A Critical Appraisal of a Teacher Development Course on the Teaching of Reading Skills at a Macau Middle School

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Abstract
This paper examines the effectiveness of a teacher education course delivered at a Macau middle school to a group of in-service English teachers and its implication for the field of teacher education. The course was centred on the teaching of reading skills and based on a theoretical framework, which could be described as broadly based on communicative language teaching (CLT). The teachers who took part in the course were given the opportunity to complete short questionnaires about their experience on the course and make themselves available for semi-structured interviews. Fifteen of the eighteen teachers who took part in the course completed questionnaires and five interviews were carried out. Interviewees were self-selecting but covered a range of teaching experience. The findings indicated that while participants found some value in the teacher education, the prevailing view was that many of the input items delivered either needed major adaptation or were unsuitable for the context in which classroom teaching took place. As a result of this, a more systematic acquisition of contextual knowledge is recommended, before in-house teacher development is offered in any individual school.

Keywords: teacher education; teacher development; context; reading skills

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Introduction

This paper examines the effectiveness of a teacher development course carried out at a Macau Middle School. The ages of the students in the school is between eleven and eighteen years. The focus of the course was on developing the teaching of reading skills within the school. Eighteen teachers took part in the teacher education course, which took place in June 2016. Some of the teachers had previously had taken part in teaching courses delivered by my institution, both within the school on specifically designed programs, or in more generic courses delivered to teachers from across Macau and funded by the local education bureau (DSEJ).

The teacher education provided consisted of six three hour 'input' sessions, which despite the title of 'input' contained a number of interactive elements and was conducted in a workshop format. Within the focus of reading skills, areas covered included reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, annotation, identifying main ideas, guessing meaning of words from context. Also included in the program were an examination of the structure a reading skills lesson, sentence and text structure, integrated skills, student motivation and online resources. There were also sessions on planning from the textbooks used in the school and a number of ready-to-use classroom activities were presented. From the point of view of my Centre, the unstated or assumed aim of the course was to improve the standard of the teaching of reading skills in the school, though this aim was not discussed explicitly it fitted in with the titles of other courses presented at our Centre, such as "How to teach reading".

Literature Review

Prevailing techniques in reading instruction in the Asian context

McAllister (2011, p.161) argues that in the Asian context, there is too much intensive reading, which he argues is "poorly taught". Li and Wilhelm (2008, p. 96-97), in their study of mainland Chinese Middle school teachers, argue that teachers view reading as simply a bottom up decoding process and give little strategy instruction or emphasis to micro-skills. McAllister (2011, p. 161) gives the following, arguably quite judgemental account and assessment of an Asian teacher's Middle school lesson.

> She begins by pre teaching a number of difficult words specific to the text, then tells the students to read the text and answer the questions that follow. When they have done this, the students exchange books and mark each other's work. The teacher calls on students to read out their answers, and says whether the answers are right or wrong. Thus, teacher and students think, reading has been taught.

Though some aspects of this approach were visible in the Middle school in this study, it may be questioned whether the last sentence can be in any way helpful in a teacher development approach. It makes the assumption that the person speaking has a categorical answer on how reading skills should be successfully taught, while no research based answer exists to this question. It is also highly dismissive of the contextual knowledge base of the classroom teacher.

Zhang (2003 p.305), in his overview of research studies within the Chinese context, of which Macau is a part, makes the striking assertion that "It is unfortunate that most often there is no marriage in reality between research findings and classroom practice". It is difficult to see how such sweeping statements could assist in teacher education, as they diminish and invalidate the hands-on experiences of the teachers themselves.

Promoting learner autonomy and independent readers

Within the Asian context there has arguably been a tendency towards simply walking students through texts and explaining the meaning to them almost line by line (McAllister, 2011). It was then, a further underlying assumption of the teacher education course provided, that the role of teaching instruction was to promote strategic readers who could use techniques taught independently. (Grabe, 2004, p. 53). McAllister's (2014, p.395) point that classroom instruction on reading should help students "be better learners tomorrow" is accepted. As most reading is likely to take place outside the class, the idea that students should be assisted to "transition from reading with support in the classroom to being maximally independent" (Watkins, 2011, p. 10) was a premise that informed the course delivered to teachers.

Perspectives on teacher training and teacher development

This paper focuses on a short professional development course for in-service teachers at a Macau Middle school. The context statement will describe this in more detail. It seems appropriate at this point in the literature review to examine issues related to teacher development.

Richards (1989, p.2-7) contrasts a training and development approach to teacher education. The training approach emphasizes the trainer as the expert and the participants as passive recipients of knowledge. A teacher's existing knowledge is seen as a "hindrance' in this approach. A development approach, on the other hand values what teachers already know. Richards (1989, p.7) describes this as a "non-deficiency approach' – the teachers are experts on their own context, usually more so than the trainers. As Freeman and Johnson (1998, p.398) state, trainee teachers are "not empty vessels", so disregarding their existing knowledge represents a disregard of valuable knowledge. Hayes (1995, p.258) makes the point that professional development sessions should give teachers the opportunity to present what they currently believe. Mann (2005, p112), makes the point that "bottom-up teacher development is not only crucial to individual language teacher development but for the teaching profession as a whole".

Effect of context on teacher education

Freeman and Johnson (1998, p. 410) make the point that "teaching as an activity cannot be separated from either the person of the teacher as a learner or the context of schools and schooling in which it is done". Any teacher educator should make every attempt to familiarize him or herself with the context in which the training is taking place, for maximum benefit to be accrued. In the present case, there was little attempt at contextualization, and that which took place was initiated by the teacher educator before the course, in the form of two class observations.

Mann (2005, p.112) advocates a need to move away from a "one size fits all" approach to teacher education and that courses should be context-based. Bell (2005, p.260) criticizes the notion that there is one methodology which is suitable across varying contexts. Bax (2003) believes that "implicit focus on methodology leads us to ignore one key aspect of language teaching—namely the particular context in which it takes place". Contextual factors which may be ignored include the physical space in which classes take place as well as learner and parent beliefs about what constitutes effective teaching (Brown, 2009, p.53-56).

In their study of the effect of teachers beliefs on their classroom practice in Macau, Fong and Jones (2005, p.1) make the following statement.

> Teacher education is supposed to enhance the effectiveness of teachers' work. However, in education and language education research it appears that many teachers rely more on their deeply held beliefs about teaching than on the knowledge and skills they learn from teacher education and professional development programs.

Littlewood (2007), writing from the Hong Kong context, which is demographically and geographically close to the Macau context, argues that teachers can be encouraged to adopt some more communicative based teaching practices with some adaptation, while retaining some more, in his words, 'traditional' practices.

Research Questions

The research questions deal with the efficacy and suitability of teacher development programs delivered by my institution. The following research questions were formulated:

1. To what extent teachers have applied the methodology and activities presented on the teacher education course and what are teachers' rationales for application/non-application of the above?

2. What are teachers' attitudes towards teacher education courses?

3. What modifications could be made to the process of designing future teacher education programs?

Methodology

Issues with conducting educational research in Macau

Qualitative Methodology

Eighteen teachers took part in the teacher education course and fifteen of them responded to the questionnaires. Owing to the small sample size, and the non-generalisability of the data, a qualitative methodology was selected.

Questionnaires

Regarding data collection, the teachers were provided with hard copies of the three item questionnaire and these were then returned to the researcher. Questionnaire data were collated in a number of categories to identify any prominent trends. For example 'specific activities' and 'classroom technology'. After the transcripts were created they were then re-read and colour coded to identify broad topic areas and areas where more than one participant covered a similar theme.

Semi-structured interviews

The starting point for the interviews was the questionnaire completed by the respondent, which I had in front of me as I conducted the interviews, but these themes were then developed in greater depth, and new themes relevant to the research questions were introduced by some of the interviewees. Five interviewees were self-selected.

Each questionnaire included a tick box on whether the respondent was willing to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted in a private place at the school and recorded and later transcribed.

Ethical considerations

Participants were guaranteed that data collected from them would be used anonymously. Other ethical considerations were discussed in the section on doing research in Macau.

Findings and analysis

Of the 18 participants who took part in the teacher education course on reading skills, 15 returned completed questionnaires.

Questionnaire data

Changes in ways of teaching reading skills in the last two years

Some time had passed since the teacher development course, which had the disadvantage that the course may not be totally fresh in the respondents' minds. However, it had the advantage for this research of giving participants time to reflect on how their teaching of reading skills had or had not developed since the original course and could capture more longitudinal changes, if they were present.

The following table shows categories, which received more than one mention in the questionnaires received.

Type of change in teaching	No. of respondents (n=15)
Specific activities mentioned by name	5
Greater use of educational technology	3
Not 'explaining texts' as much (walking students through the text	2
A more explicit approach to improving student motivation	2

The most common responses to the above question related to specific activities which had been presented during the teacher education course, rather than any theoretical material.

The second most common was educational technology. One of the teachers, said "my reading lessons involved more activities and some apps and websites".

One aspect present in the literature of the teaching of reading skills in an Asian context and through this researcher's anecdotal experience, is a tendency to 'walk students through' texts, rather than teaching them transferrable reading skills. One very experienced teacher made the following remark:

> A couple of years ago, I thought a reading lesson was very much focused on the topic itself because as a teacher I was supposed to explain and give as much information as possible to help students understand the reading passages. However, I have changed from such a content-based perspective to a more skill-based one.

It is interesting that only one respondent mentioned this course aim explicitly, and only one more – an experienced teacher, mentioned a shift towards promoting learner autonomy. Other respondents additionally mentioned related concepts such as reducing the pre-teaching of vocabulary and more student-centredness in the reading class. The teacher quoted above mentioned the word 'facilitator' (the teacher's own description of their current approach), which is in contrast with the "teacher explains the text to the students" approach to teaching reading.

Questionnaire data – What is important for students to learn in reading skills lessons?

This question was aimed at investigating how closely teacher perceptions correlated with the assumptions behind the teacher education course and theories present in the literature.

The following table shows categories which received more than one mention in the questionnaires received.

What teachers consider important for students in reading	Number of respondents (n=15)
Reading speed/fluency	5
Exam strategies	3
Guessing meaning of vocabulary from context	3
Critical or active reading	2
Reading for main ideas	2
Skimming and scanning	2
Prediction	2
That reading is integrated with other skills	2
Grasping the writer's point of view	2

The most commonly mentioned factors were reading fluency and speed, which were mentioned by five of the respondents. As one respondent put it, "I'm teaching students in senior form, so it is important for them to learn how to get the answers for the comprehension questions quickly, even if they don't know some words in the passage". Though the respondents described this as fluency it might be more accurately viewed as greater efficiency in terms of finding answers to assessment items. One participant stated that "students should be taught scanning and skimming skills in reading lessons, which allow students to obtain the main ideas of the articles.

The next most commonly mentioned item was the teaching of exam strategies, which is perhaps not surprising in an exam focused society like Macau, where, in addition to school exams, IELTS is also very popular. One respondent prioritized "scanning and skimming strategies and exam taking strategies, especially those related to standardized exams".

A number of other micro skills were mentioned by respondents, including reading for main ideas, guessing the meaning of unknown words, critical reading, active reading, prediction and "grasping the writer's point of view". Two respondents also mentioned the importance of integrating reading with other skills.

Questionnaire data – What makes a professional development course useful?

The following table shows categories which received more than one mention in the questionnaires received. A full list will appear in appendix two.

What teachers find useful on a professional development course	Number of respondents
Practical skills	4
Information about current educational technology	3
Opportunity to refresh skills	2
Teacher education should be more closely based on context, including large class sizes	2
Demonstrations of activities	2
Provision of resources	2

The most common answers to this question focused on 'practical skills', which is consistent with the focus on activities noticed in the answer to the previous question.

Also consistent with this was that three of the respondents specifically mentioned educational technology as an area they would like to focus on. Many of the disparate comments were summed up by one very articulate response from an experienced teacher, which listed the following points, which might be a suitable starting point for planning future courses at the school. She said that for a course to be effective:

1. The course is designed with a good balance of theories and practical applications.
2. The course introduces flexible and inspiring teacher pedagogies, from which teachers can adapt for classroom applications. This is particularly true with technological tools and resources, which are constantly changing.
3. The course engages teachers with in-depth discussions or exchange of teaching experiences.
4. The course provides useful teaching resources, including those online or electronic.

Interview Data

The respondents

Interviewees were anonymous. Five teachers at the school were interviewed and these teachers are referred to as teacher one, teacher two and so on. While this was a sample of convenience, as the teachers had volunteered to be interviewed, a balance was achieved between greatly experienced teachers and their more newly qualified colleagues.

Awareness of theories in teaching reading

Overall, the interviewees displayed a thoughtful approach regarding the teaching of reading, but tended to focus on different areas in their responses.

Teacher Three, while mentioning skills such as skimming and scanning, placed an emphasis on collocation and being able to use new vocabulary actively. Interestingly, this seems more in line with the aims of a vocabulary lesson than a reading skills lesson. This teacher also saw guessing meaning from context as a very worthwhile activity. Teacher Four, the most experienced teacher in this group listed skills such as reading for specific information, details and guessing from context as "useful skills" for students. Teacher Five, currently teaching a higher-level class also focused on skills which involved deeper processing on the part of the students as well as seeing the value in integrating skills, in this case reading and writing. This teacher identified the most important points as " identifying concepts, referents, - all those theories – the details – for advanced class students what they need is giving them more chance to express their opinions afterwards – to reproduce something from the reading material".

Effects of the teacher education course on classroom practice

Given the fact that most of the teachers in this study seemed to have had a lot of experience regarding various theories of teaching reading, attained both from this course and many others, a fundamental question of this work is how far teacher education influences classroom practice?. A limitation of this research is that data

here only reports what teachers on the course say about classroom practice, rather than presenting data from actual observation. There is a danger of respondents telling the researcher what he wants to hear. Steps were taken to avoid this being the case, such as assuring the teachers that the focus was on how we could deliver more effective and targeted teacher education courses. In addition, the researcher attempted to create an atmosphere in the interview which encouraged critical analysis, with, for example, positive facial expressions and gestures when critical comments started to be expressed.

All the interviewees mentioned modifications which they had made to their teaching as a result of the course, some focused on specific activities they had liked and adopted and some appeared to allude to a more significant shift in their approach to the instruction of reading skills. The most marked shift was in the attitude of the least experienced of these teachers, Teacher Three.

> In the first two years I just taught some new words because vocabulary is a big problem for my students because they don't know too many English words. OK, the words they use are always easy therefore I focused on teaching them vocabulary but after that….after taking your course…some other courses, I realized that actually vocabulary is not the most important thing. It's important but it's not the most important thing. The most important thing is to ask them to guess the meaning from the context first, I mean that's how they're gonna read.

This is an interesting point, because though it shows that the teacher has reflected on and used reading strategies presented in the course, their interpretation does not exactly coincide with that of the teacher educator who conducted the course. I.Nation (2006, p.60) indicates that for academic study, which is an ultimate goal of some of these students, a receptive vocabulary of 8,000-9000 words is required, so it does not seem justifiable to diminish the importance of vocabulary in reading. It was not the intention to underestimate that vocabulary was important, rather to modify the practice of arguably excessive pre-teaching of vocabulary and of walking students through texts line by line. This raises the point of the gap between what teacher educators intend to convey and what the teachers on a course actually take from it.

Teacher Two, another relatively inexperienced interviewee in the group also mentioned that she had previously taught reading in the manner explained above of guiding students through the text and simply explaining the content. In this teacher's words "In the first moment when I taught reading I taught them all the new words, like it could be 12 new words before reading a passage, but after I got training from you I may have pre-teached or 4 words". As Watkins (2011,p.9) states, "Too much pre-teaching may move the focus of the lesson away from developing reading skills and toward learning vocabulary" This teacher also mentioned a possible clash between what they saw as best practice, and both student and parent expectations:

> I expect reading to be combined with writing or listening ..we can combine all the skills together but students, what they expect is to explain all the words, all the meaning of vocabulary and analyse them and they get a high score in the English test. For parents, they expect them to do better in exams.

Teacher One mentioned that they had successfully employed integrated skills activities based on communicative language teaching and had enjoyed particular success with jigsaw reading. She contrasts this with what she said was her previous experience of teaching in a "lecturing style" something she had "mostly" done in the past.

Theory and Practice – Contextual Factors

Interviewees' views on contextual factors were elicited during the interviews. One reason was to probe gaps between theory and practice. Questionnaires and interviews indicated that teachers fully understood the strategies which were covered in the course, such as the teaching of sub skills and the structuring of a reading skills lesson around before reading, while reading and after reading activities, but earlier evidence from classroom observations carried out as part of the teacher education course indicated that these practices were not always incorporated into actual teaching.

One issue with applying theories from the teacher education centred around their practicability in relations to student behavior. Teacher One put this succinctly:

> Well, maybe some of the theories of the ways, the approaches, should be effective, however, they are difficult to apply in a real classroom

It seems that Teacher One is imagining that the approaches they are talking about here would be effective if they were practical, in effect that they might be successful in some idealized, abstract classroom but not in the real context in which they were operating. An attitude like this is thought provoking and challenging for teacher education, as it seems to present a deficiency model. Perhaps the teacher thinks that the approaches do not work because the students, the context or even the teachers themselves are somehow deficient. This is not an attitude likely to be conducive to teacher development.

Another contextual factor mentioned by more than one respondent was that of class size and whether some of the activities presented on the teacher education course were suitable for larger classes. Teacher Two addressed this directly:

> Because most of the theories we learned in University or in (my institution) – they are based on researches for small group …small classes but you know we have large class(es) like 30-40 students, so we have to be efficient, erm, it's quite difficult to really do everything according to theory.

This response seemed to be at the heart of the present research, so the researcher asked the respondent how useful the approaches taught on the course had been. Teacher Three remarked that "those things are useful but not quite – cannot be really applied to my students so I just did it a little bit".

This data suggests that in designing and executing teacher education in any specific context, class sizes need be a primary consideration in the advocacy of any activities or approaches. A potential problem, based on anecdotal evidence, is that many teacher educators have far less experience of dealing with large classes than their teachers who take part in their courses. Without spending sufficient time absorbing the context

in which teachers must work it can be questioned how far their role as "experts" is justified.

Teacher Two also mentioned constraints imposed by physical factors in the classroom. This teacher mentioned that "I find it very difficult to use the activities you introduced in our classroom. I'm not sure you've noticed our desks and chairs. They are fixed. It's very difficult to move them around". For the teacher educator these physical factors need to be considered in the course design. There needs to be explicit thought and discussion into how activities can be adapted to suit the physical space, or if they cannot then they should not feature on the teacher education course.

To conclude this discussion of theory and practice, it appears that for this in-house teacher development course, there was some disconnect between the two. This is a very real issue for any context in which a large number of "teacher training" courses are run. If theories are seen as just that, no more than theories, but not really relevant to the day to day practice of teachers then there needs to some reflection and re-evaluation of how these courses are designed and delivered. Courses must genuinely be 'tailor made' in the truest sense in order to applicable in the context in which they are delivered.

How these teachers believe teacher education courses could be improved upon

While teachers on the course had some positive things to say about the approaches, methodologies and activities which comprised the course, a majority of the interviewees felt that professional development courses, in general, including the one under discussion failed to fully take into account contextual factors and that for this reason teacher education courses could be made more efficient and targeted. This should surely be the aim of any in-house training course, which claims to be "tailor-made" for one school.

Suggestions made in these interviews pertained to the pre-course preparatory phase. When asked about how teacher educators could learn more about a specific context Teacher Two suggested that it would be a good idea to "talk to the teachers. I know it's very time-consuming. Ask to the teachers who are actually teaching and not the management. Ask them the problems, what difficulties they have". Ideally, this might be in a focus group style meeting before the course takes place. Alternatively, initial sessions might be shifted more towards round table discussions of this kind.

Teacher Two's advice for the prospective teacher educator conducting an in-house program was to "know more about the school". Many of the teacher educators in Macau have no or very limited experience with a class of that size, or indeed some of the physical limitations Teacher Two mentions. Coming as we often do from an EFL teaching background many of us are more used to classes of no more than 25 students and often with state of the art equipment, moveable chairs – good acoustics and sound limitation which are specifically designed with the communicative language classroom in mind.

Limitations of research

The research described in this paper centred around one Middle school in Macau. As such the results are not generalizable to Macau in general, and perhaps less so to the world beyond Macau. A further limitation was that the researcher and the provider of the teacher education were the same person, which may have influenced the responses provided by the participants, though, as described above, the researcher attempted to minimize this effect. Additionally, as Morrison (2006) describes, Macau's small dimensions do give rise to a "fishbowl" effect, which might make some respondents hesitant about giving honest answers, if they feel they might conflict with the ideas of more powerful people.

Discussion

The majority of the responses to the questionnaires indicate that the teachers on the course thought that the theories presented on the course were best practice and research based. However, while some teachers indicated that they could use activities presented with some adaptation, other respondents felt that there was a large gap between what was useful or productive in theory and what could be applied in their own context. This was either owing to physical factors, class sizes or institutional constraints, including fixed curricula and the need to cover a large amount of content. While some teachers attempted to re-evaluate the structure of their reading skills, for others it was simply a case of adopting a preferred activity or activities.

Despite the sense that some respondents felt that much of the material covered in the course needed great adaptation, or was unsuitable for this context, the majority of questionnaire responses also indicated a positive attitude towards the professional development course.

The interview portion of the data collection provided richer data in answering this question, in fact leading the researcher to speculate whether similar interviews or focus groups should have taken place prior to the teacher education course. A majority view amongst the teachers was that in future teacher education programs the teacher educator should make every attempt at gaining comprehensive context awareness, and materials should be designed with the context firmly in mind. While this was by no means a universal view, it does come through in the questionnaire, and especially interview data.

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