Perspectives on English teacher development in rural primary schools in China

Wang Ping

Abstract: Questionnaires are used to examine Chinese rural primary school English teachers' needs and challenges and perceptions in the implementation of Standards for Teachers of English in Primary Schools as professional development in rural school contexts in China. A total of 300 teachers participated in the research. Their feedback illustrates that there are serious problems with the current training model and that teachers have a very high expectation of being involved in the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education.

Key words: rural school teachers of English; PGCE; curriculum innovation; professional development

Background

In 2001, as a result of the global expansion of programmes in English Teaching to Young Learners and China's rapid social and economic change, the Ministry of Education of China (MOE) initiated a curriculum innovation: the promotion of teaching English as a foreign language in primary schools beginning in Year 3 (ages 9-10). In 2005, the MOE formulated Standards for Teachers of English in Primary Schools (STEPS). These require all primary teachers to transform their views on teaching, to develop students' comprehensive language competence by making learning a process during which students develop language proficiency, form positive attitudes, improve thinking skills, increase cross-cultural awareness and learn to use learning strategies so as to gradually become independent learners. The major change is the shift from traditional grammar-translation to the development of over-

all language competence. The emphasis lies on activating students' interest in learning, relating the course content to the students' life experiences, promoting cooperation among students and advocating learning by doing.

The rural primary school teachers of English adopting STEPS have found it quite a challenge. They need a reasonable degree of target language proficiency. They also have to acquire a fair degree of autonomy in classroom decision-making and cope with local constraints. There is also tension between the proposed apprenticeship model designed to help them learn their "new trade" and the traditional model of teacher education, which is based on studying academic, education theory in addition to teaching practice. Also, rural teachers often experience lower levels of job satisfaction than those in urban areas. They are not only overloaded with teaching hours but are also underpaid. Thus they are not always able to meet the needs of their students as they would wish. In essence, their sense of professional self is now under threat (Hayes, 2006, p. 160). In addition, they have to travel half a day or more to attend the STEPS training programme.

The cascade model employed as the sole training mode for implementing STEPS nationwide, has been criticized for offering diluted training the further one progresses down the cascade. Where this has happened, the lack of take-up at grass-roots level may, as I discuss below, be as much a consequence of the lack of consultation with the teachers by policy makers in the initial stages of STEPS (re)design as a fault within the cascade model itself. The rural primary school teachers of English have seen a disparity between the training they receive and the innovative practice they are asked to implement in their classrooms in the rural school context. Why, the teachers may feel, should they have faith in STEPS training in the first place?

Yet, without adequate training, these teachers are not able to maximize the English learning potential of rural school pupils. It was this need for English teacher professional development created by STEPS training that motivated me to conduct research. This article is thus about a study into the professional development of a large group of rural primary school English teachers in China. The aim is to explore whether the UK model of the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) could be introduced into the rural primary school context in China.

The Chinese Teacher Training Model vs. The UK PGCE Training Approach

The Chinese teacher training model

In pre-service teacher education programmes in China, the predominant teaching method is teacher-centered, with university staff lecturing to stu-

dents who listen silently while making notes. There are not many classroom activities involving the students. They do not give oral presentations and there is no micro-teaching or individual tutorial system. There are no handouts, but for each course there are textbooks. Teaching content is mainly based on the textbook (Sharp & Ning, 1998, p. 69).

The pedagogy in many Chinese schools is similar. Great emphasis is put upon the memorisation of basic facts and principles, with teachers using whole-class approaches, fixed syllabuses and textbooks. Yat-ming (1991, p. 76) states "China inherits a dogmatic Confucian pedagogical tradition which has fused effectively with the Soviet mode of instruction. The resulting hybrid pattern of teaching and learning is text-based and teacher-centred. It is geared to implement the syllabus which is usually content-overloaded". The teaching method in Chinese rural primary schools is very commonly teacher-centred and text-based too. Children are rarely actively involved in the lesson. Teachers tend to believe that a 'good' English lesson is one where the teacher clearly explains the materials and accomplishes what he/she sets out to do according to the curriculum, rather than how well students learn or how actively the learners are involved in the learning process. Willis (1981, p. 42) states that finishing course books becomes the predominate aim in both the teacher's and the students' minds. This inevitably involves a significant amount of tightly controlled practice and subsequent testing; often emphasizing the form to the exclusion of meaning and use, and any communicative purpose in learning English is forgotten.

As indicated above, the cascade model has been adopted. This model (Hayes, 2000; Bax, 2002) is widely employed to try to provide training in a cost effective manner, especially where the numbers ultimately needing training are very large and funds limited. Direct training, in the knowledge and skills thought necessary to enable the desired changes in classrooms, is given to a relatively small number of specialists or trainers. Recipients of such "first level" training are then expected to train other groups, who may then, in turn, be expected to pass on the essence of their training to their colleagues. If the hoped for 'cascade' down from first to subsequent levels can be seen to have occurred, albeit with the training content probably diluted as it trickles down (Hayes, 2000), educational planners may consider that they have introduced the means of implementing desired changes to classroom teachers cost effectively.

During the cascade training for STEPS and within a local education commission, the first teacher trainers expressed the view, that teachers would need regular courses if there was to be any significant improvement in classroom practice.

The UK PGCE training approach

In the UK, the PGCE is a ten-month pre-service teacher training course for undergraduate degree holders. Those passing the PGCE are acknowledged by Ofsted (2011) and granted “eligibility to teach” in the UK schools. The PGCE is also widely recognised in the rest of the world, allowing holders to easily register as teachers after additional local training and certification.

PGCE student teachers attend intensive and focused lectures, seminars and workshops for a number of weeks. These provide them with basic knowledge. The students read, research, reflect and deliberate with each other and with the lecturers. A number of assignments are planned, researched and written. In this period, they are encouraged to develop their own philosophy of teaching and learning. Then the students start their, approximately, 24-week school and observation placement. On each school placement there are joint observations of student teachers’ lessons. The students have to undertake at least two substantial placements in different schools, providing them with a wealth of experience from different practitioners in different contexts. Their school partnership tutor will provide them with an alternate outlook to help them to further develop their own philosophy. Finally when the students return from each school placement they share their positive and negative times, reflecting on their experiences. Rixon (2000) and Papp (2011) emphasize the necessity of such adequate training for teachers.

From 2005 to 2006, I attended a PGCE course at a university in London. During that period I worked with my academic tutor and school-based mentor collaboratively. The tutor and the mentor helped me to face up to issues or experiences and assess and evaluate my own learning to identify priorities for further action. We trainees also learned from each other in pair and group work. I got a sense of what some of my peers had experienced in class. My skills of working with others also developed. My concept of the role of a teacher changed from one of being a didactic presenter to one of a collaborative facilitator enabling learning. At the end of the PGCE, I was a qualified teacher of mandarin Chinese. In the following year I started to teach in a school in the centre of London, I found the skill and techniques I learned in the PGCE of great value. As a result the BBC interviewed me and reported my classroom teaching on the BBC website on November 24th, 2006.

A comparison

Compared with the PGCE training approach, the cascade training programme in China is short, quick, fast and cheap. It potentially reaches more teachers and focuses on the prime importance of the subject knowledge of teachers. It attempts to detail very precisely what teachers should cover,

and how this is to be assessed. There is a lack of ethos for career-long professional development.

In light of the above, I wanted to ask the following research questions:

1. What problems have the teachers encountered in the implementation of STEPS training?
2. Has the current cascade training been effective in dealing with the problems?
3. Would the trainee teachers like a new teacher training model?

The Study

Participants and instruments

The study involves 300 primary school English teachers (157 female/143 male; average age: 31). The participants are 150 teachers from 10 primary schools in Zhejiang Province, 25 primary schools in Jiangsu Province, while 150 are from primary schools in Gansu Province and the Xinjiang Uryur and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Regions.

The participants, “leading English teachers” in their schools, all attend the cascade training locally, still ongoing at the time of research. And they had also had experience of the ideas behind the PGCE from previous sessions.

I have adopted mixed methods in this study, involving the use of two questionnaires. The study will last four years. Below are the sorts of statements that I put to the teachers after their local cascade training combined with their direct experience of the teaching approaches covered in the PGCE. I asked them if they agreed with the statements or not.

Sample statements

A. Concerning the local cascade training

- The school authorities require all teachers to attend the training section of STEPS. Teachers have no say in this.
- Teachers’ critical problem in the implementation of STEPS training model lies in English language competence.
- Teachers have little opportunity to discuss STEPS or to share ideas about it.
- Teachers have access to publications so that they can learn and understand more about STEPS.
- Teachers are largely given support to attend the teacher training section within the frame of STEPS.
- Time for professional development is built into teachers’ workloads.
- Being a rural primary school teacher seems to be a challenging profession.

Responses showed that all the participants were required to attend the training at the behest of the school management teams. 'Lack of English competence' was seen as the most crucial problem by 98.9% of the teachers; while 95.9% had no say in the implementation of STEPS. The participants said teachers had access to professional development resources. Over 90% had opportunities to develop their English proficiency and methodological skills. The vast majority believed that professional development had become an important part of teachers' professional lives.

B. From experiencing ideas behind the PGCE training model

- The PGCE training approach meets the requirement of STEPS.
- I am motivated to take a PGCE to be a qualified teacher.
- I need the PGCE training approach in order to feel confident in the teaching role.
- Teachers are willing to reflect on their practice from the perspective of English teaching methodology as the PGCE training approach suggests.
- Practical training within the PGCE training approach is much better than the theoretical training dominating the current cascade training programme.
- Teachers consider that professional development based on the PGCE training approach is of importance and of help to their career development.
- The UK PGCE could be adopted as a new training model.

Responses show that over 94% of the participants were very positive about the PGCE training approach and very few held negative attitudes towards it. The ambivalent ones were less enthusiastic. For them, STEPS based on imported pedagogy was opposed to local cultural values in various ways, particularly the role experiences of "teacher" and there may be corresponding resistance to STEPS, which is perceived as western (Davis, 2012).

After the initial experience of elements of the PGCE training approach, 98% of the participants agreed with were "a new training training approach; 98% of them stated that the PGCE training approach met the requirement of STEPS; 98% said that the PGCE would help them become a better teacher to be qualified teachers; 96.7% thought the PGCE was of importance and of help to their career development; 93.7% were willing to reflect on their teaching from the perspective of English teaching methodology; 94.5% held the view that the PGCE made them feel confident in the teaching.

From the answers to the above statements, I conclude that the majority of the participants believed that professional development had become an important part of teachers' professional lives. The high rate of the statistics

also informed us that the current implementation system of teacher training in rural Chinese primary schools has been put in a challenging situation. Some of the criticism in opposition to the current ways of implementing STEPS was related to its lack of relevance to the “real teaching in real school” and lack of connection between theory and praxis (Wang, 2010).

In response to tensions and constraints and pressure, primary school English teachers were turning to ideas within the reflective practice of the PGCE training approach to attempt to integrate theory with practice. They were doing so to reassert a professional view of teachers’ theory produced under the power of the school authority.

Plans to Improve English Teacher Language Competence

Some of the primary school teachers of English were unable to understand the statements I had written in English and emailed me, saying, for example,

“I can’t answer your questionnaire because I don’t understand some of your questions. I don’t know how to answer them.”
“My English is very limited....”

One teacher later told me that she had a BSc degree in Agricultural Engineering. Since there was a shortage of English teachers in her school, she was employed as a long-term English teacher. Though she has taught English for more than 10 years, she still finds her English “far too limited”. She is always afraid of making mistakes and she has no confidence in her English.

A shortage of qualified teachers of English is a major constraint on the implementation of STEPS. It is common in rural areas in China for primary English teachers not to be English majors (Ministry of Education, 2012).

A. Providing English refresher courses

Teachers need to develop English language expertise in order to understand their roles as teachers of English language learners (Wright, 2002). Lack of English competence is a constraint.

In the refresher course the trainers encourage the trainees to learn some techniques on how to avoid difficulties when teaching a particular unfamiliar language. The issue of differentiation has therefore to be addressed and approaches have to be found to make the course relevant to the trainees with very different experiences. As a matter of fact, the overall purpose of the refresher course is to raise the confidence of the trainees.

B. Reinforcing the vocabulary the teachers will teach

The statement in STEP that primary school English teachers should “demonstrate proficiency in English and serve as a good language model for students” may be too vague to be useful in the Chinese rural school context. A study of the literature shows that none of the taxonomies has given a clear definition of what level of English language proficiency is adequate. Given STEPS trainers take materials and ideas from the English course books used in rural primary schools, materials aimed at the adult teachers, such as magazines articles, can be used as a springboard to recap basic vocabulary items on the special themes required in STEPS. Thus it is hoped that materials organized in this way are valuable to the primary school English teachers.

C. Reinforcing the classroom language teachers will use

This included social language such as greetings and language about the conduct of a lesson, for instance on starting the lesson, interactions during the lesson, words for everyday classroom objects, vocabulary for pupils’ games, talking about language, ICT terminology, ending the lesson and false cognates. In addition, classroom instructions and the names of classroom facilities and some basic grammatical terms should be included as well. Interestingly, a PGCE trainer told me that a former trainee commented that he was not able to tell a child to spit his chewing gum into the bin. Utterances such as “May I come in?” or “Can I leave now?” should be taught to the pupils.

D. Increasing intercultural awareness

Rural primary school teachers of English have little chance to visit English-speaking countries. Thus, it is of some concern that they are not aware of basic aspects of daily life there such as the school systems, some rituals, housing and transportation and political systems. All this knowledge is required by STEPS and is interesting for the children.

Discussion

A. Presenting the PGCE training approach in the current context

The desire to teach English in rural primary Chinese schools is the main motivator in becoming involved in experiencing the PGCE training approach. Leading teachers of English in rural primary schools involved in the survey

have the same motives for choosing the teaching profession, which forms a solid foundation of the study.

The PGCE can be used to encourage in-service teachers to be analytical about why they are teaching in the way they are to help them develop the rationale of their practice. What we don't want is a teacher who simply opens the book and says 'OK, I'll give the pupils that to learn, that to do' without really thinking about the quality of the learning and whether that is the best way....' Learning might be about understanding rather than simply knowing the facts. We help teachers to develop an awareness of assessing their teaching in a critical way and continuing thinking about the different ways of doing things so that their teaching stays dynamic...(From a PGCE tutor).

The UK PGCE programme has wider content for trainees' English language improvement. It has courses of differing lengths and content. It seems that the courses are more flexible at least in two respects. One is that there are different lengths and contents available for different training needs of teachers. The other is that the programme is well planned and well organized before it takes place. Copies of a variety of booklets are distributed to all schools in January of each year showing the whole year course programme by subject with an evaluation form. There are a variety of flyers including the clearly-stated training objectives and contents and all the flyers are supposed to be sent to schools at least one term in advance so that teachers get enough time to choose the appropriate courses according to their real needs.

The teachers involved in the PGCE are always encouraged to think critically or reflect critically about their teaching. The trainees' pedagogical competence is developed through critical reflection and continual experimentation with different ways. All too often, trainees attempt an approach or technique which has been reduced to a formula, and have no understanding of the rationale of the method or technique being employed or its application in the particular context. Adapting this idea might mean that primary school English teacher education can be integrated so as to develop the teachers' awareness to reflect and appraise their teaching in a critical way.

We might be able to adapt the ideas contained within the PGCE for the STEPS training programme. First, different training lengths and course content might mean that different training needs can be better met. Second, training objectives and content should be clearly stated and publicized in

schools in advance, so as to allow the teachers to choose suitable training courses. However we must consider whether the ideas or elements of the PGCE are really right for the rural school Chinese situation. Mechanically or blindly copying the PGCE presents dangerous risks for thousands of rural primary school teachers of English in China.

B. The power-coercive have suffered resistance

“It is a cultural and political problem in China that head teachers and teachers, who have no say in the decision making process, are the ones required to implement the changes in curriculum design and materials” Wang (2010, p. 68-70) .

The current centralizing trends result in teachers’ feeling “that they have little autonomy in their work, that they are constantly overloaded, and that they are not always able to meet the needs of their students as they would wish: in essence, which their sense of a professional self under threats” (Hayes, 2006, p. 160). This is also emphasized by Hilton (2006), saying “what is significant is the influence agendas surrounding curriculum development.” Fullan (2007, p. 25) describes “reculturing” as the process by which “teachers come to change their beliefs and habits.” Simply put there must be wide consultation among participants, who will then feel that they have had more of a say in the change. Teachers are often the target of a change initiative, but they are also frontline change agents. They need to be involved in the development of STEPS as early as possible and be inspired to take ownership of the change.

Conclusion

The results from the current study among the 300 participants seem to suggest two things. First, in rural primary schools in China, primary school English teacher training is still at the early stage of the reform compared with those working in urban primary schools. Second, the current programmes designed and implemented by the top-level authorities, who rarely conducted needs identification, cannot fully meet these training needs.

My experience of attending the PGCE shows that it can provide the trainee with critical information which can be looped back into his/her own teaching and learning practices. Rural primary school English teachers should establish an understanding of the PGCE which satisfies the requirements of STEPS. So what we need is an approach which takes account of the teacher’s own knowledge, skills and attitudes, which will then guide the teacher towards taking responsibility for his/her own professional develop-

ment-encouraging him/her to develop the same kind of independence and commitment to future growth.

How can we help primary school English teachers to take personal responsibility for their professional development? This question and the search for the answer will greatly challenge school authorities and teacher educators in the future. Further research has to focus more on establishing what ideas of the PGCE training approach could be adopted to help teachers fulfill the requirements of STEPS. There should be an exploration of how the PGCE ideas affect teachers' professional development since qualified rural primary school teachers of English are crucial not only in raising educational standards, leading to greater satisfaction for both teachers and pupils, but also for the development of the nation, given the importance that a command of English has in the global economy.

References

- Bax, S. (2002). The Social and cultural dimensions of trainer training. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 28(2), 165-178.
- Davis, H. (2012). Planning for success: Culture, engagement and power in English language education innovation. *Issues in ELT change management*. UK: British Council.
- Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change* (4th edition). NewYork: Teachers College Press.
- Hayes, D. (2000). Cascade training and teachers' professional development. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 54(2), 135-145.
- Hays, D. (2006). *An exploration of the lives and careers of teachers of English in state education systems in Sri Lanka and Thailand*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Centre for English Language Studies, University of Birmingham, UK.
- Hilton, M. (2006). Damaging confusions in England's KS2 reading tests: A response to Anne Kispal. *Literacy*, 40(1), 36-41.
- Ministry of Education. (2012). *Education yearbook in China* (2009-2011). Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press.
- Ofsted (2011). *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills*. Norwich: TSO.
- Papp, S. (2011). *Impact of assessment on the teaching and learning of young learners of English: result of a large scale survey on YL assessment*. Cambridge: CUP ESOL examination.
- Rixon, S. (2000). *Worldwide survey of primary ELT*. Centre for English language teacher education, University of Warwick, British Council.
- Sharp, D., & Ning, Q. (1998). The training of secondary modern language teachers in England and China: A comparative analysis. *Compare*, 28 (1).
- Wang, P. (2010). A language teacher vs a driving instructor. *Modern English Teaching*, Last Edition, 68-70.
- Willis, J. (1981). The Training of non-native speaker teachers of english: A new approach. In focus on the teacher, *ELT Document*, 110, The British Council.

Wright, T. (2002). Doing language awareness: Issues for language study in language teacher education. In H. Trappes-Lomax, & G. Ferguson (eds.), *Language in language teacher education*. 667-668. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Yat-ming, J.L. (1991). Curriculum development in the people's Republic of China. In D. Marsh, & Morris (eds.), *Curriculum Development in East Asia*, (pp. 61-81). London: Faimor Press.

Author:

Wang Ping, Associate Professor
Jiaxing University
College of Foreign Languages
56 Yuexiu Road (South)
Jiaxing, Zhejiang Province
314001
China
Email: pwang886@hotmail.com