

INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE AND TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Qing Gu

Introduction

There has recently been extensive discussion of intercultural experience and awareness in multicultural education, foreign language education and cross-cultural training (Holliday 1991, 1992, 1994, 2001; Markee 1997, 2001; Leach 1994, 1999; Nieto 1999; Alred et al. 2003; Gu 2003). Discussion has focussed on describing and understanding differences in educational culture and refining concepts of culturally sensitive and appropriate methodology (Holliday 1994, 2001; Markee 1997; Gu forthcoming). Such work is of particular relevance to language teacher education and professionalism, where teacher educators and teachers often work at 'cultural boundaries' (Roberts 1998: 3).

The notion of teacher professional development implies two concepts: (a) the concept of teaching as a profession, and (b) the concept of teachers as professionals. Teaching embodies the four critical elements of a profession described by Corrigan and Haberman (1990) – *knowledge base, quality control, resources, and conditions of practice*. Teachers possess the key characteristics of professionals who are 'equipped through specified and prolonged preparation to use validated practices and to apply them intelligently' (Doyle 1990: 7–8).

This paper seeks to delineate the impact of intercultural experiences, both on language teachers' and teacher educators' professional development. It further considers the questions that arise from a social constructivist perspective. The social constructivist approach recognises teachers as social beings (Roberts 1998). The classroom is a microcosm of wider society, and the teacher–learner interaction in the classroom context reflects values deeply embedded in the broader societal and sociocultural setting. The empirical basis of the paper is an examination of a series of case studies of Sino–British institutional development projects hosted in tertiary Chinese institutions throughout China. The case studies all involved a teacher-training component. Drawing on Alred et al.'s (2003) argument on intercultural experience *as* and *in* education, the paper demonstrates the extent to which intercultural experience in teacher education may influence both language teachers' and teacher educators' perceptions and concepts of English language teaching (ELT). The paper's focus on intercultural experience and

teacher professionalism is of particular significance in a wider context of accelerating globalisation, and rapid growth of cross-cultural training.

Background

Since instituting its Reform and Open Door policy in 1979, China has shown greater appetite for interaction with the outside world. As a consequence, the need to improve ELT has been very high on the agenda. Since the early 1980s Britain has provided 'continuous and consistent official support and assistance to China for the teaching of English as a foreign language' (Maley 1995: 15). Support has taken the form of provision to China by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) of twenty-seven institutional strengthening projects in ELT jointly administrated by the British Council and the Chinese Ministry of Education. These DFID Sino–British ELT projects (subsequently referred to as DFID ELT projects) ran from the late 1970s to 2001 and enjoyed the input of British ELT specialists seconded to the English departments of selected Chinese universities as teacher trainers (British Council 1999).

The study

From Spring 2001, the author spent seven weeks in China and four weeks in England collecting data among British ELT specialists and tertiary Chinese teachers of English. Methodologically the investigation employed a complementary combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. A sample of 24 universities that were involved in these projects were compared with 23 universities that were not involved, by means of semi-structured interview and questionnaire research. Participants in interviews included 19 British ELT specialists and 19 Chinese teachers who were involved in DFID Sino–British ELT projects (referred to henceforth as *Chinese project participants*).

The respondents to the questionnaire study comprised 133 Chinese project participants from 24 universities and 492 Chinese teachers of English from 23 universities that had not hosted these projects referred to henceforth as *Chinese non-participants*). Non-parametric tests and factor analysis were employed for the questionnaire analysis, and theme tables for the interview data analysis.

The interview data provided a detailed account of the respondents' contextually constructed beliefs regarding ELT. An in-depth examination of the British and Chinese ELT professionals' perceptions and beliefs enabled the author to look into the impact of working in a crosscultural setting on their beliefs and views regarding ELT. The questionnaire data from the wider population provided insight into an overall Chinese view concerning language teaching and learning. Chinese non-participants acted as the comparison group, representing the vast majority of Chinese teachers of English who rarely have the benefit of western expertise and supervision on language education. A comparison between Chinese project participants' and non-participants' views and perceptions would therefore be expected to identify the extent to which the DFID ELT projects had influenced the former group's professionalism in ELT.

Results

Impact of intercultural experience on Chinese teachers

Both the interviews and the questionnaire survey findings indicated a significant impact from involvement in the DFID ELT projects on Chinese teachers' professional development. The overall questionnaire survey evidence showed that there was a systematic difference in perception between Chinese project participants and Chinese non-participants who had had no immediate experience of working in an intercultural teacher-training context. The majority of the Chinese project participants interviewed indicated that they had benefited from the input of British expertise regarding ELT theories and practices. Exposure to Western methodological innovation and training was shown to enable Chinese teachers to make more rational decisions on approaches to language teaching and learning, which in turn led them to adopt a more critical perspective on their traditional teaching approaches as well as on the appropriateness of Western innovations.

Evidence from the questionnaire survey:

The primary object of the DFID ELT projects was to introduce and establish communicative language teaching (CLT) methodologies (Wickham 1995, British Council 1999). The questionnaire analysis showed that both Chinese project participants and Chinese non-participants had a more positive view of CLT than of the traditional grammar–translation and audio–lingual methods. However, as demonstrated by the very

highly significant result of a two-way Chi-square test ($\chi^2=14.52$, $df=1$, $p<0.001$), non-participants (127:84=3:2) only marginally preferred CLT to traditional teaching methods compared with the attitude difference among Chinese project participants (58:10 \approx 6:1). In other words, as shown in Figure 1, the difference in Chinese project participants' ('BC Group') attitudes towards CLT and traditional methods was far greater than that of non-participants ('Non-BC Group'). Hence participation in the projects is shown by this research to have had a significant impact on Chinese teachers' views on approaches to teaching.

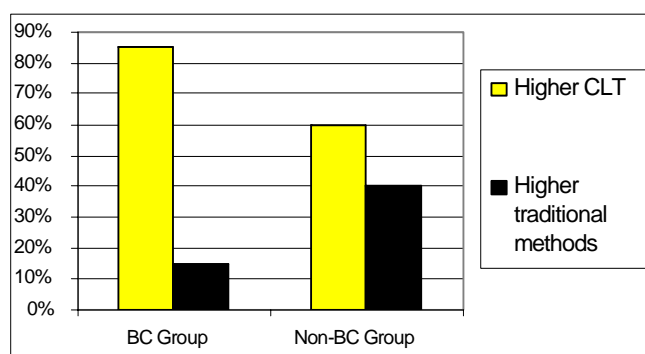


Figure 1: Teachers preferring CLT or traditional methods

Evidence from interviews:

The overall questionnaire findings show that compared to Chinese non-participants, Chinese project participants have more positive attitudes towards interactive teaching, which accords with the chief aim of the DFID ELT projects, which was to introduce a more communicative language teaching approach. Such evidence is also clearly indicated in the interview data. For example:

... after the Sino-British project I have changed my teaching methods. I mean, I just transferred from the traditional method, that is the teacher-centred, to the student-centred approach. ... I found that after I had changed the teaching methods, the students became more active in class. I am quite pleased with such a teaching method, because most students can communicate actively in class.

(Chinese participant D)

Although the Chinese project participants could see the advantages of CLT over traditional teacher-centred language teaching, this did not lead to an intention completely to abandon their tradition. The following quotations demonstrate this finding.

Sometimes I just combine these two ways of teaching, because I think each has its own advantages. ... But you know our Chinese students are foreign students, so sometimes I don't think the exercises [in imported coursebooks] are quite suitable for our Chinese students. So sometimes I change a little. I just do it in a traditional way. ... Mostly, after we have done all the exercises I just explain the passage very carefully, because maybe there are some very difficult sentences and even some new words that they don't know.

(Chinese participant A)

You know, this is the tradition in China that since they were very young people were taught to memorise, to remember things. One judgement is how well and how quickly a child can learn something by heart. This is the way I think which has been handed down from generation to generation. And Chinese students and children are used to this way of teaching and learning. And especially in learning a foreign ...language, in terms of language learning, I think foreign experts have their own views. They think language can be learned, and many mostly learned through communication. But in China I think they believe that language is learned by memorisation. I think this is where the most disagreement lies.

(Chinese participant E)

Both quotations emphasise the foreign language learning environment for Chinese learners who have little access to English outside class. Learning through memorising vocabulary and grammatical structures is believed to play an important role in English language learning in such an environment. The connotation, or cognitive significance of memorisation in the Chinese learning culture is different from that in Western cultures, where it is often equated with mechanical rote learning that does not lead to acquisition (Biggs 1996, Marton et al 1996, On 1996).

The Chinese project participants recognised the benefits of CLT, and believed that these benefits would help their students to achieve the ultimate aim of communicative competence. However, accuracy and a good knowledge about English remained major concerns. This was where Chinese participants believed the traditional focus on English forms should come into play, especially given the history

of success demonstrated by established Chinese ELT programmes which have produced a large number of competent language users (Yang 2000).

It is important to recognise that language teaching practice, underpinned as it is by personalised and contextualised teacher knowledge, is embedded in the local context (Holliday 1994, Markee 1997, Gu forthcoming). The majority of the Chinese project participants recognised the need for change towards more communicative language teaching and showed a willingness to mediate CLT to fit in with the Chinese ELT context. The following quotation exemplifies such opinions.

We should understand CLT in the context. American CLT would be different from CLT in China, as the contexts are different. ... Students are different from before, and so are their needs. ... There are too many factors that require change in teaching, the purpose of which is actually to communicate. If we understand CLT from this perspective, we may find it more practical, as there is the need.

(Chinese participant F)

Impact of intercultural experience on British specialists

The research study also looked at the impact of intercultural experience in the DFID ELT projects on British specialists. The interview data analysis strongly suggested that involvement in these projects also had a clear effect on their professional development, particularly on those holding context-dependent views on ELT.

The study revealed two clusters of British ELT specialists who showed different degrees of sensitivity to cultural and contextual issues in their accounts of language teaching and learning (also see Gu 2004). One cluster of eight British specialists demonstrated relatively context-free views on CLT. Their apparent focus was on the necessity of learning English through interaction, as set out in the literature on CLT, but with little reference to the physical teaching and learning environments in which they intended to implement CLT. In contrast, the other cluster of eleven British specialists demonstrated more context-dependent views on CLT. They were clearly more concerned with the relevance and appropriateness of CLT in particular educational contexts, and strongly emphasised the importance of contextual factors in language teaching and learning. The former cluster is labelled as the 'Context-free' cluster below, and the latter as the 'Context-dependent' cluster.

The following quotations from the two respective clusters exemplify their contrasting observations:

‘Context-free’ cluster:

We had been taught Latin in a similar way, sort of Grammar–Translation methods. I found that in some places English was being taught like a dead language. ... People still are memorising vocabulary, memorising dictionaries, thinking that that would improve their English, and absolutely no concentration on communication. ... So Intensive Reading was something that I did not understand at all.

(British respondent H)

‘Context-dependent’ cluster:

But when I did observe a class of Intensive Reading, I discovered things which disconfirmed ... my prejudices, I think. I’d always assumed in the past, coming from these traditions, very strong sort of British type CLT tradition, an Intensive Reading class would not involve participation. It would have assumed the students to be in a very sort of passive mode ... What I noticed was that there was a lot of communication going on in the classroom, but it was subtle. And the teacher was very much in tune with the flow of the class.

(British respondent D)

Such contrasting views were shown to have influenced teaching approaches and to have been the basis of the two sub-groups’ contrasting experiences in these projects. The ‘Context-dependent’ cluster specialists were found to have had more positive and beneficial experiences in the DFID ELT projects, in comparison to those of the ‘Context-free’ cluster specialists, who found their experience in China ‘emotionally quite rough and demanding’ (British respondent L) or ‘with frustrations’ (British respondent E). However, specialists from both clusters believed that experiences in the DFID ELT projects had had an impact on their professionalism. The quotations below demonstrate the extent to which different experiences of working in an intercultural educational context may have influenced participants’ professional careers in ELT.

'Context-free' cluster:

In each of my posts (in China) I had different kinds of responsibility. So I have done a lot of things. ... I have been through a series of mini-specialisations in them. When I came out of China, it was management. ... It was all related to my management experience in China, and also a lot to do with my frustrations in China with the British Council, with the university, with society at large.

(British respondent E)

'Context-dependent' cluster:

I think what I probably benefited from most was an extension of my early experiences of teaching before going to China, added to which was the idea that the way that people do things, the kinds of things that they do, the reasons they have for teaching or developing programmes in the way they do are always going to be tied to local circumstances. So that in other words, local circumstances, culture are as an important starting point as anything else. In other words, I don't believe there is one method that can be used everywhere, anywhere at all times, but that we always have to take into account local concerns. And I think that probably more than anything that is what I took away from China with a realisation that there was not one way to do it. There was a Chinese way to do it. ... And that I feel my central contribution in China would be very much towards that opening up, thinking, different viewpoints, the opportunity for dialogues between people. I think that is most useful benefit from my time there for me and for them.

(British respondent O)

Academically I have benefited because I was a teacher, which I felt ... would be quite difficult, but having taught them it gave me more academic abilities. ... It also made me start to think about the wider concept of English language teaching, and its social, political, ideological, organisational, and whatever, you know all those applications, and made me think about what I was actually doing rather than just think about going to the class the next day. ... I think I gained a lot from working with my colleagues, both Chinese and British. I think I just gained a lot personally. ... We wanted institutes to develop something that was appropriate. ... Experience in China in teacher training made me think much more about those issues than anywhere else. It changed my professional interests, my academic interests, but not directly – indirectly by making me think about things.

(British respondent K)

Discussion

Overall, the evidence in the study indicates that involvement in DFID ELT projects has had a clear effect on both the British specialists' and the Chinese participant teachers' professional development. The implementation of change in ELT in an intercultural setting is a complicated endeavour, subject to influences from a wide range of contextually-based and interpersonal factors. The key impact on both teachers and trainers of working in an intercultural context was found to be the development in them of an appreciation of crosscultural differences and a critical awareness of culturally appropriate pedagogy.

Critical intercultural awareness and professionalisation

British specialists acted as teacher trainers as well as missionaries of CLT in the ELT projects, preaching an innovative methodology to tertiary Chinese teachers of English. Introducing change in teaching is 'inherently threatening' (Prabhu 1992: 228). On the one hand, it is 'a form of denial of the validity of past behaviour' (Prabhu 1987: 103). On the other hand, it is difficult to deconstruct and reassemble existing routines in classrooms without 'causing disorientation and the threat of a temporary (and the fear of a more than temporary) inability to cope' (Eraut 1994: 26). Resistance to change in teachers is therefore a natural self-defensive human action. Such self-defence is likely to be stronger and resistance intensified in intercultural contexts when 'past behaviour' is challenged by outsiders. Rubdy (2000: 403) argues that dilemmas in educational projects may be taken as a lens to 'problematize cross-cultural issues, re-interpret initial assumptions and generate new understandings' of the paramount importance of the local context in the training design.

The following quotations from Chinese teachers clearly indicate that working with British specialists created a platform where they learned that there was another way of teaching and were able to make rational improvements to the efficiency of their teaching performance:

I had a deeper, systematic and thorough understanding of ELT and gained more confidence in language teaching. ... Before the project when I wanted to try some new ideas from reading, I did not know how to do it. ... Teaching has become more interesting. ... Besides, I have realised the importance of specifying course aims which make teaching more systematic.

(Chinese participant D)

In addition to the rational decisions on approaches to teaching, the result of reflective thinking on both the imported expertise and the existing domestic tradition by Chinese teachers gave rise to the following kind of comment:

I think our Chinese teachers know more about our students' academic levels and their future needs. Maybe this is where they (British specialists) are lacking, ... they don't have [such knowledge]. They are working in their own way, and according to their own principles. ... But if they know more about our students and our educational system, then perhaps they can do a better job.

(Chinese participant E)

The impact of conflicts and dilemmas in the DFID ELT projects, resulting mainly from clashes of different views and beliefs between the British specialists and the Chinese teachers, has had an enormous effect on the British specialists' professional development. For example,

The more I went on with the project, the more I understood that you can't simply take an idea from one place and drop it to another. It has to be naturalised. It has to be absorbed and taken in by the people themselves and made their own. And in doing so, it becomes very different from what you started with.

(British specialist E)

The above quotation demonstrates an intercultural awareness and an enhanced understanding of the promotion of ELT in the global context. British specialists' ambitions to share their expertise in ELT and their encountering of resistance to change from Chinese teachers have motivated some to reconsider the practice of language teaching and learning from a social constructivist perspective. Exposure to different teaching and learning cultures in the DFID ELT projects resulted in both

British and Chinese ELT professionals critically reflecting on and reviewing their professional beliefs and views on the cultural and contextual appropriateness of teaching and learning practice.

Teachers' professional development is a cognitive progress that leads to teacher effectiveness. Similarly, a teacher trainer's professionalism involves cognitive reflections on the provision of more *relevant* supervision in order to enhance teachers' professional growth. Such professionalism in an intercultural context is not only cognitive, but also holistic, because it involves 'learning about oneself and gaining reflexive knowledge of social and cultural practices' (Alred et al. 2003: 10). As a consequence, the change is not only professional, but also personal, as evidenced in the present study. Alred et al. (2003) argue that intercultural experience has the potential to broaden and deepen the mind through reflection, analysis and action:

An inevitable consequence of intercultural experience is that it presents a challenge to customary modes of perception, thought and feeling. Hence, when intercultural experience leads to creative, rather than defensive, learning a concomitant is serious self-understanding and self-knowledge.

(Alred et al 2003: 4)

The changes observed in British specialists and Chinese teachers in this study support Alred et al's argument. Their intercultural experiences in the DFID ELT projects has led them to reconsider their professional beliefs and identities, review the *old* and the *new* methods in context, become aware of otherness, and consequently acquire critical intercultural awareness and more rational views on pedagogy. Hofstede (1986) has commented on the importance of culture and emphasises that in order to be effective in intercultural contexts, the teacher and the trainer should focus on 'learning about his/her own culture':

... getting intellectually and emotionally accustomed to the fact that in other societies, people learn in different ways. This means taking one step back from one's values and cherished beliefs, which is far from easy.

(Hofstede 1986: 316)

Being reflexive and critical of one's own values, assumptions and knowledge is essential to achieve ultimate transformative change and professional growth in intercultural contexts. Fullan (1999: 22) observes that conflict, 'if respected, is positively associated with creative breakthroughs under complex, turbulent conditions.' The conflicts, confusion and the ultimate heightened understanding of both ELT practice and intercultural communication that British specialists and Chinese teachers experienced in the DFID ELT projects provide supportive evidence for Fullan's observation.

Implications for teacher education

The crosscultural differences in teaching and learning practice observed in this research re-emphasise a theme that has long been argued in teacher professionalism – that teacher training should give way to teacher education. Given the individualised and contextualised nature of teachers' knowledge construction, in intercultural contexts *holistic* and *cognitive* views of educating teaching professionals will have particular significance to long-term teacher professionalism and transformation.

Implementing a teacher education programme in an international context is a complicated practice. When entering such a programme, teacher educators and established teachers will bring with them assumptions, beliefs and expectations about the contents as well as the process of the programme. These assumptions and expectations draw on their individualised experiences and socioculturally based understanding of language education and teacher education (Franson and Gu 2004). Franson and Gu (2004) argue that schematic differences, such as the perceptions of the context, the theoretical and experiential knowledge of the participants, and their personalities, and attitudes and beliefs about language teaching, are likely to act as filters affecting the progress of the teacher education programme. Such schematic differences are reflected in the research findings of the study discussed in the present article. To achieve mutual understanding in teacher education in an intercultural context, Franson and Gu (2004) propose interaction in the form of continuous and persistent feedback and on-going evaluation between teacher educators and established teachers throughout the teacher education process. The ultimate aim of teacher education is to strengthen teachers' knowledge base and enhance their capacity to act on such knowledge in their teaching arenas. The following positive experience of a Chinese participant in the DFID ELT project clearly suggests the potential impact of teacher education on teachers' continuing

professional growth – a transformative process that is self-motivated, self-responsible and oriented towards competency discovery in nature.

I learned greatly during the two years in the project. I don't think I would have learned as much if I had been sent to another Chinese university to be on a full-time training course. I think the main reason is that theory was integrated together with practice in the project. Teachers had to do some reading to learn the theories independently and then test their understandings in presentation and teaching practice. I became more confident in teaching. I think it is the biggest and fundamental change in me.

(Chinese participant D)

The Chinese have an old saying – ‘Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime’. This proverb clarifies the significance of teacher education to continuing professional development – the teacher may survive a lesson with a new teaching technique; they will benefit throughout their professional career if they have developed an ability to discover and develop appropriate approaches to teaching in different contexts.

Conclusion

Analysis of participants’ experiences of DFID ELT projects shows that intercultural experience has a significant impact on both Chinese teachers’ and British trainers’ professional development. The impact on Chinese teachers was to induce a more rational view of teaching and learning practice, and a more balanced attitude towards tradition versus innovation. Exposure to different teaching cultures and the intercultural experience itself were found to have led to a stronger awareness of the impact of contextual and cultural factors on teaching effectiveness among both Chinese and British ELT professionals. Intercultural experience was also found to deepen teachers’ understanding of the meaning of culturally sensitive pedagogy. Alred et al (2003: 8) maintain that ‘A flexible model of intercultural understanding allows us to mediate between relativism and ethnocentrism’. In the teaching profession, intercultural understanding enables teachers to preserve an open, yet critical mind to look for differences and similarities in pursuit of appropriate pedagogy. The significant implication for teacher education is that teachers should be assisted to build up a

rationalised 'sense of plausibility' (Prabhu 1990) that transcends particular cultural contexts.

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