

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Teacher education and materials development in an Asian context

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Reference data:

Aliponga, J., Luk, H., Williams, G., & Yoshida, K. (2008). Teacher education and materials development in an Asian context. In K. Bradford-Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This research-funded project that is being implemented at selected tertiary schools in Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam has two goals: a teacher training program (TTP) and materials development. Its end products are English teachers who are well-equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills for developing materials in their own field; teaching materials that will suit the needs of learners, and that will develop learner autonomy and critical thinking; and teachers who can train novice teachers.

本研究は、助成を受け実施されている、日本、タイ、ベトナムの大学における英語授業観察研究である。研究の目標は英語教員の養成とアジアの学習者に適した英語教材の開発である。最終的に、英語教員が教材開発に必要な知識と技術を身につけ、学習者のニーズに合致した教材を作成し、学習者の自律学習やクリティカル・シンキングを促進し、新しい教員を養成できるようになることを目指す。



One member of our research team had a chance to observe some English language classes during a trip to Vietnam where we occasionally send our students for overseas study. The observations and interviews with classroom teachers revealed that there was a gap between self-professed goals, often of wanting the class to be more communicative, and classroom practices, often the grammar translation method. Many of them were simply not getting what they are expecting from students. Often the teachers were laying the blame for the incongruence on the students or administrative factors. However, when pressed

to describe methods to achieve their goals, many teachers failed to explain practices for achieving such goals. We came to the conclusion that while many teachers say, “I want my students to speak more,” they are not informed of how to achieve that.

The same is true at our university in Japan, specifically in our department. We discovered during classroom observations that some of our teachers have expectations of students, yet design classes that fail to address these goals. The result, often, is to blame the students. This was clearly evident from the procedures and strategies employed in the classes. This motivated us to focus on classroom observations, with the main goal of helping our teachers improve their teaching, which can be achieved through teacher education. The similarities of what we discovered in Vietnam and Japan led us to believe that teachers of English within Asia have, among the differences of culture, training, and context, similar problems.

Literature review

Ur (1997) defines teacher education as professional learning by teachers already engaged in professional practice, usually through reflective discussion sessions based on current classroom experiences. Teacher development, like professional development as emphasized by Diaz-Maggioli (2003), is an ongoing learning process in which teachers engage voluntarily to learn how best to adjust their teaching to the learning needs of their students. It goes without saying that teachers play an important role in the classroom. In fact, Carey (2004) and Haycock (1998) have stressed that there has been a growing recognition that teachers are

the most important factor in student achievement. This finds support from a landmark study on teacher quality in Tennessee in which Sanders and Rivers (1996) used student achievement data for all teachers across the state of Tennessee to determine how “effective” teachers were. As Smith and Gillespie (2007) put it, regardless of whether it is the teacher’s background and qualifications, teaching methodologies, or alignment of standards with curriculum and accountability that leads to student success, each of these depends on effective training and preparation of teachers.

Project framework

The project in the present study is being conducted to provide teacher education. As part of the study, classes are being observed to explore classroom processes pertinent to language use, content focus, content control, skills focus, and type and source of materials used (Spada & Frohlich, 1995). Classroom observations have been conducted at selected public and private primary, secondary, and tertiary schools in Japan and Vietnam, and further observations will be carried out again in both countries as well as Thailand. Since not all the intended observations have been completed, this paper will describe the first three stages of the project without presenting any results or drawing any final conclusions. After completion of all the observations, the results will be utilized for teacher development. This project does not seek to prescribe any particular teaching methodology. However, through teacher interviews it has become clear that *communication* between students is a common goal. Many teachers described their ideal role in the classroom as being supporters of student learning and facilitators of language

use. It became clear that teachers were describing student centeredness, even if they were unaware of the terminology. The aim of this project is to train teachers to design and develop their own materials that are supported by their teaching philosophies and suited to the needs and interests of their students as they see them. It is our hope to develop a simple peer or self-evaluation guide for teachers to identify their goals and assess their role in the attainment of those goals.

Research questions

This three-year on-going project seeks to address questions pertinent to teacher development and materials development at selected private and public primary, secondary, and tertiary schools in Japan, Vietnam, and Thailand. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the communicative orientation in the language classrooms at selected public and private primary, secondary, and tertiary schools in Japan, Vietnam and Thailand?
2. What are the implications of the findings of classroom observations for teacher education and materials development?

Methods

Participants

The participants in this ongoing study involve selected public and private primary, secondary, and tertiary teachers in Japan, Vietnam, and Thailand. The participants are chosen

using non-probability sampling, specifically availability or convenience sampling. We have sought help from people we know from schools in each country. For example, in Vietnam where we have visited some classes, the Office of International Affairs of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH) in Ho Chi Minh City obtained permission for us to observe classes of their English teachers. The same Office facilitated our classroom observations at the primary and secondary schools with which they have connections. In Thailand, we have made contact with individuals from the Thammasat and Assumption Universities with which our University has international exchange agreements. In the case of Japan, we have sought permission to conduct classroom observations from our University, schools of our colleagues, and high schools we visited for our University's high school visit program.

Procedure

Stage 1

This study consists of six stages, namely: instrument preparation, seeking permission to conduct classroom observation, classroom observation, data analysis, teacher development, and materials development. Two types of *instruments* have been prepared for the first stage. One is a pre-lesson interview questionnaire (Appendix A), designed to elicit information such as a teacher's educational background, teaching methods, philosophy of teaching, problems encountered in the classroom and solutions to such problems, student performance assessment, use of homework, and expectations from students. The pre-lesson interview is conducted prior to the classroom observation.

The second instrument is Spada and Frohlich's (1995) Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) Observation Scheme (Appendix B). The scheme, which has not been modified for this study, is rooted within a theory of communicative language teaching and can capture the complexity and variety of instructional events in L2 classroom settings, such as the variety of activities and modalities used, the kind of language that learners produce in pair or group work, the kinds of questions teachers and students ask one another, the types of verbal interactions which take place within different activities or tasks, the content focus of the lesson, the control of content, and even the type of source materials used.

The COLT observation scheme has two parts, but only Part A is utilized in this study. As described by Yu (2006), Part A is referred to as the macrolevel analysis and is designed to conduct a real-time coding that describes classroom activities at five major levels. The first, *activity type*, such as drill or roleplay, etc., is employed to help the observer identify the kinds of tasks and exercises that students need to do during the class. Compared to the other levels, it is not only qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) in nature, but is the only open-ended category within the context of which the information of classroom processes realized by the other levels are provided. The second level, *participant organization*, such as teacher-centered activities (like whole-class interaction) or student-centered activities (like group work), records the amount of time spent on different types of class interaction. The third level, *content*, can be employed to determine whether an observed class is primarily code-based or meaning-based in its orientation. Code-based

instruction is realized through a subcategory with an explicit focus on language (form, function, discourse, and sociolinguistic rules), whereas meaning-based orientation is realized through the subcategory of *other topics*. The fourth level, *student modality*, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, or writing, measures how much time students spend practicing the four skills. The last level, *materials*, focuses on information regarding type, length, and source of texts being used.

In short, the Part A analysis permits a description of classroom practices for different focuses of communicative competence within activities. For instance, if an activity is described as sociolinguistics-focused, the features of instruction are specified. Data from the COLT scheme will be analyzed using the information from the pre-lesson interview questionnaire. For example, if a teacher lectured throughout an entire lesson, the motivation behind this teaching approach may be identified from her pre-lesson interview questionnaire response to her philosophy of teaching.

Stage 2

The second stage, *seeking permission to conduct classroom observations*, has been done in different ways. For instance, in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, we talked first to our contact at the Office of International Relations of USSH, explaining our research objectives. Then we sent a formal letter to the Office, asking permission to conduct classroom observations. After the permission was granted, the said Office contacted different teachers from USSH, and the principals from different public and private primary and

secondary schools about our intention of observing some English classes. The teachers and students who were to be observed were given details of our research objectives and only teachers and students who had given their verbal agreement to be observed, recorded on video, and to allow us to publish materials based on their classes were observed. We confirmed this agreement with the teacher and students before each class observation. The same procedure is being followed in Thailand. We have communicated with people from Thammasat and Assumption Universities who are contacting different public and private primary and secondary schools in nearby areas.

In Japan, we visited schools at which we taught previously and at which we are currently teaching part-time, and schools at which our friends are working. In the case of our school, where we all work, the observations took the form of ordinary classroom observations that we have been conducting since the fall of 2006. We asked permission from the teachers and students we observed to use the data generated from their classes. In other cases, such as the high schools we visited as part of the high schools visit program of our University, we talked personally to career center staff, explaining our research project. The career center staff asked us to send a formal letter, which was then forwarded to the principal for approval. Again, only teachers and students who had agreed to the study were observed.

Stage 3

Concerning the third stage, *classroom observation*, we have observed selected public and private primary, secondary, and tertiary classrooms in Vietnam. When possible, each of

us observed classes separately. However, there were times when two or three of us were together at one classroom observation. During the classroom observation, aside from using the COLT scheme, we also made observational or anecdotal notes. These notes served to document and describe what took place in the class, such as student learning relative to concept development, reading, social interaction, communication skills, and other processes and variables related to teaching and learning.

Besides using the COLT scheme and note taking, we also recorded the lessons with a video camera. Using video analysis to study teaching and learning resources and learning has special advantages (Stigler, Gallimore, & Hiebert, 2000). One advantage is that it enables detailed examination of complex activities, such as the use of teaching and learning materials, from different points of view. The second advantage is that it preserves classroom use of teaching and learning materials by many people with different kinds of expertise, making possible detailed descriptions of many classroom lessons. The third benefit is it increases the opportunity to develop powerful theoretical observational systems to analyze the use of resources in the classroom and learning situations. The same procedures have been followed for classroom observations at schools in Japan. We will also employ the same procedures at schools in Thailand next year.

Stages 4 – 6

In the fourth stage, *data analysis*, both the instructional and learner data will be quantified and qualified to determine the nature of communicative orientation in language classrooms

at the selected schools. This will involve calculating the percentage of time spent on each of the categories under the major features, namely: participant organization, content, content control, student modality, and materials. After the data is analyzed, the next stage is to *conduct teacher development*. In this stage, we plan to organize a seminar where findings from the classroom observations will be presented and teachers are invited to participate in an open discussion about the observations and their implications for language teaching. The seminar will not be limited to teachers who were observed for the study. We believe that when teachers from different backgrounds come together, they have the opportunity to learn from each other's different experiences. This will be an invaluable resource for the teachers as the information will be diverse, current, and personal. In addition, we intend to promote the discussion of *materials development* in the form of good teaching practices that emerge from the research and seminar, so teachers will have resources readily available beyond the research.

Conclusion

We expect that by August 2008 we will begin seminars with teachers to develop a self- or peer-evaluation format. Currently we have seminars planned with graduate students in Thailand and with teachers at our university in Japan to identify basic questions they have, and to develop answers to those questions. It is our expectation that by the end of 2008 our research will have teacher groups formed in Thailand, Japan, and Vietnam to assist us in trial evaluations. In 2009, our target is to introduce a complete self- or peer-evaluation scheme for teachers. By the end of 2009 we expect to

have a complete program available for teachers through professional teacher organizations and teaching colleges.

Biodata

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Appendix A

Pre-lesson interview questions

Name: Mr. / Ms. _____ School: _____

Age: _____

Education: __ Graduate (MA) __ Bachelor __ Certificate

Employment: _____ year(s) _____ month(s)

School: _____

_____ year(s) _____ month(s)

School: _____

Other work: _____ year(s) _____ month(s)

Nature/Kind: _____

Total Salary: _____ VND/month

Work Schedule: _____ classes/day (each class = _____ mins)

_____ days/week

1. What do you try to do in your teaching in general?
2. What are the obstacles/problems in trying to achieve that goal(s)?
3. What do you do to solve those problems?
4. What is your teaching philosophy?
5. Why did you decide to go to graduate school? (if applicable)

6. What is your ideal language class?
7. What do you expect from students in class? after class?
8. How do you assess/evaluate your students?
9. Do you give homework?
 - ___ No
 - ___ Yes What kind? _____
10. What kind of materials do you use?
 - ___ Textbook ___ written by native speaker
 - ___ written by Vietnamese
 - ___ Teacher made
 - ___ Student made

Appendix B

Spada and Frohlich's (1995) Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching Observation Scheme (COLT)

Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching Observation Scheme

COLT PART A

Observer: _____
 Visit No: _____
 Date: _____

School: _____
 Teacher: _____
 Lesson (min.): _____
 Subject: _____

TIME	ACTIVITIES & EPISODES	PARTICIPANT ORGANISATION			CONTENT			CONTENT CONTROL		STUDENT MODALITY					MATERIALS								
		Class	Group	Indiv.	Meaning	Language	Other topics	Teacher/Text	Teacher/Text/Student	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Other	Minimal	Extended	Audio	Visual	L2-NNS	L2-NS	L2-NSA	Student-made	
1																							
2																							

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