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# Learning to teach learning: a teacher education course on learner training for in-service English instructors

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**Abstract.** Traditional teacher centered approaches have been gradually replaced in the last decades by more learner centered methodologies, but teachers have little opportunities to develop professionally and benefit from these innovations because of their working context. Support in terms of in-service courses has only recently been more widespread and whilst much input has distributed imported methodologies, there needs to be a focus on giving teachers the opportunity to adjust. The current paper proposes an in-service course which is not only concerned with promoting an innovation, but also attempts to give participants the opportunity to make their own reasoned decisions about the degree and manner of changes they wish to accept.

Learner training can be conceived as covering a wide range of possibilities from learning strategies concerned with a detailed skill to a general dispositions for learning (Dickinson, 1987). It has been also noted by various studies that learner training is used to indicate training to respond to a method of teaching, training learners to be "good" language learners, helping learners to be involved in the educational decision-making in the classroom and enabling learners to use a self-access center efficiently (Richardson, 1992). Because good strategies instruction focuses on learners, needs and ways to facilitate the development of a flexible repertoire of problem-solving strategies, we prefer terms like education, instruction and development.

Other writers however, argue that learner training encompasses other elements besides learning strategies (e.g. Dickinson, 1992; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989) such as language awareness and language learning awareness so that to them 'strategies instruction' would appear to be the narrower term. There is some variation in the literature about the main goals of learner training. Most writers tend to acknowledge the dual goals outlined by Ellis and Sinclair (1989) of enabling learners to become more efficient and of helping them to take on more responsibility for their own learning (e.g. Dickinson, 1987; Wenden, 1987). Such writers usually emphasize the relationship between these goals by claiming that helping learners to become more independent will improve their learning effectiveness.

American authors who tend to see learner training in a more restricted way usually focus on an improvement in language learning, efficiency and consequent language improvement. Oxford (1990) for example sees 'communicative competence' as the main goal of learner training.

Finally, learning how to learn has been seen as an end goal in itself by writers such as Rogers (1969). "The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security" (p.4).

Because of its close association with self-instruction, learner training has been justified on grounds similar to these of more autonomous approaches in language learning. Learner training to promote autonomy has been justified as an educational aim in its own right (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989; Dickinson,

1987; Wenden, 1987) and some teachers and educationalists have even gone so far as to say that learning how to learn is the most basic and important educational objective (Rogers, 1969) and an individual right (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989).

Need for the teacher education course on learner training: with the opening up of Romania to the West in 1989 there has been a dissemination of Western materials and methodologies which have been widely adopted by educational institutions. This was particularly so in the field of EFL as materials did not need to be translated into Romanian, but only made available at the local bookshop.

It can also be said that many of the most recent materials contain learner training components (e.g. Hotline (1993), Streetwise (1994) and Fast Forward (1992)) so that teachers are becoming familiar with the idea. However, it is my own feeling that many of these activities are not being exploited as much as they could be or are misunderstood by teachers and students alike. This may not be surprising in cases where textbook writers only include learner training because it is fashionable and new (and therefore a good selling point) and consequently design or integrate activities in such a way as to show a lack of basic understanding of the concepts involved. A learner training course for teachers would thus help teachers to use current learner training textbook activities more effectively.

The aims, objectives and learning outcomes for the proposed course derive from the needs described earlier. It can be seen that the main aims resemble those associated with the growth approach and the change paradigm identified by Eraut (1987). The former assumes that teaching is a very complex phenomenon and INSETT aims to provide greater fulfilment for teachers. This is achieved through experience and reflection. The change paradigm is based on the need for the educational system to keep abreast of, if not anticipate, changes in wider society and for schools to relate to changes in their local community.

Other more specific aims concern the particular context of the teachers involved. For instance, because of the increase in the number of learner training materials available, the course aims to enable teachers to improve their understanding of these techniques and their rationale so that they are better able to utilize them profitably in the classroom. Secondly, because of the emphasis on teacher-centered methods, this represents an argument for training learners to use methods more appropriate to their style of learning. Thirdly, because of the problems of students wishing to improve their English outside of class time, the course aims to show teachers how to enable students to take on more responsibility for their learners and become more independent learners.

The course aims to provide an introduction to learner training to in-service teachers. The course thus aims to enable learners to identify and define learner training, to be aware of its goals, rationale and target audience. It aims to help participants become familiar with key components of learner training such as teaming strategies, self-assessment and language learning awareness. Because a large part of learner training is concerned with learning strategies the course aims to enable teachers to see how learning strategies are identified and categorized to provide a basis for their teaching. It aims to familiarize trainees with the issues in implementing learner training such as the degree of consciousness of training (direct versus embedded) and the degree of integration (separate versus integrated). It recognizes that teachers may already use various aspects of learner training in the classroom and so the design of the course aims to draw on teachers' experience of helping learners to learn.

The goals for the processes involved in the course are based fundamentally on providing experiences which will encourage the adoption of the innovation concerned. Thus, an important process goal is that teachers experience learner training for themselves so that they can see better how the learners might receive the technique. Another process goal is that they evaluate different components of learner training using their own experiences of the techniques involved. As well as becoming familiar with learning issues through this procedure participants are to address teaching issues by giving teachers the opportunity to implement the techniques as well as evaluate them through a process of reflection.

Content Coursework: the content of the course progresses from a generally theoretical focus to a more practical one although there is some overlapping so that teachers can come away with techniques for implementation right from the beginning. Thus, while not avoiding the importance of a strong

theoretical underpinning for successful adoption of an innovation the course also recognizes the teachers' need for a practical component which they can try out.

The sessions themselves would be divided into broadly two parts, the first consisting of a discussion of the previous classroom/homework task, whilst the second would involve the introduction of a new topic. New classroom/homework tasks would be given on this basis. The pattern of topic introduction would thus be largely linear although with a recycling element built in.

The topics included in the course broadly follow an outline developed by Dickinson (1992) i.e. Learner training techniques, Language awareness and language learning awareness. These areas are preceded by the more theoretical aspects such as a definition of learner training, its goals and rationale.

Home-based tasks: I have decided to include much of the analysis of theory as a homework task as this is one activity which can be carried out individually. This also means that the conclusions of the homework can be discussed collaboratively in class and so more time can be devoted to pooling opinions and for group evaluation. Thus, the opportunities for gaining insights through sharing are maximized.

The homework would be in the form of a workbook which would contain all the core readings with and questions to help teachers focus on their reading and to reflect on their teaching. This workbook would also help to provide participants with a sense of direction and progress, as well as being easier to handle than a collection of loose handouts. The workbook will contain a reading list for participants to follow up on if they so wish.

Classroom tasks: participants will be asked to complete classroom tasks during their own time but before the following session. By working in pairs participants can gain support and ideas during their preparation. Perhaps the most important part of the procedure will be when participants are asked to evaluate the task. This is crucial to developing and understanding of the issues involved in implementing the technique or approach. Participants will also be asked to share their experiences with others to gain insight in the application of the technique in a variety of contexts.

Principles and Procedures: the principles which guide the course are based on the findings of research into the effectiveness of in-service training as well as my own intuition and experience. One important principle, singled out by Doyle and Ponder (1977) as of central value for most teachers, is that the course should have a practical component. By these teachers mean that they expect an in-service course to give them intimate knowledge of the approach or technique so that they can use it with confidence themselves. To obtain this knowledge a number of things need to take place on a course.

Firstly, teachers need to be able to see the technique demonstrated so that they can focus on the teaching procedure (Rogan & MacDonald, 1985; Doff, 1988). Secondly, they need to experience the technique themselves so that they can take the place of the learner and gain insight into the learning process (Parrott, 1993). Thirdly, they need to be able to see how the technique or approach can be integrated into their present teaching program (Doyle & Ponder, 1977; Doff, 1988). In addition, teachers need an opportunity to try out the particular approach in their own contexts to gain more first-hand experience of the teaching/learning issues involved. Furthermore, teachers need feedback about classroom implementation of the technique (Rogan & MacDonald, 1985) and a chance to evaluate it. All of these elements are reflected in the methodology and structure of the course design.

Another principle involved in the concept of practicality is that teachers are made aware of the cost of the innovation by calculating the amount of effort they have to put in as against the likely benefit to themselves. This is a particular difficulty with my course as the benefits to students let alone teachers are not easily perceived and it may take a long time before they are felt. The best way to overcome this problem would be for teachers to experiment with the techniques as much as possible.

As well as giving teachers practical knowledge the training course should provide a theoretical underpinning. This can be achieved by clearly communicating the rationale of the new approach to participants (Rogan and MacDonald, 1985). One effective way of enabling teachers to become more aware of the rationale or the teaching/learning issues behind an innovation is to give participants an opportunity to reflect. This can be achieved through a series of tasks so an important principle on which the course is based is that the methodology should be task-based and inductive where possible (Hayes, 1995; Parrott, 1993).

Another set of principles concern the relationship between the new approach or technique and the teachers' knowledge. This course design recognizes that participants, especially experienced teachers, do not arrive to the training session with their minds like blank states. Many teachers have strong beliefs about the teaching/learning process which research has shown often take a long time to change (e.g. Hayes, 1995). Thus, training sessions should value teachers' existing knowledge (Rogan & MacDonald, 1985; Hayes, 1995) and give them opportunities to share their expertise. In this way the process of combining what teachers already know with what they learn from others will become more overt and, I believe, more effective.

Another reason for sharing knowledge is the difficulty of reconciling disparate and conflicting objectives within a group. Factors which may affect the objectives of particular course participants include their teaching situation, experience of learning English and previous teacher training and personal reasons for attending the course. Another significant factor may be each teachers' assumptions about what learning a language involves (Parrott, 1993). The author also points to a number of factors which can work against a positive dynamic on a course such as age and professional seniority, level of English and different objectives and different backgrounds. To overcome these problems Parrott recommends such solutions as identifying needs and objectives, brainstorming problems, content and assessing the extent to which participants share or do not share assumptions about the teaching/learning process. He also recognizes the key role of the tutor in this and suggests that they have qualities of sensitivity, flexibility and creativity. While the role of the tutor is impossible to predict I have included these recommendations in the course.

A further principle which this course adheres to is that the trainers should be practicing teachers themselves. As Duff notes: "One of the inadequacies of much teacher-training activity throughout the world is that the trainers actively stop being teachers, and are training others to do something that they themselves no longer do. It is only common sense that you should practice what you preach, but training of others must be grounded in one's own practice" (p.82).

Another principle regarding the trainer is that they use normative re-educative strategies to introduce the innovation (Kennedy, 1987; Hayes, 1995). The reason for this is that they require a collaborative, problem-solving approach which it is claimed is the most effective. However, I have also included rational empirical strategies which use evidence to show the benefit of change. This approach has been shown to be effective only when people are ready for change (Kennedy, 1987) and so using these strategies in the present would be planting seeds which might bear fruit only in the long term.

One thorny question in relation to the trainers is whether they should be a native or non-native. It has been suggested that non-native local trainers are in a better position than imported natives in terms of knowledge of the context. However, teacher education programs in several contexts e.g. China (Maley, 1993) are almost solely concerned with language improvements in which case native speakers may be more suitable. Thus, if both types of trainers were available then the decision would depend on whether is language improvement were an important aim of such a course. This could be gauged in a pre-course needs analysis.

Evidence from surveys points to the importance of the type of INSETT being offered when considering whether the trainer should be native or non-native. Surveys have shown that when teachers were asked who they would prefer to see as instructors they responded differently according to the type of INSETT. Fellow teachers and other related school personnel were seen as more appropriate for INSETT which is job embedded or related but 'professors' were nominated as more desirable for courses which were certificated (Eraut, 1987). Thus, I feel that the course was to be accredited then trainers should be appropriately qualified.

A further principle on which the course is based is that it is participant-centered in that the specific needs of the participants are analyzed before the beginning of the course and regular feedback and discussion of feedback during the course ensure that the participants preferences and views are fully acknowledged. This is meant to help to shape specific agendas and is centered to the progression of the course.

Related to this principle is the recognition that to cater for the different learning preferences of the participants the course should include a variety of data, tasks and procedures. The data include demonstrations of lessons, transcripts of lessons, samples of teaching materials, literature and games. The tasks involve preparing lessons, improving materials, adapting course books, ranking strategies, comparing typologies, summarizing views, listing techniques, evaluating and arguing a case, sharing information, reporting. Procedures involve mini-lectures, pair and group work, class discussions, individual assignments, demonstrations, elicitation, buzz groups and case studies. Where possible content and process are linked in a 'loop-input' (Woodward, 1991). For example, the initial learning assessment is a useful demonstration of a language learning awareness technique as well as being valuable source of information to guide the design of the course.

In this paper I have attempted to lay out the design for an in-service course on learner training. It has also been my concern to provide a rationale for this suggested course. It can be observed that although elements of several models of teacher education were evidenced in the design, much of the course was based on a reflective approach. The reasons for this were to do with the nature of the innovation being presented as well as the type of participants (i.e. in-service teachers) rather than any educational preference for the model. As learner training is a new way of thinking and as yet largely untried, I felt this reflective approach to be most suitable. A more prescriptive approach I felt would increase teachers' resistance and an opportunity for structured collaborative reflection over a longer period of time would increase the chances of uptake by the teacher.

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