

A Study on Improved In-service Training Programs for High School English Teachers

—A Survey of Teaching Problems and Training Program Content Requests—

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ABSTRACT

With the introduction of the "teachers' certificate renewal system", beginning in 2009, the role of universities as institutions to provide training programs for current teachers to maintain their teaching skills has been increased. The purpose of this paper is to propose better training programs for English teachers by studying the problems they face and their requests for the content of training programs. By reviewing the literature and her own twenty years' experience as a high school English teacher, the author ascertained the top four problems faced in teaching and the four most common requests for teacher training course content and compared them with the results of questionnaires conducted in 2006, when 78 teachers from 46 high schools were surveyed, and in 2007, when 72 teachers from 39 high schools were surveyed, targeting a total of 150 high school English teachers in Okinawa.

The results of the surveys in 2006 and 2007 showed that teachers see two main problems in teaching: ①students' low motivation to study English and ②widely differing English levels among students in the same class. The questionnaire results also showed that there were two major requests by teachers for the contents of a training program; a) to improve their own English skills b) to improve their teaching skills. The third problem cited by teachers was ③students' low English and academic levels while the third most common request was c) to exchange information with other teachers. This last result surprised the author.

In short, it was found that a training program which meets the needs of high school English teachers should meet these three primary criteria: 1. to improve English teachers' English skills. 2. to improve English teachers' teaching skills. 3. to provide an opportunity to exchange information with other English teachers.

高等学校英語教師のためのより良い研修内容を考察する 指導上の問題、研修内容への要求に関する アンケート調査を通して

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要旨

平成21年4月から教員免許更新制が導入されることとなり、現場教師の教員としての資質能力維持のための研修の場として大学の果たす役割はさらに増している。本論文の目的は学校現場における英語教師の指導上の問題は何か、提供される研修内容に関してどのような要求を持っているのかの2点を調査することによって、研修者の需要に応える研修プログラムを考察することにある。筆者は文献調査や自身の高校教師としての経験から、指導上の問題として①教師の英語力不足 ②教師の教授力不足 ③生徒の英語学習に対するモチベーションの低さ ④生徒間の英語力格差などが挙げられるとし、研修内容の要求はそれらの問題解決を求めるものになると仮定した。その仮説を、平成18年度(78人46校)、平成19年度(72人39校)の沖縄県教育委員会主催の英語教員集中研修に参加した高校の英語教師(計150人)を対象として行われたアンケート調査の結果と比較した。結果、問題として①生徒の英語学習に対するモチベーションの低さ ②生徒間の英語力格差が、又、研修内容への要求として①教師自身の英語力の向上 ②教授力の向上がそれぞれ上位1位、2位を占め仮説と一致した。上位3位に挙げられた問題③生徒の英語能力の低さや、要求③他の教師達との情報交換は筆者の予想できなかった項目であった。まとめとして現場英語教師の需要に応える研修は1. 英語教師の英語力を高める 2. 英語教師の授業力を高める 3. 教師同士の交流の機会がある という3つの要素を満たすものでなければならないということがわかった。

Introduction

There is a vast amount of literature on the topic of language teacher education. However, most of it deals with courses for future English teachers while little is written concerning training programs for teachers who are currently teaching English. This may result from colleges and universities playing the role mainly as institutions to cultivate future language educators. However this role of institutions of higher education has been changing since the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (henceforth, the Ministry of Education) has decided to start the "teachers' license renewal system" from the year 2009, in which boards of education should establish their own training programs for the renewal of teachers' licenses. (Ministry of Education homepage) Universities and colleges now have a new calling to educate not only future English teachers but also current English teachers. As a result, there has appeared a necessity for them to prepare a good training program for English teachers. It is the author's view that without a study on teachers' problems in teaching and requests for the content of training programs, good training programs which satisfy teachers as trainees cannot be provided. The purpose of this paper is to propose a better design for training programs by studying and analyzing English teachers' problems in teaching and requests for the content of training programs for current teachers.

In section one, the author suggests what she believes to be the main problems of high school English teachers and accordingly the requests for appropriate in-service training program course contents by reviewing the literature and her own 20 years of experience in teaching English at public high schools. In section two, the survey on high school English teachers' problems in teaching and their requests for appropriate in-service training program courses is considered and its results discussed. In section three, the author proposes a better design for English teachers' in-service training programs by comparing her previous suppositions and the results of the survey.

I Setting hypothesis

McConnell points out the lack of confidence of English teachers by stating that "Many teachers are not confident about their own communicative skills in English."(2000) As for English teachers' lack of confidence in communicative skills in English, the author remembers the comment of an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) who was working at junior high schools in the northern part of Okinawa. He said that "English teachers, mainly male English teachers, tend to avoid talking with us, native speakers of English." Just after the JET (Japan English Teaching) program started, the author often heard similar comments that JTEs (Japanese Teachers of

English) tend to avoid talking with ALTs because they are afraid of making mistakes in front of their students. However, it was a little surprising that such a comment is still being heard even now, 20 years after the JET program was introduced. According to "An Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'"(2003) by the MEXT, English teacher's English ability should be STEP pre-first level, TOEFL550,and TOEIC730 or over. However, Hisamura & Jimbo (2008) comment in their essay, the survey conducted by the MEXT in 2006 found that English teachers who qualified for the standard were 24.8% in Junior high school and 48.8% in senior high school. Even though there may be teachers who have not had these tests so far and yet have sufficient English abilities, the author considers the results disappointing. It has also been cited that 70% of Japanese English teachers want to have in-service training program lectures on how to improve their own English. (Usui, 2008) This also seems to reflect English teachers' lack of confidence in their English skills.

As for English teachers' lack of confidence, they feel it not only in communication skills but also in teaching methodology. "Due to lack of training, teachers are much more comfortable with grammar translation than they are with communicative methodologies."(Reesor, 2002) Furthermore, over three decades ago, in 1976, when Wilkins' seminal text entitled "Notional Syllabuses" was published, it had a significant impact on the development of communicative language teaching. Supporting this, the work of the Council of Europe, as well as language educators such as Wilkins, Widdowson, Candlin, Brumfit, Keith Johnson, and other British applied linguists exploring the theoretical basis for a communicative or functional approach to language teaching came to be referred to as the Communicative Approach or simply Communicative Language Teaching(henceforth, CLT).(Richards and Rodgers, 2001)

CLT appeared more than 30 years ago as the newest teaching methodology, which came to be known for its aims are to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and to develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills, acknowledging the interdependence of language and communication. However, the author found that Japanese, as well as other Asian English teachers are still struggling in trying to implement CLT in their classrooms. For example, Professor Tran Van Phuoc, of Hue University College of Foreign Languages, describes the difficulties to introduce CLT in the classrooms in Vietnam. (Tran, 2008). Additionally, the author learned from her university students that most of their high school English teachers seemed to still favor using primarily the Grammar-Translation method to "teach" English. As Reesor comments, "there is a possibility that English teachers do not know much about CLT, and still stick with the traditional way of teaching."(Op.cit.2000)

This brings the discussion to the topic of student motivation. Along with many other educators, Rod Ellis states that "motivation is a key factor in language

learning."(1994) Prior to Ellis' statement, Schunk said that "motivation influences learning and performance."(1991) Since motivation is an integral factor to get pupils to study, the author believes that all teachers are doing their bests in their classes to raise their students' motivation to study. Students' lack of motivation is a problem which should be of great concern for teachers. Pintrich and Schunk(2002) stress the importance of motivation by comparing students who are motivated to learn with those who are unmotivated. A similar study had been done ten years previous to Pintrich and Schunk, by Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons (1992). A summary of the findings shows that motivation influences learning and performance and what students do and learn influences their motivation. Around the same time, Meece added that students who are motivated to learn often find that once they do, they are intrinsically motivated to continue their learning (Meece,1991). Since the author believes in the value of motivation, it is understandable for her why teachers eagerly want their students to be motivated to study. Hiromori(2006) cites that Japanese teachers at work are still trying hard to motivate students to study by citing the writings of many educators such as Ishikawa(2004), Kikui(2003), Kitao(1997), Kojima, Terasaki(2003), Nasu(1996), Sasaki(1998), Shinnita, Fukaya, Tagami, Arimura(1995) and Tatsuno(1987).

When the author was teaching English at public high schools, she considered the diversity of students in the classroom as a problem in teaching. She felt it hard to develop higher level students' English and to consider lower level students' English at the same time by using the same textbook. Following is an excerpt from Yu Ren Dong(2000):

In second language classrooms, effective ESL teaching consists of instruction that is sensitive to nonnative English-speaking students' language, culture, and educational needs; contains teaching strategies that engage diverse learners; and occurs within a nurturing and challenging environment (Collier, 1988; Freeman&Richards, 1993; Johnson,1996;Richards& Lockhart. 1994). However, many ESL teachers do not feel that they are adequately prepared to teach students whose language and literacy learning experience are different from those of their peers and themselves. Often their knowledge of diverse students is seriously lacking, acquired in artificial fashion from teacher programs.(Johnson,1996 Seichner,1993), or used solely on their own educational and cultural experiences (Freeman& Johnson1998)

What Yu said can be applied not only to second language classrooms but also to foreign language classrooms, where the diversity of students is not cultural but in their motivation, their level of English, and literacy learning experiences. How to deal with such diversity of students is one of the problems teachers face, especially in

Japan, where they have large classes of approximately 40 students.

Another problem facing high school teachers in Japan is lack of time. Teachers seem to becoming busier every year, often with busy work which has nothing to do with education. When the author investigated the reasons why high school English teachers usually do not use their own teaching materials, the most common reason was that they were "too busy to prepare the materials"(Yonaha 2007). Thus the author believes that teachers being too busy doing extra work is a severe problem which current English teachers have.

To summarize, the following appear to be the main problems that the author believes English teachers face: ① lack of their own English skills ② lack of teaching skills ③ lack of student motivation ④ diversity of students in a classroom ⑤ too busy doing extra work. Teachers' requests for specific appropriate contents for an in-service training program should reflect the problems in teaching since their aim to participate in the training program should be to solve their problems. (Hara, 2000) Thus, teachers' requests for the contents of the training program should be ① To improve their own English skills ② To improve their teaching skills ③ To learn how to motivate students ④ To learn how to deal with the diversity of students.

II Questionnaires and the results

The author had been participating in the English teachers' week-long intensive training program offered every summer by Okinawa Prefecture Board of Education for 6 years, from 2002 to 2007, as one of the lecturers. Before each summer program started, a questionnaire was given to the participating high school English teachers regarding the following two questions, "What are you concerned about in your class?" and "What do you expect from this seminar?". English teachers who participated in the program answered these two questions by writing freely. The author kept the survey responses. The author read the answers of the questionnaires from 2006 and 2007 and categorized them. There are several points which the author extracted from each teacher's answers. For example, regarding question ① "What are you concerned about in your class?", one female teacher wrote as follows.

I'm concerned about the different levels among students and the recent lack of Self-motivation even with the good students.(1) Nowadays students tend to wait for teachers to give them assignments in order to study. They take less and less initiative, such as memorizing vocabulary for the upcoming classes. Once they are finished with the assigned works. In addition, the foundation of the students' English is weak(2) We constantly need to review the basic patterns of grammar and syntax rather than learn new materials. A lot of time must be spent on review and there is not enough time left for the actual curriculum.

Also, the lack of vocabulary(3) is a major factor in spending too much time on materials.

In this answer, from the underlined sentences four factors were noted: from the underlined phrase(1), problems of "diversity of students" and "students' lack of motivation", from the underlined phrase(2), a problem of "students' low English level" and from the underlined phrase(3), a problem of "students' lack of vocabulary" were extracted.

About question ② "What do you expect from this seminar?", another female teacher wrote as follows.

Since at this seminar, all lectures will take place in English, and discussions and presentations are required, I will be immersed in English as if I were in an

English speaking country. I expect this seminar to improve my English speaking and listening ability(1). I am also looking forward to having an opportunity to learn some teaching methods that I can bring back to school and share with my co-workers(2). In addition to that, I expect to discuss my own concerns, I stated above, with other teachers(3).

From this answer, three factors can be extracted. They are "To improve their own English skills" from the underlined sentence(1), "To improve teaching skills" from the underlined sentence(2), and "To get information from or exchange with other teachers" from the underlined sentence(3). In order to increase the reliability, the author read all the answers by teachers and categorized them twice for intra-rater reliability.

The 150 teachers who were surveyed (78 in 2006 and 72 in 2007) were all working at public high schools in Okinawa. They were the participants in the training program held in 2006 and 2007 by the Okinawa Prefecture Board of Education to support the project to "cultivate Japanese who can speak English" advocated by MEXT. In answer to the two questions: "What are you concerned about in your class?" and "What do you expect from the training program?", the resulting answers are given below. First are the answers from 2006 are considered. Here, the author focused on points which were commented on by more than four people.

Results of 2006

① "What are you concerned about in your class?"

1. Students' low motivation to study English. (29 people)
2. Diversity of students (15 people)
3. Students' low level of English (7 people)
4. little time to do extra things (6 people)
5. classes too big to manage (5 people)
 - how to make the class more active (5 people)
 - how to improve out-put skills (5 people)

- how to make students independent learners (5 people)
- how to teach oral-communication effectively (5 people)

② "What do you expect from this seminar?"

1. To improve my own English skills.(44 people)
2. To improve my teaching skills. (37 people)
3. To exchange with or get information from other teachers. (34 people)
4. To learn how to use multi-media (computer, audio-visual etc.) (12 people)
5. To learn teaching theories and methodologies. (10 people)
6. To learn how to motivate students. (8 people)
7. To learn how to make English class communicative. (5 people)

Followings are the answers of the questionnaires in 2007. Again, the author has focused on those answers given by four or more participants.

Results of 2007

① "What are you concerned about in your class?"

1. Students' low motivation to study. (22 people)
2. Diversity of students (15 people)
3. Students' low level of English (11 people)
4. Less time to do extra things. (7 people)
5. How to teach grammar effectively. (6 people)
6. Classes too big to manage. (4 people)
 - How to have communication in class. (4 people)
 - How to improve my own English skills. (4 people)

② "What do you expect from this seminar?"

1. To improve my own English skills. (34 people)
2. To improve my teaching skills. (34 people)
3. To exchange with or get information from other teachers. (26 people)
4. To learn how to use multi media.(computer, audio-visual) (15 people)
5. To learn how to have communication in class. (10 people)
6. To learn how to participate in team-teaching. (6 people)

The total results of 2006 and 2007 are as follows, focusing only on the top five answers.

Total results of 2006 & 2007

① "What are you concerned about in your class?"

1. Students' low motivation (51 people)
2. Diversity of students (30 people)
3. Students' low level of English. (18 people)
4. Less time to do extra things. (13 people)
5. Classes too big to manage. (9 people)

② "What do you expect from this seminar?"

1. To improve my own English skills. (78 people)
2. To improve my teaching skills. (71 people)
3. To exchange with or get information form other teachers. (50 people)
4. To learn how to use multi-media.(computer, audio-visual) (27 people)
5. To learn how to have communication in class. (15 people)

III Consideration and Analysis of the results

Considering that the questionnaires were not multiple choice but rather free writing, it was surprising for the author to find that the four or five answers to the two questions were the same in both 2006 and 2007. Because the answers were not chosen from multiple choice selections but answered freely in their own words, the fact that the same answers were acquired shows that high school English teachers worry about the same problems and expect about the same content for in-service training programs.

The author considers that the top three problems found; "students' low motivation", "diversity of students" and "students' low level of English" should lead to requests for in-service training programs to include materials to help teachers "to improve teaching skills" and "to exchange with or get information from other teachers", showing that they are looking for solutions for the existing problems. Even if they cannot find all the solutions, just getting to know each other as fellow-teachers worried about the same problems will be a great relief and an encouragement for them to continue to persevere. When these results are compared with the suppositions that the author proposed in the preceding sections of this paper, among the problems the author cited, "lack of teachers' English skills", "lack of teachers' teaching skills", "students' low motivation", "diversity of students" and "too busy" were all mentioned by teachers as problems. "Students' low motivation" and "diversity of students" were, in fact, the first and the second problems of the top three most common problems given. However, the third most commonly cited problem, "students' low level of English" was one that the author did not expect as one of the major problems.

Regarding the requests for the in-service training course contents, the author supposed, "to improve my own English skills" and "to improve my teaching skills" would be first and second of the top requests. However, the request which placed third for the surveyed teachers, "to exchange with or get information from other teachers" was also unexpected by the author as a major request. Even though the author's supposed requests of "to learn how to motivate students" and "to learn how to deal with students' diversity" did not come out, they may be considered to have been included in "to improve my teaching skills". As for the request of teaching skills, CLT related comments were found, such as "to learn how to have a

communicative class [or: communication in class]", which was in the fifth place in both 2006 and 2007. This indicates that CLT is still a kind of new teaching methodology and teachers are having difficulty to employ it in their classes.

In conclusion, the survey results imply that an effective in-service training program for teachers should focus on at least three major goals:

1. To improve English skills of English teachers.
2. To improve teaching skills of English teachers.
3. To offer opportunities for teachers to exchange ideas with each other.

In order to accomplish goal number 1, it may be good to conduct all the lectures in English or provide an opportunity for debate, discussion or oral presentations in English. For number 2, various practical teaching skills and ideas should be introduced such as "how to teach grammar effectively" or "how to have effective communication in class" because both of these were cited as problems. Furthermore, since teachers cited "students' low motivation", "diversity of students" and "low level of English" as their primary problems in teaching, a class which provides practical ideas on "how to motivate students", "how to deal with a variety of students" or "how to improve students' English level" will appeal to teachers. As for goal number 3, teachers should be given enough time to get to know each other in a relaxed atmosphere by scheduling time for a long lunch break or coffee break, etc. Time should be allotted not only for getting acquainted but also for sharing ideas and learning from each other.

"Research, in general, is consistent in showing that teachers trained to implement effective teaching practices raise student achievement more than untrained teachers."(Brophy & Good, 1986) Therefore, there lies the necessity to provide an effective in-service training program since it leads to better student achievement. In order to make training programs effective for teachers, their problems and requests for specific contents appropriate to their perceived needs should be reflected in designing the program.

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