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Some thoughts on being trained as a trainer of primary teachers

By Vu Mai Trang, Vietnam

Introduction

The journey doesn't seem very long... If you put three years into the life span of a teacher who has made teaching her career and not just her job, it is just the blink of an eye. Yet let's imagine how much she may gain from this three year journey, especially if thinking about the Vietnamese saying "Go out for a day, get a full basket of wisdom"!

The three years were for a part-time, face-to-face course run by the British Council (BC), after which I was expected to train primary English teachers in my home country. Participants were selected by the BC, and trained in the country.

There were 4 phases in the 3 years. During the first 3 phases, we attended short courses, then did teacher training workshops (as trainers) in between. The 4th phase was mainly practical when we had to deliver workshops mostly independently. The course was funded by BC's *Access English* Project for a number of countries in East Asia (See the end of the article for more information). In Vietnam there were 41 participants and we are now the first primary teacher trainers ever in the country since there's been no formal education for primary English teachers in Vietnam until now, only for secondary English teachers.

What I gained

My journey to become a British Council trainer of primary teachers has such a special meaning. I see myself here and now, transformed! Different! I have collected much wit and wisdom and the training course was like doing a jig-saw puzzle, seeking pieces, accumulating them, and putting them in their places. Now looking back, I am amazed at how many pieces I have in my basket. Here are some of my favourite jig-saw pieces:

The Muse of the training room

One of the most important ideas I have learnt from the course is that the person who decides what is going on in a teacher training room should *not* be the trainer, but the teachers. Before the course, I had once worked as a teacher trainer for the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training. As a young, (and inexperienced), trainer then, I made every effort to be well-prepared for the sessions, loading the presentation with every bit of knowledge I had on the topic, thinking this would definitely do the teachers attending the workshop good. But it turned out often to be a failure, as later I found out that almost half of the teachers did not understand what I was saying! And also what worked for me may not necessarily work for them. Taking this course, with sessions on training skills (involving drawing pictures of a participant teacher, doing needs analyses, scenario planning, etc.), and having hands-on experience in planning and delivering practical workshops, I have realised that

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any trainer should allow teachers a greater role in the management of their own learning, and should also consider their needs, styles, and goals, Nunan (2003) calls this 'Learner-centred learning'. I call this the principle of "The Muse of the training room". The teachers become Muses who inspire (not require!) the trainer to do things.

The fishing rod

I like the way all the input on the course was given to us in two-ways. We learnt the what, but we were also given opportunities to discover the why - the rationale behind what we were doing. We considered why we do what we do, why something works, but something else doesn't.

We learnt the theoretical basics of how children learn. This now provides an important basis for our decisions on how English should be taught to our young students, and thus also on how teachers should be trained to teach young learners. We also had the chance to analyse what makes a good trainer, and a good workshop; we reflected on ourselves to find out our strengths and weaknesses; we scrutinised every activity in our training plan to work out why it is good or not yet good enough; and we were even given a chance to officially observe our master trainers. I really saw conscious reflective practice, promoted by, e.g. Farrell (2007), come alive with these useful insights.

More important, besides the knowledge and skills taught explicitly, we learnt a lot from the way our master trainers delivered the courses, their training techniques and manner, and the way the materials were designed and organized. I noticed this Lortie's "apprenticeship-of-observation" (1975), and did watch out and think more carefully about what I do and how I do it in my pre-service teacher education classrooms or in-service teacher training rooms.

This sustainable approach of "Giving a person a fishing rod, not just a fish", makes perfect sense and I do now see myself as a more confident, independent ToT. Now whenever I start jotting down ideas to prepare for a workshop, or a lecture at the university, I try to make sure what is presented will not only be valid in itself, but will also be good, in turn, for independent, flexible application in the teachers' own classrooms after they leave the room.

The jig-saw puzzle

The idea of a jig-saw puzzle pops into my mind when I think of my PToT course. It was also inspired by the cooperative learning that was so pronounced during the course. We had a lot of cooperative conversations, about learning and *for* learning, either between the master trainers and us future trainers of teachers (ToTs), or among us ToTs. We also enjoyed the group work, pair work, discussions, mingling, fair share, group micro-teachings, etc. we had together. I thought there was a truly collaborative spirit throughout the course where each of us had the opportunity to learn from each other to perfect ourselves, that is, to find our own missing jig-saw pieces.

Positive interdependence and individual accountability (McCafferty et al, 2006) were fostered especially while we worked in teams for our practice workshops.

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We all contributed and then reached consensus, which seemed hard to achieve at first, but became easier in the later phases, once we understood we were working towards common goals, and had learnt some cooperative skills!

This jig-saw principle means a lot to me, thinking of myself as a learner, a teacher, and a trainer. The missing pieces that a learner/teacher/trainer lacks can often be found with the help of others.

The journey didn't feel very long, especially because we enjoyed it so much. From being a green teacher trainer, I have taken big steps towards becoming a professional, rather than a layperson, an amateur, a technician, or an academic (Ur, 2002). I take pride in my work, and become more reflective each day. Whenever I plan a workshop, give a lesson, discuss something with a colleague, mentor a new teacher, write a paper, or start a research project I feel the benefit of this project. To end this personal account, I would like to say thank you to all who have helped me to make it this far: the course designer, the master trainers, my peer ToTs, the teachers who attended our practice workshops... The jig-saw pieces I got from you have become my treasures.

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More about Access English: It is a 4-year project developed and run by the British Council in partnership with ministries of education in 9 countries in East Asia: Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, The Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. Although there is great diversity in the region, what the above countries share is a need for support in developing national English Language Teaching agendas at both primary and secondary levels. The project aims to provide support to changes in English Language Teaching in three areas: support for policy makers, support for teacher educators and support for teachers. In Vietnam, within the Project's scope, the British Council are working with the Ministry of Education and Training and a number of Higher Education institutions in the country to run *Primary Innovations*, a trainer training course which aims to create a cadre of 41 Primary English Language Teaching Specialists. This course equips participants with the necessary skills, knowledge and confidence to deliver workshops and teacher training courses to other primary English teachers in their local area. (<http://www.britishcouncil.org/vietnam-english-teacher-development-access-english.htm>).

More about this article: This article started as an award-winning entry to the Primary Trainers of Teachers (PToT) Competition organized by the British Council's Access English Project in East Asia April 2011. To enter the competition, trainers who had taken part in the British Council Primary Trainers of Teachers (PToT) Programmes were invited to write a short article of about 1,000 words, entitled 'My journey as a primary trainer of teachers', about how they developed professionally as a trainer and how they have applied the skills learned on the PToT course. The consultant for the project, Jaynee Moon, and a small panel of master trainers (representing a cross section of the countries involved in the PToT programme) selected the winning entries. (For further information, please contact Brian Stott, Regional Project Manager, Engaging Teachers, British Council, 254 Chulalongkorn Soi 64, Siam Square, Bangkok 10330 Thailand; email: brian.stott@britishcouncil.or.th).

About the author:

Vũ Mai Trang is Associate Dean, Faculty of English Teacher Education, University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. Trang has extensive experience working as an English teacher and teacher trainer and is co-developer of teaching methodology materials for pre-service teachers at Viet Nam National University and in-service teachers for Viet Nam Ministry of Education and Training. She holds an MA in ELT from Nottingham University, UK. She has published two translated books on literature, and one book on teaching English to Vietnamese young learners.