can't do this yet, but I want to try
- I don't think this is necessary.

Space was also left in the grid for them to add in further skills or guidelines of their own which they felt were also important.

6. presenting points in a logical order
7. giving examples to concretise ideas
8. using humour, anecdotes and analogies to clarify and enliven the ideas
9. linking ideas constantly
10. repeating and reinforcing the main points
11. closing clearly with a re-iteration of the focus of the session

D. SETTING UP TASKS

1. dividing instructions into stages
2. checking that participants are following as instructions are given
3. supporting instructions with demonstrations or gestures when possible
4. speaking loudly and distinctly enough to be heard & understood by all
5. using simple, direct statements for instructions
6. writing instructions legibly on the board
7. noting time limit of task
8. checking if participants understand the task before asking them to begin it
9. giving signal for participants to start the task

E. MONITORING GROUP WORK

1. making sure that group members know their roles
2. giving groups time to work before checking on them
3. checking on the progress of work
4. asking questions to guide the group's understanding of the task
5. asking questions to help the group improve the quality of its work
6. giving approximately equal time to each group
7. noting the pace of the groups and adjusting time if necessary

F. PROCESSING GROUP PRESENTATIONS AND OUTPUT

1. making sure that presenters can be seen and heard
2. listening attentively to the presentation
3. taking down notes about the group output
4. planning the discussion strategy as the group presents
5. keeping to one's chosen structure for discussion during the feedback session
6. using one's notes only as a guide during the discussion
7. asking questions to elicit the participants ' comments
8. getting the participants to make the evaluation
9. making the participants give reasons and details to support their views
10. summarising the participants ' comments
11. re-emphasising the main focus of the session or topic

G. PLENARY ROUND-UP AND CLOSING

1. eliciting participants' insights and learning
2. synthesising participants' ideas
3. relating participants' ideas to the session focus or topic

3562 words