

Effects of a Professional Development Programme on New Zealand Language Teacher Beliefs and Teaching Practice

Christine Biebricher, University of Auckland, New Zealand

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Abstract

The study is set in New Zealand where teaching and learning other languages is not compulsory, and one result of this context is that teachers often have to teach a language without having pedagogical knowledge of or training in language teaching. As a consequence, many professional development opportunities are offered. This research project tries to establish the impact of one of those Professional Development Programmes on participating teachers' beliefs of language teaching and on their teaching practice. The project explores the effects of a three week Mandarin language and pedagogy immersion programme in China on non-native and native speakers. The participants are in-service teachers who have little or no training in language teaching. The study illustrates the teachers' language teaching beliefs as well as teaching practices before their international experience, and how they develop over time afterwards. Out of the ten participants four are chosen as case studies, two of which are presented in this article. The study is a longitudinal one based on narrative inquiry, interviewing participants prior to their professional development and twice afterwards over several months. The findings suggest a substantial impact of the programme on teaching beliefs and on teaching practices, in particular on the use of target language and teaching methodology.

Keywords: teacher beliefs, teacher training, professional development

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Introduction and context

In New Zealand learning other languages is not compulsory and not considered a priority within society. As a teacher, specialising in a language is not required, but teaching a language, even without linguistic or pedagogical knowledge, could become part of the teaching duties. In an attempt to bridge this gap, many professional learning and development opportunities are offered. It is unclear, however, how effective the programmes are for teachers. This research project therefore tries to establish the impact of one of those professional development programmes on participating teachers' beliefs of language teaching and on their teaching practice. The project explores the effects of a short-term international professional development (PD) programme, a three week Mandarin language and pedagogy programme in China on non-native and native speakers. The participants are in-service teachers who have little or no training in language teaching.

Although existing research looks into either teacher beliefs (Borg, 2011), or professional development (Guskey, 2002, King, 2014) or the effects of short term international experience programmes (Barkhuizen & Feryok, 2006, Trent, 2011, Willard-Holt, 2001), there is a lack of studies combining those areas which the present research project aims to connect.

Professional development for language teachers has attracted considerable attention and the effects of short-term international PD programmes on teacher beliefs and habits has particularly been evaluated. Barkhuizen and Feryok (2006) studied expectations and experiences of Hong Kong students in New Zealand during a six week programme and found an impact on the students' language learning, pedagogical understanding and cultural awareness. Similarly, Trent (2011) examined Chinese students participating in a six week immersion programme in Australia aiming to increase language proficiency, cross-cultural awareness and understanding teaching English as a second language. The students reported gains in proficiency, cultural understanding and a contribution to their identity as English language teachers. In her study, Willard-Holt (2001) established the effects of a week long experience of American English native speakers in Mexican schools, teaching English. The experience impacted on participants' beliefs and attitudes towards teaching and their empathy for non-native speakers of English.

Although those professional development programmes have had a clear effect on teachers' attitudes, habits, cultural awareness and, in the first two studies, language proficiency, effects of these programmes on teachers of other languages than English is not documented enough. Additionally, the impact of international PD programmes on the beliefs of in-service teachers is scarcely evaluated, and according to Borg, the impact of teacher education on 'in-service language teachers' beliefs is limited' (Borg, 2011).

The presented study aims to investigate the effect of an international professional development programme on in-service teachers of Chinese, looking at the teachers' cognition, but also at their teaching practices, illustrating those effects in two case studies.

The research questions posed were the following:

Are there any effects, and if so which, of an international professional development programme on in-service language teachers’

- a) beliefs of language teaching and learning
- b) language teaching practice?

The international professional development programme

The evaluated programme was a three week immersion programme in China which took place in the New Zealand summer school holidays just before the start of a new school year, and it included three components: language learning, cultural understanding and tasks based around Mandarin language teaching.

The participants received daily language classes through a tertiary institution in Beijing, and activities varied according to the language proficiency of the participants. The institution also organised cultural events such as calligraphy and Tai Chi sessions. The accompanying facilitator from New Zealand, instructed the participants in task-based language teaching. The participants had to apply this knowledge in several ways. For example, the teachers had to interview people on the street about a certain topic or had to ask native speakers for directions. The teachers had to document the interviews by audio- or video-recording people to provide evidence. The teachers then reflected on how those tasks could be adapted and used in their specific language teaching contexts in New Zealand schools. Another feature of the pedagogical strand was to highlight the connection between language and culture and finding ways to illustrate intercultural communicative language teaching. After the first week of generic language instruction the language classes focused on structures and language needed to complete the expected tasks. The participants worked in mixed ability groups to decide on how to present the task.

The programme was designed as full immersion and participants were encouraged to use Mandarin whenever possible. Native speakers on the programme were paired with non-native speakers for tasks and social activities to encourage the use of Mandarin as frequently as possible.

Participants

Out of the ten participants on the programme four were selected for case studies, two of which are presented and discussed in this article. The ten New Zealand teachers were made up of five native and five non-native speakers and consisted of nine female and one male teacher.

The language knowledge of the non-native speakers varied greatly from two rating themselves as ‘intermediate or above’ and three rating themselves at a lower level. None of the non-native speakers had been trained as a Mandarin language teacher.

The case studies were made up of two native speakers, Xian-Li and Liang-Min, and two non-native speakers, David and Janet, who all taught at New Zealand secondary schools; two at all boys colleges and two at coeducational schools. Both native

speakers were originally from Taiwan with Mandarin as their first language, but also had a high language competence in English and in Japanese. The non-native speakers were speakers of those languages as well, but had English as their first language and a high proficiency in Japanese. Their Mandarin level was the equivalent of B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and A1 of the CEFR.

All four had a teaching degree and the two native speakers were trained as language teachers in Taiwan, but the two non-native speakers had no formal language teacher training. However, both of those teachers had been teaching Japanese for several years.

Both native speakers indicated similar reasons for applying for this professional development opportunity emphasising a desire to better understand Chinese language and culture, and to receive training about pedagogy. As mentioned above, the two non-native speakers had a background in Japanese, and their main purpose for the professional development was to improve their linguistic competence in Mandarin to be able to teach at all levels with confidence.

The two cases chosen for this article provided the most information-rich data while showing similar trends as the other cases.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected in three semi-structured interviews with each participant. Prior to their departure they were interviewed to find out about their language learning and teaching history, their language teaching beliefs and about their usual teaching practice to establish a context for each teacher. The teachers were interviewed again within four to six weeks after they had returned to New Zealand which coincided with the beginning of term one of a new school year. The second interview aimed, among other things, to find out what the participants had experienced in China, what their general perception was and tried to establish if any beliefs about teaching and learning a language had shifted. The third and final interview was scheduled six months after the professional development programme and asked participants to estimate if there had been any changes in their teaching practice, if, as a consequence, their learners experienced any changes and if their beliefs about teaching a language were affected.

The data of the three interviews was structured and evaluated based on Guskey's framework of professional development (2002) which establishes teacher beliefs and classroom practice before a professional development programme, looks at changes in teachers' classroom practice and in student learning outcomes and finally estimating if there has been a change in teachers' beliefs and attitudes which marks the beginning of a new cycle in a similar way. The data was complemented by the participants' application form and a formal evaluation form administered by the event providers.

Sampling for the case studies was based on purposeful sampling to obtain cases deemed information-rich for the purpose of this study. The case studies explore commonalities as well as differences across cases (Duff, 2008).

Findings

The two case studies presented in this article are that of Xian-Li and David. The case studies illustrate the background and context of the two teachers and highlight their identified beliefs alongside with consistency or discrepancy in their teaching practices. One belief out of the stated ones will be evaluated and tracked according to Guskey's evaluation framework before the impact on beliefs and practice over time will be showcased.

Case study 1: Xian-Li

Background and context

Xian-Li was 41 at the time of the study, originally from Taiwan and a native speaker of Mandarin. She came to New Zealand to do a postgraduate degree in teaching. Although she learnt English in Taiwan it was a 'very traditional grammar based' approach and she could not understand or communicate when she first arrived (i1). Asked which language she felt most comfortable with now, she emphasized that it was context dependent, choosing Mandarin as language for feelings and personal circumstances, but English for anything relating to teaching and teacher training, as her experience took place in an English speaking country.

Xian-Li had been working at her current secondary school for six years at the time of the interview and had prior experience at another college for three years. Her school was a co-educational year seven to thirteen college, catering for students between 11 and 18 years. Apart from Chinese the school offered Spanish, but from year 11 onwards students could only choose four subjects resulting in languages becoming an unpopular choice and leading to very small or even combined year level language classes.

Both the Mandarin and Spanish teacher were specialist teachers only teaching languages. Xian-Li taught at all year levels and had a Mandarin Language Assistant to support her with preparation and sometimes with teaching.

Xian-Li identified that her students needed more input in Chinese as there were not many opportunities for them 'to interact or communicate' and when students excelling in exams 'come to real communication with Chinese then they are still' (i.1). In her first interview prior to the international PD Xian-Li explained that her motivation for participating was twofold: to reflect on her practice and to 'work with other language teachers and to really rethink of my own teachings and see what I can improve' (i1).

Beliefs and classroom practice

In the following some of Xian-Li's beliefs and her classroom practice are presented.

Target language input

One of Xian-Li's beliefs centered on the need for more target language input which she mentioned several times in the first interview. Despite this relatively strong belief

she envisaged 'conduct[ing] [her] class in Chinese' as an ideal outcome of the professional learning. This might seem slightly surprising, given she is a native speaker of Mandarin and language competence does not seem to be the obstacle for teaching in Mandarin. When asked, she explained that non-native speakers 'probably don't feel confident to use language', but as a native speaker 'we have a sort of attitude, I mean for me, like it's easier we just explain in English and they will understand, just quick solutions if you are under time pressures' (i.1). This practice of teaching in English strongly conflicted with her previously stated belief. She justified her approach with it being the norm in a New Zealand language classroom as 'in New Zealand environment it's just all the instruction in English all the time, every language classroom it's common practice to be honest' (i.1), also highlighting a wish to conform with others as 'it's kind of a trend and if you are the only one it's difficult' (i.1). Being a highly reflective teacher, Xian-Li recognised that her beliefs and teaching practice conflicted and added: '...you need to see the value if you use more Chinese [...] it might take a longer time for me to actually help them to understand, but in long term the result will maybe be more rewarding' (i.1). She acknowledged the usefulness of changing her attitude to align more with her stated belief 'I think I need to shift my attitudes and actually implement this' (i.1).

Target language use by learners

When it came to her learners, Xian-Li believed that there should be more oral output in Chinese in her lessons, either through students interacting with each other or through responding to her in the target language. Similar to her belief around language input she stated that her practice conflicted with that belief as the learners' output was often only in writing rather than in speaking.

Purpose of learning

It was important for Xian-Li that her learners saw a purpose for learning Mandarin and that they had to 'see the application of using a language rather than just something on a textbook for them to sit the exam' (i.1). She explained further that she always attempted to contextualise the learning for her students. However, just as with her other beliefs, she mentioned the conflicting practice, as 'everything is sort of academic oriented so the exam and assessments are very important' (i.1). The discrepancy between her students' assessments and their use of Chinese was evident to her as the students good in exams, based on reading and writing, could not use Chinese outside an assessment situation and for communication.

Impact: 'Language learners need more input'

Xian-Li's strongest belief by far was that learners needed more input in the target language. This is evaluated based on Guskey's framework of the effect of professional learning development.

Professional development

During her time with the other participants in China Xian-Li appreciated the combination of native and non-native speakers and stated that it helped her 'to think from the students' perspective' (i.2). She also realised in conversations with the non-

native speakers that some aspects, words or phrases needed further explanations and she realised ‘that my students would not get this straight away and they would want to know and understand more, too’ (i.2).

Change in classroom practice

This insight to look at her lessons from a learner’s and non-native speaker’s perception had an immediate impact on Xian-Li’s classroom practice when she returned: ‘I think I have tried to make more attempt to use more target language. And I think it’s also an inspiration from working with the non-native teachers, because I found with them and with my students, when you explain to them and will take time, then they can start to use it. But if you don’t explain in the first place they just wouldn’t use it’ (i.2). She highlighted again her slight shift in belief about the importance of explaining aspects in Mandarin when she described a shift in her behaviour: ‘in the past I was just thinking there is so much I need to cover, so I wouldn’t spend a lot of time to explain all those instructions. [...] But now I feel it’s actually really valuable or important’ (i.2). Additionally to giving instructions in Mandarin or offering explanations in the target language Xian-Li decided to use more authentic material to increase the input and to incorporate a more student centred approach in her teaching. She mentioned that she now emphasised group and team work, but also shifted her teaching style to a more inductive one illustrating that in an example for essay writing: ‘[...] instead of teach them how to write essays now they just brainstorm ideas and they actually have to come up in their groups with the points they want to cover in their essays and how would they structure it. So I think in the sense I sort of throw more responsibility or make them take more roles in their own learning and actually they enjoy it more rather than me explaining all the things. So I feel somehow the shift is still carrying on’ (i.2).

Change in student learning

The change in Xian-Li’s teaching practice also had an effect on her learners. To her mild surprise, the students reacted positively to her shift in teaching as ‘they are actually quite interested to have more input.’ (i.2), although the students initially indicated that they did not understand the teacher. Xian-Li explained her strategy to ‘repeat again and I will speak slowly and I will explain and repeat again’ until ‘they will start to pick up some repetition and will gradually get it and use it’ (i.2). Although her new approach of teaching was more time consuming it was reinforced by results the teacher could see quite early on: ‘... and the other time I noticed two students were actually using those Chinese instructions to converse, and they asked each other questions, and I was very impressed’ (i.2). She mentioned several times that her students enjoyed her ‘new’ style indicating that students’ motivation was higher than before.

Shift of belief

Xian-Li’s insight during the professional development, her attempt to change her teaching practice combined with the students’ reaction encouraged her to align her belief about the importance of target language input with her conflicting belief about explaining things in English. She was aware that ‘it’s a kind of habit, because it’s easier. Students will get it if you explain in English. But it’s a shift in my mentality

and then I start to be more aware of how much Chinese I speak to them in classes' (i.2). The programme heightened her awareness of how to give instructions in Mandarin and gave her strategies on how to increase target language input.

Effect after six months

In the third interview with Xian-Li she reflected on her practice again and illustrated some additional changes. She explained that in the past she 'started with vocabulary and sentence patterns or grammatical structures and then more essay writing or more longer reading passage' (i.3). As this approach had never led to students using the language appropriately she decided to shift from an isolated use of the target language to an authentic and more purposeful context for learning: 'I was thinking if they learn all the basic vocabulary on the structures, but they can't achieve any communicative purpose, what is the point for them to do so and they might remember those words beautifully but they can't use those words to express in a communicative context' (i.3). Her shift of belief centred on setting a context for her learners and to use language in a situational context. In order to achieve that, Xian-Li was by then convinced of the benefits of target language use. However, as she said in her previous interview, she realised before that 'it's important to communicate' (i.3), but in her practice '[she] want[ed] to control'. When she saw that her students explored different ways of using the language and different ways of achieving their goals she decided to align her belief with her practice even more.

Overall, Xian-Li aligned her beliefs about the need for language input with her practice.

Case study 2: David

Background and context

David was 45 at the time of the study, a native English speaker from New Zealand and a proficient speaker and user of Japanese. His command of Chinese was relatively high, equivalent to B2 of the CEFR, as David had lived in China for a year. However, in his opinion his Chinese was only good because of his Japanese knowledge and his conversational skills were very limited in Chinese according to his judgment. David had been teaching at his current school for nearly ten years, had taught at another secondary school previously and had lived in Japan for about eleven years.

He taught at a secondary school for boys between 13 and 18 years, and was one of two language teachers at his school. Apart from Chinese, the school offered Spanish and Japanese. The latter was also taught by David at all year levels and he had a high level of proficiency and experience in teaching Japanese. However, he had never formally been trained to teach another language. Having been approached by his principal to teach Chinese, David agreed to take on the challenge. The school wanted David to teach students from their first year of secondary school and to gradually phase out Japanese. David had been teaching Chinese for less than a year to first year secondary school boys at the time of the study.

David's motivation for participating in the professional development programme was to raise his linguistic skills to ultimately teach students at all year levels. He also felt

‘there is no other support’ (i.1) so he was determined to make use of the opportunities available.

Beliefs and classroom practice

Whereas Xian-Li had some quite strong beliefs about language teaching which collided with her teaching practice David’s beliefs and practice seemed to be in utter accordance.

Teaching style

In his first interview before the international PD programme David stated very clearly that he believed boys were very focused on form and function in a language. He believed that boys wanted to understand how language ‘fits together’ and therefore they enjoyed analysing grammar as they could ‘reassemble language’ (i.1). He realised that ‘this approach is a little more old-fashioned’ but he firmly believed it was ‘a very male way of approaching things’ (i.1). According to David, the ‘grammar-translation approach is intuitive to most people’ (i.1), and he justified his style further with the belief that ‘boys aren’t naturally conversationalists’ and ‘don’t like conversations’ (i.1). As a result, David separated structure and content of the language.

Target language input and use by learners

Backed by his belief that ‘boys like to understand’ he used ‘quite a bit of English’ (i.1) and his lessons reflected a dichotomy of English and Mandarin. He explained that with a lack of professional training in teaching a language which led him to adopt an ‘explain in English and do in the target language’-approach which seemed logical to him. Consequently, his students only used Mandarin for newly introduced language or for specific activities. Apart from that, the classroom language was English.

Impact: ‘Boys want to understand and assemble language’

David’s beliefs circled around how boys conceptualised language which to him was a need to understand and to ‘assemble’ language rather than use it in conversations. This concept of beliefs is evaluated based on Guskey’s framework of the effect of professional learning development.

Professional development

During the professional development programme in China David was impressed that the whole programme was done in Chinese and that participants were expected to have conversations in and outside the classroom in Mandarin. After his return he mentioned in the second interview that he found this ‘really useful’ and that the communicative approach employed by the PD programme helped him achieve his goal of increasing his language competence to run a class in Chinese.

Change in classroom practice

As a result of his positive experience David decided to try a new teaching style with his students. He created table mats with different themes, for example classroom phrases, responses to questions, and greetings which the students had available throughout the lesson and which could be used any time. He also introduced a 'red light' for his classroom giving a visual cue that with the light on it was 'only Chinese'. Overall, he tried 'to use as much Chinese as possible with the lesson' (i.2), something he had not done in his previous language lessons. David now used 'general everyday communication for the sake of communication' and acknowledged that 'it is really useful' (i.2). 'Communication for the sake of communication' meant for David using language in a real life purpose and in context. This was an entirely new idea in his teaching and he illustrated it with an example where students were given some sweets wrapped in colourful paper as a prize. Instead of handing them the sweets and congratulating them in English he used the prize to introduce the colours and only after the students had told him in Mandarin which colour of sweet they preferred they received their prize. As David stated 'this is very different for me. So if I can maintain this without falling back into my old tricks then, yeah, long term certainly it will be quite a revolution really' (i.2).

Change in student learning

To his mild surprise his students 'love' the tablemats and 'often use different phrases or different table mats'. Despite his belief that boys did not really like communicating he found that his new approach of using the target language 'for communication sake' had a positive effect on his learners: 'I have to say their enthusiasm is quite high and they really enjoy communicating [...] more than the phrase or the structure for the day' (i.2). David was surprised about this effect as it seemed to contradict his belief about how boys learnt and what boys needed. At the same time he was pleased with his learners' ability to communicate with him in Mandarin in the classroom.

Shift of belief

Because of the positive impact his new approach had on his male learners David was willing to adjust his belief of separating the language of instruction and the language content. He acknowledged that he 'changed to a communicative approach', but the deeply rooted notion that boys needed to understand was still quite strong and therefore only led to a slight adjustment of his set of beliefs.

Effect after six months

In the third interview after six months of the professional development David continued to implement his 'new approach' of contextualising language and he still tried to include as much Mandarin in his lessons as possible. Similar to Xian-Li he came to the conclusion that with isolating language and restricting it to vocabulary and grammar his students were not able to use the target language in a conversation: 'teaching them more old fashioned grammatical and vocabulary list approach the students are only producing what I taught them to produce, and I guess, yeah, I am talking to them more in the target language I suppose, and they talk back to me in the target language, whereas before I was teaching them phrases and words and they were

repeating the phrases and words only back to me' (i.3). He was still surprised that contextualising language led students to create 'their own legitimate language and [they] come out with little phrases by themselves'. David noticed also another side effect of his new approach: His students were more engaged and motivated: 'The boys are very, what's the word? Very intrinsically motivated, actually communicating in the language rather than just studying it' (i.3) which led to a higher retention rate in his classes. He explained that usually he lost a number of boys to studying other subjects after a term, whereas now the loss of students in the Mandarin class was minimal. He attributed that to his communicative approach: 'I would say it's more to do with the teaching approach' (i.3). Due to all those positive effects David was willing to adjust even his belief about boys' learning stating: 'I am thinking now we perhaps need a little bit less explanation to be honest. They don't actually need as much explanation of activities in class as I had previously thought' (i.3).

Following the professional development programme David changed his practice and then adjusted his beliefs accordingly.

Conclusion and implications

In both case studies the teachers changed their teaching practices as a result of the international professional development programme. Both used more target language, especially for authentic classroom communication rather than only for language instruction. Communication for a purpose paired with target language use resulted for both in very positive effects making the learners more engaged and motivated. Consequently, Xian-Li and David adjusted their beliefs about teaching. Interestingly, neither of them mentioned the language classes nor the explicit methodology training of the international professional development programme as influential for their change in practice, but instead the first-hand experience of successfully using only the target language for communication and, for the native speaker, the experience of seeing language learning through non-native speakers' and learners' eyes. The insight that contextualised target language use is achievable, and even enjoyable, is not a ground-breaking one and seems to be almost standard in modern language teaching methodology, but for those teachers without language teacher training it was an entirely new idea and close to 'a revolution'. A limitation of the study is the fact that all data is based on the teachers' perception rather than classroom observation. Future research could combine those areas to see if they align.

If the relatively short international professional development programme can change teachers' beliefs and teaching practice it would be worthwhile thinking of ways to multiply this impact allowing more New Zealand teachers to benefit from it.

Although the participants do not state it explicitly it seems the change in teaching practice is not necessarily a result of being in a different country, but that of having a first-hand experience working together with native and non-native teachers. Further research could investigate if similar effects can be achieved by replicating that approach locally. Another possible reason for the change in teaching practice could be attributed to the fact that the participating teachers had to reflect and monitor their teaching practice and beliefs over a relatively long period of time obliging them to become aware of them and to focus on any changes.

Further research is needed to determine the influencing factors for changes in teaching practice and beliefs more clearly. However, for participants in this study the international professional development programme was effective with a strong impact on teaching practice and language teaching beliefs.

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