

The Education of Language Teachers in East Asia

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Bio Data

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Abstract

This article looks at the education of English language teachers in the Asian context and stresses the reasons why there's a need for all second language teachers to be properly educated in a professional and reflective manner in order to increase the respect accorded to our profession. In this era of second language teaching, it is essential that in any training course for teachers there is a strong concentration on reflective practice and language awareness as a means of meeting 'local' needs, demands and expectations. The training course must be context sensitive, realistic in its objectives from the outset and supported by a coherent rationale that draws on theoretical influences and practical examples of second language teaching. These days there are so many teacher training courses that it's difficult for teachers to pick their way "through the mass of accumulated information, opinion and conflicting advice; to make sense of the vast literature, and to distinguish between solid truth and ephemeral fads or plain misinformation" (Stern 1983, p. 1-2). In the Asian context, where this author is working, this confusion over the value of courses has led to a lack of proper training procedures within the EFL industry. Now is the time to focus on how teachers should be trained in this context.

Introduction and Context

In earlier literature, it was often assumed that methodologies underpinning the provision of English Language Teaching in eastern Asian countries such as Korea and China were dichotomous, with western ideas of autonomy and communicative language teaching standing in binary opposition to traditional, Confucian influenced notions of education. However, a new strain of thought, promulgated in literature such as Littlewood (2000), Ha (2004) and Chang and Beaumont (2004) suggests that less divisive approaches can be pursued by adopting more patient, bottom-up approaches that are both context sensitive and

guided by belief in the benefits of persuasion over imperialistic forms of direct imposition.

The search for these bottom-up solutions, shaped by the twin pillars of patience and persuasion, must begin in the classroom and, in my opinion, this is why east Asia requires competent and reflective teachers in every classroom. In Korea, for example, this needs to happen regardless of the split between “government education and the free market private education system” as described in Robertson (2002). A crucial feature of the Korean milieu which sets it apart from other east Asian countries is the competitive, exam oriented nature of its society, heavily shaped by Confucian ideals, as detailed by Robertson, perhaps with echoes of the Chinese situation in Hu (2002) and discussed in the broader Asian context in Chang & Beaumont (2004).

However, Korea’s emphasis on education is often betrayed by inconsistent recruitment practices on the ground, as may also be the case in Japan and other east Asian countries. This is an area of concern that must be addressed in unison with the implementation of proper teacher preparation programmes, based more on practice than simply theories. Firstly there has to be a massive shift in the common contemporary myth that any English native speaker has the capacity to be an effective language teacher. Indeed, in the academic literature on teacher education, Britten (1985) offers the suggestion that the selection of suitable trainees is as important as the content of the training itself and Robinett (1977) speaks of selecting “those already best endowed with the desired qualities” because, in the words of Strevens (1974) “not every human being would make an adequate teacher, let alone a good one.”

In my opinion, the best way forward for Korea and east Asia in general is an acceptance of “a philosophy of (*EFL*) teaching as profession”, as espoused in Pennington (1990, p. 134) and to compel all new teaching recruits to complete a short term developmental training programme which will provide a coherent practical methodology overtly linked to a clear theoretical rationale, based on the reflective model of teacher training as outlined in Wallace (1991) and shaped by activities and procedures taken from Ellis (1986).

Simultaneously, this course will serve as a basic orientation to the country's educational, cultural and social milieu because, in the words of Britten (1985), "an important consideration in drawing up training goals is the cultural relativity of teaching models" and this notion of cultural relativity is inextricably linked to issues of context sensitivity which have been recurring themes in Asian EFL literature over the past decade from the Thai-based work of Ellis (1995) and Adamson (2003) to Chew's (2005) ethnographic study of the rise and fall of CLT in Singapore and in the more mainstream literature of Hu (2002) and Ha (2004) in their work on China and Vietnam respectively.

The Trainers and the Trainees

Ideally, as the content and processes used in teacher training programmes should be based upon a system of continuous reflection and use active rather than passive means of teacher education, in terms of trainee involvement and participation, all candidates should possess qualities and attributes conducive to this type of education and training. However, it is equally important that any course is based on realistic expectations. Thus, on the basis of current statistics, a majority of the teacher trainees here in Korea and in the broader context of east Asia are likely to be recent college graduates, from North America, Oceania and the British Isles, in their middle twenties with no professional teaching qualifications, often more interested in life experience than long-term career satisfaction.

Some participants, such as those taking up university positions, will have gained Masters Degrees in ELT, but current evidence does suggest that they will be in the minority. As a consequence of this, the reflective processes and activities and procedures used in courses must be adapted to meet the needs and inexperience of these particular trainees because, as in Sharkova (1996), "if the trainee student does not have the necessary theoretical knowledge and has not received efficient training in classroom skills and competencies, reflection becomes shallow and superficial."

Of course, a lack of teaching qualifications on the part of the trainees does not dilute in any way the serious intention of preparing teachers to meet the

high expectations of the EFL classroom. As all teacher training courses are striving to create an image of professionalism, they should follow modes of teaching and learning in Higher Education, as referred to in Wallace (1991, p. 44-47). All trainers must be suitably qualified in English teaching and have relevant experience of living and working abroad, so as to use their experiences and socio-cultural awareness as part of the reflective process at the heart of teacher preparation programmes.

Aside from this, teacher trainers ought to be versatile, constructive and motivated individuals who have professional experience of teacher observation, assessment, language awareness workshops and the type of activities and procedures used in a range of teaching methodologies, which can be suitably adapted to meet the needs of L2 teacher rather than L2 student education. They should also be aware of the contemporary professional debate on using western style communicative approaches to teaching in a manner that is context sensitive and open to adaptation. Within their training, there should be room for debate and discussion on the cultural appropriateness of CLT in an Asian context. In the past, teacher education courses have stressed the virtual omnipotence of the communicative approach but, in the Asian context, it does not always appear to work effectively in its undiluted form, as evidenced by a wide body of quantitatively based literature and my own qualitative judgements. Indeed, teachers must be taught to avoid falling into the trap of being doctrinaire in their approaches to CLT and find a more creative means of marrying its benefits into a style of teaching better suited to the local context. What I am essentially saying is that trainees must be made to understand that a rigid implementation of the communicative approach offers no magic formula in itself but this approach does provide a fertile source of activities and procedures that are readily open to adaptation.

Finally, trainees should have extensive knowledge of language teaching methodologies so that they can promulgate aims and values of various traditions and methods and then allow trainees to reflect on their own teaching style in the light of this. Above all, they should be able to adapt contemporary teacher training theory to meet the specific needs of this training

context. For example, on a teacher preparation programme that I have designed, the trainer will be expected to make trainees aware of O'Brien's (1981) E-R-O-T-I model by active and analytical engagement in each stage of the process and to draw on Woodward's (1988, 1991) concept of *loop input*, such as using task-based activities to highlight their function in the EFL classroom. An example of what is meant by *loop input* could be the use of multimedia demonstrations to show trainee teachers how to use Computers and Video in the language classroom.

The Target Teaching Situation

In the design of this course it is important to remember that the target teaching situation is the east Asian classroom and that, in the words of Chang and Beaumont (2004) "developments in the English language classroom cannot be divorced from the educational context in which they occur, nor can education be viewed in isolation from the surrounding socio-cultural milieu." Therefore, in my opinion, the important factor, regardless of L2 student age/level or the nature of the educational provider, is that trainees have to be prepared for teaching in Asia.

Although there are a vast range of courses and institutions in the east Asian context, the same underlying principles of reflection and context sensitivity can be applied to any age level or teaching situation once the trainee acquires a grasp of such concepts as professionalism, the need for continuous professional development, a high level of language awareness, time management, preparation and planning, informed decision making, the use of appropriate teaching methodologies, employing a wide range of pedagogically sound activities and procedures in the EFL classroom, showing sensitivity to different learning styles and understanding how socio-cultural influences impact on the L2 classroom. Certainly there are fundamental differences in teaching businessmen in Japan and infants in a Korean kindergarten but the core values and responsibilities of the teacher essentially remain the same in every conceivable context.

Need for a clear rationale

Wallace (1991, p. 92) makes the assertion that “every course should have a rationale” which he then describes as “a reasoned explanation of what kind of course it is and why it has been designed in the way that it has” and further stresses the point that “it is also important to specify the training and educational philosophy underpinning the course.” This clarity of philosophy and focus is vital in the Asian context, which finds itself at a crossroads in its ELT history. Furthermore, in light of the connection between education and the broader socio cultural milieu, as referred to in Chang and Beaumont (2004), Strevens (1974) asserts that in order to provide general professional training for educators and teachers, a course should primarily “guide the trainee towards an understanding of the nature of education in relation to the individual and society.”

In this context, the latter assertion is a challenging prospect and this is why preparation programmes should be based on the following objectives.

- To set valid and realistic training goals from the outset and not to merely implement change for the sake of change; thus designing a course appropriate for and beneficial to the host country’s own traditional education system.
- To provide professional training based on the Reflective Model outlined in Wallace (1991), drawing influence from activities and procedures found in Ellis (1986) and “to provide trainees with the knowledge, the skills, and the competencies they will need to perform well at the workplace”, as stated in Sharkova (1996).
- To connect this training to language learning methodologies appropriate for the context as stipulated by Adamson (2003) who speaks of the need to inform teachers of realities about the whole educational system in which they are to operate in.

- To adopt a holistic approach to teacher development, as in Britten (1985, p. 113); to recognise “the need for the development of personal qualities of creativity, judgement and adaptability” and to reflect on the nature of language teaching, as discussed in Strevens (1974) and Freeman and Richards (1993, p. 193) and to use this as a means of eliciting the importance of language awareness from the trainees.
- To give trainees experience of teaching, using a process of progression from skill-specific micro lessons to the teaching of longer lesson segments, using the three features referred to in Britten (1985), namely a skills approach, a scaled down practice situation and, crucially, maximum relevant feedback. Furthermore, to incorporate continuous reflection into this practice teaching, so as to assist “the developing teacher’s path toward becoming an expert teacher” (Lange 1990, p. 240-250) and create an image of “teaching as profession” (Pennington 1990, p. 134) thereby bringing a cessation to a situation where many poorly trained recruits are being forced into “a baptism of fire” (Britten, 1985) in an east Asian classroom.
- Crucially, to lead trainees towards an acceptance of the need to strengthen formal knowledge of English grammar, vocabulary and phonetics, through work on language awareness, as espoused by Strevens (1974), Wright & Bolitho (1993) and Britten (1985) who speaks of teaching “new skills of language awareness and of adjustment to the learner’s level.”
- To instil in trainees a full, experiential knowledge of the fundamental importance of thorough lesson planning at all times, as promulgated by Strevens (1974) and Britten (1985) who also stresses the evaluation and correctional aspects of language teaching.
- Finally, to help professionalize east Asia’s ELT industry as a whole; to standardize the approaches taken and the methodologies used in EFL teaching, and to adopt a bottom-up, patient approach to changes that are necessary for the benefit of L2 education in Korea.

From theory to practice

In terms of the literature, there are two accepted frameworks for thinking about the process of teacher training namely Ellis's (1986) 'Activities and Procedures for Teacher Training' and Wallace's (1991) 'Modes of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.' At the core of both frameworks are similarities with contemporary language learning methodologies and the training programme has drawn on influences from each party, alongside activities taken from Parrott (1993). This course falls into Freeman's (1985, 1986) assertion of what is needed, specifically "an understanding on two levels: a view of what language teaching is and a view of how to educate individuals in such teaching."

On most teacher preparation programmes, trainees will more than likely start out with limited knowledge of the local cultural and educational milieu or professional practice in teaching English as a Foreign Language. However, it is my belief that they can make a successful progression from the simulated world of the training programme, even in a relatively short space of time. They will achieve this through the process of Experience, Rationale, Observation, Trial and Integration, as detailed in O'Brien's 1981 E-R-O-T-I model and by being immersed in a continuous process of reflection upon received and experiential knowledge through the application of the procedures and strategies contextually adapted from Ellis (1986), Woodward (1988, 1991), Wallace (1991) and Parrott (1993).

At the outset of any course, trainees should have an introduction to the Asian milieu, using methodologies, practices and activities which parallel those used in the EFL classroom and will be required to adopt a reflective perspective from the outset. This will serve as a base for considering the type of teaching appropriate in this context and as the course progresses, they will be fed more detailed information about methodologies and activities used in contemporary language teaching.

Simultaneously, rather than chronologically, they will be led/guided towards analytical knowledge and reflection upon what they already know about teaching, learning and second language acquisition, before being shown models

of language and teaching situations as a form of gradual exposure to the realities of teaching in a simulated environment, as in Ellis (1986).

The content of any good preparation programme, such as the Cambridge CELTA for example, should also pay particular attention to language awareness, in the sense of giving native speaking trainees a better theoretical knowledge of teaching and using language in the east Asian classroom, in line with Wright and Bolitho's (1993) assertion that "the more aware a teacher is of language and how it works, the better". They add that "once a teacher is secure in their grasp of the language it clears the way for better practice in other key areas of "preparing lessons, evaluating, adapting and writing materials, understanding, interpreting and ultimately designing a syllabus or curriculum: testing and assessing learners' performance, and contributing to English language work across the curriculum" (1993).

This is a view shared in earlier literature by Strevens (1974), Geiger (1981), Ellis (1986) and Edge (1988). However, in considering the language awareness aspect of the course I am aware that there is a contemporary trend to "downplay the importance of explicit knowledge about language, and .. place considerable trust in the native speakers' implicit knowledge" as stated in Ferguson and Donno (2003, p. 29) who also suggest that current EFL training courses are often criticised for not helping teachers towards "mastery of a body of distinct, specialised knowledge" (2003, p. 29). The language aspect of this programme therefore aims to strike a sensible balance in keeping with Strevens' (1974) assertion that training goals must be "realistic and valid" but also striving for a level of professional competence that one would expect to find in a training course for any other serious profession.

The end results

By the end of a well-run programme the trainees should have made substantial, measurable and observable progress in terms of their ability to teach English as a Foreign Language in the Asian classroom and should be able to relate practice to principle and to have an awareness of the rationale

of particular procedures and to understand “the organisation of language courses in terms of ends and means” (Britten, 1985), so as to better understand the exam-oriented culture in which they are operating.

Trainees should also have gained knowledge of those skills defined as critical by Freeman (1985, 1986), namely the ability to “present material, give clear instructions, correct errors in various ways” and “manage classroom interaction and discipline” and in line with Strevens (1974), to have a deeper “understanding of the nature of education in relation to the society” and the “moral and rhetorical function of the teacher” in societies such as those influenced by Confucianism, as written about in Hu (2002). From my own experience gained through this module, the education of language teachers in east Asia will remain incomplete without them being “led,” “fed” and “shown” the importance of context sensitivity before being “thrown” into the real classroom, to paraphrase McGrath (1995).

If teachers are properly trained, this will motivate students who, in the writing of Littlewood (2000), “do not, in fact, want to be spoon fed with facts from an all-knowing ‘fount of knowledge’” but rather “want to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers” (34). The time has come to offer a more professional impression of teaching English as a second language in Asia and the best means of doing that is to ensure that those who come here to teach are properly trained.

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