



Teachers and Changes : A School-based Professional Development Programme for Thai Teachers

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to develop, implement and evaluate a professional development programme for teachers of English as a Foreign Language in Thailand to assist them to make a major change in their pedagogy, a change mandated by the National Education Act of 1999. More specifically, what was required of them was to change from being a teacher who delivers instruction in the classroom to a teacher who acts as a facilitator in a learner-centred classroom.

The study was conducted in a non-metropolitan region in Thailand, and involved nine primary EFL teachers and their classes in three cities. Data were gathered by quantitative (questionnaire, classroom observation checklist) and qualitative (interview) methods before and after the PDP to record changes in the teachers' perceptions and classroom practices over eight months. The data showed that all the teachers were rated higher by their supervisors on the six major criteria chosen to characterise CLT, and the teachers and their students provided corroborating evidence of a major shift in pedagogy towards the model preferred by the Thai Ministry of Education.

The study showed that a professional development programme of this kind, closely adapted to a specific context, involving preparatory workshop training followed by a semester of guided,

strongly supported classroom implementation practice, can make a significant change in Thai primary EFL teachers' understanding and use of CLT as an innovatory pedagogy. It indicates that this model of professional development is capable of providing a means by which the desired change to a learner-centred, communicative English language curriculum might be achieved system-wide in Thailand, one that has up to this point proved very difficult to implement.

The background of the study

The need for educational reform in Thailand was sharpened by the country's severe economic downturn in 1997. Thailand's 'relatively weak human resource base' was identified as one of the major underlying factors in the economic crisis and this in turn led the government to re-examine urgently the quality of the country's educational system (Office of the National Education Commission, 2001a).

Education in Thailand has developed from traditional forms conducted in Buddhist temples, the palace and within the family. The impact of King Chulalongkorn's modernisation of the country from 1868 and the introduction of Western concepts of schooling by missionaries in the later Nineteenth Century led eventually to a state educational system, one which was also based upon resisting colonial imperialism. The monarchy (and after 1932, the constitutional government) sought to achieve a balance between traditional ways of learning and foreign approaches. This intermixing and adapting of different traditions and cultural forms gave Thai education a continuing role in addressing social change and the modernisation of the country. This history of reform in education linked to national development was taken to a further stage with the establishment of the National Scheme of Education in 1960, which promulgated the First National Education Development Plan. The seventh of these plans, issued in 1992, emphasised that 'the educational system should facilitate the

country's development process towards self-reliance, sustainability and enhance global competitiveness' (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999). It was the failure to obtain these outcomes, in part due to the impact of influences outside government control, like the Asian economic crisis of 1997, but also due to a perceived failure of Thai social institutions 'to adapt themselves to cope with the formidable changes' facing them (Office of National Education Commission, 1999), that created the environment for a still faster rate of reform.

In response to this most recent of demands for reform, the Thai government, acting through the Office of the National Education Commission (ONEC) under the Prime Minister's Office, formulated radical new policies to bring about necessary changes within the education system at all levels. ONEC carried out initial research into the provision of quality education in developed countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, Canada and Australia, with a view to their application in the Thai educational system. Foremost in ONEC's interest was these systems' capacity to develop students' analytic and independent thinking. On the basis of this enquiry ONEC prepared recommendations for consideration by the Thailand's Constitution Drafting Council, with the result that the 1997 Thai Constitution contained extensive recommendations concerning major educational changes. These included the provision of a twelve-year basic quality education free of charge throughout the country, the promotion of local wisdom and national arts and culture, and the development of the teaching profession through extended pre-service education, in-service programmes, certification and registration.

ONEC's recommendations also led to the National Education Act which passed through parliament in August 1999. The Act represented 'an unprecedented and long over-due break' (Office of National Education Commission, 2001a) from traditional Thai educational policy in that it focused on reform of learning for a more creative and constructivist approach to knowledge

acquisition. It urged as well administrative reform towards greater decentralisation, financial reforms in schools, which would allow educational institutions to manage their own budgets, reform of educational resources emphasising the use of information technology to support learning, and encouraging schools and communities to work closely together.

Planned changes to teaching and learning

The reform of learning envisaged by ONEC required rethinking adherence to the long-standing tradition of formal instruction in teacher-directed classrooms. In a report by ONEC's Sub-Committee on Learning Reform, *Learning reform: A Learner-centred approach*, the specialist committee under the chairmanship of Professor Dr Prawase Wasi (2001) argued that there were a number of key 'indicators of the urgent need of teaching-learning reform in the school system': learners of all ages learn only the subject matter and written texts, lack training in analytical thinking, self-expression and the acquisition of knowledge for themselves, do not 'learn to learn' but are recipients of transferred knowledge through routine and repetitious methods of instruction in teacher-directed classrooms, and are unhappy and bored. This resulted, it was argued, in schools not creating an environment conducive to learning linked with community life.

Responding to this concern about the teaching-learning process long established in Thai schools, the National Education Act of 1999 devoted a full chapter to learning reform, providing guidelines for a participatory approach to creating a new teaching-learning vision. The proposed learning reform was essentially a shift from focusing on content to focusing on human beings as learners and their needs: a learner-centred approach has become mandatory in all Thai schools. More specifically, the proposed reforms stipulate learning processes that provide content and activities in response to learners' interests and aptitudes. The proposed curriculum bears in mind individual differences and

expects teachers to train students in thinking processes, in independent learning, and how to apply knowledge for obviating and solving problems. In so doing, it requires teachers to organise activities for learners, which draw from authentic experiences to drill in practical work for complete mastery. Both learners and teachers are expected to learn together from different types of teaching-learning media and various sources of knowledge (National Education Act, 1999: Section 24: 10-11).

The significance of the study

This present study arose from the researcher's perception of the daunting challenge faced by classroom teachers who wished to meet the requirements of the National Education Act, and particularly the predicament of primary English for Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who were now expected to provide effective instruction to all their students. Traditional methodologies were not proving very popular or effective with cognitively maturely adolescent learners; the problems posed by attempting to teach by traditional methods in the primary grades were greater still, with relevance, cultural awareness and independent learning even more difficult to establish with students at an early stage of cognitive and social maturity. That adoption of the new curriculum would be beneficial and was urgently needed were not questioned, the critical issue was implemented: how could the transition to new methodologies be brought about most effectively?

Research on curriculum innovation (Marsh, 1988; Wilson & Corcoran, 1988; Louis & Miles, 1990; Fullan, 1992; Bottomley, Dalton, Corbel & Brindley, 1994; Williamson & Cowley, 1995) has suggested that there are three major factors leading to successful implementation. One is that the teachers involved must perceive the need for change in curriculum and pedagogy and feel the need for professional development. Another is teachers' understanding of the innovation. The third is that teachers must be able to achieve the pedagogical changes expected of them; with the

adoption of the new national curriculum policy, Thai teachers needed to be able to adapt the preferred curriculum and pedagogy to their own situations. For these reasons, the researcher considered the devising of an appropriate professional development programme for Thai primary EFL teachers would be a key mechanism for the successful implementation of the National Education Act as it applied to this specific context. In responding to the requirements of the Act as soon as possible after it came into effect in 1999, the search for effective programmes to support teachers in the challenge for changes needed to have begun by then also.

The purpose of the study

The broad purpose of the present study was to investigate a model for bringing about a major change in teacher pedagogical behaviours in EFL primary school teachers in Thailand. Within that general intention was the aim to develop, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of a professional development programme conducted with a limited group of representative local educational administrators ('supervisors'), Grade 6 EFL teachers and their students, with a view to establishing through this shorter-term pilot programme an effective working model that could, with adaptation and refinement under changing circumstances, be used by others. More particularly, the study examined the impact of this professional development programme (hereafter called 'the PDP') upon teachers who used traditional forms of direct teacher-centred instruction but who wanted to make the shift towards becoming facilitators in learner-centred classrooms. It considered also their perceptions and those of their supervisors and their students about the change in pedagogy that resulted from the teachers' involvement in the PDP.

For a change, which is major enough to constitute a paradigm shift in pedagogical theory and practice to succeed requires more of its instigators than a mental map of the new territory. It needs an effective process of implementation, with assistance for teachers as

they find their way into unfamiliar and at times hazardous terrain. A coaching approach has been claimed to be valuable in supporting teachers through the challenge of innovation (Joyce & Showers, 1980; Galton & Williamson, 1992). Coaching can be effective for developing implementation skills in teachers by providing clear guidance on what to do and how to do it. It has also been shown to have the flexibility to assist individual teachers in dealing with the specific difficulties they encounter, to assist them to gain the management skills to cope with the complexities of change, and to provide this support directly when it is most needed (Galton & Williamson, 1992). For these reasons the researcher saw a coaching approach as an important element in enabling the content of a professional development programme to be delivered and absorbed, and then to be adapted for use in the teachers' own classroom practice.

The content of the PDP was to be based on a Task Based Learning (TBL) approach to teaching EFL, employing a coaching model in its mode of delivery. Such a specifically designed PDP had not, in so far as the researcher or those members of the Ministry of Education he contacted, been used before to introduce pedagogical innovation in Thailand. It was postulated that this approach would help teachers to manage their classrooms so as to maximise the opportunities for learners to put their limited language to authentic use and to provide a more effective learning environment. It was also postulated that educators and students would have positive attitudes to the PDP and its classroom outcomes. In the evaluative phases of the study, data were to be gathered on the PDP's perceived effectiveness and the attitudes of the educators and students involved in the programme towards it.

The scope of the study

The professional development programme conducted in this study, and upon which its conclusions about TBL combined with a coaching model are based, was designed to investigate a means by which significant changes in both understanding and use of communicative language teaching (CLT) in primary EFL classes might be effective. The PDP and its evaluation attempted to balance the constraints placed upon what a project conducted by a single researcher could achieve in a limited period of time with the broad aim of investigating its potential application to nation-wide curriculum innovation. The strategies chosen to represent the larger context in the parameters of the specific pilot programme are outlined below:

The participants

The participants in this study were volunteers drawn from districts in urban and rural areas in non-metropolitan Thailand (i.e., not in Bangkok or its immediate neighbourhood). They were invited by superintendents in a Thai Education Department based in the region where the PDP was conducted. The key participants were three education supervisors and nine Grade 6 primary school teachers from three schools who indicated their enthusiasm to develop their professional careers and to participate in an innovatory EFL programme. The students in these teachers' classes were also involved in the sense that their response to the new pedagogy was sought as part of the data gathered on its effectiveness. The small size of the sample enabled the researcher to work intensively with the supervisors and the teachers in delivering new content, monitor individual change through school visits, provide professional support in after-lesson discussions and group meetings, and administer questionnaires, view videotapes of entire lessons and interview all participants separately.

The timeline

The period immediately following the 1999 Education Act was a crucial one for curriculum change in Thailand. The demand for

reform was urgent, but the implementation of a pilot programme needed to allow for an adequate period in which pedagogical change could take place and be evaluated. This study began soon after the Act came into force, allowing for the process by which permission was obtained to undertake the research and the choice of participants to be made. The timing also was linked to the start of a school year, and began in the vacation period before its commencement to enable professional development seminars to be conducted with the participants. The study was comprised of three phases conducted over nine months: Phase 1 (preparation, initial training of participants, and supported classroom introduction of the new pedagogy), Phase 2 (collection of data on teaching methodology and attitudes), Phase 3 (monitoring the major stages in pedagogical change).

The research methodology

The study used both quantitative methods (questionnaire, classroom observation checklists) and a qualitative method (interview) for data gathering. The combination of methods was designed to give reliable measures of changes in teacher behaviours, to validate this data through triangulation and to give a richer or more detailed account of the participants' understandings and attitudes during the process of changes. The researcher acted both as the manager of the PDP (controlling input through seminars, viewing and helping to assess videotapes of teachers in their classrooms, discussing pedagogical issues with supervisors and teachers after lessons) and as researcher (devising data-gathering instruments, recording interviews, organising and analysing data, evaluating the programme from the data gathered). Bias that could be introduced through this duplication of role has been minimised wherever possible, especially in giving the key responsibility for rating teacher behaviour to their supervisors, keeping permanent records (videotaping lessons and tape recording interviews), using independent translators to check accuracy of Thai/English translation of data, and the use of multiple research methods and instruments for gathering data.

The results

The study showed that the professional development programme (PDP) designed and implemented by the researcher with a group of primary EFL teachers led to changes in their classroom practices to meet the requirements of the curriculum mandated by the Thai National Education Act of 1999. The PDP was devised and carried out in accordance with principles established in other professional development settings, and modified to fit the specific context in which it was conducted. From the success of the programme, as perceived by the teachers, their supervisors and their students, the conclusion can be drawn that the main features of a task-based learning methodology, combined with a coaching model supporting implementation, can lead to teacher changing to the communicative language teaching approach. A further conclusion is that the principles followed in devising and conducting the PDP that were drawn from the literature on professional development in other settings can be applied to the specific context of this study, most notably with primary EFL teachers in Thailand.

The study showed that the coaching model employed in the PDP was an effective means to assist this group of teachers to implement the new curriculum successfully. Both the supervisors and the teachers reported that coaching helped them to clarify the way in which the new curriculum could be implemented in the classroom. It reduced the uncertainty and complexity of curriculum innovation, rendering it more manageable; both groups were more confident in their roles as a result, and better able to solve difficulties when they arose. This finding of the study supported what Joyce and Showers (1980), Gelton and Williamson (1992), proposed in their studies. That was, the coaching approach could assist teachers to develop effective ways of implementation innovation by simplifying a complex task into a manageable component.

The model of coaching adopted in the PDP had a number of features that were concluded to be important to its success. These features consist of five main components: presenting a theory,

demonstration, practicing, providing feedback and coaching for application, proposed by Joyce and Showers (1980). In the PDP, it began with a workshop for supervisors and teachers in the holidays just prior to the school semester; in this three-day training session the central elements of the new curriculum were presented, the specific process of implementing it during the PDP constructed and agreed upon by the group, and videotapes of an EFL lesson by each of the teachers viewed and discussed – leading to a general agreement that there was a need for changes in methodology by the members of the group. The follow-up to the training session extended throughout the school semester, and consisted mainly of fortnightly visits by supervisors to the three schools/teachers involved in the programme in their district. In these visits, typically, the supervisor viewed lessons of individual teachers, gave supportive expert feedback, and discussed difficulties and issues raised by the teachers. These visits also involved meetings with key figures such as principals, and were accompanied by the researcher who was involved in discussions, but the supervisor and the teacher were the main participants. The three teachers in each of the districts met outside school hours with their supervisor and the researcher from time-to-time to discuss common issues and strategies, and to strengthen their mutually supportive ‘innovation network’.

In affirming its success the supervisors and teachers involved pointed particularly to the greater clarity of understanding they had of process of implementation of the new curriculum, the confidence they gained through the regular feedback they received from supervisors, the expert advice they received which helped to solve day-to-day problems, the lessening of their feelings of anxiety and the general spirit of support, encouragement and collaboration in the PDP was conducted. The teachers pointed also to unresolved difficulties: too short a space of time to develop the necessary skills to implement the new curriculum, and the need for more support in the form of relevant materials, especially. The supervisors reported that they needed more budget support from the Provincial Education Board, and that they had insufficient time to make school

visits as expected. They commented also that they thought the teachers needed more on-site coaching to sustain the changes they were making, and that peer coaching might be a long-term alternative to the form initiated in the study. As mentioned in the literature, individuals found it difficult to carry out the change alone. Teachers needed ongoing supports from both administrators and skilled consultants to their continuing commitment to the innovation (Blackler & Shimmin, 1984; Fullan, 1992; Bottomley, Dalton, Corbel & Brindley, (1994); Cowley & Williamson, (1995).

These outcomes link this study to other studies on professional development and curriculum innovation in quite different situations, as reported in the literature review (see for example, Berman & McLauhlin, 1976; White, 1988; Fullan, 1992). However, there were of course specific characteristics in the way the training sessions were conducted, the liaison with schools, the supportive networking, and the giving of feedback and advice that linked this PDP to its local setting within a Thai cultural context. These aspects of the PDP, while not documented here, would have had crucial effect on the outcome; without these adaptations to situation, the PDP would not have succeeded as it did. The researcher's close working knowledge of the Thai education system and familiarity with the location of his study ensured, too, that the PDP was sensitive to context. There was another feature that may have contributed to the success of the programme but which was only tangentially mentioned by participants: the particular role and authority of the supervisors. Teachers agreed that supervisors have the key role to play in curriculum innovation; this stems from their responsibility for curriculum implementation at the district level. This view of PDP was pointed out by Cowley and Williamson (1995) that a model of implementation should be flexible and open for localised interpretation and implementation at a pace determined by the schools and their teachers. Beyond this, however, the Thai education system – with its firmly hierarchical structure – gives a special status to external experts such as the supervisors (and to academics/researchers). When people in such roles become

advocates for change, working as colleagues and supporters for classroom teachers, serving their needs and collaborating with them closely in a way that does not traditionally happen, then a culturally-specific effect could work to the advantage of the programme. Together with the halo effect that normally contributes to the success of pilot studies and experimental groups, this PDP had a strong impetus towards success from the specific conditions under which it was conducted.

Suggestions

This study developed, implemented and evaluated a small-scale, pilot professional development programme to assist primary EFL teachers to implement the changes mandated by the Thai government's National Education Act of 1999. In fact, this study was a quasi-experimental study. Its outcome was certainly encouraging in indicating ways in which future programmes in this field might be conducted, and it contributes to the body of literature on curriculum development and in-service education generally. Its success also points to further research which could usefully deepen the understandings it generates and extends the practical application of its approach to professional development. Some suggestions follow :

Would it work with a non-volunteer group?

Because the study was conducted as a pilot project with a volunteer group of participants as well as a limited group of schools and areas, it is suggested that further studies should be conducted by repeating the same process with a non-volunteer group of participants in different circumstances. This would extend the generalisability of the results. In addition a replication of the research without the researcher should be conducted to investigate whether or not the results will be the same when compared with this study. As mentioned by Fullan (1992), perception of a particular need is an influential factor in the success of any innovation. It is very challenging for further investigation whether or not the finding would be positive with a non-volunteer group.

***Further research on peer coaching / networking to
develop teachers as professionals in the long term***

It was obvious from the findings of this study that a coaching approach is a powerful way of assisting teachers to cope with curriculum change, as well as assisting teachers to develop their professional teaching career. Traditionally in Thailand, people who provide coaching are experts from ‘outside’, such as education supervisors or university academics who are expert in those areas. Research studies (e.g., Beijaard, Verloop, Wubbels & Feiman-Nemser, 2000; Joyce & Weil, 2000) have suggested that teachers themselves can provide useful coaching to, or rather with, their peers. In this way, teachers can share their own experiences about teaching and classroom practice, especially those with more experience collaborating with those who have less. Further studies of peer coaching and teacher networking could be conducted to assess their future role in professional development of the kind recommended here. Beijaard, Verloop, Wubbels and Feiman-Nemser, (2000) emphasise the importance of research on peer coaching that it contributes not only to the professional development of a colleague, but to the teachers’ professional growth as well.

Teachers adapting to changes

Teacher professional development has become increasingly important in many countries, including Thailand (Hallinger, 2000; Simons, Linden & Duffy, 2000). This is because teachers are affected by changes from both outside and inside schools and those changes affect their working lives. Many teachers feel insecure when confronting changes to be introduced into their classrooms required by government policy changes. Previous research and studies drawn in the literature such as Parish and Arrends, (1983), Blackler and Shimmin, (1984), Maris, (1986), Berman and McLaughlin, (1977, Fullan, (1992) and Gelton and Williamson, (1992) report in a range of cultural contexts where teachers feel insecure and lack of confidence to change. It is recommended that further investigation of the impact of changes which affect the quality of teaching and

teachers' work in Thailand would be most useful. Understanding of local characteristics in adaptation to changes could contribute significantly to the ways that innovation is introduced in this country. Studies of Thai teachers' perceptions about their professional competencies, work lives and professional identities would also be suitable for further investigation.

Fields other EFL

It has been shown in this study that attempting to implement curriculum innovation through a teacher development programme requires a consideration of local context and local culture. In addition, a professional development programme should provide for focus on both the content of the innovation and also the process of implementation, in order to maximise its chances of success (Fullan, 1992; Bottomley, Dalton, Corbel & Brindley, (1994). More importantly, it needs a means of assisting teachers to maintain the goals of the innovation and to support them through the process of implementation (Joyce & Showers, 1980); Gelton & Williamson, (1992). The programme introduced in this study was designed to serve all of the above purposes, specifically in the area of EFL. However, further investigation is suggested to ascertain whether this framework can be applied to other fields or areas of education in Thailand (or elsewhere), such as science, mathematics or social science. This is because not only do EFL teachers confront the changes in their teaching methods, but also teachers in other curriculum areas require a professional development programme, which will assist them to cope with reforms which will bring changes to their professional practices.

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