

The interface between theory and practice: The role of teacher educators and teachers in a school-based teacher development initiative

Winnie Wong May Pang

Hong Kong Institute of Education

Among the various approaches that can be used to try to bring about changes in educational initiatives, the main strategies have been broadly classified into three types; those that center on problem solving processes, conceptual changes, and the power and authority of some agents over others (Morris 1998). In a highly centralized educational system such as Hong Kong, the change strategies employed in curriculum initiatives have been associated with the third. Curriculum planning tend to be imposed on teachers from the top such as the Education Department, for example initiatives like the Activity Approach, the Communicative Approach and the recent Target-oriented Curriculum. Teachers as one of the major participants in the curriculum development process are rarely involved in the planning and decision-making.

This paper describes phase one of a one-year school-based teacher development initiative in which English teachers of a Hong Kong primary school take up the responsibility for the changes made to their curriculum with on-site support from a team of four teacher educators from the Hong Kong Institute of Education. This teacher development project aims at adopting a problem-solving and interactive approach to teacher change in curriculum initiative. It also attempts to explore the roles of teachers and teacher educators in the process of collaboration. It intends to seek the interface between theory and practice in the local educational context, in particular in empowering teachers through mutual communication, negotiation, consultation, rather than top-down persuasion.

This paper reports the preliminary findings from the qualitative data collected and discusses implications in relation to the roles of teachers and teacher educators and the interface between theory and practice in a collaborative project.

Introduction

Among the various approaches that can be used to try to bring about changes in educational initiatives, the main strategies have been broadly classified into three types: those that center on problem solving processes, conceptual changes, and some agents of authority or power over others (Morris, 1998). In a highly centralized educational system such as Hong Kong, the change strategies employed in curriculum initiatives have always been associated with the third. Curriculum renewal tends to be imposed on teachers from the top such as the Education Department. Teachers as one of the major participants in the curriculum development process are rarely involved in the planning and decision-making. It is often such a lack of ownership in the curriculum renewal process among many other reasons that

curriculum initiative is found ineffective and mismatches exist between the intended and implemented curriculum.

Teacher education programs provided by the local institutes, as most pre-service and in-service teacher education programs elsewhere, have mostly adopted a 'theory into practice' model. As Sankey (1996) interpreted, "learning to be a teacher is essentially a matter of learning established educational theory that is then applied to practice" (p.70). This is also true for in-service teacher re-training. Teachers who enrolled on refresher courses are often regarded as poorly or weakly informed about practice disregard the number of years these teachers have been practicing the profession. Teacher educators, on the other hand, are regarded explicitly or implicitly as theorists who are "well informed about practice" (Sankey, 1996:70) even though they have left the frontier for an extended period of time. And it is such a separateness between theory and practice that has led to the never ending debate between theory and practice and the not uncommon criticisms about the ineffectiveness of teacher education programs for teacher change.

In a pursuit to seek the interface between theory and practice, this paper reports phase one of a school-based teacher development initiative in curriculum renewal. In this project, English teachers of a primary school take the initiative in making changes to their existing curriculum with on-site support from a team of teacher educators. In the context of a problem-solving and interactive approach to teacher development in curriculum initiative, this paper also attempts to explore the role teacher educators and teachers can play in the process of institute-school collaboration for teacher development. It intends to identify the strategies that facilitate teachers for change. This paper also reports the preliminary findings from the data collected and discusses implications in relation to the roles of teachers and teacher educators and the interface between theory and practice in a collaborative project.

Theoretical framework

Figure 1. School-based Language Teacher Development Framework

According to Morris (1998), a curriculum renewal out of a problem-solving endeavor is the most effective in bringing about changes in educational initiatives. Such an interactive model echoes the situational curriculum model proposed by Malcolm Skilbeck in which the major curriculum processes involve analyzing the situation, defining objectives, designing the teaching-learning activities, implementing and evaluating of the program of students' learning in a particular context (1984). As what White (1989) proposed, the situational model for school-based curriculum development might better be called a curriculum renewal model, which sees the importance of initiating curriculum renewal by teachers involved in specific school situations as an important starting point. It relates curriculum renewal processes to existing practices, which is essential to the nurture of ownership in the teachers involved.

However, renewing existing practice without novel strategies, concepts, or perspectives to help exploring the issue from a new dimension or dealing the problem with new strategies or solutions may end up perpetuating the basic problem. Like what Sankey (1996) contended, "in marginalising all theory it is throwing out the baby with the bath water" and "it is simply

naïve to believe that the practice of teaching can be cut free from theory" (p.72). Therefore, theory is required in conceptualizing phenomena, understanding issues, and most important of all, offer alternatives to deal with the complexities and uncertainties encountered by teachers in their everyday teaching.

Teacher research studies revealed that teachers act according to their beliefs about the subject matter or teaching and learning, which are mostly implicit (Pajares, 1992; Johnson, 1992 & Grossman, 1990). Explicating teachers' implicit personal theories and beliefs about ELT is, therefore, an essential first step in the curriculum renewal process. It is important to thaw teachers' old ideas if they are to change; though such old ideas may have helped building their sense of 'self' (Sakofs, Armstrong, Proudman, Howard & Clark, 1995). With the help of the teacher educators, teachers may be able to discover their implicit beliefs that have been shaping the way they go about their daily teaching. And through a critical self-evaluation, teachers may try to let go of the ineffective routines and be willing to take up challenges entailed in the renewal endeavor.

At the second stage of the curriculum renewal process, alternative approaches to teaching and learning can be tried out to answer the problems brought up in the initiative. At this stage, interaction between the teacher educators and teachers involves inter-flowing of new curriculum strategies, latest updates in ELT research and insider knowledge of constraints in the site. Teacher educators can bring in new insights to teachers' decisions and hence expose them to alternative or latest ELT approaches. Skill building is also a major task for teacher educators at this stage of development. They should help teachers acquire the skills required to bring about changes in their practice. This echoes what Glickman, Hayes, and Hensley's (1992) assertion that "the building of an expanded knowledge base is essential to finding new answers" and "...a school needs information beyond what it currently possesses" (p.24).

At the third stage of the renewal process, the focus is on implementation of the new curriculum plan, which allows teachers to apply what they have newly acquired to answer their problems emerged from practice. This is a phase in which action and reflection form loops of learning during which teachers may begin to theorize about the approach of practice they have put into practice. Teacher educators at this stage play their facilitative role in stimulating reflection in the part of teachers, which may induce learning. Teacher educators' facilitative role should diminish as teachers are empowered and eventually teachers should take on an independent role in initiating another cycle of renewal or initiative.

The processes involved in the curriculum renewal process and the roles teacher educators can play in this collaborative model can be summarized in Figure 1. The collaboration between teachers and teacher educators in the search of new answers to dissatisfaction in the existing curriculum or any aspect of practice provides a good interface in which ELT theories get contextualized and used. As "learning takes place during knowledge use" (Eraut, 1994:34), this paper hopes to explore an alternative of teacher development to the existing "theory into practice" model.

The project

Background

This study was developed in 1998 as a follow-up project of a school attachment scheme initiated by the Hong Kong Institute of Education for its staff members who were to teach in its newly validated primary education Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program. Two

colleagues of the researchers' joined the scheme in which they were required to teach at least two weeks in their own discipline, that is English, in order to obtain 'recent and relevant' experience of classroom teaching in local primary schools. They finished their attachment in a local subsidized primary school, which in the following semester invited them to help running staff development sessions to address issues emerged in their practice. And it is out of such a need for development support that the project was developed.

Phase one

The project was designed in response to the dissatisfaction in the current practice and curriculum of the English teachers of a subsidized primary school located in the northern western of the New Territories of Hong Kong. Phase one, which was intended as a pilot or exploratory venture, involved eleven teachers teaching Primary 5 and 6 from the school, and four lecturers from the English Department of the Hong Kong Institute. Phase one of the project ran from the second half of the academic year of 1998 and should be carried over to 1999. Stage one and two of this phase completed before the summer of 1998 and the collaborative activities in this phase included:

Stage one

A questionnaire was sent to the whole panel of English teachers of the school and returned in two days' time before the teacher educators met the teachers in an initial meeting for more background understanding and negotiation of topics for curriculum renewal the following week. Two meetings were held to discuss, analyze and focus the teachers' concerns for curriculum development. In the first meeting, preliminary findings from the data analysis of the questionnaires were fed back to the teachers. A workshop was also conducted to introduce to the project teachers problems and trends of English language teaching. Discussion of language areas for curriculum development was also done. In the second meeting, the head teachers of the project team worked with the lecturers in a workshop to identify directions for the curriculum renewal to follow.

All teachers attended the workshop agreed that the curriculum in P5 and P6 were fragmented, disorganized and required integration. They felt that the content was overloaded, the level too hard and too remote from students' life experience. They arrived at some guiding principles for the new curriculum:

1. It should be in line with the TOC;
2. It should be coherent with other levels of learning in the key stages;
3. It should be based on students' interests and experience; and
4. The most effective and appropriate strategies for teaching students should be identified.

It was decided through discussions and negotiations during and after the workshop that curriculum tailoring was chosen to be the answer to the project teachers' quest for alternative methods to render effective teaching to their pupils.

Stage two

Stage two aimed at facilitating the project teachers in developing and acquiring the task-based approach to tailor the curriculum in use. A workshop was conducted in early June to work on task-based planning, task writing and introduction of new teaching strategies like the use of IT in teaching. Ten English teachers from P5 and P6 participated in the workshop. They looked at a sample task some P5 teachers designed earlier and discussed the strategies and steps to carry out the theme of going out. Then the teachers were supposed

to identify another theme for P6 students and design a new program for P5 and P6 for the year 1999/2000. However, with the moving of campus and various settlement issues of teachers and students, the plan was postponed to December 1999.

Before the break for the summer holidays, 5 English teachers were interviewed to gauge their views on whole project, as well as their short term and long term aspirations for the school's development.

Stage three and four

At these two stages the new curriculum plan should be implemented in classrooms and evaluations and reflections to follow which should feed into the next phase of study.

Discussion

After considerable amount of discussion and negotiation between teacher educators and teachers, curriculum tailoring to accommodate task-based learning for Primary 5 and 6 levels was agreed to be the priority problem area to be addressed. It was in such a context that the collaborative teacher development program was embedded. The roles played by both teachers and teacher educators in this joint venture are explored and discussed to illustrate the interface between theory and practice in the Hong Kong English Language Teaching (ELT) context. The strategies employed in the collaboration are also elaborated with supporting examples of activities.

The role of teachers and teacher educators in the innovation

Throughout the project, we conveyed explicitly the message to teachers that teacher educators were playing the roles of consultants and facilitators in the teacher development program. However, at different stages of the project, we could further identify the specific roles played by teachers and teacher educators so as to portray a more comprehensive picture of the roles played by both parties in this collaborative project.

Stage 1: Teachers as self-evaluators while teacher educators as schema activators

At the initial stage, teachers evaluated their own teaching practices and identify their inadequate areas for improvement so as to position themselves in the teacher development program. However, teachers might not be aware of the fact that their personal beliefs and values about teaching and learning English would have shaped their teaching practices (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). In order to improve teaching practices, teachers might have to reformulate their teaching beliefs. The role of teacher educators at this point was to activate their schema of the conceptual theories underlying different approaches to English Language Teaching (ELT). At the same time it helped to locate the stance of individual teachers regarding their ELT beliefs and practices. Through questionnaires and discussions in initial meetings, we found that most teachers were still adopting the structural and skill-based teaching approach in teaching English. Such information formed the starting point for our planning of teacher training activities.

Stage 2: Teachers as curriculum developers while teacher educators as knowledge informants and instructional consultants

Understanding the burning need to adopt task-based learning as proposed in the official curriculum renewal initiative, teachers agreed to start tailoring their existing English curriculum in order to accommodate task-based learning. Since teachers were required to take on the demanding roles as curriculum developers and instructional designers in the

new curriculum, they therefore felt desperate and incompetent in meeting the challenges at various levels of the educational context. At this stage, teacher educators served as knowledge informants and instructional consultants since they were often regarded as experts in these areas. Thus in our first workshop, we introduced to teachers the principles underpinning task-based learning and the conceptual framework of the Target Oriented Curriculum as proposed by Clark, J.L., Scarino, A. & Brownell, J. (1994), so as to open up to alternative ELT approaches for teachers' information and attention.

Both teachers and teacher educators shared the notion that theories should be able to help inform classroom practice and thus could be tested in the classroom. Teachers by then were eager to develop their scheme of work that could incorporate task-based learning. Practical skills and knowledge such as identifying major themes and designing good learning tasks by re-sequencing, restructuring and adapting their textbook materials were found to be inadequate in teachers. At this point teacher educators played the role of instructional consultants to give assistance, advice, feedback and demonstration at the procedural and instructional level. In another workshop, we worked together with teachers to demonstrate the necessary skills and knowledge in developing a task-based scheme of work for P. 5. In the same workshop, we demonstrated an alternative way to storytelling using PowerPoint presentation. Teachers felt that this workshop was very useful as they learned some practical ideas and instructional strategies and thus felt more informed and ready to change.

Stage 3: Teachers as curriculum implementers while teacher educators as peer reviewers

At this stage the Theory-Practice-Reflection model would be adopted. Educators like Elliot, J. (1991) and Wallace, M. (1991) have documented this model to be an effective approach to teacher education. However, it would not be easy to be operationalised in the educational context of Hong Kong, where action research and reflective teaching is still considered to be a very innovative concept in teacher education. Thus this would be a very important stage to exemplify the effectiveness of the interface between theory and practice. It was envisaged that this stage would take shape in the current semester. Teachers at this stage would implement their new program at the classroom level. Teacher educators would then act as peer reviewers to give them feedback to help them reflect on their teaching. In doing so, teachers would be able to evaluate more critically on their own teaching and the effectiveness of the new program. However, owing to the moving of school campus, stages 3 and 4 had been postponed to the coming term.

Stage 4: Both teachers and teacher educators as evaluators and planners

Ultimately teachers and teacher educators would evaluate and review the program and take further actions to improve it as well as to plan future actions. By then another cycle of teacher development program would be needed in response to any new concerns emerged. At this stage teachers would be expected to become more reflective practitioners to pursue their personal on-going professional development with a reduced degree of support from teacher educators.

Collaboration strategies

Throughout the meetings, teacher educators tried to take on the role as consultants and facilitators rather than outsider experts who would indoctrinate them with theories by adopting a top-down instructional approach. There was a wide range of strategies being used in this collaborative teacher development project. They will be discussed and elaborated with concrete examples.

Mutual understanding and trust

For any collaborative project to succeed, it was extremely significant to first seek mutual understanding and trust between teachers and teacher educators. Without teachers' trust and understanding, teachers' participation would have been weakened and their willingness to cooperate and collaborate would be a question. Therefore we first indicated that we were not there to challenge their expertise, but to explore more effective alternatives to teaching English. We assured them that we were not there to preach nor to force them to change, but to work collaboratively to solve problems they had identified in teaching English, with particular reference to the new challenges evoked from the official curriculum renewal. We promised to keep all sensitive data confidential without releasing them to their principal or their colleagues. By far we found that we could sustain a good working relationship with teachers.

Negotiation

Since we were adopting an interactive approach to teacher development, it was important to ensure that teachers' voices could be heard and respected. Thus we did not act according to our own agenda. Instead, we let teachers initiate on the areas they preferred to improve and the type of support they wanted us to offer. However, what they initially suggested was not educationally relevant to the new ELT trends. For example the majority of teachers wanted to improve their teaching of phonics and grammar in isolation. Therefore we explained to them that phonics and grammar could be taught more effectively in the context of task-based learning. Teachers were convinced and agreed to readjust their priority in dealing with problems identified, and through constructive and positive negotiation among themselves and between teachers and teacher educators, a final priority agenda was arrived at. In planning development activities and workshop tasks, the same strategy was used to ensure equity and autonomy in decision making for both teachers and teacher educators.

Consultation

This was the most pertinent and noticeable strategy in this teacher development program. At different stages of the curriculum innovation, teachers consulted teacher educators for various purposes, ranging from seeking theoretical and conceptual clarifications to improving instructional strategies. It was mutually agreed that our role was not to provide them with ready-made teaching resources for classroom use but to act as facilitators and consultants in the innovation. Thus it was the responsibility of teachers to develop their own knowledge and competencies in dealing with curriculum and instructional needs with the full support of teacher educators. This strategy was found to be rather effective and well observed by teachers.

Interaction

Since we were adopting an interactive teacher development approach, by all means we hoped to build up a positive collaborative environment and culture for both teachers and teacher educators to interact freely. Thus we encouraged teachers to approach us at any time through e-mail, over the telephone or using fax machines should they find the need. Many discussions, arrangements and decisions were made between teacher educators and teachers using the means mentioned above, as frequent face-to-face meeting was not manageable for both parties owing to their heavy workload and regional locations. For example, upon receipt of teachers' faxed teaching ideas and plans, we faxed our written feedback to them followed by telephone conversation to seek further clarifications. This was much welcomed by teachers and proved to be effective in fostering interaction and dialogue between teachers and researchers.

Regarding the mode of teacher training activities, the meetings and workshops were conducted in a very informal atmosphere so that teachers would feel relaxed and more comfortable and ready to interact with themselves and teacher educators. All participants could actively involve in experience sharing, discussions, making suggestions and giving comments to others' views. As one teacher remarked in the interview:

" It (workshop) is very interactive, not like a lecture. We began to know our role afterwards. "

Empowerment

The ultimate goal of this project is to empower teachers to develop professionally and independently. Throughout the project, teacher educators strongly believed that teacher development could best be achieved through self reflection on one's teaching beliefs and values in order to inform one's instructional strategies. Hence, teachers were expected to play a proactive role in reflecting upon their teaching, making educational decisions and curriculum planning with the support of teacher educators. What we did to empower teachers was to recognize the significance of their existing practical knowledge and experience. We also stressed the importance of taking responsibility in their own ongoing professional development at their own pace. A more effective measure was to show respect on and appreciation of their work and effort put in the project. To build up their confidence, we structured the workshop activities in a way that they would be well informed and supported before they were asked to work on their own. In order to overcome the worry and threat of working alone in isolation, they were encouraged to work as a team so as to get mutual support in all aspects. The ultimate intrinsic force to further empower teachers probably would be their self-actualization in the process of change.

Major concerns and implications

From the data collected at this stage of our project, some major concerns have to be addressed to ensure the effective development of both the curriculum innovation in the school and the development program for teachers.

1. How to encourage active participation of passive teachers?

Unlike P. 5 teachers, who envisaged the burning need to adopt the new curriculum, it was found that P. 6 teachers were not too ready to participate in the project owing to the lack of communication with P.5 teachers and their lack of incentive to change. What is essential for researchers in the near future is to readdress the needs of P6 teachers. On one hand we should avoid adopting a top-down approach nor an outsider-dominated policy to force them to conform to innovation. On the other, we need to work closely with all P6 teachers to redefine their framework for change, hoping that they understand the need to collaborate with P5 teachers to ensure coherence and continuity in the curriculum change. Respect on their existing professional expertise and their opinions should be a good entry point to empower teachers. To encourage them to make decisions on what to change, how to change and what sort of support they need from researchers is the next step to get them involved in the project and this is also an effective way to make them feel responsible for the forthcoming activities.

2. How to address diverse needs of different teachers?

As teachers varied in a considerable degree in their conceptual understandings and competencies in ELT, it was difficult for teacher educators to cater for diverse needs of individual teachers through training activities designed for the average mass. Owing to the

mode of workshop activities, some teachers might feel that their needs were being neglected or they felt that the program was not able to address their needs. What we can do to overcome this problem is to design different workshop tasks and training activities for different groups of teachers at certain points. Another alternative is to target one group of teachers at a time. The implication is of course that teacher educators have to contribute a lot more time and effort in doing so. To make it manageable for teacher educators, support and consultation from other colleagues of our institute can be brought in to strengthen our manpower.

3. How to monitor the progress of the program?

Time constraint and heavy workload had always remained the major factors that might have affected the effective development of the project. Our project teachers unanimously revealed that they had been so busy with their regular teaching and non-teaching commitments that they could not manage to arrange meetings for all English teachers on a regular basis, nor could they meet as a team to develop instructional materials. Time and workload was not the unique problem for teachers, it was also a problem for teacher educators, and thus on-site teacher training activities had not been organized too frequently so far owing to the unavailability of teachers or teacher educators.

In order to monitor the smooth transition of our project from one stage to the other, teachers and teacher educators have to negotiate and agree upon a reasonable time frame and a manageable output system. Regular meetings have to be scheduled well in advance before the term starts. However, since teacher's participation is on a voluntary basis, pressure should not be imposed on them, but instead we might try to make their learning process worthwhile, and to announce ownership of their output produced. In so doing teachers might be inspired to keep track of what they agree to accomplish throughout the project

Conclusion

From the preliminary findings gained from the first two stages of this pilot study, an institute-school collaboration seems to be an appropriate strategy to address the gap between theory and practice. And to ensure the effectiveness of both curriculum innovations in school and teacher development programs, a problem-based interactive approach is worth further exploring by adopting consultative and facilitative strategies. However, perceived problems such as how to address the diverse needs of individual teachers and the influence of subtle politics of the context over teachers' genuine incentives in school-based staff development have to be addressed. Therefore, school-based teacher development support has to be long term to allow thorough understanding of the school culture and the human dynamics.

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