

WHAT DO THEY WANT TO KNOW? QUESTIONS FROM VIETNAMESE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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BACKGROUND

The basis for the work reported here is a number of in-service courses for Vietnamese teachers of English to secondary, teachers' college and university students in Vietnam. On each of three visits to their country I took prepared material, based on the sort of needs analysis which can be done at a distance and which includes suggestions from third parties. Early in each course this prepared material and the delivery method were modified in response to teachers' questions and suggestions. This study reflects on these courses by analysing the teachers' questions.

NEEDS ANALYSIS

Traditionally, the first stage in course design is needs analysis, and one way of doing a needs analysis is to ask course members what they want to know. This is difficult when the lecturers are from another country and planning has to be done before they meet the course members. Fax and e-mail exchanges with the organisers do not usually survey the needs of the actual teachers who will be attending. As Dubin and Wong point out (1990, p.284), inservice providers do not necessarily understand the teachers' classroom and institutional situations. Furthermore, the learners themselves may not have a clear picture of what is possible on an inservice course when they have never attended one.

In this case there are at least three options. One is to take advantage of whatever has been written in journals or institutional reports by others working in the same country or in a similar situation (Dubin and Wong, 1990; Penaflorida et al., 1992; Howe, 1993; Nixon, 1995). If the lecturer is making a return visit then of course feedback from the last group will be taken into account. Another option is to modify the content on the spot as needs arise. Dubin and Wong's (p.286) suggestion for collecting teachers' questions through the course has advantages for the lecturer's credibility as well as for course content.

DECISIONS ON COURSE CONTENT

As well as the organisational considerations, there are concerns about the content of an inservice course delivered by a foreigner, in particular the appropriateness of methodology designed in one context for another (Howe, 1993; Hird, 1995; Lamb, 1995; Lewis, 1995b). On the one hand Howe, writing from her experience of teaching in Vietnam, claims that whether language learners are "passive" or "active" in class depends more on teachers' expectations than on culturally nased learning styles. On the other hand many

writers report problems. Chinese teachers on a course taught by Hird in Hangzhou "saw only limited possibilities for the use of Western methodology in their teaching" (1995, p.22). He sees several reasons for this belief: the over-emphasis on oral communication at the expense of written in some communicative approaches, the expectation that students will have many out-of-class opportunities to develop communicative competence, and a failure to incorporate teaching and learning styles traditionally valued in China, such as memorisation and an emphasis on perfection. Other factors such as the national examination system and the need for teachers to earn extra income outside of regular class hours are grouped by Hird as "China-specific", although they will be familiar to teachers in other countries.

A similar conclusion about a lack of transfer between inservice courses and later classroom practice is reached by Lamb (1995). The results of his enquiry a year after running a course for teachers in Indonesia make discouraging reading. They include "no uptake", "confusion" and "adaptation and rejection", although a few teachers did report "a fundamental change in their approach to teaching" (p.78). His suggestion was to start the course with awareness-raising activities to alert participants to their current practice and its underlying values. In an earlier report on the Vietnam project described in this paper (Lewis 1995b), further suggestions are made for overcoming this same problem.

Against all the reservations which need to be taken into account is the fact that Western teacher educators *are* often asked to conduct courses in countries like China, Indonesia and Vietnam and some of them are asked to return. Their decision then is which aspects of a general approach to teacher education are worth dwelling on in a particular short course in another country from their own?

MODELS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Wallace (1989) summarises three models of professional development: the craft model where learners study with a "master" practitioner who demonstrates and instructs, the applied science model in which knowledge is passed on to trainees, and the reflective model in which new and experiential knowledge are measured through practice and reflection.

Viewed in relation to in-service courses taught by foreign professionals, the craft model has limited application, although the idea of a "master" practitioner doing demonstrations which the teachers then imitate, can happen in a small way if the lecturer is willing to teach in front of an unfamiliar class. The applied science model may seem closest to the format of inservice courses in general. New ideas culled from current international literature are handed on by the lecturer and then put into practice later by the teachers.

In the third model, reflection, teachers bring together the knowledge handed on by the visiting lecturer with their own classroom experience. They then put into practice and reflect on the new suggestions. Reflection has been developed as a major thread in language teacher development (Richards and Lockhart, 1994). Its advantage for inservice

courses is that it is "not linked to a particular method or view of teaching" (p.3) but allows teachers to explore whatever they are currently practising in terms of the new ideas they have received.

Collecting the teachers' questions

Before my first visit to teach the course in Central Vietnam, information about what was expected came from a New Zealand Volunteer Service Abroad teacher who was working there. I knew that participants would be mainly practising teachers from schools around the central provinces, and that staff at the Teachers' College would also sit in. As well as suggestions from the New Zealand teacher, I drew on earlier experience in teaching in a neighbouring country and on first-hand reports from others who had been to Vietnam recently. By the second and third visits I was able to base the courses partly on questions and suggestions from earlier sessions and also build in time to respond "off the cuff" to needs as they arose.

The questions which are analysed here are from teachers in three different tertiary institutions in Vietnam over a three year period. The questions were written on slips of paper at various points in the course in response to my suggestion that knowing their concerns would help me make the course more relevant to them. They were willing to do this provided they could be anonymous. I then analysed the questions in three different stages and for three different purposes: first at the end of each day in order to respond to them during the course, next as the basis for a book to be prepared later and finally as part of a longer process of reflecting on inservice courses. In quoting the questions here and in the book, any non-standard forms of English have been edited out.

Categorising the questions for in-course responses

During the course, the questions were put into categories according to how I could respond to them: by giving information on the spot, through a demonstration lesson or through guided discussion involving course participants. Some questions also required follow-up material such as articles sent through the post later.

Questions which called for factual information were answered during the appropriate session planned for that topic. For example:

I have read about 'language across the curriculum' and 'content based language teaching'. Are they the same? What exactly do they mean?

Other questions called for a demonstration of how some theoretical piece of advice could work out in practice. For example:

How can teachers introduce grammar rules naturally?

In some cases an inductive approach was taken - demonstration followed by the teachers reporting on the principles they saw in action, and at other times the approach was deductive - the principles were set out and teachers then watched them in action.

The demonstrations were done either through using the "fishbowl" technique, where a group of teachers become the "students" at the front of the room, while other course members watched, or in actual classes of students with the teachers sitting at the back. The latter is, of course, more of a challenge. In this case it meant taking separate lessons under the headings of listening, speaking, reading and writing because that was the way classes were organised. It also meant teaching under the same conditions as the teachers faced every day - large classes with students sitting at long benches with no room for the teacher to approach each student individually. There was considerable shyness amongst some of the students about speaking English in front of a native speaker. On the positive side, there was the novelty of being taught by a "foreigner" whom they had seen around the campus for several days.

During the follow-up discussions, questions needed to be answered with reference to the teachers' own classroom situation. Although the visiting lecturer might have ideas, on the basis of having taught in similar circumstances, if teachers were to "take up" the ideas, in Lamb's (1995) words, there needed to be a chance to discuss all the options with examples from teachers who used the same coursebook.

Categorising the questions as the basis for a book

One of the outcomes of my visit was to be a training book (Lewis, 1996) which I sent back to the institutions where I had worked for their reference. The book has also been of some interest to other teacher educators who work in similar situations. The course organisers, but not necessarily the teachers themselves, were aware that this would happen.

In categorising the teachers' questions as the basis for the book, I kept in mind that it would be seen by people who had not attended the course. The headings therefore had to be straightforward. The material was organised into two sections, with a total of thirteen chapters, each chapter starting with the teachers' questions. First came answers to questions about general approaches: communicative language teaching, teaching English through content, learning to learn and assessing language use. The second part dealt with particular aspects of teaching English, such as teaching grammar in communicative approaches, language through literature, English for specific purposes and lesson planning.

The course leader's responsibility

As well as my immediate responses to their questions during the course and their usefulness as the basis for the book, they were important to me as I reflected on my role and looked for messages to be taken into account in planning future courses. For example many questions, such as references to low salaries and having to work at evening school teaching each night to earn a living, gave me background information about the wider teaching situation, but seemed beyond the brief of a visitor. They seemed to fall along a continuum as represented in Figure 1.



The following question illustrates the left-hand end of the continuum.

There are a couple of premises here - that students read text book dialogues aloud and that memorising is the lesson goal. Criticism of the sort of choral repetition that kept me awake from the adjoining classroom late at night in one school could be seen as an attack on a deeply established tradition.

How can we get the material to do this kind of teaching?

Accommodating oneself to the status quo

We have to teach pronunciation during reading lessons. How can we do this?

Both of these were addressed during demonstration lessons and follow-up discussions. They gave rise to the topic of motivation and organisational options within large classes. The specific barriers that teachers mention are those that are well addressed in books and journals for teachers: large classes, predetermined lesson outlines, and unmotivated

students. Reading articles from sources such as *English Language Teaching Forum* which are written by classroom teachers like themselves can have an impact.

The organisation of language lessons under into fixed categories was another recurring theme.

Is it necessary to make students do some writing in the speaking class?

The point is not whether or not it is necessary but how the two can best be integrated if that is what the state curriculum sets out.

For some questions, teachers need to know that their conditions are similar to classroom conditions around the world. The length of time allotted to language learning is one example:

We have only 45 minutes for a lesson on reading and 45 minutes on listening. How can my students make progress in such a short time?

Emphasis on learner training was one response to this question.

Pressures from beyond the classroom were mentioned by some teachers.

What can I do when parents say, "My child isn't learning any grammar rules in your class?"

If parents have these concerns, then they need to be acknowledged by a whole staff, since there is a conflict between changing methodology and parents' perception of what constitutes a proper language lesson. As with other questions, teachers can be told that schools in many parts of the world face similar situations and that working cooperatively with parents is a common response.

Suggest change

Finally some questions point to classroom practice which could be changed.

What can I do when students keep making the same grammar mistakes over and over?

My response to the above question was to talk about the second language learning process and to suggest that alternative marking systems to the traditional counting errors can be beneficial to learners' developing language. For the next question there was a chance to talk about different ways of teaching vocabulary, including involving learners in the process through predicting meaning in context.

The reading passages in our text books are very long and there are too many new words to explain. Do you have any suggestions?

A few that were concerned with affective factors could also be answered with organisational suggestions.

With my class reading just seems a struggle to get at meaning. What can I do to make them enjoy the reading lesson?

RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, here are some recommendations for both visiting lecturers and the national teachers in the organisation of inservice courses. Visiting "experts" make their message more credible when they are willing to respond to teachers' questions by doing demonstration lessons under local conditions. If, for example, overhead transparencies are available and can be seen from the back of a large room they are worth including in the demonstration. The same applies to the use of material which the lecturer might be tempted to take in from another country but which local teachers would not have access to.

The second recommendation is to acknowledge the boundaries of one's role in answering questions. Some of the questions deserve an answer that shows local teachers in their classes. National teachers and teacher educators can be encouraged to develop their own training resources. Videos could illustrate language teaching approaches adapted to local classrooms. Training packs which address questions asked during this and other in-service courses could be made available for teachers in remote areas. If visiting lecturers combine giving some immediate responses to questions with offering long-term suggestions for local initiatives, then they can look forward in the future to being able to use such materials as part of language education courses in their own countries.

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